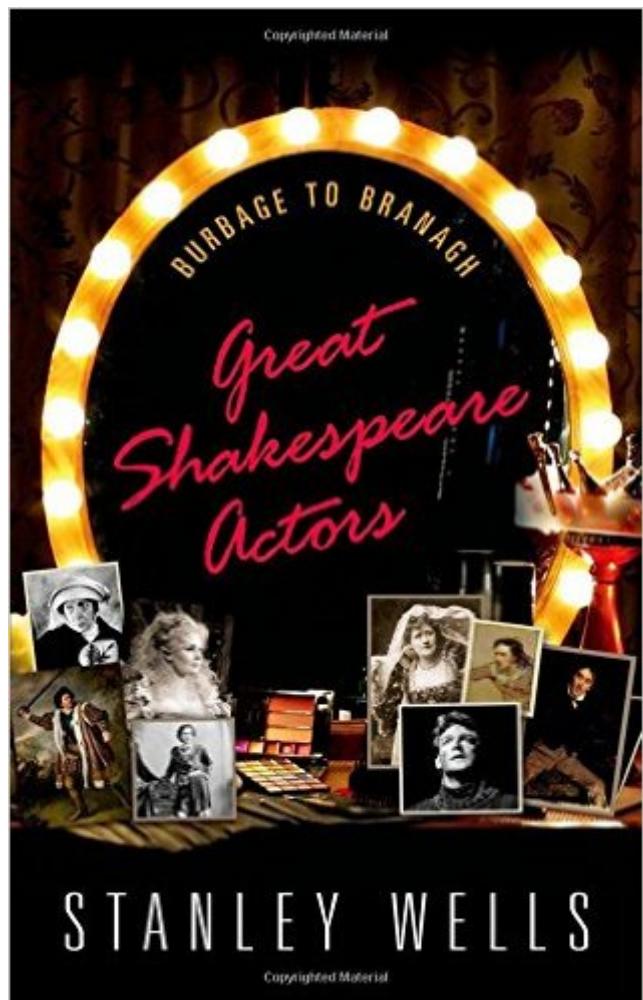


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Great Shakespeare Actors: Burbage To Branagh



Synopsis

Great Shakespeare Actors offers a series of essays on great Shakespeare actors from his time to ours, starting by asking whether Shakespeare himself was the first--the answer is No--and continuing with essays on the men and women who have given great stage performances in his plays from Elizabethan times to our own. They include both English and American performers such as David Garrick, Sarah Siddons, Charlotte Cushman, Ira Aldridge, Edwin Booth, Henry Irving, Ellen Terry, Edith Evans, Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud, Ralph Richardson, Peggy Ashcroft, Janet Suzman, Judi Dench, Ian McKellen, and Kenneth Branagh. Individual chapters tell the story of their subjects' careers, but together these overlapping tales combine to offer a succinct, actor-centred history of Shakespearian theatrical performance. Stanley Wells examines what it takes to be a great Shakespeare actor and then offers a concise sketch of each actor's career in Shakespeare, an assessment of their specific talents and claims to greatness, and an account, drawing on contemporary reviews, biographies, anecdotes, and, for some of the more recent actors, the author's personal memories of their most notable performances in Shakespeare roles.

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Customer Reviews

For history buffs and lovers of theatre, this is a fun book that looks at some of the best Shakespearean actors right from the time of Shakespeare himself to the present. Not only does the reader learn how the styles, the scripts and the interpretations differed over the four hundred years but we also get glimpses of the personal lives and times in which these actors (and actresses) lived. It is fascinating to see how the current events of the time impacted what was and was not in vogue.

It even looked at actors who were from other countries, some whose native tongue was not English and who either acted in their own language while the rest of the cast spoke English or butchered the pronunciations. I suspect it was quite entertaining but perhaps not in the way intended. It takes us on a trip from Shakespeare's common beginnings to his elevation as classical art to the attempts to make him accessible to the masses. We go from young boys playing female roles to the Restoration where women were allowed on the stage to gender switching and other interesting reworkings of the storyline.. While the book is written in chronological order, it is also one that the reader could dip in and out of without losing track., as each actor is given his or her own chapter. As we are in the midst of Festival season, it would be fun to read this and then watch our modern actors tackle the same roles and compare..

I'm sorry to say this book is a huge disappointment to me. I respect Stanley Wells as a scholar of Shakespeare (not including text structure and the mechanisms of prosody) and even more as a scholar of Elizabethan culture, but it is sad to see that, like many critics and scholars, he understands almost nothing about acting. He can describe the effects of a performance, but when he attempts to explain the process the actor used to get there, he is simply ignorant. Also, given his reputation, the bibliography he provides to document his points is shockingly weak: he uses one or perhaps two currently popular biographies for each actor, sometimes omitting major works, and he seems to have consulted very few primary sources. For John Philip Kemble, for example, he lists only Linda Kelly's recent "The Kemble Era" and doesn't mention the more scholarly classic, "John Philip Kemble," by Herschel Baker. For Sarah Siddons, he omits James Boaden's 1827 "Memoirs of Mrs. Siddons," which includes interviews with her colleagues. I don't think Wells's book will help anyone understand how an actor works on a Shakespeare play, and its generalizations will probably do more harm than good.

Dr. Stanley Wells the author of Great Shakespeare Actors is an acknowledged expert on the works of the Bard William Shakespeare (1564-1616). In this 308 page book he gives the reader a glimpse behind the drawn curtain to learn more about famous and great actors and how the production of Shakespearean drama has evolved since the days of the Globe Theatre's heyday in the sixteenth century to today. Shakespeare is the world's greatest playwright and his immortal tragedies, comedies and history plays will live as long as humanity roams the earth. The book looks at the acting careers of several Shakespeare actors from Richard Burbage the star of Shakespeare's company to such luminaries as Sarah Siddons, David Garrick, Edmund Keen, Edmund Booth, Ellen

Terry, Michael Redgrave. Sir Laurence Olivier, Sir Ralph Richardson, Dame Peggy Ashcroft and many others. The author also provides information on the staging and acting styles which have been favored over the long centuries of Shakespeare acting on the boards. This book is a fun read filled with pictures and facts. It would be very helpful for acting students, students of drama and Shakespeare and anyone who want to enhance their cultural literacy.

I found this to be extremely dull, given the exalted roster of its subjects. Some good stuff here and there, but there are better books out there, and, I hope, not so dryly written.

how could you not include the great John Wood?

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