SCHOCH, Richard W. *Shakespeare's Victorian Stage: Performing History in the Theatre of Charles Kean*  

Reviewed by LAURENCE WRIGHT

This book is a primarily a study of Charles Kean’s productions of Shakespeare’s English chronicle plays at the Princess’s Theatre between 1852 and 1859, a period crucial to the development of ideas of English nationalism. Schoch focuses on these particular stagings as more than drama; as performances of nineteenth century theories of history and historical representation. His project operates under the aegis of the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ in cultural theory, and is suspicious of neo-marxian fundamentalism. This more flexible historiographical outlook constitutes in the main a positive feature of the study, but the willingness to accept that “political interests do not pre-exists their expression through linguistic structures” (20) indicates the limitations of a twenty-first century intellectual milieu still in the thrall of linguistic philosophy. One longs for the early strafing of Russell and the devastating demolitions of Popper to strike home, so that philosophy once more becomes possible and humanly important.


That said, the joy of this book lies in the fresh interpretation of production detail drawn from a wide variety of sources: playbills, photographs, newspaper clippings, promptbooks, letters, sketch-books and contemporary magazines. It constitutes an energizing foray into the world of newly “archaeologized” (183) nineteenth century Shakespearean production. Charles Keen aimed for historically accurate revivals of Shakespeare. So not only was history often the major concern of the plays he was presenting, but an emerging sense of the history of history inevitably impinged as an important determinant of the productions which resulted from his antiquarian fossicking (Kean was appointed a Fellow of the Royal Society of Antiquaries in 1857 – see chapter 1).

Why Kean aimed for the effects he did seems as important as the effects he achieved. He developed a powerful theatrical ideology that drove his productions. He was as much concerned to educate his audiences as to entertain them, and the effort to make people aware of history as a matter of public importance matched his attention to the power of drama as such (this view Schoch develops in contrast to the tension between historiography and theatre diagnosed in Kean’s work by Bann – see p.93). As Schoch puts it, “Like Carlyle, his literary counterpart, Kean intuited the link between a theatricalized history and an historicizing theatre: that historical ‘annals’ were composed of exciting ‘dramas’; that the collective memory of historical events was safeguarded by ‘our national poet’; and that the restoration of public buildings and monuments was most thoroughly accomplished not by architects, but by theatrical scene painters” (85-86). In doing so, Keane sounded an encouraging “all’s clear” (131) to the acceptance of theatre as both entertaining and serious, in other words, as properly Victorian.
In an age where history seemed to be running away with itself under political and technological impulses only tangentially related to the supposedly stable past, it was reassuring to set in place an imaginative foundation through the deployment of historicized theatre. However, the shared public experience of theatre nonetheless opened this ‘history’ to class-inflected perceptions and debate: the imaginative foundation proved as subtly unstable as the mercurial present.

The research in this book is especially strong in relating theatrical developments to social ones in sensitive and illuminating ways. For instance, the support of the Royal Family for the theatre, in the midst of its oft-cited and determined efforts to refashion itself into an ideal symbol of ‘the family’, following marked unpopularity during the waning years of the Hanoverians, encouraged the return of the aristocracy to the theatres and fostered the growth of an unabashed theatre-going public (130-131). The eighteenth century’s acceptance of re-used flats and wings in subsequent productions seems to reflect historical acquiescence in foregrounding action impelled by universal human nature against a relatively passive background of circumstance. This tendency to recycle standard scenery lasted well into the nineteenth century. The ‘spoof’ creation of an historically ‘authentic’ production – ‘spoof’ because the aim was recognized as inherently unachievable – nevertheless symbolizes a move towards a newly conceptualized ‘total theatre’ where the arts of the scenographer were valued as never before. The historicising impulse led to the absorption of the Romantic and then the Gothicising picturesque in Georgian scenery painting, domesticating established traditions of landscape painting for the theatre in the service of ‘history’ (68-69).

To my mind, the most powerful and captivating chapter is the final one, in which Schoch argues that Kean’s productions created a sense of theatre as the magical conjuring-up of the past on stage. He evidences Ellen Kean enacting the Chorus in Henry V in the figure of Clio, for the 1859 production, and follows this with the recognition that the iconography evident in the promptbook sketch for that production reflects the representation of Hermione’s statue scene in The Winter’s Tale three years earlier (142-162). This sense of history being magically resurrected on the stage comes close to the heart of Kean’s theatrical enterprise, and speaks volumes about the emerging nineteenth century sense of history as both publicly important and ultimately contestable. It has much to do with “the prominence in Charles Kean’s repertoire of Shakespeare’s most bewitched plays – A Midsummer Night’s Dream, The Tempest, Macbeth and The Winter’s Tale” (159).

The impact of Charles Kean on the Victorian stage unites important interests of Victorians and Shakespeareans, past and present, in a rewarding manner. Far from validating the ‘over-stuffed’ costume drama which constituted the popular twentieth century notion of Victorian Shakespeare, this book demonstrates a far more profound rationale for these productions, one which continued to devour much theatrical energy until the responsibility for publicly evoking historical realism passed to the twentieth century form of the cinema (see Envoi, 183-188).
This work represents theatrical history as it should be written, another book from Cambridge University Press that leaves the competition trailing.