



"A solid overview of the
BBC Shakespeare series with many
insights along the way.

The production diaries for *Troilus* and
Errors make fascinating reading."

Alan Dessen

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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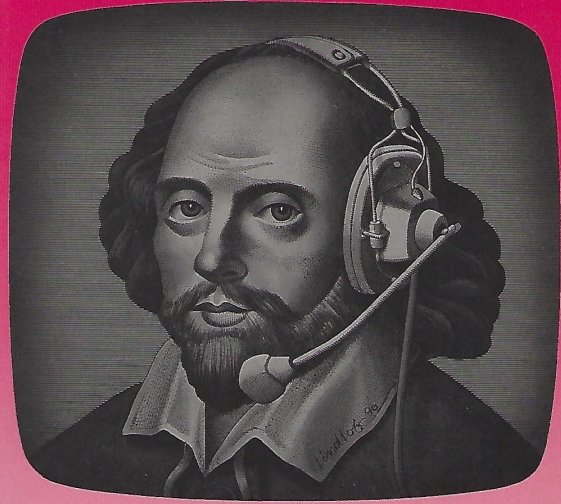
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T H E B B C
S H A K E S P E A R E
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Making the Televised Canon

S U S A N W I L L I S



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in a 1,000-seat house, enough to make Joseph Papp or the RSC envious.

Citing figures for only Britain and America, however, excludes the fact that by 1983 the series was sold to and shown in thirty-seven other countries as well, including China, Iraq, Japan, Kenya, Peru, and Poland. By 1987 sixteen more countries had purchased the series, as various as Czechoslovakia, Egypt, Jamaica, Mexico, and Sri Lanka.⁶⁰ Such international exposure suggests the series may well have effects as yet little known. Director Elijah Moshinsky once mused briefly that although the series is not very well thought of in England, he was invited to a conference at the Sorbonne to speak about his *All's Well* and was sent a copy of a French paper delivered on the semiotics of that production.⁶¹ At its annual convention, the Shakespeare Association of America sponsored a number of seminars on televised Shakespeare and the BBC series during the late 1980s. It would be ironic but not uncommon were the value of the BBC effort only belatedly recognized at home.

EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH

The worldwide sales of the productions were a corollary goal of the series; the primary focus for this "Shakespeare phenomenon" was the nations of the funding corporations, Britain and America. In line with the major objectives of the Shakespeare series, to attract viewers and to enhance education, a second major public relations effort concentrated on educational programming. Fundamental to these programs was the emphasis on studying Shakespeare in performance, not just as a text on a page. Although Shakespeare is almost universally taught in English classes, the planners, especially the Americans, realized that numbers of students have bad experiences with and bad memories of studying Shakespeare. Many of those who worked hardest and were most dedicated to supporting the productions and educational programs for the series, as they discussed the value of the programs as supplements for teaching, would add, almost as a confession, "Well, I never liked Shakespeare myself when I was in school." Some had

never before willingly read an entire Shakespeare play, but all found productions to enjoy and moments to savor in the series. The possibility of the productions helping make the experience of Shakespeare's work a positive one spurred the development of educational supplements to the series.

In Britain the BBC sponsored a three-pronged educational program for the public based on books, television programs, and radio broadcasts. Because the texts focused on the current production and the radio broadcasts on performance history, the BBC effort extended the usual literary commentary to a practical concern with playing the material that was appropriate to the educational goal of the series. To facilitate any serious study of the productions, BBC Books published the texts as scripts, annotated with textual cuts used, production scene numbers, and details from the camera scripts; to each of these were joined a literary analysis by the series's literary advisor John Wilders of Oxford University, an invaluable essay on the production by Henry Fenwick based on interviews with director, designers, and actors, color and black-and-white production photographs, and a glossary. The texts give a reader a quick reference and a full account of each production. The early volumes appeared promptly, expedited no doubt by the work of the script editor and production assistant in preparing the text. But once Alan Shallcross (Messina's script editor) and David Snodin (Miller's script editor) left their posts to become producers in the Drama division, there was no script editor for the remainder of the series and thereby no one to expedite the preparation of copy for BBC Books. Perhaps this factor contributed to the late publication of the last four scripts, delayed until 1986, over a year after the series ended.

The background of the televised *Shakespeare in Perspective* educational programs offers an additional glimpse into the history of the series. Early in the discussions, the BBC's Continuing Education division offered to plan a series of educational programs to complement the productions. Seizing on the support, Messina incorporated televised educational programs into his ideas for the Shakespeare series. From various possible formats, Victor Poole, Executive Arts Producer for BBC's Continuing Education, chose a

"Shakespeare in Perspective" approach for the programs, with an interesting individual giving his or her perspective on the play, but because the Drama division wanted Continuing Education to make "trailers" for the productions composed of interviews with directors and actors on the problems of producing and playing Shakespeare, as Victor Poole recalls, "there was tension from the start, and instead of collaboration, each project went its own way,"⁶² as did so many aspects of the Shakespeare series. The greatest problem this independence posed for Continuing Education was with scheduling. The original plan had called for the 25-minute *Perspectives* to precede the productions by an hour or so on the same night, but they were sometimes scheduled two or three days ahead of the productions and in a few instances even followed the plays.

Victor Poole's intention and the idea that actually shaped the educational series for its three directors—Barbara Derkow, David Wilson, and Sally Kirkwood—was "to enlighten a new audience for Shakespeare on television, attract people to the plays, and give them some background material." Consequently Poole sought as speakers "people from all walks of life—authors, politicians, performers, barristers, businessmen," all public figures familiar to British television audiences. The speakers included authors Anthony Burgess, Stephen Spender, and Germaine Greer, journalists Malcolm Muggeridge, Clive James, Anna Raeburn, and others, a Minister of State, a former chairman of the British Rail Board, a general—a real variety. "It was a requirement," Poole explained, "that they liked Shakespeare, that they encapsulated the stories of the plays, provided an historical framework, where feasible, and offered some original thoughts which might intrigue those already familiar with the text or stimulate thoughts in those ignorant of the Bard's output," but these were guidelines rather than a formula, and the speakers were encouraged to follow their own best inclinations, especially regarding their own opinions. Poole most wanted interesting ideas about the plays, a thesis to prompt viewers to think and respond instead of being passive recipients of the action.

Poole's other major consideration was audience educational level: "The level of the *Perspectives* had to be gauged for 6th form—O- and A-level examinations—because I saw a potential audience

among students as well as general viewers," so the speaker could assume the audience had some familiarity with Shakespeare and would know what the plays were and generally when they were written. Students proved to be a constant audience in Britain, and demand for the free booklist of background reading issued by the Continuing Education department was "very high: usually 600–800 per play and mainly from schools and colleges," Poole added.

In theory the Continuing Education division would receive a list of the season's plays from Drama and begin arranging speakers, who would write their own scripts and be filmed in a location appropriate to the speaker or play, such as the Inns of Court for judicially focused *Measure*. In practice, any number of glitches and predictable snags appeared. In the course of the series, the scripts differed in quality, some exciting, a few trivial. According to Victor Poole, "The success of the *Perspectives* varied with the choice of presenter. Sometimes, as in the case of Wolf Mankowitz on *Merchant*, it resulted in a programme that was a powerful plea for the tolerance of minorities in our society and by placing the jew in the historical perspective made the play more powerful than ever." Once when the film crew arrived to shoot a *Perspective*, the eminent thinker who had agreed to provide the commentary merely stood before the camera and stated, "This is one of the silliest plays ever written and I have nothing to say about it." (The play was *Hamlet*.) In that case, there was little choice except to start over.

The size of the television audience for the *Perspectives* was gratifying for Continuing Education, Poole reported: "Our audience figure for the '*Perspectives*' was around the 1,000,000 mark." In many cases, at least, it seems those who tuned in the productions were willing to learn more about them or to review the play's context as an enhancement to viewing and so watched the *Perspectives* as well. (A critic or two also tuned in, prompting at least one scathing review of these shows.)⁶³ The *Perspectives* also proved quite successful as part of a Shakespeare "package" when sold with the productions. This auxiliary appeal of the Continuing Education programs was undoubtedly part of their attraction during the early deliberations about the series: they might enhance the plays' marketability.

The other aspect of the BBC outreach programming in conjunction with the Shakespeare series was the radio series, "Prefaces to Shakespeare," which aired a famous British actor commenting about a specific play and his or her experience in major Shakespeare roles. The list of those participating is a Who's Who of British theatre: Dame Peggy Ashcroft, Sir Michael Redgrave, Janet Suzman, Anthony Quayle, Michael Hordern, Judi Dench, and many more—all offering lively anecdotes and a wealth of personal knowledge about performing Shakespeare. The BBC thought enough of these "curtain raisers," the *Perspectives* and the "Preface" programs, that BBC Books published transcripts of the broadcasts as essays in two paperback volumes titled *Shakespeare in Perspective*, both edited by Roger Sales. These together with the scripts provide a well-rounded, publicly accessible account of BBC programming in support of the Shakespeare series, which focused on education in the broadest sense, adult and student, unlike educational efforts in the United States, which focused on programs for schools.

In America planning for the BBC Shakespeare series began in 1975, almost as soon as in Britain; even as Morgan Bank, Exxon, Time/Life, and WNET sought to complete the funding, they proceeded to plan outreach and educational programs. Unlike the BBC, the underwriters did not have educational divisions, television and radio production units, or book publishers built into their corporations. And unlike the BBC, which therefore plugged its efforts into the existing units and the existing approach, the American underwriters began asking questions, seeking answers. Exxon with its extensive experience in arts programming guided Morgan Bank in the early going; for instance, they introduced them to Tel-Ed, the educational branch of the Stone/Hallinan public relations firm they had contracted to provide publicity for the BBC Shakespeare series in America. (Metropolitan, which only became involved in 1978, missed most of this planning phase.) No one was quite sure what the effect of the BBC Shakespeare series would be in America, but the general feeling was that it could be significant. Messina's statements about the cultural and educational value of the series—never untrue, but somewhat laced with public relations

amid the power-brokering inside the BBC—were probably taken more seriously and no doubt more earnestly in the United States. Here was a great opportunity; what could be done with it?

The American exuberance did not, however, create a state of complete harmony among the participants. If the BBC units vied among themselves, the broadcast and publicity firms also vied in the United States. Yet even this competitiveness backhandedly attests their commitment to the Shakespeare series and its potential for profit or education.

Initially the planning involved every avenue of access to the public: television, radio, books, high school classrooms, adult study groups, special lectures. Many of these materialized, many did not. The book proposal for a special American edition of Shakespeare's plays to accompany the BBC series died in prospectus when Time/Life said the project would have scheduling problems and be difficult to coordinate. WNET had lined up some of its finest people to produce and direct half-hour televised introductions to the plays—an idea that drew Joseph Papp's ire when he was asked to host them—but discovered the programs would entail twice the cost of the American underwriting of the plays themselves, so the idea withered. In fact, the greater expense of television production in America was an element often overlooked in the American challenges to the BBC series; the dissension grew along artistic lines, as if the issue were only cast, not cost. Nonetheless, frustration at the comparative economics probably fueled as many fires as did wounded integrity.

Radio programming in conjunction with the series fared better, especially with National Public Radio's (NPR) "Shakespeare Festival" in 1979, the BBC series's inaugural year in America. In addition to a special series of Shakespeare-based operas and Renaissance music programs, NPR produced a two-hour docudrama, "William Shakespeare: A Portrait in Sound" by William Luce, starring Julie Harris and David Warner, and broadcast a WNET lecture series from Lincoln Center in April 1979 with scholars Sam Schoenbaum, Maynard Mack, and Daniel Seltzer. And for every production, NPR station WQED in Pittsburgh planned a half-hour radio introduction to the play to be aired the week before the

telecast. Such an outburst of radio programming was both hype and tribute; the tribute was genuine, but when the Shakespeare series did not immediately revolutionize the cultural climate of America, the major programming efforts for radio ceased. Even television planning was similarly affected. A two-hour Shakespeare variety show gala planned as a PBS fund-raiser in 1981 (with stars such as Richard Chamberlain, Charlton Heston, Chita Rivera, and Robin Williams) could not find an underwriter.

The other corollary outreach program planned before the series went into production was the Folger Shakespeare Library's "Shakespeare: The Globe and The World." Comprised of artifacts and books to illustrate Renaissance daily life and Shakespeare references, paintings on Shakespeare subjects and performances, and clips from Shakespeare-based films, this multimedia touring exhibition was a major event, traveling to museums in San Francisco, Kansas City, Pittsburgh, Dallas, Atlanta, New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., and supported by both a companion volume by Sam Schoenbaum and an audiovisual instructional kit for teachers and students. As John Andrews, then Director of Academic Programs at the Folger Shakespeare Library and publications editor and conceptual consultant for the project, reported, the exhibition spanned a host of ancillary activities: lecture series, film festivals, concerts, Renaissance feasts, Elizabethan dance and fencing demonstrations, dramatic presentations, and satellite publications and exhibits. It met with acclaim across the United States, but it was an exhibition that happened amid funding difficulties only by the sheer persistence of those believing in it, very like the Shakespeare series itself.⁶⁴

These programs enhanced the broadcast of the BBC Shakespeare series in America; the primary emphasis of the pre-broadcast planning, however, went into education. The underwriters suggested a plan to use the series in schools and asked for proposals. Since Time/Life adamantly refused to grant off-air taping rights for educational purposes, allowing only rental or sales—a policy that led some to charge them with greediness—educational programs had to be planned to work with on-the-air viewing. There was an effort from the West Coast to support postsecondary uses of the series,⁶⁵

and a broader, more informal educational effort led to the dissemination of family viewing guides, produced for seasons one through three by WNET/Thirteen, for season four by McCaffrey-McCall and enclosed in *Time* magazine, and for seasons five through seven by Metropolitan Life.

By the end of the first season, however, it was apparent that the focus of the education program in America would fall almost entirely on secondary education. The underwriters were most interested in this grass roots educational outreach, to the extent that they spent at least as much on the educational program, which they awarded to Tel-Ed, the educational subsidiary of Stone/Hallinan, as they did on underwriting the series itself.

Tel-Ed insisted that educational programming for the Shakespeare series should focus on the junior and senior high school level, where most American students first meet Shakespeare. Re-education would not be as necessary if the initial introduction to Shakespeare was strong and appealing. In planning the Tel-Ed program, executive officer Tim Hallinan said they had three basic objectives: getting more plays taught (most curricula teach only a few, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Macbeth*), encouraging teachers to think of the BBC series as a resource, and having Shakespeare taught more often.⁶⁶ During the work on the educational materials, Hallinan and Tel-Ed encountered only two formidable problems. The first was Time/Life's not allowing off-air taping, a decision Hallinan found indefensible and certainly counterproductive to education; the second was the length of the productions after the first two seasons. With shows three or more hours long scheduled to start at 8:00 or 9:00 in many cities, some schoolchildren simply could not stay up for the duration of the production.

The Tel-Ed approach was to make educational materials on the productions available to every high school in the United States. Because the first season was laden with the plays usually taught in American public, private, and parochial schools, Tel-Ed emphasized those plays and sent out more than 36,000 education packets to English department heads, receiving between 17,000 and 18,000 responses about the materials. During that first season Tel-

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Ed also tried to anticipate and help with problems teachers might have with plays outside the usual curriculum. In the material, Hallinan said, they "put out hooks" about lesser known plays with very good BBC productions. As a result, 4,000 to 5,000 teachers, mostly in urban areas, tried *Richard II* in their courses with good response.

Based on this experience, they thereafter spent their money on the best productions, and since many of the best productions were of the lesser known plays, the base of plays being taught broadened. Through the televised series every play in the canon, Hallinan reported, has been taught in several thousand American classrooms; 11,000 to 12,000 teachers undertook *Antony and Cleopatra*, for instance, and over 17,000 taught *Merchant*. Largely as a result of this educational effort, he added, Shakespeare classes at many universities grew markedly; some professors who experienced this response in their classes considered it an outgrowth of the students' high school experience with the series, for almost every student had seen one of the productions. While that degree of viewing saturation does not hold true for the entire country, it attests the great positive effect such production-oriented education programs can have.

In assessing the educational program, Bruce Roberts of Morgan Bank called it the greatest success in underwriting the series. Hallinan remarked that of all his publicity and educational work, he was proudest of this set of materials and its educational effect. The American Theatre Association gave Tel-Ed and the underwriters its 1984 Founder's Award, and the National Council of Teachers of English also recognized their efforts with an award. Everyone was so high on the educational value of the series that by 1981 John Andrews of the Folger Library, chairman of the underwriters' advisory panel for education, and Bruce Roberts began long-term thinking about how to extend the educational potential of the series. Of the series's three American underwriters, ultimately only Morgan Bank continued the educational program, and they were pleased to have reserved renewal rights from the beginning. When John Andrews suggested they model their program on *Masterpiece Theatre* and divide the shows into one-hour segments dubbed "The

Shakespeare Hour," Morgan Bank readily adopted the idea, and late in 1984 the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded funds for a new series to begin spring of 1986.

The Shakespeare Hour was planned as a different approach to the Shakespeare productions, a "recycling" more specifically educational in focus. A three-year series, it would treat five plays per year in a fifteen-week season, with repeats the following fall. The plays each season would be linked thematically—love, power, and revenge respectively—using what Roberts characterized as the fifteen best, most widely taught plays and with taping rights for schools to facilitate their use of the shows. Walter Matthau agreed to host the series and became quite committed to it: "since 1952, when I did Iago on the 'Philco Playhouse,' no one had offered me a job connected with Shakespeare. And when this came up, I jumped at it like a hungry tiger seeing fresh meat again."⁶⁷ Along with his comments, the programs would include "minidocumentaries" to highlight the themes of the season and to round out the hours when a section of the play ran short.⁶⁸ New educational materials were prepared, and a book for the general audience was also published by Signet, *The Shakespeare Hour: A Companion to the PBS-TV Series*, edited by Edward Quinn, containing a thematic introduction, essays on each play in the season, and a select bibliography. The total cost projection for the series was \$600,000 to \$650,000 per year, and all parties agreed to reexamine *The Shakespeare Hour* at the end of the first season.

"We thought we had a winner," reflected John Andrews, "like with the series." The cancellation of *The Shakespeare Hour* immediately following its first season hit all participants hard—Hallinan, his advisors, Matthau, Andrews, Morgan Bank. Suddenly it was really all over, after ten years of planning and implementing. In a sense, the second end of the series in America came too fast for its planners, as if untimely ripped from them. Causes abounded—too many stations did not show the series in prime time, it was not publicized thoroughly enough, it was not given a proper test. PBS affiliates were tired of Shakespeare after seven years; the new format came too fast on the heels of that programming marathon, so the local programmers axed it. Nonetheless, Hallinan affirmed,

"the underwriters wanted a lasting legacy; they got it." Then with an understandable mixture of pride and regret he added, "The high school English teachers are the only ones who realize what the series has meant." As a result of the series, he continued, high school teachers are more adventurous in planning curriculum material and more students going into college will be Shakespeare-literate. Andrews maintained, "The series's reputation will improve because the series gets better the more you see it. It is a wonderful resource."⁶⁹ Hallinan stated his view a bit more assertively: "The series will be seen as a monumental achievement fifteen years from now."⁷⁰

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Assessing the Shakespeare series was the continual task of the critics as well. They not only worried whether the series was a boondoggle or a mere flourish when it was announced, but at the end they also made some retrospective comments of their own, such as Cecil Smith's in the *Los Angeles Times*: "The series has been the target of critical catcalls on both sides of the Atlantic, shabbily treated by many PBS stations, often ignored or damned as dull, dull, dull."⁷¹ The generalizations about catcalls or yawns at dullness were not uncommon at the series's end, as if much of the series's reception had been a long, fairly consistent detraction. That is the mathematical magic of criticism, which can add a string of largely positive reviews and get a negative total; no critic wants to appear uncritical. Certainly the charge of dullness, rephrased to suit individual critical temperaments, had been banded about, especially early in the series, yet even in the first year the reviews of individual productions as they appeared were predominantly appreciative. Of course, one rather expects critics to disagree, but it may be salutary to remember that they do disagree about the value of the Shakespeare series, its best and worst productions, its finest directors, perhaps the more so in a realm as open to various tastes and strictures as Shakespeare on television.

Some of the criticism stemmed from the nature of the endeavor