

Revising Shakespeare for Stratford Stages

GTLII
Collingwood
26 October 2018

When Antoni Cimolino became Artistic Director of The Stratford Festival, he announced that there would be a shift in emphasis in Festival productions. Before his appointment Shakespearean comedies became 'the third musical', such as the *As You Like It* with John Lennon and Elvis Costello look-alikes. Cimolino promised a renewed emphasis on the actor, the text, and the simplicity of the Festival stage. Actors also regularly stress the importance of Shakespeare's scripts, affirming that as an actor the most important thing to do is trust the text. The best direction an actor can receive is that found in Shakespeare's lines. The texts of the plays, however, are unstable, variable, multiple, incomplete, and constantly subject to revision.

This talk explores the complexity of Shakespeare's texts as products of early modern printing houses, modern editions, and scripts for performance on Stratford's stages. The first part of the talk traces the steps in the process of creating the earliest books of the plays. Because no manuscript of a Shakespearean play survives, these playbooks are the starting point for all the various kinds of work done on Shakespeare's plays and poems. At every stage in the publishing process, decisions (and mistakes) were that affected the text as a physical object.

Some Stratford directors have a facsimile of the earliest quarto and folio texts at hand during rehearsals. While the facsimiles may be consulted from time to time, directors and actors normally work with a modern edition of a play. The second part of this talk looks briefly at the work of editors of the plays, who also make decisions that alter the transmission of the text.

Finally, we turn our attention to Stratford directors as 'revisers' of Shakespeare's works and the factors that influence their decisions: the interpretation of the play, the design of a show, contemporary staging practices, changing social values, and a director's 'reading' of the audience. The composite scripts of the plays, as we'll see with an excerpt from that for *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, make it clear that Shakespeare's words are certainly not sacred. Directors change words, distribute one character's lines to others, re-arrange the order of scenes, cut speeches, cut entire scenes, and insert new material of their own making. To put Stratford's revisions of Shakespeare into a larger historical social context, we shall focus our attention on a particularly controversial play, *The Merchant of Venice*. Stratford's nine productions of this play over 58 years reveal revisions and re-writings of Shakespeare's work that create and re-create Shylock, Antonio, Portia, and Jessica and the 'worlds' they inhabit.

Ted McGee