



Not Shakespeare: Bardolatry and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century by Richard W. Schoch

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NOT SHAKESPEARE: BARDOLATRY AND BURLESQUE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY. By Richard W. Schoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; pp. viii + 209. \$55.00 cloth.

What should compel us to give our attention to nineteenth-century burlesques of Shakespeare's plays? Are we too beholden to the Victorian concept of usefulness to acknowledge their wealth and richness? Richard W. Schoch states that the purpose of his *Not Shakespeare: Bardolatry and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century* is not merely to "restore an unjustly neglected series of comic plays and performances" (3). Through shifting our focus from burlesque's "form to [its] function" (19), Schoch wants to persuade us of the genre's power as a critical tool. "Rather than 'solving' the problem of the legitimate, the burlesque operates as an ongoing mode of criticism . . ." (86). Burlesque encourages us to undertake "acts of cultural engagement" (33). That the author succeeds so well in engaging the reader throughout this well-researched and highly readable study is a hallmark of its success.

Schoch points out that a legion of critics, from George Eliot to Jonathan Bate, has denied the worth of such works beside the majesty and sweep of Shakespeare's originals. Schoch's passion for these works is based on his belief that they have great importance as interpretive instruments: "What David Z. Saltz has written of Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine* (1977) applies equally to any nineteenth-century burlesque of *Hamlet*: that it 'spins a dense web of allusions to Shakespeare's play, and even more, to the mythologies that have accrued around the play over the centuries, and to the ideological implications of those mythologies'" (21). Schoch places Shakespearean burlesque in a comic tradition that has persisted in our theatrical culture from the days of Aristophanes to the present. "Because parody comically distorts both an original text and readers' expectations of that text, readers always understand a parody by reference to its original . . . whose value it at once both affirms and denies" (19). In other words, Shakespearean burlesques are welcome tonics that allow the spectator to see the works of Shakespeare more clearly—unimpeded by undue reverence. Schoch's book cautions us against the dangers of "Bardolatry," whatever its manifestation. If "performance [is] a cultural production and not . . . an isolated aesthetic artifact" (29), then any era's claim to correctness in reference to Shakespearean interpretation and staging is suspect, for it is inevitably biased and therefore inherently distorted.

The burlesques of plays as varied as *Hamlet* and *The Winter's Tale* challenged, through their ironic stance, nineteenth-century practices in the staging of Shakespeare's works. Legitimate actor-managers such as Charles Kean and Edwin Booth, emphasizing "antiquarian splendor and supernatural stage effects" (65), claimed to possess the authentic and correct way to produce Shakespeare's works. The burlesque theatre continually brought into question the ideological and artistic notions that were the basis for such claims.

Ignorance of specific Victorian references need not keep us from reading these plays if we "can recognize that ignorance—both ours and the original audience's—is the constitutive condition of burlesque spectating" (39). Parody and burlesque underscore the fundamental distinction between reality and its representation. Ignorance should not unduly prejudice us against works of cultural production with which we have limited or no familiarity. Indeed, Schoch suggests that ignorance can be provocative, stimulating, and extremely enticing.

Schoch manifestly admires and delights in the sheer virtuosity of nineteenth-century burlesque performers and authors. Striving to honor "the genealogies of acting traditions" (48) descending from such luminaries as Garrick and Kemble, the performers of the legitimate stage were not inherently superior to the stars of the burlesque theatre, who often excelled as actors, singers, dancers, acrobats, magicians, etc. Laughter is not easily won, a fact of performance that we all too easily overlook. The laughter that Shakespearean burlesque evoked in its audiences was not simply "the easily won laughter of mimicry [, but had] a great deal to do with the thoughtful laughter of a more searching parody."

In reading Schoch's book, I was reminded that when properly contextualized, a work of parody acquires considerable impact. For instance, a fictional work such as *The Producers* is revealed for the truly daring work it is when seen in the context of source material such as *Triumph of the Will*. Schoch provides wonderfully vivid accounts of Shakespearean burlesque in the context of Victorian bohemia and such nineteenth-century concerns as "colonialism, the dissemination of Western 'civilization' and evolution" (181). His discussions of the context surrounding such works as James Morgan's *Coriolanus: a Burlesque* (1846) and especially Robert and William Brough's *The Enchanted Isle; or, Raising the Wind Upon the Most Approved Principles* are exemplary, if for no other reason than that they lead one to think deeply about the meanings of Shakespeare's works and their uncanny

ability to reinvent themselves for succeeding ages. Burlesque clearly sought to contest the very notion of Shakespeare's status as a literary and theatrical icon: "The burlesque preserved Shakespeare by denying Shakespeare" (66). "Indeed . . . by performing 'not Shakespeare' it [burlesque] created an alternative space about just what performing Shakespeare means" (102). Directors and designers as well as Shakespearean scholars will profit from a careful reading of Schoch's lucid book, if only by being warned afresh of the dangers of interpretive hubris.

Finally, this is a very personal book, which, in communicating the author's passion for his material, incites in the reader a desire to read the burlesques with a respect for their wit and power, and—by reflection—to examine carefully his or her stance toward any sacred masterwork of dramatic literature. Should we enshrine such works we can easily embalm them, thereby robbing them of the vitality we strive to honor, preserve, and communicate viscerally to others.

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PETER SELLARS. Edited by Frédéric Maurin.
Les Voies de la Création Théâtrale 22. Paris:
CNRS Éditions, 2003; pp. 447. 49 Euros
paper.

Peter Sellars, the subject of Volume 22 of the *Voies de la Création Théâtrale* series, published by the French government think-tank CNRS (Centre National des Recherches Scientifiques) and edited by Frédéric Maurin, has been a source of fascination and exasperation to his supporters, audiences, and critics throughout his career. Dubbed at various times a *wunderkind*, iconoclast, genius, and trickster, his professional ambitions have seemed elusive, as he attached and detached himself from various institutions worldwide. Given opportunities and sometimes *carte blanche* to build, develop, and lead permanent theatrical organizations, Sellars arrived with imaginative ideas and enthusiasm only to leave his employers in the lurch shortly thereafter, as he did with the Boston Shakespeare Company, the American National Theatre at the Kennedy Center, and the Adelaide Festival of Arts in Australia. He appears to have willingly contributed to his reputation as an eccentric.

His aesthetic direction has been clearer, however. Early on he developed his guiding convic-

tions, summed up in the following assertions: "The theatre is as much a social act as an aesthetic," "[t]he most avant-garde work is in reality popular" (161), and "to do what has not yet been done" (261). The first statement, opines the books editor, has often been ignored by scholars and critics. Maurin's contention is that Sellars's sociopolitical commitment has been neglected or ignored in favor of his cleverness, boldness, humor, and technological wizardry. One of the book's objectives is to correct that oversight. Sellars emerges from the study a complex and engaged artist who believes in the power of theatrical art to effect change.

Although not chronological in form, the book traces Sellars's life in the theatre from his early childhood studies and experimentation with puppetry through 2001, a presumably mid-career point, since he was then forty-four. It provides descriptions and analyses of his numerous productions, some in extensive detail. The methodology consists of archival research, interviews, and attendance at rehearsals and performances. Its scholarship is admirable. As is customary in this series, *Peter Sellars* is the result of collaboration, here nineteen contributors. The book is divided into four main sections, three of which treat the principal "ways" (a reference to the series title, which means the ways of theatrical creation) Sellars has taken in his professional life; the fourth is composed of interviews with his colleagues. All the essays offer valuable information and insights into his work, although because of the book's structure, many cover similar ground, albeit from differing perspectives. The production descriptions are enhanced by 167 illustrations, of which twenty-four are large color plates. I wished for more of the latter, since the color photos are very helpful tools in bringing Sellars's ideas to life. Space limitations prevent me from offering more than a summary of this useful work.

Section one, "L'aimant lyrique" (The Lyric Magnetizer) deals with Sellars's opera experience. For Sellars, who frequently bemoans the state of contemporary theatre, opera, the heir to Greek tragedy, is the ultimate form of total theatre: "[t]he only form capable of evoking and representing the simultaneity of events, their confusion, their juxtaposition, the bitter tragedy of the world—in brief, all the chaos that constitutes the framework of contemporary history" (16). He argues that opera serves as a political metaphor in part because of its large themes—the fall of cities, the destruction of peoples, the struggle of good against evil. When the great operas were written, they dealt with pertinent political issues of the period, which for Sellars still reverberate today.