

**Francesca Clare Rayner. 2022.**  
***Shakespeare and the Challenge of the Contemporary:***  
***Performance, Politics and Aesthetics.***  
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Veronika Schandl  
*Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Hungary*

Commencing a book review by focusing on the concluding chapter is an unconventional approach. However, in the case of Francesca Clare Rayner's book *Shakespeare and the Challenge of the Contemporary: Performance, Politics and Aesthetics* it may prove beneficial as it urges readers to revisit the volume after reading its final section. It is in this concluding chapter (entitled "Performance Matters: Contemporary Shakespearean Performance Criticism") where, in her aim of addressing the pertinent questions of contemporary Shakespearean performance criticism, Rayner posits that adopting a *performative* approach to writing about Shakespeare in performance can resolve several prevailing challenges. Drawing upon the works of Peggy Phelan and Della Pollock, Rayner contends that "as opposed to conventional critical writing, performative writing tends to be open-ended, self-reflexive and often subjective rather than objective, thesis-led and conclusive. It deconstructs stable notions of self and other in order to open up multiple dialogues within and between selves. Unlike creative writing however, it also pursues critical lines of enquiry using theoretical insights from various subject areas" (172). This proposition is also the underlying objective that the book strives to accomplish and succeeds in doing.

Indeed, the volume can be read as an informed manifesto for contemporary Shakespeare performance criticism. For a criticism that is ethically motivated and politically informed. A criticism that uses theory and literary criticism with ease and in a way that could also resonate with a non-theatrical readership. A criticism that describes performance elements with a keen eye to detail yet with a constant awareness of the performance as a whole. A criticism that disavows the pretense of objectivity, for it harbors genuine concern for the artists and productions it investigates. A criticism that does not shy away

from moving beyond Shakespeare studies, extending its purview into theater studies, cultural studies, queer criticism, and other domains.

Picking up from where Jan Kott's assertion that Shakespeare is our contemporary left off, Rayner presents a compelling case study of recent Portuguese Shakespeare productions. Through her insightful analyses, she explores how these productions address the questions of the contemporary posed by Shakespeare's works. In doing so, Rayner also examines how performance criticism can effectively rise to the challenge of describing these issues and capture the performative solutions devised to confront them. The book takes into consideration the impact significant events such as Brexit, global climate change, and the pandemic have had on Shakespearean productions. It acknowledges that "how and why Shakespeare is performed has been radically transformed by processes of globalization, mediatization and neoliberal market economics and the global inequalities that have resulted from these features" (4). It is this strong social awareness that characterizes all the chapters in the book, adding greatly to the unique tone of Rayner's writing.

Rayner argues that although the Portuguese theatre scene and its Shakespeare productions may be perceived as relatively self-contained or enclosed, they serve as a captivating case study for contemporary Shakespeare productions as a whole. This is primarily due to their connection to "intermediality, with devised, rather than text-based performance, with ensembles who co-create performances rather than being director led and with a focus on the participation of the audience rather than their silent presence in the auditorium. It is informed politically by concerns around democracy, disempowerment, and austerity" (10). This reviewer, not Portuguese and with limited insight into Portuguese theatre, acknowledges the success of Rayner's endeavor. The examples of theatrical productions described in the book provide a transnational and cross-national perspective, offering insight into the contemporary European condition. They resonate with the reviewer's own experiences, despite being located on the opposite end of the continent.

The five central chapters of the book engage with the actual productions that exemplify the particular aspects of the contemporary nature of Shakespearean performances. Teatro Praga's Shakespeare trilogy (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* [2010], *The Tempest* [2013], and *Timon*

of *Athens* [2019]) showcases an intermedial deconstruction of traditional theatrical and generic conventions. The trilogy challenged the notion of reciting the plays' texts and instead emphasized the creation of "an enjoyable, pleasurable co-authored experience" (26). Rayner insightfully describes how Praga's *Dream* peeled back the comedic veneer to reveal the debilitating aspects of love, while their *Timon*, the most frequently performed Shakespeare play in Portugal since 2010, critically examines cultural institutions and the allocation of resources within the cultural sphere. In the next chapter, Tiago Rodrigues' *Three Fingers Below the Knee* (2012), *By Heart* (2013) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (2014) are used as examples of Shakespearean traces in contemporary performance texts, but Rayner also uses them to challenge concepts about Portugal's "postmemory generation," a generation that was born after the end of the Salazar regime, and is struggling to have a space and a voice, since it is often silenced by the stories of the previous generation. While the first chapter focuses on the intermedial dimensions and physicality of the performers, this chapter entitled "Memories of the future: Tiago Rodrigues and dramaturgies of the Shakespearean trace" delves into personal and collective memory, and the challenges of audience involvement. What connects these chapters is also their context: most of these shows were performed against the backdrop of the financial crises and austerity measures of the early 2000s.

Nuno Cardoso's four Shakespeares (*Richard II* [2007], *Measure for Measure* [2012], *Coriolanus* [2014] and *Timon of Athens* [2018]) are strongly political in their intent and are used in the book to illustrate the pan-European idea of a theatre that should "both reflect and intervene in society" (87). Placed in distinctively Portuguese settings, these productions offer a critical examination of the deepening social divide within Portuguese society. Rayner makes a compelling argument that although these stagings may initially appear as providing no empowerment for their audiences, as they reflect the realities of contemporary Portugal through their "cruel optimism" (103), their continuous interest in everyday human interactions in locations such as football fields, car parks, or public toilets (which serve as sets for the productions) demonstrates that Cardoso's "political cynicism is closely related to political idealism" (104).

Through the analysis of Christiane Jatahy's *The Moving Forest* (2018), an immersive and multimedial take on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Rayner

sheds light on both the ethical and performative challenges that arise from the apparent empowerment of the spectator. This production serves as a case study that reveals the complexities associated with granting the audience an enhanced role in the performance experience. Rayner skillfully strikes a balance between her role as an engaged participant in the production and her objective role as a reviewer, as she describes the diverse elements of surveillance, objectification, and misuse within *The Moving Forest*. Furthermore, she demonstrates how performer-generated visual and written materials can be seamlessly integrated into a review, showcasing a comprehensive approach to analyzing the performative process.

The book's final theatrical chapter discusses mala voadora's *Hamlet* from 2014. This analysis confronts established notions of authority within Shakespearean texts and performances. It emphasizes how the production, utilizing the "bad" quarto text, self-reflexive scenography, and a consistent incorporation of parody and melodrama, dismantles preconceived expectations of *Hamlet*. Rayner argues that despite subverting traditional interpretations, the production legitimizes its unique approach to the play by virtue of its vitality and the enjoyment it offers to the audience.

Francesca Clare Rayner's book is a remarkable achievement, tackling the challenges posed by contemporary Shakespearean productions while simultaneously serving as a heartfelt reminder of a European sentiment that unites us through Shakespeare, theater, and scholarly pursuits. It is a tour de force of theatrical criticism, empathy, and social insight that we all need when facing the (seemingly growing) challenges of the contemporary.

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*Author's contact:* schandl.veronika@btk.ppke.hu

*Postal address:* PPKE-BTK, 1111 Budapest, Bertalan Lajos u. 2, Danubianum – BME, Hungary.