
Sidney Homan. *Directing Shakespeare: A Scholar Onstage*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004. 152p.

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The subtitle of this book immediately raises the question to which the book responds: what is a scholar doing onstage? Homan attempts to narrow the divide between the scholars who establish and interpret readers' texts and the actors and directors who establish and interpret texts for an audience in the theater. Homan is a hybrid, a scholar who traces his work in the theater to his meeting with a famous academic who declared that he had never seen a production of Shakespeare in his life because he "would never want a mere director or his actor to interfere with my ideal conception of the playwright" (xi).

Homan repeatedly characterizes the difference between the critic's and the director's approach in temporal terms: "what distinguishes the critic from the director is that the former establishes a world after the play has been read, one that serves as a retrospective analysis of the playwright's effort. The director, albeit coming to the play armed with a concept, establishes a world moment by moment, as experienced by both actor and audience" (35). His accounts of productions take us through the processes of production and performance beat by beat. An actor asks: "What do I do now?" (73), or the cast and crew learn at the last minute that the theater in which they will perform is technically unable to sustain an intended illusion (83), and the process has to take a new turn.

Homan begins with an account of a production of *King Lear* that he directed in 1998. His first chapter proceeds through the play scene by scene, explaining some of the choices that he made as he worked with the actors and with the physical environment of the theater. For example, the actors who were not performing at any given moment sat on the stage behind a scrim, like a reflection of the audience they faced, and responded to the action before them in actions and gestures appropriate to their characters. (Homan did something similar in *Julius Caesar* in 2002.) The costumes were all black, relieved with touches of purple for members of the royal family, and the mad Lear wore a gray robe. The orchestration of the first chapter, literal because the musical score is one of the foundations of the production of *King Lear* on which the chapter is based, contextualizes the analytic chapters that follow. The effect is more like that of Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* than it is to that of the "Wagnerian overture" (xi, 1) to which Homan compares the chapter; it also resembles the "seedling" (5) first scene of Homan's production of *King Lear*: "not only *Lear's* end but its entire progress was there in the beginning, in that long, complex first scene" (5).

The next five chapters concentrate on a single aspect of production: for instance, cutting, the director's concept of the play, working with actors, set design, and adapting a play to the cast, director, and theater. A chapter on the intertextual process linking productions of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Hamlet*, a chapter that responds to a Chinese actor's question, "Why, sir, is Shakespeare eternal?" and two anecdotes that exemplify the insights, sometimes very surprising, that work in the theater can provide, complete the book.

The chapter on cutting, which uses *Hamlet* as its example, is understandably defensive in tone: "I cannot fully, absolutely justify the practice. But does it do any good to say that everyone, or almost everyone, does it?" (21). Homan realistically argues the reluctance of audiences to stay put for more than two and a half hours. His best justification is the historical fact that the surviving texts suggest performances in Shakespeare's theater of the same play in versions of varying length and content.

More controversially Homan presents their parts to the actors rewritten as maddeningly iambic prose "because I want the acting text to look less like poetry and more like real speech.... I ... want my actors to focus on their characters as people, not as declaimers of poetry" (24-25). What Homan, the actors, and the audiences miss, despite his insistence that "Shakespeare's rhythms are still there" (25), is the way in which Shakespearean blank verse is situated exquisitely on the frontier between poetry and spoken utterance. Like the "Brechtian style" Homan worked to achieve in his production of *King Lear* it operates on "that thin line between reality and illusion, audience and actor, the house and the stage" (3). The verse achieves a certain formality whether the effect is comic, as in Richard III's "I thank my God for my humility" (II.i.73) or tragic, as in Lear's "Never, never, never, never, never" (V.iii.309) or both as in Hamlet's "I'll lug the guts into the neighbor room" (III.iv.212). In *King Lear* particularly, the subtle and all but subliminal effects of the verse help to make the intense pain of the play tolerable. Homan refers to himself as "guilty" and to his own commission of "crimes" (29); the cuts are easier to forgive than tampering with the poetry. Rewriting may explain at least some of the many inaccurate quotations, for instance *Lr.* I.i.86 (5), V.iii.173-174 (8); *Ham.* V.ii.189 (60); *JC* II.iv.41 (71); *MND* I.i.17 (74); *MV* V.i.138 (126); *LLL* V.ii.931 (129); *Ant.* V.ii.313 (132).

The most interesting and perceptive part of the book is the penultimate chapter, which attempts to explain why Shakespeare is eternal. As Homan moves through his responses to the actor's question, responses which refer for example to characterization, dialogue, and the creation of juxtaposed worlds like those of court and forest or Venice and Belmont, he draws on his experience as an actor as

well as a director. The book refers constantly to the interactions among members of the cast, the director, and the designer and the resolutions of shared problems together. It thus emphasizes the collaborative nature of work in the theater, an emphasis that is especially valuable for readers and students whose experience of Shakespeare is primarily that of being alone with a book or those whose imagined character “Shakespeare” is an isolated romantic genius with his quill and quire. While even Homan’s detailed descriptions of whole productions and bits of productions are no substitute for the experience of a performance by actors before the audience who reflect them, as Homan repeatedly reminds us, the kind of collaborations that he describes brings us closer to the irresistibly fascinating lost world of Shakespeare’s theater. ✱