Michael Dobson. 2011
Shakespeare and Amateur Performance: A Cultural History
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The wide gap between professional and amateur theatre has traditionally been regarded as a non-negotiable division between two mutually exclusive remits. But, as Michael Dobson suggests in the introduction to this monograph, the boundary between the two over the last few centuries has not only been permeable, but also blurred and difficult to trace. Actors with no formal training continue to access the profession, and professional practitioners regularly take part in unpaid productions when remunerated jobs are unavailable. As the author states, "it has never been easy to distinguish between a young waiter with a serious amateur interest in the theatre and an apprentice actor with a part-time job in catering" (7). If the boundary is difficult to determine with precision in our own time, it seems almost impossible to establish this distinction when we consider theatre practice before the nineteenth century. As Dobson shrewdly observes, "William Shakespeare was not what we would call an amateur, certainly, but as the liveried nominal servant of an aristocrat and then a king he was not exactly what we would now describe as professional either" (5).

Scholars have dedicated more than considerable attention to the performance history of Shakespeare's plays in the commercial theatre since they premiered. Major critical editions of the plays now regularly include serious consideration of performance issues based on professional practice, and the work of experts in theatre studies over the past few decades has been especially fruitful in the investigation of Shakespearian performance. However, few of them have tried to add non-professional theatre to their scholarship,

perhaps assuming that amateur productions are just not as interesting to analyse, or as worthy of serious critical scrutiny. Only in recent times some members of the scholarly community have managed to actively challenge this preconception. Major essays by leading academics such as Andrew Hartley (2012) and Jeremy Lopez (2012) have focused some scholarly interest on the neglected work of non-professional theatre groups, vindicating their work as part of the wider performance context of these plays.

A token of this increasing scholarly interest that amateur Shakespeare is receiving is the fact that during the 2012 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in Boston no less than two seminars were devoted to this topic. Andrew Hartley convened "Shakespeare on the Campus Stage," while the author of the present monograph led "Voluntary Sector Shakespeare" with contributions from a group of eminent scholars including Ton Hoenselaars, Kiki Lindell, Siobhan Keenan, Isabelle Schwartz-Gastine, and Clara Calvo.

With this book Michael Dobson has made a major contribution to the study of the amateur phenomenon specifically applied to Shakespearian performance. It is an energetic reaction to the "persistent inattention among scholars to the importance of non-professional activity within the reception of Shakespeare in particular" (10), and it is grounded on an incontrovertible fact: there have been more amateur productions of Shakespeare over the past four centuries than professional enterprises.

Dobson has chosen to limit the scope of his study to cover only "amateur performances given in English," primarily performed in "Britain and Ireland and, to a lesser extent, North America" (9), conceding that a comprehensive survey of non-professional productions of Shakespeare is an impossible task, given that most archival material is accessible only in very partial shape, often as anecdotal oral evidence, or as collections of pictures, recordings, and other memorabilia kept in private hands, or has simply not survived. While some performing groups keep comprehensive archives, most have never been concerned with preserving their work for posterity.

The decision to focus primarily on the United Kingdom is immediately justifiable by the vibrancy of non-professional theatre in the country. Participation in amateur dramatic groups and

societies is a time-honoured tradition in Britain, where groups that sometimes exhibit great technical and managerial sophistication have been active for many decades, or even centuries. Their repertory spans from classical drama to full-blown Broadway musicals, charity recitals, concerts or revues, as well as the latest theatrical hits of the commercial London theatre, quickly transferred to the amateur stage by paying expensive performance rights to the playwright's agents. Shakespeare's plays are regularly included in this repertory.

The United Kingdom also saw the most vigorous effort to engage more effectively with their neighbouring amateur practitioners made by a major professional company: the Royal Shakespeare Company launched in early 2011 the RSC Open Stages festival to promote the cultural transaction between professional and amateur practitioners, offering free workshops with professionals, as well as the promotion and support of amateur productions of Shakespearian plays and adaptations through a network of regional hubs all over the country, including the opportunity to perform on the stages of the RSC in Stratford in a series of national showcases that put an end to the project in mid-2012. Michael Dobson, now director of the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford, took part in the project as its main research associate.

Given the impossibility of being all-inclusive, Dobson has chosen to structure the book as a collection of more or less independent sections devoted to a series of meaningful and illustrative case studies: domestic, civic, expatriate, and outdoor Shakespeares.

The first section, "Shakespeare in private," traces the emergence of "private theatricals" from the production of a conflated *Henry IV* staged in 1623 in Sir Edward Dering's country house in Surrenden, Kent, to the production of Dryden's adaptation of *Antony and Cleopatra*, *All for Love*, at Blenheim Palace staged by the Duke of Marlborough's grandchildren, and other productions at country houses in the eighteenth century. The chapter concludes with a comprehensive analysis of "the great Kilkenny theatricals of 1802-19" (46), completing the three movements that sketch the development of non-professional Shakespearian performance in the two centuries following the death of their author.

The second covers the emergence of the amateur dramatic society as we understand it today, negotiating the considerable public opposition to private and non-professional productions outside the theatres with royal patent towards the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, when Shakespeare was identified "as the property of the legitimate public Theatres Royal" (69). The study continues through the important creation of the Stockport Garrick Society in the early twentieth century, and the establishment of dedicated theatres for amateur dramatics all over Britain.

The third section traces the fortunes of amateur theatricals performed by British expatriates in various places and under very different circumstances, ranging from diplomatic missions to countries in the British Empire, to Shakespeare productions given by British prisoners of war imprisoned by the Axis during the Second World War. This study includes the productions at the Stalag VIIIB Lamsdorf concentration camp in Silesia in 1943, where a young Denholm Elliott alternated Eliza Doolittle in Shaw's *Pygmalion* with Viola in *Twelfth Night*.

The final chapter presents an account of the particularly British preference for amateur Shakespeare productions in the open air that are especially popular in the summer, when actors regularly have to battle against the unpredictability of the British weather.

With his characteristically elegant and formidably engaging tone, Michael Dobson offers an important book, hopefully a pioneering work in a thriving field of research. The lives and stories presented on its pages pay tribute to many generations of ordinary people who took to the stage etymologically out of love, and who, with varying degrees of success, demonstrated that the possibility of offering compelling and skilled theatrical performances is not the sole patrimony of professional practitioners. And in this celebration the author shows the way for other scholars to continue to engage with non-professional theatre as a cultural phenomenon worthy of further enquiry.

References

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