

Anecdotal Shakespeare: A New Performance History. Paul Menzer.
London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015. xx + 254 pp. \$29.95.

Menzer's splendid book is an engaging compilation of Shakespeare theater anecdotes, showing how they supplement our understanding of Shakespeare's plays. Books tend to be more enjoyable to read when their authors enjoyed writing them. This is such a book. Menzer's work at the American Shakespeare Center admirably qualifies him for his scholarly treatment of this "populist form of theatre history" (12). His research among the archives of the Folger Shakespeare Library provided much of the material on the five plays he explores, as he read "dozens of actors' memoirs" and "thousands of theatrical scrapbooks" (xiv).

Menzer's preface, introduction, and coda are especially compelling, as he makes numerous cogent generalizations about theater anecdotes. He convincingly shows that these stories enact and elaborate on core features of Shakespeare's plays as they "defibrillate dormant material" (xviii); and that, while "anecdotes are not built to convey facts, they're designed to deliver truth" (20). Further, "If a play attempts to hide something, anecdotes are sure to find it" (xix). Anecdotes are like screen memories in psychoanalysis, containing important truths, whatever their distortions. I heard about a director who felt his Ophelia needed to play her role less innocently, but more aggressively and sexually. When she resisted, he resorted to sexualized interactions with her, trying to steer her performance in the desired direction. On stage, she ignored his advice. After the play closed, however, she aggressively sued him for sexual harassment. A chapter on *Othello*, in narrating blackface mishaps, explains that a "ham," in the theater, originates from using ham fat to grease actors' faces; the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the term "ham-fatter" for a poor actor to 1880. Menzer reports that *Richard III* has created "an unusually coherent body [of anecdotes] that stage the antagonism between an actor and his author. . . . Richard murders his way through the play . . . until there's no one left to kill, except the author" (139–40). Going off script "is the single most effective way to cope with the dispiriting fact that everything . . . has been written down for [actors]" (139).

Anecdotes draw attention to aspects of the text that might otherwise be overlooked. Some stories lead Menzer to conclude, in his chapter on *Romeo and Juliet*, that Elizabethan balcony scenes "are haunted by elopement and incest" (129). Anecdotes are

often bathetic, puncturing theater's idealistic illusions. They may help actors cope with the psychological strains of their profession. One personal anecdote about that strain: leaving a theater, I ran into the actor who had just played the role of a disturbed woman. Explaining that I am a psychoanalyst, I asked if she thought her character might have dissociative identity disorder (multiple personality). "My character didn't have any psychiatric problems," she claimed — despite her having had a psychiatric hospitalization. Perhaps it was her character, not really the actor, who was in denial.

In his chapter on *Hamlet*, Menzer narrates the provenance of real skulls that provide the iconic memento mori for the gravediggers' scene. One story claims that when Shakespeare's remains were dug up, his skull "did not look like his effigy" (36). Menzer eschews most anecdotes about Shakespeare himself. He favors published anecdotes over oral history, thus concluding that the *Macbeth* name taboo dates only to the 1930s. However, certain cultural experiences make such a deep impression that they get passed on orally, from one generation to the next, for centuries. All the residents of one remote, illiterate Indonesian village survived the 2004 tsunami because they obeyed the injunction that had been passed down since their last tsunami, in 1907: "If the ground shakes, run to the hills." Oral history, necessarily, constitutes the only archives of the illiterate. Menzer observes that "efforts to leave the stage always leave themselves open to anecdotes" (55). Samuel Schoenbaum recounts such a story — Queen Elizabeth, determined to get Shakespeare's attention when he was on stage, finally blocked his exit and dropped her glove. Shakespeare returned the glove to her, improvising the lines, "And though now bent on this high embassy, / Yet stoop we to take up our cousin's glove" (*Shakespeare's Lives* [1991], 225). This contrasts sharply with actors who forgot their lines when performing for the queen (7).

All Shakespeareans will want to read this entertaining and enlightening contribution to performance studies.

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