

**Charles Ney. 2019. *Directing Shakespeare in America. Historical Perspectives. The Arden Shakespeare.*
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Writing on Shakespearean directing in America is a daunting task. Nonetheless, in recent years, critical works by scholars such as Helene Wickham Koon, Nigel Cliff, Denise Albanese, James Shapiro, Dympna Callaghan and Suzanne Gossett, Katherine Rowe, Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan and others on Shakespeare in America have raised scholarly and public interest in sustained examination of the impact of Shakespeare in the USA. Are there specific traces to identify Shakespearean theatrical directing in the USA apart from the fact that the body of recorded productions took place on American soil? Charles Ney proficiently—though not exhaustively—accomplishes the task of presenting clues which help paint the broad picture of directing Shakespeare in American theatre with admirable clarity. He does so by starting with a survey of the directors emerging between the 1870s and the 1940s. Then he reviews Shakespearean directors at the Oregon Festival, at the Old Globe, and the New York Shakespeare Festival. He examines the works carried by directors at Shakespeare Festivals and Theatres and, finally, concludes with miscellaneous examples of Shakespearean directors and theatres across the USA.

Ney historicizes the way in which the American theatre industry has mounted and received Shakespeare in the last century and a half. A teacher and a director himself, he takes the emergence of the theatre director in America as his vantage point. Having consulted testimonies, letters, promptbooks, diaries, lectures, academic and newspaper reviews, etc., his methodology consists in explaining the style, prominent features and rationale of most directors' working procedures. Though the book doesn't intend to be steeped in theory, at first sight, he discerns two major tendencies in American theatrical directing of Shakespeare: one intends to serve "the author's voice and intention" and another one embraces "complete artistic freedom in interpretation of the play" (2). After posing this idea, Ney

attempts to reveal a larger and more complex and nuanced reality. Starting, as said, with the emergence of the theatre director in the US, he reveals the process by which actor-centered artistic policies gave way to director-centered artistic policies in the American theatre. He distinguishes directors definable by their imposing and controlling personalities and those concerned with bringing a respectful and humane approach to directing actors and to interpreting the text. Reading the book, we discover that—though there is room in the USA for directors with strong artistic instincts—America’s rationale in Shakespearean directing stems from reverence for the text and a series of added principles akin to America’s democratic ethos and to the public value that Shakespeare holds in the United States.

Rather than fully describing Ney’s book and then looking into the book’s results, I will start by highlighting some of such results. As I was reading, I felt that the reader interested in the subject might not only benefit from reading Ney’s work alongside other scholarly and historical works on America’s Shakespeare, such as Vaughan and Vaughan’s *Shakespeare in America* (2012) or James Shapiro’s studies on the subject. I also found that, while many sections presented illuminating statements, others tended to privilege summary of what critics and reviews had said over Ney’s exposition. Or, at least, exposition seemed to get obscured amidst quotes from reviews whose authors evaluated concrete details of the productions. This does not mean that the book fails. In fact, the findings of Ney’s thorough and in-depth research lead to strong points which are worth knowing before reading the book.

From Ney’s conclusions, I gather that American directors have been at odds between contemporariness—in its different manifestations—and authenticity when thinking of *mise-en-scènes*. While varied degrees of interventionism with regards to the plays’ interpretations have been identified in directing styles, I infer that a tendency exists to look favorably upon directors who evolve towards deciding to extract what they think lies at the heart of the text, not to rely on “concepts.” Thus, evolutionary shifts from concept-based productions towards text-centered productions—balancing director’s artistic subjectivity with the author’s intentions—seem to appear as natural learning processes. Amongst other evidences that

Ney seems to lean on this view, we may later on find the way he describes director Michael Kahn's evolution:

[Kahn] matured through his decade working [at the ASF]. A theatrical innovator, he began as a strongly conceptual director, exploring production ideas based on contemporary observations; these became ruling ideas for his powerful evocative productions. When he started directing at AST, all choices were subservient to his concept. [...] As he developed more experience, he let go of the need to impose on the plays. Instead, he sought to reveal what he thought Shakespeare had written. (104)

Also discerned is the fact that directors tend to privilege rapid delivery, speed, physicality, and clarity in performers and that their treatment of actors is also a mark of directorial styles as relevant as stylistic choices. As a matter of fact, a relationship seems to be implicitly established between the way actors are treated and the way texts and author are treated. The volume also appraises the way in which American actors' performances shine whenever their own qualities—athleticism, hard-working habits, ethnic diversity, tendency to realism, etc.—are preferred to the “gloss” of British or European acting conventions. Thus, one may interpret the book, alongside other scholarly works on Shakespeare in America—such as the recent James Shapiro's *Shakespeare in a Divided America* (2020)—as a history of reception of Shakespeare going hand in hand with America's sometimes tortuous processes of democratization.

Reading the chapters, such key principles seem to naturally unfold while reading Ney's thorough account. Starting with early directors like August Daly, David Belasco, Arthur Hopkins, Orson Welles, and Margaret Webster, we notice a tendency to privilege erudite but clean, play-centered, gimmick-free, uncluttered, technically proficient, and innovative productions whether such productions embrace naturalistic, pictorial, iconoclastic styles across varied constituencies, public or commercial.

The next two chapters—two and three, on the Oregon Festival and on the Old Globe—study Iden Payne, Angus Bowmer, Jack O'Brien, Tyrone Guthrie, and others. Describing Payne's modified Elizabethan approach, inherited from Sir William Poel, Ney associates the American tradition with a British theatrical model which is adapted for the architecture of the US venues. Indeed, Payne extends the Elizabethan model, establishing stage zones of

influence to facilitate rapid successions of scenes and defining diverse uses for curtains to augment such speed in the transitions. Free air productions—akin to ritual and overt theatricality—and the director's humility and capacity to learn from others are also highlighted as values in the profession. Continuing through chapters four and five—on American Shakespeare Festival and on The Public Theater—Ney examines the above-mentioned Kahn's trajectory and proceeds to examine John Houseman, Jack Landau, Gerald Freedman, Peter Coe and, importantly, Joseph Papp, creator of The Public Theater, and his successors. Together, these artists progressively move away from the psychologically burdensome "acting method" in favor of language and text and of a democratically-oriented ethos to disseminate Shakespearean performances amongst a diverse public. The sixth and seventh chapters, on festivals and on varied theatres and directors, reveal the quantitative increase of Shakespearean performances in America in the last few decades. Contributions by Kahn—at the Folger Shakespeare Company—, William Ball, Liviu Ciulei, Garland Wright, Mark Lamos, Ellis Rabb, or Julie Taymor are examined. Again, it is noticeable that freedom from the shackles of concept, preference for energetic, vivid, rapid and physical performance lead to interpretations that often—as in the case of Mark Lamos' Hamlet—run against the grain of received interpretations. Pluralistic ethnicity and accomplished performance are preferred to concept. Nonetheless, distinct theatrical and aesthetic techniques such as those deployed by Ciulei and Taymor have their own place, as the book reveals, in this rapid development of American Shakespeares.

Ney's work is to be recommended, making a pleasant and informative reading. Rich in detail and with a taste for carefully arranging specificities in logical and organic ways, the volume reveals trends defining director's Shakespeares in America. A priceless document for scholars interested in theorizing Shakespearean performance in the USA, it reveals the fertile American theatrical tradition as a basis on which to broaden our perspectives on the significance of Shakespeare—not just as performance, but as a series of texts and their critical histories—in American popular and public culture. For literary scholars and adaptation scholars, the book rethinks concepts such as faithfulness or fidelity to author's intentions or to text, ideas which are normally looked upon with suspicion in these fields, suggesting the

exploratory eagerness of directors and actors to intensely and passionately read rather than to pigeonhole the texts.

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