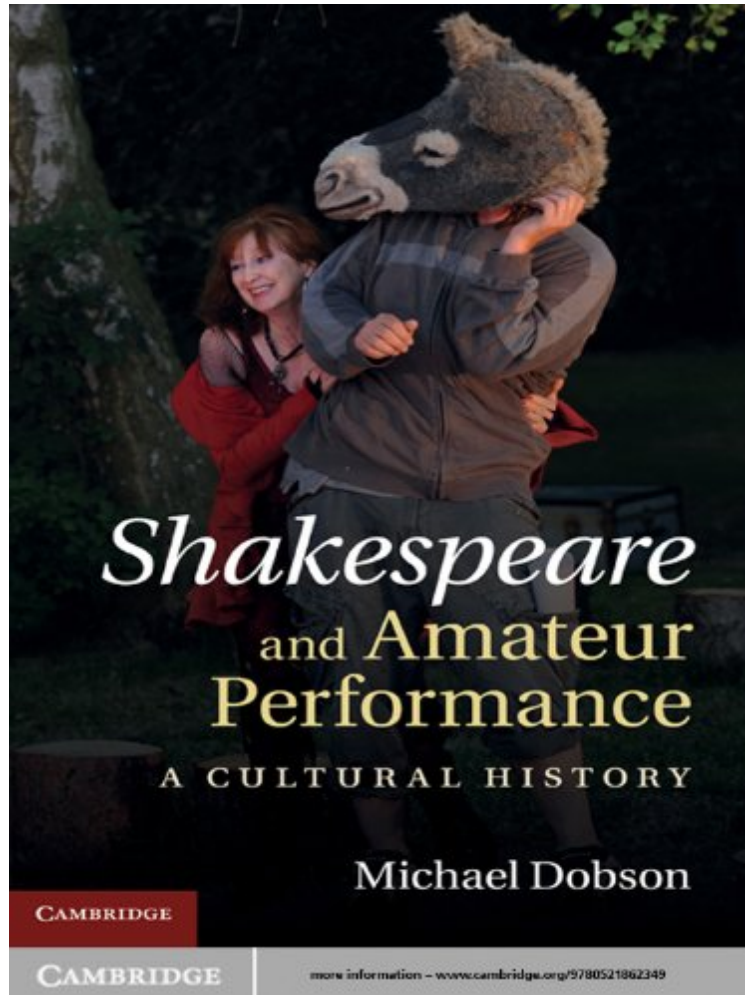


Shakespeare and Amateur Performance

Michael Dobson

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Michael Dobson : Shakespeare and Amateur Performance before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Shakespeare and Amateur Performance:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. For the Love of The Bard
By Rob Hardy
There are professionals and there are amateurs. We tend to demean the amateurs, and of course we would never consent to take the services of, say, an amateur dentist. We should remember, though, that the word "amateur" comes from the Latin word *_amare_*, the same root of such words as "amatory." Amateurs put forth their efforts for the love of it, with no expectation of financial gain, so if we laugh, for instance, at any faults in amateur actors, we ought to do so quietly. Not so with Shakespeare; there are plenty of laughs at the expense of Bottom and his boys as they give us their chinked version of *_Pyramus and Thisbe_* within *_A Midsummer Night's Dream_*. Shakespeare's magical play is, in fact, a favorite for amateur performance, but the subject of Shakespeare by amateurs has been more a subject for fun and jokes than it has for serious appreciation. That's far from the case in *_Shakespeare and Amateur Performance: A Cultural History_* (Cambridge University Press) by Michael Dobson, a professor of Shakespeare Studies at the University of London.

Dobson admits that while professional performances have had no lack of critical documentation, he has had scraps to work with such as "blandly approving reviews in local newspapers mainly anxious to mention all the people involved who would wish to be thanked." Shakespeare has been performed by amateurs for coming up on four hundred years now, and Dobson lets us know we ought to be grateful for their efforts. Amateurs have over the centuries in countless productions given the plays to audiences who might otherwise not have seen them, and given them a good time, and given them something to think about, and for Dobson, amateurs have done this work at least as effectively as the professionals. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the upper classes mounted private, home versions of the plays, but not *Romeo and Juliet*. It was the most popular of Shakespeare's plays for professionals, but not for amateurs. Dobson writes, "The very idea of the improprieties that might be involved should any respectable woman play Juliet in a domestic setting, despite the fact that it scarcely ever happened, haunted the imagination of opponents of private theatricals for generations." From performances in stately homes, amateur efforts descended in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century into the drawing rooms of the middle class and the clubs of gentlemen. But Shakespeare was to regain serious status in the early twentieth century, especially with the founding of "The Guild of the Norwich Players" in 1911. It was founded by Newton Monck, and he was its director for decades. In 1933, he became the first director ever to have staged every one of Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare was to travel with the English language outside of his home country (which is the land most documented in Dobson's history). During the US campaign in Texas against the Mexicans in 1845, a young and beardless officer took the part of Desdemona in *Othello* (this theatrical cross-dressing, with which Shakespeare himself was familiar, is a recurrent theme in the book). He was Lieutenant Ulysses S. Grant. Dobson says, though, that the "most spectacular instances of British expatriate Shakespeare, though they are now largely and perhaps deliberately forgotten, undoubtedly occurred during the Second World War." Why deliberately forgotten? There are ideological issues. The English prisoners surely were keeping up morale by performing in roles of their national playwright, and perhaps they were insisting on their intellectual freedom even within their barbed wire surrounds. But their Nazi captors helped in providing printing, costumes, and make-up. Was this collaboration? And what does it mean that the Nazis enjoyed seeing prisoners act out *The Merchant of Venice*? Dobson's final chapter is on amateur Shakespeare performed outdoors. This is the way it is done in our time. There is plenty to be said for outdoor performances. That favorite, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is perfect for fields and woods, for instance. While the amateurs can still spend money and effort on costumes (often a particular point of enthusiasm), an outdoor performance needs fewer backdrops or props. Outdoor performances borrow on the popularity of outdoor pageants, and on the academic interest of staging Greek dramas as they used to be. The open air stages often stress a somewhat out-of-place Elizabethan antiquarianism, and one features peacocks that, Dobson testifies, announce "their intention of roosting with loud screams around the start of act 4." This is a funny, informative book about taking amateurism seriously. From time to time, it is the amateurs rather than the professionals who have more reliably kept Shakespeare onstage. "For four hundred years Shakespeare has suited and indulged such amateur actors and their audiences with endless generosity," Dobson writes, and pays tribute to the enthusiasts for whom merely reading or studying the plays or merely seeing them performed by others just won't do.

From the Hamlet acted on a galleon off Africa to the countless outdoor productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that now defy each English summer, *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance* explores the unsung achievements of those outside the theatrical profession who have been determined to do Shakespeare themselves. Based on extensive research in previously unexplored archives, this generously illustrated and lively work of theatre history enriches our understanding of how and why Shakespeare's plays have mattered to generations of rude mechanicals and aristocratic dilettantes alike: from the days of the Theatres Royal to those of the Little Theatre Movement, from the pioneering *Winter's Tale* performed in eighteenth-century Salisbury to the *Merchant of Venice* performed by Allied prisoners for their Nazi captors, and from the how-to book which transforms Mercutio into Yankee Doodle to the Napoleonic counterspy who used Richard III as a tool of surveillance.