



This Rough Magic

A Peer-Reviewed, Academic, Online Journal

Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval and Renaissance Literature



Living with Shakespeare: Essays by Writers, Actors, and Directors. Edited by Susannah Carson

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Reviewed Work(s):

Source: *This Rough Magic*, Vol. 4, No. 1, (June, 2013), pp. 93-95.

Published by: www.thisroughmagic.org

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

“Living with Shakespeare: Essays by Writers, Actors, and Directors.

Edited by Susannah Carson. New York:

Vintage Books, 2013. Pp. 528.”

reviewed by Jacqueline Porte

Sometimes a text can come along that brings a wealth of new perspectives to a familiar field, casting new light on works that academia has held close to its heart for centuries. This text comes in the form of the thought-provoking *Living with Shakespeare: Essays by Writers, Actors, and Directors*, edited by Susannah Carson. The collection can help teachers and professors introduce a fresh approach to the works of William Shakespeare. Carson presents pieces from surprising sources, ranging from comic book and graphic novel writer Matt Sturges to accomplished thespian Sir Ben Kingsley.

The collection provides fascinating and different perspectives to plays that hold such depth. Graphic novel author and comic artist Bill Willingham discusses the active participation of the author-viewer (“or –reader”) that is necessitated by Shakespeare’s plays. He tells of how he watched a performance of *The Merchant of Venice*, only to find that based on his companion’s response, it seemed as if they had watched two completely different plays. Sir Antony Sher discusses both overcoming and using his South African roots while working with the Royal Shakespeare Company: he first

struggles with a lifeless instruction of the texts and later is thrilled and moved by Laurence Olivier's trilogy of Shakespeare films. Richard Scholar, a Fellow and Tutor in French at Oriel College, discusses free-thinking and rhetoric in *Julius Caesar*, while director and author Dominic Dromgoole muses on audience participation in character development, and actor James Earl Jones discusses his recurring and ever-enlightening role as Othello. The broad range of disciplines and foci of the authors featured in the collection provide an excellent depiction of the richness to be discovered within Shakespeare's works.

These essays are quite, light reads, and their tone ranges from serious to exclamatory to humorous—Carson feels no compunction against allowing her authors a swear word or two. There is a great sense of freedom and accessibility provided by the collection that will give apprehensive readers the push to recognize that every perspective on Shakespeare is valid one. Carson does not, however, ignore the secondary criticism we have grown to expect and respect. Angus Fletcher, for example, Emeritus Professor of English at the City University of New York explores the relationship between Tolstoy and the Shakespearian Gesture, but much of the text focuses on very personal responses to the plays as felt by those who have formed a creative partnership with Shakespeare.

One could certainly use this text as a rich source for highlighting the variation students might find in their own analyses of their assigned reading, but the most

significant message of the collection is that Shakespeare's works are not meant merely for consumption as part of an assigned reading, but for communion, for creating a relationship with. With the aid of this collection, professors and teachers will be well-equipped, not only to introduce students to secondary writings on Shakespeare, but to them how to internalize his stories and form a lifelong bond with the bard himself.