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Shakespeare in Ten Acts

The British Library's exhibition *Shakespeare in Ten Acts* is occasioned by the 400th anniversary this year of Shakespeare's death. I don't actually find it that intuitive to celebrate the date of someone's death – will there be special commemorations of Margaret Thatcher in 2063, or David Bowie in 4016? – but this year has provided a rationale for the further celebration of one figure who rarely goes uncelebrated.

Each of the exhibition's ten rooms centres in principle on a particular performance or production from the last four centuries. The relevant production is highlighted, but orbited also by other, auxiliary items and texts. Thus a room about the first black Othello in Britain (the African American Ira Aldridge) is also the place for images and records of other instances of *Othello* and of multi-racial casting in other plays. Artefacts include a letter from Laurence Olivier refusing to call for Paul Robeson to play Othello in Britain, on the grounds that he was keen to 'have a bash' at the role himself.

Most of the featured plays are well known, but some of the productions were new to me: notably the performance of *Hamlet* on the sailing ship the Red Dragon, anchored off the coast of Africa in 1607, when Shakespeare still had several late works to write. In fact the exhibition seems unsure whether the seaborne performances actually took place, but they serve as occasion for a display of international transpositions of Shakespeare: brochures and texts for *Hamlet* in Japanese, *Macbeth* in Russian and so on.

I also only had faint memories of the most infamous Shakespeare forgery. In the late 18th century William Henry Ireland produced a fake cache of Bardic documents, including a saccharine letter to Anne Hathaway and, most notably, an entire history play. The story of *Vortigern* was drawn from Holinshed's Chronicles, and based on a real 5th-century warlord; otherwise I'd have thought 'Vortigern' was a poor attempt at a name fit for a Shakespearean protagonist. It's intriguing that the play was staged for one night only in Drury Lane: with the commercial momentum that made its premiere profitable, why not continue the run? Or if it was too absurd for an audience not to laugh, how did it make it to the stage in the first place? This 18th-century room also features the Shakespeare Jubilee in Stratford which seems, with high English bathos, to have been partially rained off. In any case, puzzlingly, it was never scheduled to include a single line from Shakespeare, despite being organized by David Garrick, his era's most celebrated Shakespearean.

Late in the exhibition Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c.1970) is extensively represented, with a room standing in for Brook's white cube stage, a swing like those ridden by his fairies (but out of action on this visit), the bright green dress of his Titania

and posters from the aesthetic era of flower power. It's perhaps curious, but probably somehow coherent, that Brook's minimalist modernism should have consorted so readily with countercultural extravagance. Shakespeare on film is not extensively represented in this exhibition: there's a glimpse of the impressive ending of *Prospero's Books*, but Olivier's Technicolour *Henry V* or Welles' *Chimes at Midnight* might have merited a fuller display.

It's all good, but actually most compelling is the start. The exhibition's 'Prologue' offers an original 1623 Folio ('looke / Not on his Picture, but his Booke', opposite the most famous image of the writer) and Robert Greene's *Groat's-Worth of Wit* (1592) with a little hand pointing to its most famously Bardophobic passage. These relics keep coming: in the next room is *Nine Days Wonder* (1600), Will Kemp's own account of his dance from London to Norwich, reminding me why my former colleague Adam Smyth called Kemp the Alan Partridge of his day. The exhibition also offers at least two instances of Shakespeare's signature, alongside those of other businessmen on dense legal documents: the canny 'maltjobber and moneylender' as a speech in Joyce's *Ulysses* pictures him. He seems to have written his name differently at different times: perhaps he was cautious about it, having once (*Henry VI Part II*) depicted a clerk being hanged by angry rebels 'with his pen and ink-horn about his neck' because he was able to sign his name. The rebels' leader arraigns another figure: 'thou hast caused printing to be used [...] thou has built a paper mill'. But it's a good thing that some of these papers survived. You can learn from exhibitions like this, but their greatest reward is just the awe of proximity to such papers and objects, casually handled centuries ago by people who can hardly have known how much history they were making.