



This Rough Magic

A Peer-Reviewed, Academic, Online Journal

Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval and Renaissance Literature



Playing Shakespeare. By John Barton. London:

Methuen Drama, 2009. Pp. ix + 210.

Reviewer(s): Michael Boecherer

Reviewed Work(s):

Source: *This Rough Magic*, Vol. 3, No. 1, (June 2012), pp. 90-92.

Published by: www.thisroughmagic.org

Stable URL: <http://www.thisroughmagic.org/boecherer%20review%202.html>

***Playing Shakespeare.* By John Barton. London:
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John Barton's *Playing Shakespeare* is a transcription of nine BBC television programs, which originally aired in the UK in 1984. For those who did not catch the original airing of these programs, the series beautifully engaged the audience on a variety of Shakespearean topics. One could easily classify John Barton's *Playing Shakespeare* as a master class in acting, as Barton spends the entirety of the series directing and conversing with some of the most important Shakespearean actors of the 20th century: Sir Ian McKellan, Dame Judi Dench, Sir Ben Kingsley, and Sir Patrick Stewart to name but a few. While it might be easy to characterize this text as one best suited for drama students, John Barton's *Playing Shakespeare* will appeal to instructors and students alike. The book provides great insight into unlocking Shakespearean text, and encourages the reader to envision Shakespeare's drama using a variety of techniques.

This text, like the television programs it stems from, is constructed as a dialogue - one in which Barton and his actors discuss various problems and challenges associated with Shakespearean drama, poetry, and verse. The book is laid out in two parts -

"Objective Things" and "Subjective Things" - and each section is comprised of six individual chapters. Whereas Part I looks at the physical aspects of Shakespeare's craft (i.e., verse, prose, character, set speeches, soliloquy, and the sonnets), Part II takes on the challenge of interpreting the emotions (i.e., irony and ambiguity, passion and coolness, etc....) locked within Shakespeare's language.

Playing Shakespeare's strength comes in the plethora of examples studied by Barton and his actors. These individuals dissect sections from twenty-four of Shakespeare's plays, as well as countless sonnets, through question and answer discussion and acting exercises. These discussions and acting exercises give the reader greater understanding of *how* Shakespeare's language works and *how* it can be manipulated to evoke both clarity and audience responses. Translating these techniques into the classroom setting would be easy to accomplish due to the step by step methods that Barton and his actors lay out.

The weaknesses of Barton's text, if there are any, are few and far between. Readers may be put off by the fact that Barton's *Playing Shakespeare* is little more than a word for word transcription of the original BBC production from which it takes its name. One could argue that it would be easier to insert Barton into one's class by playing sections of the original BBC telecast for their students, and discussing the material after viewing it. Individuals unaware of modern Shakespearean drama may also wonder who Ian McKellan, Patrick Stewart, or Judi Dench are - as none of the

actors highlighted in the text are introduced beyond their names. These, of course, are minor quibbles; anyone who focuses on them ignores the fact that John Barton's *Playing Shakespeare* is a book of ideas - one that is meant to be studied and utilized. Rather than "trying to push [his] interpretations as something authoritative or absolute," Barton is "more concerned with suggesting a way of thinking than with trying to say this is the *only* way a particular speech can be done" (Barton, 133).

John Barton's *Playing Shakespeare* can be found in a variety of editions. Newer editions printed after 2009 have three more chapters than earlier printings, and come packaged with a DVD in which Barton interviews Judi Dench, Ian McKellan, Patrick Stewart, and Jane Lapotaire. Though the DVD may prove useful given the proper setting, the true value of John Barton's *Playing Shakespeare* lies in the text itself.