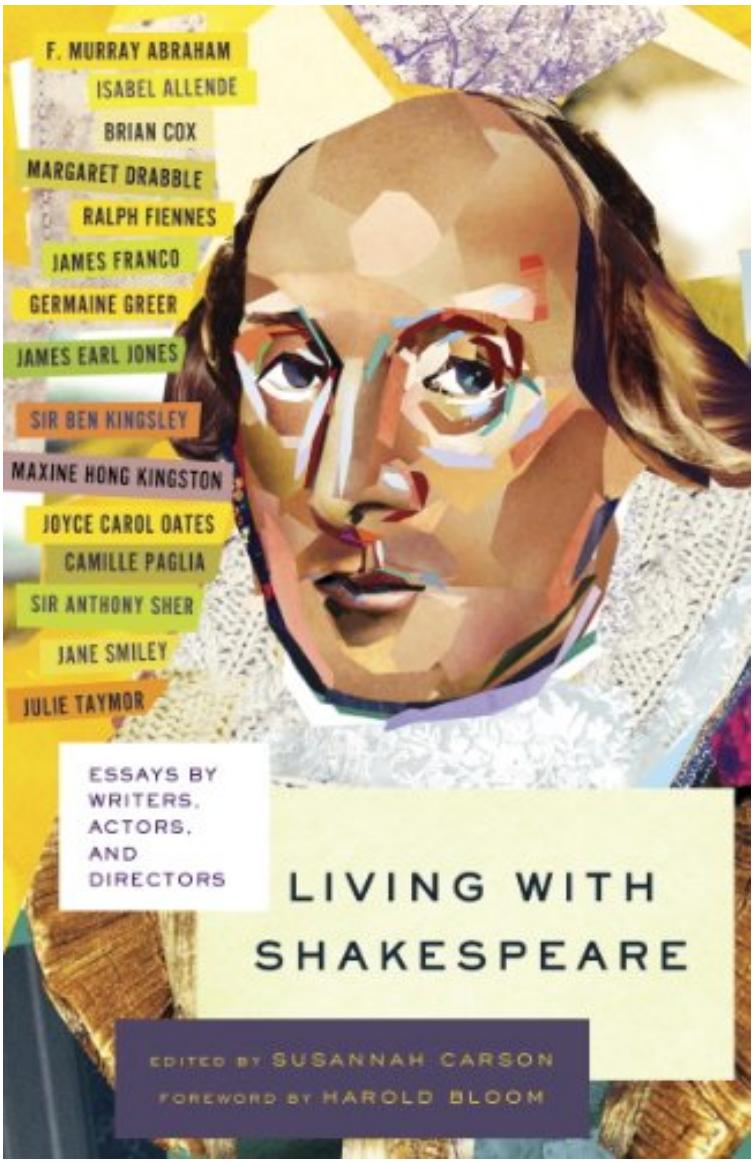
Living with Shakespeare: Essays by Writers, Actors, and Directors



Par Susannah Carson
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[Online library] Living with Shakespeare: Essays by Writers, Actors, and Directors

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurWhy Shakespeare? What explains our continued fascination with his poems and plays? In Living with Shakespeare, Susannah Carson invites forty actors, directors, scholars, and writers to reflect on why his work is still such a vital part of our culture.We hear from James Earl Jones on reclaiming Othello as a tragic hero, Julie Taymor on turning Prospero into Prospera, Camille Paglia on teaching the plays to actors, F. Murray Abraham on gaining an audiences sympathy for Shylock, Sir Ben Kingsley on communicating Shakespeares ideas through performance, Germaine Greer on the playwrights home life,

Dame Harriet Walter on the complexity of his heroines, Brian Cox on social conflict in his time and ours, Jane Smiley on transposing King Lear to Iowa in A Thousand Acres, and Sir Antony Sher on feeling at home in Shakespeares language. Together these essays provide a fresh appreciation of Shakespeares works as a living legacy to be read, seen, performed, adapted, revised, wrestled with, and embraced by creative professionals and lay enthusiasts alike.F. Murray Abraham Isabel Allende Cicely Berry Eve Best Eleanor Brown Stanley Cavell Karin Coonrod Brian Cox Peter David Margaret Drabble Dominic Dromgoole David Farr Fiasco Theater Ralph Fiennes Angus Fletcher James Franco Alan Gordon Germaine Greer Barry John James Earl Jones Sir Ben Kingsley Maxine Hong Kingston Rory Kinnear J. D. McClatchy Conor McCreery Tobias Menzies Joyce Carol Oates Camille Paglia James Prosek Richard Scholar Sir Antony Sher Jane Smiley Matt Sturges Julie Taymor Eamonn Walker Dame Harriet Walter Bill Willingham Jess WinfieldExtraitExcerpted from the ForewordIn my long career as a teacher, I have found that students, interviewers, and fellow readers keep asking me, Why Shakespeare? It seems a question as necessary to ask as it is impossible to answer, unless you respond, Who else is there? Who but Shakespeare has influenced so many creative intellects? The genealogy includes Milton, Austen, Dickens, Keats, and Emily Dickinson, and many of the strongest writers of our own generation. Who besides Shakespeare has perfected expressions of experience, and broadened and defined the horizons of human possibility? He has given us, through thirty-seven plays, 154 sonnets, and four longer poems, a secular religion.His is the most capacious of consciousnesses. He comprehends and apprehends realities that are available to us but beyond our ken until he manifests them.If you run any mode of criticism, whether historicismold or newor analytical, through Shakespeare, you find it is Shakespeare who illuminates your mode of thinking and not the other way around. His is an electrical field. Anything entering it will light up, but Shakespeare powers the illumination.There is no God but God, and his name is William Shakespeare. Yahweh is not God. William Shakespeare is God. Heinrich Heine said, There is a God, and his name is Aristophanes. On Heines model, I again remark: there is a God, there is no God but God, and his name is William Shakespeare.Shakespeare did not set out to create a religion, or to define us. We can never know his motivespresumably to fill seats, write good parts for his actors, stay out of the sight of Walsingham, Elizabeths Chief of the Secret Service, and so avoid the fate of Thomas Kyd, who was tortured, and Christopher Marlowe, who was stabbed to death. In the plays, we find traces of Shakespeares evolution as an artist. He swerves from the influence of Ovid, Chaucer, and Marlowe, and discovers that the only opponent worthy of agon is the writer of his own earlier plays. Not Shakespeare as man, but Shakespeare as playwright was the source of his own continued artistic struggle to break free of self-overdetermination.Paul Valry, great theoretician of influence, said we must learn to speak of the influence of a mind upon itself, a very rich insight which I have adapted to my own understanding of Shakespeare. After a large book on Shakespeare called The Invention of the Human and a shorter one devoted to Hamlet called Poem Unlimited, I explored the influence of Shakespeares mind upon itself in The Anatomy of Influence, which provides some radically new readings of the elliptical qualities in Hamlet, in The Tempest, and of Edgar in King Lear. The only significant influence on Shakespeare, in the end, was Shakespeare himself. Increasingly in his work, what he leaves out becomes much more important than what he puts in, and so he takes literature beyond its limits. He transforms himself, a victory for art, and yet his own position as poet and as self-precursor resulted in an internalization of the conflict and an unresolvable ambivalence.The result is a panoply of characters who possess inner lives so very intricate that, although they are finite on the page, to us they nevertheless remain infinite in faculty and endless to meditation. The more elliptical the renderings, the more complex, illusory, and transformative the result. Shakespeare invented the depiction of inwardness in imaginative fiction, and with these characters he shows us how to overhear ourselves think and, by so doing, become richer, more complex, and more sensitive human beings. We learn about ourselves in these plays, and at the same time we enter their worlds to overcome our loneliness. These are our friends, our lovers, our enemies, our parents, our children, and the characters we encounter only briefly in the course of our daily lives.Ralph Waldo Emerson said that Shakespeare wrote the text of modern life, which means that we are all of us, each in turn, a kind of amalgam of various Shakespearean roles, though I would prefer to call them people. Shakespeare is people, and I write about them not only as roles to be performed, but as more real than you and I. If this is an eccentricity, at least it is a useful one for many actors, and for readers who look to literature for more than confirmation of their own critical agendas.Old Bloom likes to identify with Sir John Falstaff, but another part of him secretly and inwardly identifies with the Black Prince of Denmark, and another part, rather yearningly, doesnt identify with, but wishes he were on warm terms with, Cleopatra of Egypt. Many years

ago, in London, I saw a production of Macbeth with Michael Redgrave as the hero, and the marvelously fierce, sexually intense actress Ann Todd playing Lady Macbeth. When she cried out Unsex me here! Miss Todd grabbed herself in the crucial area and doubled over. Many men in the audience were highly activated.My favorite fantasy is that Falstaff did not allow himself to be done in by his murderous adopted son, the dreadful Prince Hal, and instead Shakespeare let him wander off to the Forest of Arden. There he sat on one end of a log, with the beautiful Rosalind on the other, and the two matched wits. Orson Welles had a fantasy in which he remarked that Hamlet did not go back to Elsinore but voyaged on to England, where he eliminated poor Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, stayed on, grew old and fat, and became Sir John Falstaff. Welles played a splendid Falstaff in the movie Chimes at Midnight, with Jeanne Moreau as Mistress Quickly.We are used to characters breaking loose from Shakespeare. You cannot confine these figures to their own plays. They become instances of what was said of Spensers Faerie Queene by Gabriel Harvey: that Hobgoblin had run off with the garland of Apollo. Shakespeare kills off Mercutio, since otherwise who would pay attention to Romeo? Juliet is marvelous enough, so people would keep admiring her. It became a choice between Mercutio and the play, and Mercutio had to go. In the same way, what can you do with Falstaff? He is larger than the play. He is life itself. Shakespeare may not have intended Sir John to turn into this comprehensive vision of immanence, but his is the outstanding instance of the real presence in all literature. He appears again in the beautiful Cockney prose elegy of Mistress Quickly in Henry V, but that isnt Sir John anymore. The impostor in the unforgivable play The Merry Wives of Windsor is not Falstaff either. It is in Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2 that he triumphs.My book Hamlet: Poem Unlimited shows the Prince escaping from Shakespeare and writing his own play. He loathes the story that is unworthy of a majestic and marvelous mind. Shakespeare and Hamlet fight it out in the play. That sounds like Bloomian fantasy, but the more deeply you absorb Hamlet, the more you realize that the Prince has cut loose from Shakespeare. I can understand anyone not much liking Hamlet. I remember a conversation with the learned scholar Alastair Fowler in which he said to me that it wasnt right to call Hamlet a hero-villain, for he is rather a villain outright. Hamlet is responsible for eight deaths, including his own. He destroys everyone in the play who has a speaking part, with the exceptions of Horatio, the fop Osric, and the dunderhead Fortinbras, who marches in with his army at the closeand so pragmatically Hamlet is very bad news indeed.And yet he raises for Shakespeare, for me, and for you, a problem that we cant, I think, escape. One of the strangest ideas in Freud, expressed in his letters and by anecdotes concerning him, is the belief that great souls who are able to sustain a thorough psychoanalysis can emancipate their own thinking from its sexual past. When Freud is at his most reductive, he is sometimes strongest. It is the very small childs immense curiosity about gender difference that is the origin of thinking in every one of us, and almost all of us never transcend this. Thought never does get emancipated from its sexual past, and so we are caught in an endless moody brooding. Hamlet escapes, and I do not know whether that is his triumph or Shakespeares. Hamlet has freed thinking from its sexual past. He does not know, we do not know, and perhaps Shakespeare does not know, when the actual sexual relationship began between Gertrude and Claudius. This leaves the unnerving possibility that Hamlet is the natural son of his uncle. If you protest how unlike he is from Claudius, reflect that he scarcely resembles that great basher of heads in battle, his putative father King Hamlet.In Hamlet, and perhaps also throughout his canon, Shakespeare seems to have liberated his own thinking from its sexual past. He produces the uncanny detachment of the Sonnets. They are a different mode than the plays, for they do not invent human beings. Lyric rather than dramatic, the narrative they offer is dangerous if employed to reveal the historical man. The poet of the Sonnets is Shakespeare, and yet he is also outside Shakespeare, revealing and concealing himself. Sonnets 1 through 126 possess a distanced erotic intensity, and the Sonnets from 127 on show an indisputable and heated erotic rancidity, although both the earlier poems concerning the fair young man and the later poems dealing with the dark lady are unified by their ironic stance. Shakespeare is so advanced in irony that we never will catch up. There is but one Sonnet in the sequence which is beyond irony, and that is 129, Thexpense of spirit in a waste of shame, which affrights us but will not let us go. Here, perhaps nowhere else, the force of Shakespeares sentiment becomes just as strong as his craft. He is one with the Sonnets speaker, momentarily and deliberately giving in to madness as perhaps the last defense there ever can be against the lure of that perilous imbalance. There may be elements of Shakespeare himself in Hamlet and in Falstaff, and perhaps traces of the same rancidity in the later plays, most notably in Measure for Measure and Troilus and Cressida, but in those dramatic instances the craft outlasts the sentiment?Such rancidity is different from Shakespeares negations, which culminate in the high tragedies. At their strongest, as in Iago, Shakespeares grand negations are figures in a negative poetics which is a kind

of dramatic negative theology. Iago is the incarnation of the spirit of modern war, which is his religion. Even Shakespeare surpasses himself, since, after he composes Othello, in the next fourteen consecutive months he goes on to write and revise King Lear, Macbeth, and Antony and Cleopatra. Had one the privilege of having a drink with Shakespeare in a tavern, no doubt in salacious company, insofar as either of us could disengage our attention from our associates and the spirits, I suppose I would have asked him: Am I right in believing that after the high tragedies that culminate in King Lear and Macbeth, and then modulate magnificently into Antony and Cleopatra, it had all cost you too much?Revue de presse"An eclectic collection of pieces from an eclectic collection of writers about reading, directing, performing and adoring the Bard of Avon.... All will find light and warmth, comfort and companionship in these glowing pages." Kirkus s"A cornucopia of delights for lovers of the Bard." Booklist"Lively.... Thought-provoking.... The collection is a consistently stimulating read, which goes a great way toward illuminating the degree to which we all live alreadyand can live even furtherwith Shakespeare." Publishers Weekly (starred review)