

## Shakespeare Matrix Across the Continent

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Nicoleta CINPOEȘ, Florence MARCH, Paul PRESCOTT, eds. *Shakespeare on European Festival Stages*. London – New York: Bloomsbury, 2022. XV+235 p.

„Triumph my Britain, thou hast one to show / To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe. / He was not of an age but for all time!” Ben Jonson’s famous eulogy in the 1623 edition of Shakespeare’s works could well be the motto of this informative and inspiring volume of essays written and compiled by eminent international scholars of Shakespeare, published in the prestigious *The Arden Shakespeare* series. In twelve fascinating chapters, seventeen authors of *Shakespeare on European Festival Stages* show how the influence of the Bard can be seen in the second half of the twentieth century to the present day through a specific medium and genre, the performing arts festival.

Ideally, a festival is much more than a series of random events. Festival research is a relatively new, dynamically developing academic field, and although in the last decade or two researchers have approached the phenomenon mainly from the perspective of economics, marketing, and management, we find that Alessandro Falassi’s definition, which claims to be complete, is much more helpful for our interpretation. According to the researcher, who viewed the phenomenon from the perspective of anthropology and ritual, „[i]n the social sciences, *festival* commonly means a periodic celebration composed of a multiplicity of ritual forms and events, directly or indirectly affecting all members of a community and explicitly or implicitly showing the basic values, the ideology, and the worldview that are shared by com-

munity members and are the basis of their social identity.”<sup>1</sup>

However careful and thorough our definition, the festival field is a relatively fast-changing area, where it seems that events that make it clear early on exactly what makes them different from other related events can survive and thrive for a long time. This is important to emphasise because a naive reader might think that there are few more boring themes than festivals centred around a single playwright. One may believe that they all work the same way: the audience is treated to a succession of better or worse performances of the works of the chosen author.

Some might treat this volume with similar prejudices, but they could not be more wrong: *Shakespeare on European Festival Stages* shares knowledge that goes far beyond the individual case studies, when it also offers some thoughtful contributions to the relationship between cult and canon, and the practical aspects of the Shakespeare industry. In addition, the volume offers a range of concrete examples of current trends in contemporary world theatre such as community theatre, collaborative creation, cross-cultural theatre, and site- or city-specific art.

The foreword, co-authored by the three editors of the book, Nicoleta Cinpoeș, Florence March, and Paul Prescott, is a careful introduction to the chosen topic, which, in addition to defining all four words of the title with exhaustive precision, also indirectly explains the reason for the book’s publication, convincingly arguing for its necessity. The authors do not exaggerate when they define the genre of their book as a ‘travel compan-

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<sup>1</sup> Alessandro FALASSI, „Festival”, in Thomas A. GREEN, ed., *Folklore* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1997), 296.

ion'<sup>2</sup> on the first page: as the reader moves further and further away in time and space from 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Stratford and London, the itinerary of a brand-new Shakespearean Grand Tour, structured and organised in a different way from any previous one, is nicely outlined.

The tour is conducted by qualified tourist guides: theatre scholars, English Renaissance and Shakespeare scholars, critics, dramaturgs, artistic advisors lead the ambitious tourists through the various chapters of the guidebook. As a result, the speakers often occupy an intermediate position: they view the festival as an unbiased, 'objective' external eye, while the texts are made truly exciting by the 'internal' perspective that often emerges. In other words, all the texts here are written by the person who *had to* write them. The careful editorial work is evident in every contribution.

These are well-prepared, thorough analyses that provide a wealth of factual information, but also offer an interpretation of it, and although they could be used for promotional purposes, either directly or indirectly, in a rather injudicious way (if only because many of the events presented in the book are members of the European Shakespeare Festival Network /ESFN/), they actually complement the protean image of Shakespeare, with an attempt to delineate a cultural phenomenon as highly variable as the protagonist. The texts, as the foreword emphasises, oscillate between 'love and alienation' (p. 3), while at the same time proudly claiming to celebrate rather than criticise the phenomena they analyse.

The editors immediately make the rules of the game clear: according to them, the focus would have been greatly misplaced if the

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<sup>2</sup> Paul PRESCOTT, Nicoleta CINPOEȘ and Florence MARCH, „Shakespeare on European festival stages: an introduction”, in Nicoleta CINPOEȘ, Florence MARCH, Paul PRESCOTT, eds., *Shakespeare on European Festival Stages* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2022), 1.

United Kingdom's Shakespeare-related events had been included. However, the country's traditional, or more accurately, highly conservative tradition of acting Shakespeare, i.e. the performances and the festivals in the UK are not really worthy of a separate volume.

The concept is therefore to be welcomed, if only because of the other, not so hidden agenda behind the decision: the volume is clearly thinking in terms of dislocation and decentralization, festivalization, eventification, and inclusiveness. I must admit that, while it was very enlightening to read about the functioning of important hubs of the European (Shakespeare) festival circuit, such as Avignon or Craiova, I felt privileged to learn about Shakespeare events taking place, for example, in the courtyard of a school in a small village in Bulgaria, or within the ancient walls of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Serbian villa.

The only Shakespeare festival happening in a village (!) in Europe is hosted in a Bulgarian settlement of 1,500 inhabitants. What has been going on in Patalenitsa since 1999 is a model for the continent: the event, which was born from pro bono work in the backyard of a school, is in fact a redefinition of the term festival. Two decades of the festival have changed the whole image of the village: there is an exceptional pedagogical and intergenerational work of social inclusiveness, which is also increasingly followed and supported by professional theatre professionals.<sup>3</sup> Yesterday's child actors are now returning to the village as graduate directors and actors: a social model is being built, with Shakespeare's name on it.

Villa Stanković, half an hour's drive from Novi Sad, has hosted the annual Itaka Shakespeare Festival since 2014. While the organisers often select lesser-known plays of the author and promote innovative, alternative,

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<sup>3</sup> Boika SOKOLOVA, Kirilka STAVREVA, „From a schoolyard play to civic festival: Shakespeare in the Bulgarian village of Patalenitsa”, in CINPOEȘ, MARCH, PRESCOTT, eds., *Shakespeare on European...*, 160–164.

transcultural approaches, they also place great emphasis on contextual events. Artistic Director Nikita Milovijević sums up his expectations for the invited productions: "For me it is most important to ask how to turn Shakespeare into something I can relate to, how to make Shakespeare my own experience."<sup>4</sup>

I have chosen my two examples for a reason: while there is a strong tradition of Shakespeare festivals taking place in castles and fortresses on the continent, there have been some refreshingly unusual venues for some time now. As the essays in this volume sharply point out, in the case of theatre location is never just one of the components, but a factor influencing and determining the totality of the performance at any given time: aesthetics always stem from the choice of location, but if a director consciously confronts the site, it can also give rise to some enlivening contradictions.

One would hardly dispute that Shakespeare is a "truly globalized phenomenon". However, this constellation is made more exciting and contemporary by the addition we find on these pages: the most recent portrait of Shakespeare is above all "pan-European and post-English" (p. 4). And this is by no means the end of the definition that prevails on the pages of this volume: as the chapters progress, we encounter new definitions of Shakespeare, each one dependent on social contexts, historical circumstances, language, and culture.

During the great post-World War II frenzy of festival creation in Western Europe, Shakespeare is most often seen as a 'peace fighter'. His universal, transnational character was recognised not only by cultural diplomats, but also by artists, many of whom have staged Shakespeare's core works of the West-

ern canon. The next turning point was marked by the fall of the Iron Curtain, when Shakespeare's works became "vehicles for – *inter alia* – an opening of borders and reconnection with a cross-national network of theatre-makers, a celebration of local, regional and national excellence, and (not insignificantly) a pretext for restorative joy" (p. 9). Shakespeare is also a brand (not only within the theatre world), a playwright with mythical status, who has a leading role in promoting theatre as a form of communication worldwide. Not only that: many of the essays in this volume confirm the comment made in the context of the Shakespeare festivals in France that the playwright is "a catalyst for creativity, a factor of social cohesion and a vector of emancipation" (p. 27). In Eastern European countries, Shakespeare often appeared at key historical moments in close association with (lost) freedom: in the Czech regions he was a symbol of change and cultural emancipation (p. 56-57), and in the Romanian dictatorship he was a "language for survival" (p. 96).

As for the structure of the volume, after the helpful introduction, eleven separate chapters give an account of seventeen European Shakespeare festivals. There is an almost equal number of festivals in Eastern and Western Europe, and the editors have taken care to ensure a representative compilation. The relationship between centre and periphery can also be studied historically: it is instructive to note how, say, the Craiova or Gyula festivals were created from scratch, i.e. without any strong existing local traditions, and then successfully built themselves up.

Craiova is a textbook example of the festival boom that took place around the regime changes in Eastern Europe. The event has grown enormously over three decades, thanks to the consistent building and ambition of festival director Emil Boroghină. The foundation behind the festival maintains a library, supports book publishing, and runs an archive, etc. Its work has an impact throughout the country, as the Craiova Shakespeare Festival

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Alexandra PORTMANN, „Shakespeare's Globe in Inđija: A portrait of Itaka Shakespeare Festival (Serbia)“, in CINPOEȘ, MARCH, PRESCOTT, eds., *Shakespeare on European...*, 222.

has made it possible to publish the new translation of Shakespeare's complete works in Romanian.<sup>5</sup>

A decade and a half later, in 2005, the Shakespeare Festival was launched in Gyula, a small Hungarian town on the Romanian border. Its start and development are also linked to one man, director József Gedeon, who revived an old, flickering tradition when he decided to entertain the visitors of the spa town with Hungarian and international Shakespeare performances every year. His bold undertaking has both paid off and failed: since his death in 2016, the festival has had other priorities, but at least it is still running.<sup>6</sup> The presentation of the "Hungarian Shakespeare" was and remains an important goal, with accompanying programmes and a conference to accompany the performances that come to Gyula from all over the world.

The order of the chapters in the book unfolds not on a West-East axis, but on a past-present axis: the Festival d'Avignon, founded in 1947, is the oldest of the festivals discussed, while the most recent offshoot is the open-air event launched in 2014 at Villa Stanković close to Inđija, Serbia. Yet the authors sometimes sacrifice strict chronology in order to emphasise geographical, thematic, and cultural links. In Elsinore Castle (Helsingør), Shakespeare has been present almost continuously since 1916, if not in the form of a festival, and not only with *Hamlet*. An example from the other end of the timeline: in the second chapter on Shakespeare festivals in southern France, we find Shake-Nice! in the city of Nice,

<sup>5</sup> Nicoleta CINPOEȘ, „A world's stage for many players: the International Shakespeare Festival – Craiova (Romania)”, in CINPOEȘ, MARCH, PRESCOTT, eds., *Shakespeare on European...*, 98, 108.

<sup>6</sup> Júlia PARAIZS, Ágnes MATUSKA, „The Gyula Shakespeare Festival (Hungary): Local, national, European, global”, in CINPOEȘ, MARCH, PRESCOTT, eds., *Shakespeare on European...*, 178–182.

now suspended, founded only in 2015 by Irina Brook.

Almost all chapters are also focused on country reports: the authors summarise a brief history of Shakespeare playing in the region in question, with particular reference to previous festivals or events that could be considered as such. Several regions in Eastern Europe boast of having been visited by travelling English actors as early as Shakespeare's time, in many cases indirectly laying the foundations for playing Shakespeare in the centuries that followed.

Several chapters begin by recalling one or more of the emblematic Shakespeare performances at the festival, which the authors believe have markedly defined the profile of the event, even long term. The Avignon Festival is not a Shakespeare festival in the strict sense of the word, but the English playwright was a prominent presence from the very beginning: Jean Vilar's *Richard II* was staged in four editions between 1947 and 1953, and he directed *Henry IV* in 1950 and *Macbeth* in 1954. However, the note made by Florence March is important to remember: Vilar proudly resisted the temptation of "guaranteed income" or "share capital", which was the hallmark of Shakespeare.<sup>7</sup> (The history of the Almagro Festivals in Spain is a good example of this real danger. Here, from the 1980s until recently, Shakespeare almost dominated the programme, but in 2019 the new management of the festival decided to favour the great authors of the Spanish Golden Age at the expense of the English playwright.<sup>8</sup>) Back to the performances that create the festival profile: a notable example

<sup>7</sup> Florence MARCH, „Shaping democratic festivals through Shakespeare in southern France: Avignon, Montpellier, Nice”, in CINPOEȘ, MARCH, PRESCOTT, eds. *Shakespeare on European...*, 23.

<sup>8</sup> Isabel GUERRERO, „Shakespeare at the Almagro festivals: reinventing the plays in Spain”, in CINPOEȘ, MARCH, PRESCOTT, eds., *Shakespeare on European...*, 43.

in Craiova is *Ubu Rex with Scenes from Macbeth* by the great Romanian director Silviu Purcărete, which premiered in 1990 and was shown in Edinburgh and Braunschweig the following year. The production was a milestone: in a country newly free of dictatorship, it went far beyond itself, and with its help Purcărete was discovered by Western Europe.<sup>9</sup>

The collection is also inclusive in that it includes small, medium, and large-scale festivals by international standards. The history of each festival is not simply recalled by dates, names, and performances: the authors place the subject of their chapter in front of the narrowly defined local, regional, national, and often international context. Among other things, the composition of the audience is discussed, with references to age, nationality, or even the primary interests of the target group. They also talk about subsidy and ticketing ratios, and in this context, they discuss the festival as an economic enterprise.

It is welcomed that future oriented thinking is a feature of many festivals, and probably also a key to their survival. Neuss, Rome, Gdańsk, Patalenitsa are just a few of the many examples where the management imagines the present and the near future with workshops and performances made by and made for young people, addressing and activating as wide a circle as possible. The editorial work for the publication took place during and after the pandemic, with several authors describing the strategy of each festival under the unexpected circumstances: in Craiova, an online edition of recordings of Shakespeare performances from the past decades was organised, and in Patalenitsa *Measure for Measure* was presented in a minimalist staging.

The details on the different festivals' program structure are fascinating. In Hungary, we often complain that, despite the fact that we have three dozen Shakespeare plays left,

<sup>9</sup> Nicoleta CINPOEȘ, „A world's stage...”, 93–94.

directors keep coming up with the same four or five tried and tested titles. The next time we hear a similar complaint, we should remember that other theatre cultures with much more favourable financial and infrastructural conditions cannot necessarily be called risk-taking in this respect either. It would seem from this volume that even the largest and oldest festivals do not use more than fifteen to twenty titles from all the author's works, and that the favourites are mostly coincided everywhere, regardless of tradition or geographical location. It is fair to say that *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Tempest* have been the most frequently performed Shakespeare plays across Europe for many decades.

The venues, as I have pointed out, speak for themselves. The architectural solutions that are (almost) contemporary with Shakespeare, or at least communicate in their design and construction with the English Renaissance theatre of the time, form a separate group. By bringing the medieval Cour d'Honneur du Palais des Papes into play, Avignon created an important (new) tradition early on, by breaking the architectural code of the Italian playhouse and repositioning its audience. The Almagro Festival's 17th century Corral de comedias is a very exciting venue in terms of its history. The opening of the courtyard of Prague Castle by Václav Havel to Shakespeare was a clear message: the democratic ethos that pervaded the author's world was suddenly in the hands of ordinary Czech citizens in 1990. The popularity of the outdoor Shakespeare Festival at Elsinore Castle hardly needs explaining, and Anne Sophie Refskou draws the reader's attention to a qualified case of dislocation when she describes the uncanny nature of the venue and writes about the “unhomely encounters” that took place there.<sup>10</sup> In Rome or Neuss, Globe replicas

<sup>10</sup> Anne Sophie REFSKOU, „Unhomely Shakespeares: interculturalism and diplomacy in

help to evoke the atmosphere of Shakespeare's time.

In the context of this latter, important location in Germany, Vanessa Schormann draws attention to the possibility of experiencing a characteristic that has been much repeated in Shakespeare studies: that is, the text of the play was primarily to be heard during the Renaissance, and the visual aspects of the spectacle were secondary.<sup>11</sup>

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Elsinore", in CINPOEȘ, MARCH, PRESCOTT, eds., *Shakespeare on European...*, 198–200.

<sup>11</sup> Vanessa SCHORMANN, „Globalatry in Germany: The Shakespeare Festival at Neuss – a

The stakes are very similar for each of the festivals bearing Shakespeare's name, albeit by different means, in different financial circumstances and cultural conditions: when an experience of similar weight is made directly tangible to the 21<sup>st</sup> century spectator, a bridge is in fact built from the present to Shakespeare's time.

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dramaturg's perspective", in CINPOEȘ, MARCH, PRESCOTT, eds., *Shakespeare on European...*, 87.