

An Interview with W.B. Worthen*

The interview has been conducted by
Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney (University of Łódź, Poland)

Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney (later as KKC):

I appreciate very much that you have agreed to this interview with me, which will constitute an introduction to the volume of our journal devoted to the symposium “Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance in Polish Theatre.” The symposium, attended by eminent Polish Shakespeare specialists, was organized by the International Shakespeare Research Centre in March 2016, at the University of Lodz. You were invited as a Special Guest of the Rector of the University. The title of the symposium was inspired by your book, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*, which evoked a great interest all over the world. It has been translated into many languages, including Polish. Could you, please, explain why you have taken Shakespeare as the main object of your research?

W.B. Worthen (later as WBW):

Well, the funny thing is that I never intended to work on Shakespeare. I did a lot of Shakespeare and early modern drama studies as an undergraduate student, and had intended to study poetry and poetics in my doctoral studies in English at Princeton. But I somehow slid toward the study of drama, and still consider my principal field to be modern drama, modern performance, and drama and performance theory. In the late 1980s, though, I became irritated with how performance was represented in “Shakespeare Performance” criticism, and wrote an article that to my complete astonishment was accepted by *Shakespeare Quarterly*—nothing like anger to motivate writing! And although I had written about early modern acting and drama as a chapter in my dissertation and first book, *The Idea of the Actor*, I actually consider this article my first “real” Shakespeare piece. I then turned to modern drama, but became interested in the questions of materiality and textuality, which seemed to me to have a lot to do with how we model the “performance” of writing on the page, and on the stage, too. So that led me to questions of authority and so back to Shakespeare. Since

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that time, I've found Shakespearean drama and the very special circumstances of its publication and performance to be a very rich site of exemplification: I don't think I so much *do* Shakespeare studies as *use* Shakespeare to exemplify question of the modeling of performance, especially performance that uses writing in some way.

KKC:

One of the academically exciting aspects of your book is its synthetization of several current discourses, such as, for example, textual studies, new historicism and performance criticism in the context of authorship and authority. Before we proceed further, I would be grateful if you could give us your definition, your understanding of performance studies?

WBW:

OK, here it goes. The first thing I'd say is that I've written a couple of essays trying to accomplish this task and they've succeeded with some people and really failed with others! And, of course, as someone trained in literary studies who writes often about theatre, I might be seen as professionally disqualified from answering this question well. Or fairly. So, again, here it goes. I think performance studies tries to consider performance—aesthetic performance, social performance, cultural performance, even industrial performance—as a single, complex field of activity, one susceptible to theoretical characterization and analysis. The challenges here are many, and the first generation or so of performance studies tended to, in my view, define performance studies exclusively: *against* literary studies, *against* theatre studies, and so on. But I think there's a more active interplay of disciplinary work taking place now, one indeed often fostered by the people who were, let's say, a bit more embattled or pugnacious in the 1980s and 1990s.

KKC:

Your book explicitly presents the relationship between plays, texts and performances. What is your attitude to the stage (performances) in the contexts of Shakespeare as a product of a contemporary culture?

WBW:

What a great question. As usual, I think several incompatible things. First, I am skeptical of the position accorded Shakespeare on the theatrical horizon: too many of my friends and colleagues see *only* Shakespeare, which to me is a bit like only reading detective fiction, or reading only sports magazines: you don't really understand the medium, particularly if you understand the medium (wrongly in my view) as determined by one kind of writing. Second, on the horizon of contemporary culture, I think that theatre, always said to be dead or dying, is actually in very good shape, no longer on life support. Perhaps it's because we ("we"—people in industrialized countries with the money to support

the habit) spend so much time interacting with virtual and recorded performance. So while theatre is a very tiny part of the horizon of contemporary culture, it's actually often a very exciting part, which is great. The problem for me is that Shakespeare isn't always the exciting part of that part of the horizon. And, of course, Shakespeare isn't only a stage commodity. There is a huge amount of Shakespeare performance online; much of it is, like much theatrical Shakespeare, derivative, not terribly imaginative, largely conventional—in other words, it's just like most other artistic activity is and has always been. But every so often Shakespeare remains a site of powerful imaginative and productive activity, activity that is, for better and worse, licensed by the enormous cultural authority of Shakespeare, both the name and the works.

KKC:

What do you exactly mean by the term “productive” intertextuality?

WBW:

Well, it's always hard to answer the question of what I mean, or meant. But what I mean here is that some forms of intertextuality are really generative, develop new insights, new meanings through juxtaposition, through repetition and revision (Suzan-Lori Parks's term), through a kind of alienating dialogue. Sometimes intertextuality is just showing off, sometimes it's banal, sometimes it's the dying cadence of an echo. But sometimes it provokes new thinking. You know, probably the most formative literary influences—well the most formative intellectual and affective influences—for me have been Eliot and Beckett: they're both productive and provocative users of intertextuality. I'm thinking of *Endgame*, for example: “My kingdom for a nightman.” Let alone “It is finished.”

KKC:

In Poland under the communist regime, Shakespeare's texts were used as a commentary upon the totalitarian reality. The synchronic reading of his plays resulted in a theatre aesthetics that manifested itself in the *mise en scene*: scenery, use of space, costume, movements, gestures and voice. Can we speak about Shakespearean authority in such productions?

WBW:

Well, I'd hesitate to answer that question coming from you: you'd know much better than I. But in a general way, it seems to me that authority doesn't reside in the text but in the things the text seems to be made to say and do: so in other words, one sign of an “authoritative” production used to be doublets and pumpkin pants; Peter Brook seemed to find an “authoritative” vision of the stagey theatrical magic of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* in circus-y tricks (balancing plates on a stick); perhaps even Heiner Müller found something “authoritative” regarding Hamlet's isolation and the historical uses of Hamlet as a figure of alienated political consciousness in *Hamletmachine*. So I think that if

the director and designer think of their work as recuperative, trying to say something “Shakespearean” with their production, that discourse doesn’t have to emerge through the text: it can appear anywhere in the *mise-en-scène*. For me, though, it’s precisely the idea that Shakespeare can be *used* to say things without Shakespeare’s authority that’s the most intriguing: using Shakespeare to say things Shakespeare couldn’t say then, and perhaps as a bourgeois craftsman wouldn’t say now, but that we want to be able to say for ourselves here and now, wherever that may be. This might sound a lot like Terry Hawkes in *Meaning by Shakespeare*, and it’s certainly drawn from his thinking.

KKC:

Can Shakespearean authority ever produce an interpretive closure in contemporary theatre?

WBW:

Yes, it does it all the time, and to bad effect. I talk to theatre people all the time who know what a Shakespeare performance can and should do. I don’t mean to criticize them: literary people know what a critical reading of Shakespeare can and should do, too, much of the time anyway. This is where Hawkes’s “or” is so powerful, the notion that repetition produces the conditions for alterity. For me, this means that, sort of like Keats “On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again,” when I go to see *Measure for Measure* or *Hamlet* once again, I know in part what I may be in for. But I resist the “again.” Perhaps it’s because I’m somehow alienated from my own experience, but I don’t often sit in the theatre thinking of past productions, “this is so much better/worse than Helen Mirren.” I just am there, in the here and now, wanting to be in the here and now. And, I think, perhaps again unlike other people, I don’t want to be in it with Shakespeare. I want to be in it with these people, working with me and often for me (it’s capitalism, ever since Shakespeare), undertaking something together that has Shakespearean writing as part of its mediation. And I don’t like feeling like I have the answer when it’s over. I like feeling like the theatre, for all its conventionality, delivers something that’s not fully comprehensible.

KKC:

To what extent can the cinematographic concept “auteur” justify the transmission of Shakespeare’s authority to modern theatre? Is it possible to trace recurring techniques used by directors and critics to reproduce “authentic” Shakespearean meanings across the centuries?

WBW:

Yes, I think so. There’s a Welles Shakespeare, there’s certainly a pretty Branagh Shakespeare, a Brook Shakespeare. But of course the director was invented for just that purpose, like the orchestra conductor: to deliver the “work of art” from a scripted medium to a performance medium that was understood to be ineffably

incapable of realizing it. So any director stands in a relation of infidelity to the author, all the while being tasked with the job of delivering the author (well, that was the 19th century idea anyway, but you hear it all the time still). And, yes, it is possible to trace the signs of the claim to authenticity or fidelity: for Lichtenberg, Garrick pausing with his arms outstretched, *and knocking off his hat!* was the sign of the transmission of a truly Shakespearean horror at seeing the Ghost in *Hamlet*. In that case, it was the actor as vehicle. Irving's weird mannerisms seemed to interfere with projecting Shakespearean authority to many of his critics (Shaw was right: he'd have been a great Gregers Werle or Oswald Alving; all that twitchiness seemed too modern for Shakespeare). You're the expert on Ira Aldridge, so I'm on shaky ground here, but I'd hazard to say that his performances were partly so exciting to their audiences because his enormous dignity surprised his public, were held in tension with the (racist) notion that no black man could ever aspire to iterate that (Shakespearean) authority—and he very clearly did. So when you think of how, say, Bergman or Brook or Peter Hall articulate the entire processual form of the performance as indebted to Shakespearean authority, I think you see how for us it's that interaction between author and director as *auteur* that matters.

KKC:

Your third chapter, “Shakespeare’s Body: Acting and the Designs of Authority,” focuses on British and American texts presenting theories of acting, texts about actors’ training and stories written by performers who describe their work in selected productions. Would your analyses be different if you were to present this issue in the context that is so popular nowadays of an international Shakespeare?

WBW:

Yes, it certainly would be different. One of the things I was working on then, and which seems to have made relatively little traction, had to do with the notion that acting is an ideologically rich and complicated process, the use of bodies trained to signify in a system that claims to refer to the practices of daily life, however far removed or stylized that system might be. So the notion that modern actors speak, in Kristin Linklater’s phrase, in Shakespeare’s Voice, is perfectly illustrative: we use the authority of Shakespeare to justify our own physical training as though it were recuperative. This is largely my complaint about industrial actor training, a process in which, as the chair of a theatre department in which many of my students want to be industrialized, I am complicit: what does it mean not to alienate notions of “character,” let alone “language” or “greatness” or “humanity” in actor training of any kind? For this reason, I’m really attracted to any kind of theatre work that seems to offer alternative kinds of performance work, however it might be developed. A director I know likes to take the cast to a strange location at night, say a park, and turn them loose to

develop new sensory experiences; how that work will relate to the performance cannot be anticipated, but I'd be disappointed if the idea were as simple as "turn that fear into something to use in your character." Instead, I think there are a number of ways in which rehearsal and training methods, some drawn from sources outside Western theatre, some drawn from outside theatre per se, can be used to dislocate and so enrich our understanding of what performance might be made to do.

KKC:

When your book was published, several critics rightly called it one of the most important publications devoted to the question of Shakespeare's authorial influence in twentieth century criticism. Has Shakespeare's authorial influence changed in the twenty first century?

WBW:

Well, I'm flattered and gratified, though in my view it's really the work of textual critique and cultural theory that has unseated the author, work that I've followed much more than I've innovated. But is there still Shakespeare in the third millennium? Yes. He is all over the curriculum of universities, and all over actor training too (just look at how conventional in terms of language, character, action, politics most Acting Shakespeare classes are; and how uninformed by the implications that scholarship might hold for what we might do with Shakespearean writing onstage). What I do think is interesting, though, is that many of the questions I raised around the turn of the century, and even more recently, have a new inflection: the notion of the textual instability of Shakespeare's plays has changed them on the cultural horizon in visible ways; the complication of authorship as a commercial commodity dependent on collaboration is now well known (Shakespeare co-author of *Macbeth*, and possibly of *Arden of Faversham*); and I think the combinatory rhetoric of digital culture has led to much less anxiety about mixing and mashing Shakespearean writing with a wide range of forms of production. I'm not thinking here just of hip-hop Shakespeare, but of forms of production that simply move beyond the representational realism ascribed to Shakespearean theatre. So Shakespeare, authoritative Shakespeare is far from dead in classrooms, on the stage, on TV, on film, on digital screens. But sometimes I think of *that* Shakespeare as less alive than merely undead. The good news is that everywhere you look, there's a commitment to making something new via Shakespearean writing, which is perhaps the only way to kill the zombies.