

Studies in English, New Series

Volume 4

Article 24

1983

Kolin, Shakespeare in the South: Essays on Performance

Charles D. Cannon
University of Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cannon, Charles D. (1983) "Kolin, Shakespeare in the South: Essays on Performance," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 4 , Article 24.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol4/iss1/24

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Studies in English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English, New Series by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

PHILIP C. KOLIN, ED. *SHAKESPEARE IN THE SOUTH: ESSAYS ON PERFORMANCE*. JACKSON: UNIVERSITY PRESS OF MISSISSIPPI, 1983. 297 pp. \$20.00.

Ably edited and introduced, *Shakespeare in the South: Essays on Performance* is an attractive, well-finished book with thirteen essays in addition to Kolin's preliminary "Overview," disposed under two rubrics: "Histories of Shakespearean Performances in the South" and "Some Southern Shakespeare Festivals." Remedying the neglect of earlier histories of the theater that focused on the northeast, the essays treat performances in what are largely coastal or river cities.

Though the first performance in Virginia of Shakespeare was in Williamsburg, according to Aronson, with *The Merchant of Venice* in 1752, Aronson believes that Richmond's significance has been overlooked, a number "of sources" having cited Junius Brutus Booth's "American debut as being in New York when, in fact, it was in Richmond." In his account of Shakespearean production in Maryland, Thaiss notes that the presence of players in Maryland at Annapolis depended to a large degree on the reception actors received in Philadelphia and New York. When Quakers in Philadelphia or Calvinist ministers in New York made for a hostile reception, the players found Annapolis with its "more relaxed moral climate" a friendlier place to act. In Jonas Green, editor of the *Maryland Gazette*, there was one in colonial Maryland "who supported the stage more strongly than any other colonial journalist."

Alone of the cities treated in Part I of the book, Charleston has two essays. Though Nalley in treating the 1764-1799 period believes there has been too much emphasis on "one brilliant season," 1773-1774, and by the 1790s the actors who came to Charleston "were not America's best," she notes nonetheless that "Available records from New York and Philadelphia indicate that neither city had a season of Shakespeare to equal Charleston's in the early 1770s." Continuing the chronicle for Charleston from 1800 to 1860, Holbein notes the popularity of *Hamlet* of the tragedies, "the first performance of *The Winter's Tale* in the United States," and the possibility that Romeo was played by a woman in Charleston before in New York. In a performance of *Macbeth* in 1844 the ghost of Banquo rose from a "trap door immediately at the seat designated" for him. Finally Holbein notes the perceptiveness of an unnamed editor who protested in print the adaptation (standard procedure at the time) of *King Lear*: " 'We put our veto against the vile alteration which this play has undergone....' " Though the City Council may have interdicted a proposed perfor-

mance of *Othello* in Charleston in 1807, between 1809 and 1860 there were sixty-four performances.

In New Orleans *Othello* was Shakespeare's first play to be performed. Although here and elsewhere in the south the tragedies were most often performed, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (26 December 1831) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (8 March 1836) were, according to Roppolo, first performed in the United States in New Orleans. *The Merchant of Venice*, notes Toulmin, was the first "professional performance" of Shakespeare in Mobile on 1 June 1822. A play by Shakespeare was often only part of the entertainment for a night in Mobile and elsewhere, with entertainment sometimes lasting for four or five hours, but J. Purdy Brown in Mobile had a custom which may be unique. When "a play—be it tragedy, comedy, or melodrama—appeared to 'drag,' " he would send on stage "horses and circus riders 'to end the piece.' "

Concentrating on the "river cities" of Natchez and Vicksburg, where most of the performances of Shakespeare occurred before the Civil War, with more "than 40 percent of Shakespeare's plays" before 1860 "enacted in the brilliant three-season span of 1836-1839," Orange notes the first performance of Shakespeare in Natchez to be of *Othello* by local actors on 15 April 1814. Two playhouses were built in Natchez (the first one, completed in "1812 or 1813," burned in 1821); the second one accommodating seven hundred as opposed to five hundred for the first. The new playhouse, "constructed on the site...of a graveyard," provided support for the staging of *Hamlet*. Orange notes that Sol Smith said " 'Human bones were strewn about....In digging the grave of *Hamlet*, I experienced no difficulty in finding bones and skulls...." Sixty miles "up the river" in Vicksburg the Citizens Theater was completed "for the 1836-1837 season." During the 1837-1838 season plays were presented "five (occasionally six) nights per week during the season...." Beginning his collegiate survey of performances of Shakespeare with a performance at the University of Mississippi on 20 June 1899, Orange notes the participation of Alfred Hume and Stark Young. Hume later became Chancellor of the University and Young became a distinguished critic of the drama and a novelist. Orange concludes his account by noting a memorable performance, illustrated with a picture of the cast, of *The Taming of the Shrew* with a "showboat setting" at the University of Southern Mississippi, 160 years after "a presentation of it at Natchez" in what "was probably the first of all showboat performances" of Shakespeare.

Othello was the first play performed in Houston, (as it was in New Orleans and in Mississippi), performed on 12 February 1839. "Scalpers" got as much as twenty dollars for tickets to Edwin Booth's *Hamlet* in 1887, a highly admired performance of Shakespeare in Houston in the nineteenth century. Rice University has contributed to the performance of Shakespeare, first with Professor Axson's long reviews of the performances of Fritz Leiber, whose performance in *Hamlet* was held in high regard in Houston. McNeir said Axson's reviews "revealed the virtue of the reviewer and the virtuosity of the reviewed." In recent years there have been interesting performances of Shakespeare out of doors on the campus at Rice "on the lawn beside Lovett Hall," "by the Chemistry Building," "by the Physics Building," and elsewhere. Noting that Shakespeare has been presented in Houston "for nearly a hundred and fifty years," and that he "has had bad times and good times," McNeir believes "The best times for him probably lie ahead."

Lower believes critics have sought to simplify the complex problem of the color and makeup of *Othello* and the audience's perception of and response to *Othello*. Lower considers it too easy a solution to see antebellum southerners responding to the play as a warning against "miscegenetic love" with the Moor having no more than "a good tan." The first play performed in three southern states, *Othello* was only "slightly less popular" than *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*. As Lower sees it, "Theater was separate from the affairs of the day...Antebellum southern audiences regarded theatrical performances as Art, quite distinct from life." *Othello* could, and "did move those audiences." On the other hand, "No antebellum southern audience would have been prepared for the 'untheatrical' experience of a black actor as *Othello*." Concluding his account of *Othello* on the southern stage, Lower describes the successful performance in Atlanta of the black actor Paul Winfield, who in "ritual robes of native Africa" in one scene chanted "over a pile of...bones, squatting to beat the stage floor rhythmically, eventually collapsing from the intensity of the ceremony." The success of the play contributed to increased support for the arts in Atlanta.

Champion's " 'Bold to Play': Shakespeare in North Carolina" is the first essay in the second grouping treating southern Shakespeare festivals. Beginning with some mention of the earliest dramatic activity in Wilmington near the end of the 1790s "on the lower floor of Innes Academy" and in Fayetteville "on the lower floor of the Masonic

Lodge Building in 1801," he moves to a questionnaire he sent to 111 institutions to ascertain whether "recent productions have been slanted...for particular regional appeal." Conceding a response of "18 of 111" was a disappointment, Champion indicates that the responses nonetheless indicate "a rather vigorous Shakespeare tradition." The most "significant Shakespearean news" now is "coming from High Point, the home of the newly formed Shakespeare festival." With some sensitive assessments of performances in his essay, Champion conveys his enthusiasm for an operation which has combined "rapid artistic maturation" with "prudent economic policies guiding each stage of its development...." He commends the festival as "an excellent model for other stages interested in developing such cultural programs."

Kay's account of the origin and success of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival notes "certain hallmarks" of this festival: "little tampering with the text (usually the Arden edition of the play); gorgeous costumes; spare effective sets on a thrust stage; a rapid pace, and exuberant sophisticated staging of the comedies." Less effective with the tragedies (*Lear* an exception) and histories, Kay notes that no Roman plays have been produced and comedies have been produced twice as often as all other genres. Though it is typical for one of the comedies or romances to be "relocated from its typical setting" during a season of the festival, Kay has found two of the ten to be wholly successful. This "astonishingly successful festival" began with a five-hundred-dollar loan and a first-night performance attended by twenty-four people in a high school auditorium that was not airconditioned. It has developed into a festival with an attendance of 20,000 for a season and "national recognition from the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Shakespeare Quarterly*."

The Globe of the Great Southwest in Odessa, Texas, is largely attributable, according to Dachschrager, to Mrs. Marjorie Morris, "a one-time English teacher, life long devotee of Shakespeare, and an indefatigable money raiser...." The initial performance in 1966 after several years of intermittent construction (until more money could be raised) was Paul Baker's "six performances of *Julius Caesar* by his Dallas Theater Company." Among Dachschrager's conclusions about the performances in this 418-seat replica of the Globe is that "the comedies are easily the most popular," with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the most popular. When in 1980 the National Shakespeare Company presented *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Julius Caesar*, the

Odessa American hailed the performance of *Much Ado* as having exceeded "all previous efforts at the theater, both directorially and dramatically." Illustrating the predominance of the comedies is the fact that of the tragedies only *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, and *Romeo and Juliet* have been staged more than once.

Omans and Madden's final essay treats "Shakespeare in His Age," an institute originating with the University of Central Florida and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. With "Know thyself" as the theme, conference members presented a concert of Elizabethan music, staged *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and prepared a 200-page guide "for the teaching of Shakespeare." Consequent on the success of the enterprise, a second institute is being planned with "the question of the outsider" as the theme.

From the essays as a whole it may be learned that tragedies predominated among plays staged in the antebellum South but comedies predominate in the contemporary festivals. Southern audiences then and now have responded favorably to good acting of Shakespeare and do not need—and rarely get—performances calculated to appeal to the region. For some plays of Shakespeare, as noted earlier, the first performance in the South was the first performance in the United States. For a brief period performances of Shakespeare in Charleston may have rivaled those in Philadelphia and in New York in quantity and quality. Finally, contemporary southern festivals have, on occasion, achieved national recognition for the quality of their performances.

Charles D. Cannon

The University of Mississippi