

# A LIFE WITH SHAKESPEARE

*a memoir*



Andrew Hilton

*Cover Photo:*

*Philip Locke as Ulysses, Nicholas Selby as Nestor, Roland Culver as Agamemnon and myself as Diomedes in the NT production of Troilus & Cressida, directed by Elijah Moshinsky and performed in London's Young Vic in the long, hot summer of 1976*

*Photo © Donald Cooper 1976*

I have been an actor and director for half a century. I have done what most actors do: everything from mainstream classical theatre, to theatre-in-education, to fringe theatre in London and Edinburgh, to radio drama, voice-overs, business training videos and role-playing, to television sit-coms and serials. I have driven an elderly Robert Mitchum around a Berkshire field for the American mini-series, *The Winds Of War*, been entertained with rude jokes by Sir John Gielgud during a long and tedious technical rehearsal for *Julius Caesar* at the National Theatre, and played Shakespeare in many exotic venues around the world, including the American University in Beirut, the amphitheatres in Fiesole and Verona, a completely unsuitable chemistry lecture room in Brooklyn, and most memorably for me, the Rialto Cinema in Limassol.

Through all of that two overriding passions stand out. Directing the premières – playing midwife I call it – to good new plays. And interpreting the work of Shakespeare.

I never, never tire of Shakespeare and I never cease to wonder at him. He has run through my life like a word in a stick of rock. Looking back, I find it bizarre that it was only in 1999, at the advanced age of 52 that I formed a company, *Shakespeare at the Tobacco Factory*, devoted to his plays.

I regard him not least as a teacher. Not a moralist or even a philosopher; those commonly anthologised sayings – “neither a borrower nor a lender be”, “as flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods”, “life’s a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more” – such pearls, if that is what they are, belong in the minds and mouths of Shakespeare’s characters, not of the man himself. I find in him instead the richest possible resource for understanding what human, *humane* life is and is not; a whole battery of litmus tests, if you like, for what is healthy, creative and good in our human exchange and what is fearful, reductive or destructive. And though I have often wished there had been a little more money in it, I feel myself highly privileged to have been able to spend so much of my life exploring his plays as actor and tutor, and finally as director.

I began young. My parents were heavily involved in good amateur theatre in Lancashire and Shakespeare seeped in at my pores as I got under people’s feet, rattling around the Bolton Little Theatre during long weekend Dress and Technical Rehearsals, or repeatedly watching my mother’s production of *Othello*, hoping that one night its story would change and all would end happily.

He seeped in with the smells of greasepaint, moth balls, bad drains and scene-painters’ size – all obligatory backstage odours in the fifties – mixed with the more untypical and far more pungent smell of coal gas from the corporation gas works next door.

Theatre, like so much of life, is almost odour-free now. I think it’s a shame.

After some school Shakespeare, I read English at Churchill College, Cambridge, where I was taught by a remarkable Shakespearian, Michael Long. I played in student drama – including Horatio in *Hamlet*, Gower in *Pericles* and Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale* – and directed a production of Middleton & Rowley’s *The Changeling*. Then with a company made up of Oxford and Cambridge students I toured the American East Coast with productions of *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar* directed by Jonathan Miller, then a celebrated doctor, humourist and filmmaker just beginning a new and illustrious career as a director of classic theatre and opera.

It was Jonathan who got me my start in professional theatre. One day – it was in the summer of 1971 – as we were rehearsing *Caesar* in London, he asked me if I fancied a job. Bernard Miles, the founder and Artistic Director of the Mermaid Theatre in Blackfriars had rung him to say “I need one of your students, Jonathan. He’ll read scripts, assist on productions, and if he makes out I’ll give him his own main house production after a year. Send someone down.” I was sent. Completely undecided about my ambitions for the future – I had actually trained as a teacher – I doubt if I could have passed a real interview to sweep the stage, but this wasn’t a real interview. Bernard, a professional raconteur, told me a few stories and offered me the job. “£15 a week – no, go on we’ll make it £16 – and luncheon vouchers. Start when you get back from America. But before you go, don’t miss our new production of *Othello*. I’m having a second crack at Iago (Bernard was 64 at the time) and we’re going to have a naked Desdemona. It’s there in the text – ‘Unpin me here’ she says to Emilia. People say it means ‘unpin my hair’ but it’s obviously her frock. We’re having a bit of trouble finding an actress, but it’ll all sort out. Have a good trip.”

So that winter I went off to America with *Julius Caesar* in the knowledge that I had a job in *London theatre* to go to on my return, having first endured the most embarrassing production of *Othello* I ever hope to see. The embarrassment was not predominantly in the nudity; Bernard’s Iago was, so very sadly, excruciating.

The theatre is a haphazard world in which you grab at any opportunity you can, and only the fortunate few set their sights on a particular kind of success and achieve it. Returning from America with dreams of staging Jacobean tragedy and Shakespeare, I found myself handed instead the Mermaid’s programme of entertainments about science for 9-12 year-olds. I knew precious little about science – at school I had failed O-Level chemistry and only scraped through in physics – but I was well advised by the then Director of the Children’s Gallery at the Science Museum, Geoffrey Sneed, and I seemed to ask the right (childish) questions about electricity, sound, basic mechanics etc. So much so that I began to write the shows myself. I remain particularly proud of a melodrama in which a large, cast-iron safe is stolen through the first floor window of HM Patent Office by the use of only the five basic machines: the lever, the pulley, the inclined plane, the wheel-and-axle and the screw. Written after I left the Mermaid, *The Patent Office Robbery* toured U.K. theatres five times between 1978 and 1987.

The Mermaid proved to be a three year diversion. There was to be no Shakespeare for me there, and I didn’t get that main house production. The schedule was swallowed up, first by the première of *Cowardy Custard* that ran for a year and then the Cole Porter sequel *Cole*, which ran for another. There was little space left for a rookie director with a barely convincing plan to revive a long-forgotten play by Harold Brighouse. But my luck wasn’t out. I left the Mermaid, read scripts for the Royal Court, wrote some programmes for Schools’ Radio, worked for a builder for a few weeks, then got another call from my fairy godmother, Jonathan Miller. He was directing *Measure for Measure* and *All’s Well that Ends Well* at the Greenwich Theatre. An actor had dropped out and could I play the Provost in *Measure* and a tiny character mysteriously called ‘the Astringer’ in *All’s Well*?

That meant working, in my first job as a professional actor, with the young Penelope Wilton, in blazing form as Isabella in *Measure* and Helena in *All’s Well*.

*Measure for Measure* was set in the 1920s in the Vienna of Sigmund Freud; it played fast and loose with the play in some respects as Miller’s productions often did, but at its best, in the great

scenes between Angelo and Isabella, it was by far the best bit of Shakespeare production I had ever seen, let alone been involved with.

From that I went almost immediately to join the National Theatre company, in its last months at the Old Vic in Waterloo. Again my luck was in. Just as an actor had dropped out of the Greenwich season, so David Yelland's understudy had asked to be released from Tony Harrison's British Raj version of Racine's *Phèdre*. They had agreed to let the actor go but were finding it hard to find a replacement who could handle Harrison's dazzling but difficult rhyming couplets. They decided I could and I got the job. So, untrained and unprepared as I was, had David Yelland ever gone sick, I would have found myself playing some mighty scenes on the Old Vic stage opposite Diana Rigg. David didn't miss a performance but I was installed in the company and small parts were to follow: in *Hamlet* and Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, both with Albert Finney; as Diomedes in *Troilus and Cressida*; and as Cinna the Poet in John Schlesinger's production of *Julius Caesar* with Sir John Gielgud.

And the great Peter Hall was now in charge, lining up the long-awaited move to the new building on the South Bank. Peter Hall, the man who'd created the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford and run it in the 1960s when I'd spent several September weeks camping up the river with school friends, punting down every evening to see the plays: the Wars of the Roses with Ian Holm magnificent as Richard III, Ian Richardson equally magnificent as Coriolanus, and many other now legendary performances. Even stuck to a plastic, six-shilling seat on the back row of the Gods in the late summer heat it had been magical stuff. Now I was in Peter Hall's National Theatre Company and being rehearsed by him in a production of *Hamlet*.

Ten weeks – only the National and the RSC can afford such generous rehearsal periods – ten weeks it seemed to me of carefully ironing a great play flat. This, you see, was 1975 and in the world of Shakespeare production – as in other things – there was a counter-revolution underway. To scroll back a little ...

I remember from the '50s and early '60s, and mainly, though not entirely, from school and amateur theatre, a handful of settings common to my own experience of Shakespeare's plays. For the English-set histories and comedies there'd be a black and white, timber-frame building off the lid of a biscuit tin. For the Italian-set plays a rostrum upstage and a deep blue sky on the cyclorama behind it. Delicate Venetian arches, which rarely seemed quite tall enough, made entrances to either side and sometimes spanned the whole of the upstage rostrum. Costumes in both involved a great deal of velvet, but not always enough body to give them shape. Wrinkly tights, of course, and a lot of pointy, elfin shoes. Fools sported cap and bells, with one leg blue and the other red. Tabarded officers held rather short pikes (to negotiate those low arches) with silver painted points and gaudy tassels. It was charming in its way, but an entirely self-referring world. It belonged nowhere but in the theatre of William Shakespeare. It was often cloyingly sweet, swept clean of the vulgarity, ugliness and violence that are part and parcel of Shakespeare's vision. It tended to be dull – "but never mind, isn't the poetry *marvellous*!"

But then it was the late '60s. I and my fellow students were revolting, about almost anything you care to mention. About the BOMB, the Vietnam War, and the reign of the Colonels in Greece; but also about the exams and the syllabus (how dare they tell us what to study and why?); about single sex colleges and about the theatre of the establishment: the emptyheaded West End of

London for its shallow comedies and saccharine musicals, but also the equally empty tradition of the classical theatre, most exquisitely typified by the honeyed voice of Sir John Gielgud.

In truth, Peter Hall at the RSC had already started the revolution. In 1965, in another famous production I was fortunate to catch, David Warner had played Hamlet as a bescarfed and disaffected student from Wittenburg university – an utterly twentieth Century impersonation, albeit in a Renaissance setting – and Hall and his designer John Bury, in their memorable History Cycles, had thrown out the gaudy tabards and cardboard pikes and set Shakespeare's warring barons in a harsher world of stone, steel and bronze.

But we were an arrogant lot and it didn't stop us thinking that we were the vanguard, that it was for us to reclaim Shakespeare for meaning and for relevance. We made it a point of principle to speak the verse badly, preferably in a regional accent. What was that 'marvellous poetry', after all, but a sonorous consolation, there to reassure and soothe, where we wanted to shock and disturb. So it was out with the polite public school singsong and in with the scaffolding, the barbed wire and the aggressive bark – often aimed directly and embarrassingly at you there in the third row.

It was silly, to some degree. But Shakespeare emerged from it at least partially cleansed of centuries of habit and convention, and freed from that entirely self-referring world that had so very, very little reality. We had asked "why are we doing this stuff?" If the only answer was, "Oh, because Sir Cyril would make such a noble Antony or Dame Edith such an affecting Portia" that cut no ice with us. We wanted a Shakespeare that counted again, plays that rubbed up against our own lives in a way that stimulated and challenged.

This movement spawned what we now know as 'directors' theatre'; concept led, often modern-dress interpretations, complete with mobile phones, sub-machine guns, computers and cocaine. To those who despise it, it's merely directors showing off. And showing off is often a part of it – "aren't I clever to spot this amazing parallel between *King Lear* and the Bosnian war?" If you've seen much Shakespeare you'll know the kind of thing. But though this has often gone way too far, it has at least attempted to build a bridge between Shakespeare's world and our own. Without that bridge what is the point? So we have become accustomed to finding the plays reimaged, shifted in period, altered in context, or radically reconceived to make their stance on race, and more recently on gender, acceptable to our own time.

But – returning to that later *Hamlet* at the National in 1975 – we were already living with a backlash. The Shakespeare scholar, John Russell Brown, recruited by Peter Hall as the National's Literary Manager in succession to Kenneth Tynan, had written a book called *Free Shakespeare*, and it was the counter-revolutionaries' Bible. "No more of this interpretation, please. We must free the text, offer up the words and let Shakespeare speak for himself." Particular targets were Jonathan Miller and Peter Brook, famous for his revolutionary production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where a plain white box and a number of trapezes served for the Athenian forest.

For a man like Peter Hall, working fantastic hours, heading an embattled organisation (the press hated the South Bank venture, the builders couldn't finish the job, and the stage staff were striking) – for Peter this was a godsend. Cast star names, pour money into set and costume and let the text – the whole text, every single word of it – speak for itself. It was a huge contrast to his more innovative days with a semi-permanent acting company in Stratford.

The reviews for *Hamlet* were mixed, but to my mind it was a disaster, no more than an elegantly packaged patchwork of individual actors' previous experiences of the play. The context was all very smooth and glossy, sumptuously costumed and beautifully lit – actually rather operatic – but underneath it all, it seemed to me, it was sterile, it had no coherence and no *world*.

So, by a series of lucky chances, and inside twelve months, I had been exposed to the two poles of Shakespeare production: the wilful and mischievous interpreter, Jonathan Miller – who could work to any budget, large or small and with any actors, from would-bes like me and my Oxbridge friends to Laurence Olivier and Penelope Wilton – and the grand but self-denying stage manager who relied completely on star casting, fabulous costumes and glossy design to impress.

I have often disagreed with Miller on aspects of Shakespeare interpretation but I was convinced then, as I still am, that the *Free Shakespeare*/hands off approach is not an option. A director has to make choices, bridge the divide between 1600 and now, not just direct the traffic on stage. You cannot be neutral. You must interpret.

This is the position I had arrived at – by those many fortuitous routes – certainly by the time I left the National Theatre in 1978 to join the Bristol Old Vic Company.

10 years were then to be spent pursuing the life of an actor. Some good theatre, Shakespeare and modern. I had fine parts in plays by David Hare and David Edgar in the Old Vic's Theatre Royal and I also played in Adrian Noble's two 'New Vic' studio Shakespeare productions – *Titus Andronicus* (Simon Callow as Titus) and *Timon of Athens* (John Shrapnel as Timon and Pete Postlethwaite as Apemantus). And later I would tour the Middle and Far East as Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice* for the British Council, and then go East again – to Hong Kong, Jordan and Qatar – as Hortensio in a Cambridge Theatre Company production of *The Taming of the Shrew*. But much of the rest was the everyday stuff that middle-range actors survive on: training videos and role-playing for businesses; radio drama; tv commercials; and utterly undemanding and stereotyped television roles – mine were usually banker, hospital consultant, barrister or judge.

This left a hunger to really get stuck into something. In 1982, with my writer-friends, Dominic Power and James Wilson, I set up a short-lived fringe company that produced Dominic's hilarious parody of the Bloomsbury Group, *Gillfins*, at Islington's Old Red Lion, and took James' *Homo Ferox* (an 80-minute monologue for me) to the Edinburgh Fringe. We lost money on both and though there was no moment of decision to abandon *Mind's Eye Theatre*, no further projects were proposed. For some years I had been teaching Shakespeare acting to American undergraduates enjoying their 'junior year abroad' in London, and later I was to get some satisfaction from teaching Shakespeare text-exercises at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, but still I looked elsewhere than Shakespeare for a solution. With my wife, Diana Favell, I became involved with Bristol's new-writing co-operative, Show of Strength. I would join as one of the three directors, and Diana as the production manager. The company had just mounted a single production in a pub in Bristol's Gloucester Road, and was looking for another pub venue in which to offer an annual autumn and winter season of four plays. Together we found the Hen & Chicken, a matter of yards down North Street BS3 from the then empty Tobacco Factory. The seasons that followed were to prove a significant factor in the evolution of a genuinely home-based theatre scene in Bristol. I had two exciting new plays by Dominic and James waiting to go – and in choosing once again to promote their work I felt I had at last taken charge of my own

life to some small degree.

To Dominic's *Tales of the Undead* and James' *Let's Do It* I added the UK premieres of Brian Friel's *Living Quarters* and the Australian Michael Gow's *Away*, and my first production of *Measure for Measure* (Tim Crouch as Angelo). But after five years of this – and we had a baby boy by this time – it was becoming difficult to sustain. There's no living in pub theatre and we were all feeling the financial strain. So, while Diana stuck with it for another year, in 1994 I left the company and tried to recover our position with more acting work. But still I dreamt of a scheme – some plan for a new, light-footed company that would do more new plays or perhaps even Shakespeare, that would bring all my experience together, finally create a design out of the muddle, and at the same time, pay!

### **Bristol's Tobacco Factory**

Four years later, in 1998, I went to see Show of Strength's first production at the Tobacco Factory. They had had to quit the Hen & Chicken, when it had become impossible to compete with live music from the bar below, then mounted a number of seasons in a medieval hall in the soulless Broadmead shopping area, then returned with huge relief to their old stamping ground in BS3. The Factory, a huge, red-brick complex, covering over a million square feet of the then unfashionable suburb, had been largely abandoned by Imperial Tobacco by the mid-1970s. Most of it had then lain empty, passing from speculator to speculator until someone lost their shirt on it and it fell to the Official Receiver to split it into saleable units, with the expectation that the buildings would all be demolished for redevelopment. Almost all of them were. But in 1993 the architect, George Ferguson, who would later become the first elected Mayor of Bristol, bought one of them to preserve it and give it new life as an experiment in mixed use. There would be studios, offices, a restaurant, a bar, apartments and on the first floor, a large arts space. In 1998 the place was still a building site (a Health & Safety officer asked Show of Strength, not entirely facetiously, if they were going to issue their audience with hard hats), it was unheated and had manifold problems, but I knew almost at once that I wanted to do Shakespeare there.

The idea developed rapidly. The space would be intimate without being poky. I could use all the experience I had gained directing Shakespeare exercises in large rooms at the Theatre School. It would be Shakespeare in close-up, but not Shakespeare with a cast of only four, five or six – that other late twentieth century trend in Shakespeare production – but the real thing: large-cast productions in an intimate space with no member of the audience sitting more than twenty feet away. There would be no rhetorical booming, but Shakespeare spoken 'trippingly on the tongue', as the great man required, by intelligent actors who understood what they were saying. Many of them would come, I knew, from among the best graduates of those classes at the Theatre School, others from the Show of Strength days, others from my many other ports of call along the way, others would just turn up.

We would do five spring seasons – following on Show of Strength's autumn and winter ones – of two plays, using a single ensemble. I knew I could get a substantial acting area and two hundred or more seats. I knew there was an audience for it. Those New Vic Studio productions years before had been sell-outs. The question was could I afford to do what the Bristol Old Vic had been able to do in the late seventies/early 80s but clearly couldn't afford to do any more?



I came up with a scheme that would work, just. We wouldn't look for public subsidy, but operate commercially. We sought private investment of at least £30,000 and were close to that target when we opened in February 2000. Wages in the first few years were extremely low – far short of Equity minimum – but enjoyed equally across the board, and in time, with several seasons playing to over 90% capacity, they rose to near union levels. In 2004 the company was reborn as a charity, still without public subsidy, but with significant support from Patrons and Trusts.

Artistically, I think we achieved what I set out to do. We offered not traditional but what I will always argue has been fundamentally honest Shakespeare. Though we edited, amended, sometimes even added text, we tried not to bend or distort, or to annex the plays to our own pre-occupations. We sought absolute clarity in language and narrative, and absolute reality in action. And we interpreted. Centuries of tradition cannot be scraped away to leave a 'pure' Shakespeare shining like newly unearthed gold; the traditions have to be replaced, most crucially by creating a credible world for each play. That *might* be Shakespeare's own world, as far as we can know and express it 400 years on. Or it might be one that Shakespeare didn't live to see. Either way, it must have social and economic force and credibility. Everyone in it – from the leading characters to the tiniest bit players – must know their world, know where they belong in it and have a more completely imagined life in it than 'the two hours traffic of the stage' will allow them to reveal.

To take just two examples. In *Twelfth Night* the Lady Olivia is neither just a pretty rich girl with a comedy maid, nor a grand duchess accustomed to her position of power, though she is almost always played in one of those two ways. Her father and her only brother have just died in quick succession, and against all expectation she has assumed control of a great estate – whose huge staff from the grooms and the gardeners to the cooks and the cleaners, would have been in 1600 almost without exception, men – and she is dependent on her Steward, Malvolio, for his knowledge and guidance. In Malvolio, tradition has handed down something like a butler in an upper middle class home, ludicrously self-important, with little to do except answer the door and return gifts. But tradition has not handed down the economic realities of his and Olivia's situation, which every member of Shakespeare's audience would have known. Namely, that the Steward in an aristocratic household like Olivia's was a powerful and influential figure, a sort of Executive Director. To Olivia, who has been so suddenly pitched into authority, he would be a rock; her protector, her teacher, her confidant. Shakespeare's audience would have known, too, that Malvolio was a gentleman in his own right – perhaps with his own establishment managed by his own steward in a microcosm of Olivia's. And they would also have known that, while marriages between great ladies and their stewards were severely frowned on – certainly in the upper echelons of society – they were by no means unknown. As Malvolio himself muses, there are precedents for "this that I dream of."

It is in this context of reality – and a degree of credibility in Malvolio's ambition – that the play assumes its greatest power and sharpest comedy. But though Shakespeare takes it as read, it's not our context; our social and economic weave is different and we can find ourselves at a loss trying to navigate the world of 1600.

2018's rather disappointing RSC production of *Twelfth Night* clearly re-imagined the play as a Victorian *Upstairs, Downstairs*, a context in which Duke Orsino's threat to kill Viola at the end

of the play is frankly ridiculous, a petulant fantasy rather than the truly ugly possibility Shakespeare conceived.

So there are good reasons not to move *Twelfth Night* from its Renaissance setting, but to try to give that setting some real substance. And to present Orsino as the young Renaissance prince that he is – a scholar and a soldier, and a ruler with absolute power over life and death.

I am far from confident that my own production in 2002 wholly achieved that ambition, but I do know that every modern-set production I have seen – and I have seen a great many – have trivialised the context and severely misread Olivia, Orsino and Malvolio.

A very different play, and a different solution: *Coriolanus*. You may not know that play well, if at all. For me it's one of the greatest of them all, but it's so empty of sympathetic characters that it has never become popular. It is, of course, a play about the ancient Romans. Up to a point. To Shakespeare and his contemporaries the heroes of Rome – and their culture and values – were felt, we believe, as almost contemporary. And that's how Shakespeare's audience would have witnessed the play – in contemporary Jacobean clothes. But what would speak, most eloquently, to an audience now? Jacobean design was an option, but lacking in strong classical reference. But if we were to go back to Rome itself, to the togas and the short military skirts that Hollywood has defined for us we might have lost the sense that Shakespeare was writing about *England* through the glass of Roman history. There is this doubleness in the Roman plays that I believed we had to capture.

My solution for *Coriolanus* was an English, eighteenth century setting. Eighteenth century classicism we are more familiar with. It's part of our image of the age, in art, in architecture and in dress. And the eighteenth century English were as much in awe of Rome as the Jacobean were. So here we have the elegance of the eighteenth century ruling class in the figure of Menenius, flanked by two, rather puritanical, Tribunes of the People -



*Menenius*: Paul  
Nicholson  
*Tribunes*: David  
Collins &  
Jonathan Nibbs

and the brutality of the wars Caius Marcius is engaged in. Here he has entered – ‘a thing of

blood', as the text has it – from the Volscian city, Corioli, which he has conquered almost single-handed, and which will earn him his honorific, 'Coriolanus':

*Coriolanus*: Gyuri  
Sarossy  
Photos © Alan Moore  
2001



That production was extremely well received by the critics – the Times called it ‘thrilling’ – but a few audience members took me to task, believing, somewhat against the evidence, that Shakespeare intended the play to be costumed in period, with togas, short military skirts and many an artificially bronzed knee.

Despite such departures from tradition, you might have gathered by now that I have been cautious. In my 27 Shakespeare productions at the Factory there were no AK47s, computers or mobile phones, in fact no play moved further forward than the 1930s. I cringe when the word ‘sword’ refers to a machine gun, or ‘doublet’ to a pin-stripe suit. But there are much more significant problems in updating. An autocratic regime in 2020 has a very different feel to one in 1600. The layers of devotion, obedience and obligation afforded King Duncan in *Macbeth*, King Richard the Second in his play, or King Lear in his, are crucially, *crucially* different from those accrued by a fascist dictator in the 20<sup>th</sup> century or a corrupt tyrant in the 21<sup>st</sup>. The threads that tie societies together really do matter. If you want to produce a play about now, and set it now, then *write* it. Shakespeare is much more than a lucky dip tub of juicy plots with a marketable brand.

But he is not easy. As I have already said, my chief concern has always been clarity. Clarity of statement, and clarity of story. It seems to me ridiculous that an actor should stand on stage uttering the incomprehensible. And if I allow that to happen I’m effectively telling the audience that it’s O.K. just to get the gist; that they don’t have to listen with the sharply critical ear that they would bring to a modern play. But that is exactly how I want them to listen. So understanding must be made possible. That means taking out the few obsolete words and replacing them. It means occasionally adjusting the grammar. It means cutting out a line or two, even a paragraph, if even Shakespeare scholars cannot fathom them.

Narrative clarity can call for larger interventions. Shakespeare clearly wrote under extreme time pressure. You can see the consequences in changes of mind mid-play. At the beginning of *Twelfth Night* Viola declares that she will get access to Orsino's court by pretending to be a eunuch and singing for her supper. In the event she does neither – Shakespeare's change of mind, I believe, not Viola's. But he doesn't have time to go back and adjust. He may already have handed his first few scenes to costly professional scribes to produce the individual cue-scripts for the actors to learn.

In *Twelfth Night* this is an insignificant problem and needs no adjustment. But midway through *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare finds he has to pause the action to fill in a rather complex back-story for Mariana, Angelo's jilted fiancée. This slows the play just as it should be gathering pace, and really tests the audience's patience and concentration. For my production Dominic Power, who was to collaborate with me throughout the Factory seasons, found a way to establish Mariana's story much earlier, in an entirely new scene of about 50 lines, in which the Duke of Vienna, by this point posing as a friar, hears her confession.

No-one seemed to notice that this was a cuckoo in the nest, or at least no-one objected. And Dominic worked a very similar trick in *The Comedy of Errors*, where the Courtesan is introduced rather too late in the play, again requiring an uncomfortably belated, and rather indigestible, piece of back-story. Another new scene, inserted much earlier in the narrative, solved the problem. Again, no-one appeared to recognise it as new writing. One national critic happily credited its ripest language to Shakespeare.

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such interference with the texts was taboo. Cut them, to bring running times down to an acceptable level, yes, but amend them, no. To some degree that was a reaction to the wholesale butchery that eighteenth and nineteenth century producers had committed. A new approach to Shakespeare production by William Poel and Harley Granville Barker in the years before the 1st World War elevated the text above the Victorians' elaborate stage artifice and inaugurated a long period of sometimes quite extreme deference to Shakespeare's words. So Dominic and I prepared ourselves for howls of anguish. But they never came. When we produced *The Taming of the Shrew* two reviewers congratulated us for restoring the epilogue from an 'early quarto'. We know of no early quarto of *The Taming of the Shrew* – the play survives only in the later, Folio edition – and there is no epilogue. Our epilogue was 100% Dominic Power. If you're familiar with that play, you'll know that it begins with a prologue ('The Induction') in which a Warwickshire tinker, Christopher Sly, is taken from a ditch dead-drunk, dressed in fine clothes and tricked into believing that he is a great Lord with a beautiful wife for whom the Italian play of Kate and Petruchio is performed by a troupe of travelling players. This framing device is often cut completely, not least because it has no conclusion. But as Dominic and I saw it, Christopher Sly's experience is one of the glories of the piece, a truly Pirandellian conception, so we decided we should keep him in *and* complete his story. After the end of the Kate/Petruchio tale he awakes in the ditch he has fallen asleep in the night before, but to a new reality, a new conception of himself.

In 2016 Dominic and I went further than that, in adaptations to *All's Well that Ends Well* that perhaps crossed the line between finessing on a text and materially changing it. *All's Well* is a play that I had considered programming in at least two earlier seasons, but my reservations about it had made me draw back. In common with many readers, actors and audiences I had found the ending unconvincing in event and uncertain in tone; is the play a dark-toned, but true

comedy – i.e. with a genuinely happy ending – or a ‘problem play’ in which Shakespeare intended the resolution to be felt rather as we experience the resolution of *Measure for Measure* – uncomfortably ambiguous, more the manipulative Duke’s resolution than Shakespeare’s. Is Helena a manipulator to match the Duke, perhaps richly deserving of an over-privileged slob like Bertram for a husband? Dominic and I felt more sympathetic to both these young people than some others have and we agreed that Dominic should commit his boldest edit yet. First, this was to transform Lavatch, the Clown in the Countess Rossillion’s household, into Bertram’s music and dancing teacher. This man would be in love with Bertram himself, jealous and disapproving of Helena and eventually driven near to madness by her marriage and subsequent pursuit of her reluctant husband. He would make a far more plausible ambassador to the French Court than his oafish predecessor and permit two new songs to be added to the text (Dominic is an excellent lyricist) as well as adding another layer to the theme of unrequited love. But though this entailed a fairly major rewrite, perhaps an even bolder move was to allow Bertram twelve lines of guilty reflection following the false news of Helena’s death. The Folio text is curiously silent on Bertram’s receipt of this, surely a major event in his personal journey. This is what Dominic wrote for him:

Helena dead? The playmate of my youth  
 turn’d to dust by my indifference?  
 Too fond she was, and I too cold at heart,  
 e’en now not mourning but in wanton flight  
 from a bed of luxury, a virgin here defil’d.  
 Dare I catch my reflection in a glass,  
 the visage that returns is blotch’d with sin,  
 botch’d by nature inwardly malform’d,  
 while outwardly the world esteems me fair.  
 Appetite and pride have at a stroke  
 murder’d the lady and my immortal soul.  
 To Rossillion and family now am I fit  
 to show my duty and play the hypocrite.

It certainly prepared the way for a more convincing reunion between the two at the conclusion.

You may say this is a slippery slope to a wholesale rewriting; you may even feel an outrage that others may have felt at the time but felt it pointless to express. I am unrepentant. I believe we honour, not desecrate, Shakespeare by questioning his work in these ways. If, in the case of *All’s Well that Ends Well*, Dominic and I radically misjudged Shakespeare’s intention then it’s important to say that none of these edits and additions will accrue to the texts in the future. They are of the moment only, and will be forgotten while the great Quartos and Folios will march on and on.

With very few exceptions our Tobacco Factory Shakespeares were extremely well received. Audiences packed the theatre, its capacity gradually rising to around 300, recording those 90% sales time and time again. There were exceptions; *Titus Andronicus* played to only 40% or so and nearly brought us to bankruptcy; and our non-Shakespeares – Chekhov, Middleton & Rowley, Molière and Sheridan – also fared more modestly, only Tom Stoppard bucking that trend with many a would-be audience member turned away from his fabulous *Arcadia* in 2014.

I had not expected the national critics to travel to Bristol to review us, but many of them did: Paul Taylor of *The Independent*, Lyn Gardner of *The Guardian*, John Peter of *The Sunday Times*, Susannah Clapp of *The Observer*, Jeremy Kingston of *The Times*, and Dominic Cavendish of *The Daily Telegraph* chief among them. There were glowing tributes to the clarity and economy of the productions, and to the unselfishness of the ensemble. Lyn Gardner remarked that our casts ‘made acting look as easy as drinking a glass of water’; and Susannah Clapp called them ‘free of celebrity but full of stars’. For all of us involved it was a golden time.

**But lastly** – why do all this on an old Factory floor, with a ceiling that’s too low, structural pillars that interrupt the view, and the risk that a pizza delivery scooter will roar past the building at the most inappropriate moment?

Those New Vic Shakespeare productions in the ‘70’s were enormously significant for me. The intimacy and the freedom of the rehearsal period – rarely, if ever, conducted on a stage, almost always in a large, daylit room with just a few chairs, a desk for the director and stage manager and a rather grubby coffee station for the 15 minute breaks – these conditions could be enormously exciting – creative we would say. When the characters’ stories and their passions don’t have to be projected up to the gallery, but can be lived as truthfully as possible in front of you, when nuance in language is echoed and reinforced by nuance in the face – after all, ours is the age of the film – even kings and madmen, and great heroes from history become real and recognisable. But all too often we experienced the disappointment of transferring this child of our imaginations to the conventional stage, to its great set and elaborate costumes, finding that something of that excitement was lost in the journey, buried somehow under an artifice not of our choosing. At worst our fellow actors no longer looked like real human beings at all; at best, the need to project difficult language into a large space seemed to wipe out nuance and limit actor-to-actor communication.

Audiences had been of the same mind. Suddenly, in the New Vic Studio, they had found Shakespeare’s language, spoken quietly, comprehensible, and his characters, in close-up, recognisably human. It was to be the same at the Factory. After a performance of *King Lear* in 2000, our opening production, a man approached me enthusiastically: “you’ve rewritten it, haven’t you – I understood every word”. It was hard to persuade him that, in that instance at least, we hadn’t rewritten a syllable. He was reacting with the same excitement that we had all felt, watching our fellow actors at work in rehearsal. Yes, we had moved a few yards from the rehearsal room to a theatre, but it didn’t feel like that; more that we had explored a play privately for three or four weeks and then without a great change of gear or location, simply admitted the audience to observe and share what we were doing.

There is something that’s a little harder to express – something about the makeshift that taps into the very roots of theatre and the art of the actor. We cannot return to the days of Hamlet at Elsinore, when a troupe of actors could show up virtually unannounced, rustle up an audience and present a play on an improvised platform that very night. Society and theatre have changed too much. But there is some part of an actor that feels like a stranger when she enters a great palace of culture with acres of mauve carpet and floors of offices devoted to management, marketing and audience outreach. A part that might even dream of putting a torch under it all, before leaping onto a box to tell the story of the fire to anyone who cares to stop and listen.

Fortunately, there are alternatives to such an extreme scenario. Theatre in an abandoned tobacco factory is one of them.

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*Postscript, June 2025*

Shakespeare at the Tobacco Factory was wound up in 2021. I chart its history, production by production, in my book, *Staging the Word, the Life & Death of a Theatre Company*, which I self-published in 2024.<sup>1</sup> Looking back, I wonder if the company's 20-year career was perhaps the last example in the UK of ensemble Shakespeare – at least of *large cast* ensemble Shakespeare – and to a lesser degree of ensemble theatre itself. The RSC seems to have abandoned the form, and the old seasonal repertory companies that the advent of the Arts Council breathed new life into have all but vanished. Actor employment outside London has diminished markedly, as have revivals of the great back-catalogue of British plays from the sixteenth century to the twentieth. It is one of those enormous sea-changes in the context of our lives that so often go unremarked; like the catastrophic loss (to the car) of the working-class child's natural playground, the city street.

Will the pendulum swing back? I fear it may not, and that the theatre world I was privileged to enjoy for half a century as actor, director and audience may be gone for good. But while the work of many a lesser playwright may well be consigned to history, Shakespeare theatre will surely survive – though in what form I hesitate to speculate.

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<sup>1</sup> Order a copy directky from me at [apmhilton@gmail.com](mailto:apmhilton@gmail.com). At £24.50 inclusive of p&p, I do it £5 cheaper than Amazon!