



This Rough Magic

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A Lifetime With Shakespeare: Notes From An American Director of All 38 Plays.

By Paul Barry. McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2010. 252pp.

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*A Lifetime With Shakespeare:
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It is a towering accomplishment to have seen, let alone directed, each and every one of Shakespeare's plays. Writing a book about this endeavor, however, may prove a tad problematic for a reader.

Paul Barry brings a refreshing take to the table when discussing the reason for his approach to the plays. He is a careful reader and pays close attention to what is so often overlooked in modern performance: the imbedded stage directions. His discussion of this tool, so valuable both in the classroom and when directing the plays, will be indispensable to inform any instructor teaching Shakespeare at any level.

The sections discussing Early Modern staging and its relevance to a 21st century approach are stimulating, as are the discussions of the need to instruct actors in the art of fighting with early modern weapons and how to accomplish this feat economically. All too often, when firearms are substituted for edged weapons, the audience is less than convinced and distracted from the flow of the performance. And who has not seen

a stage or film production of a play that makes the lasting impression a question of questionable choices on the director's part? Happily, not so Paul Barry's.

Barry's respect for and discussions of English history, both generally, but especially in connection with the History Plays, grounds his director's comments in fertile soil. A production cannot necessarily teach history, but those engaged in presenting the play should know what the background is.

Especially enjoyable are the parts of *A Lifetime with Shakespeare* where an experienced man of the theater shares insights into what works on stage and how, what does not, and why and how to create humor. All too often Shakespeare's bawdy side is downplayed or omitted in performance, and it is refreshing to see and read an experienced director who recognizes the place of humor on stage in both comedy and tragedy. And all too often the classroom neglects to visit the stage, the fact that drama is created for performance; this book invites us to go there.

The problem with the book comes with the territory: all plays are discussed. A reader very early on runs into the problem of organization: why this order? Also, why are some plays, like *Hamlet*, so summarily dealt with, while others, like the Histories, are treated in deep, often very repetitive, detail? Summary and sometimes the lack of it is problematic as well. Again, the Histories are summarized in detail, while a play like *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is mostly left with the label, "we don't care much for it." Some

plays seem to have been produced and written about just to score a perfect record.

Maybe such feelings should not be this clearly expressed.

And finally, there is the question of the title. The front cover claims *A Lifetime with Shakespeare*, while the spine announces *A Lifetime of Shakespeare*.

That said, the problem of reviewing a book like this involves reading it through from cover to cover, something that cannot be recommended for Barry's book. This reviewer recommends reading the chapters not listing a play first, then dipping into the titles when the need arises, which it certainly will for any instructor teaching Shakespeare. The relevancy to the classroom and the grounding of the plays in their time and the actual text cannot be stressed enough.