

Shakespeare in Ten Acts

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The British Library

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Shakespeare in Ten Acts, a superb and expansive exhibition at the British Library, offers a view into ten productions of Shakespeare that changed Shakespeare forever. Arranged chronologically, but offering pathways throughout to earlier and later centuries, ten displays both tap into traditional expectations and satisfy new curiosities. Coming from a variety of repositories, the materials range from the First Folio to a video clip of the Wooster Group's digital-age *Hamlet*, delving all the while into topics including stage technology, globalism, gender, race, textual authenticity, and stage aesthetics. The objective of the exhibition is not to shore up a sense of Shakespeare's universal genius, but rather to illustrate the vast array of interpretations, adaptations, and even forgeries, that have shaped his works' legacy for the modern day and beyond.

In the antechamber to the exhibit halls, visitors are greeted by a First Folio and an introductory video clip with facts about Shakespeare. Hardly presenting the playwright as a solitary genius, however, this display also features materials emphasizing Shakespeare's place in the wider world of London and the England beyond it: early mentions of Shakespeare in print (Robert Greene's *Groats-worth of Wit* and Francis Meres's *Palladis Tamia*), editions of his poetry and plays (*Venus and Adonis* and *Love's Labour's Loss*), and manuscripts pertaining to New Place in Stratford. The Shakespeare of Stratford, one finds according to a heraldry manuscript referring to "Shakespear y^e Player," was indeed the Shakespeare of London, and he was well-known in his own time.

The next rooms highlight the early seventeenth century, placing emphasis on London playhouses, theatrical spectacle, and cross-cultural exchange. Visitors come face-to-face with one of two extant copies of the *Hamlet* first quarto and its version of the play's most famous speech: "To be, or not to be, I there's the point." Among other materials are Visscher's panoramic 1616 map of London, a backstage plot for the lost play *Dead Man's Fortune*, and a diary kept by John Manningham, each helping to illustrate the theater of seventeenth-century London as it was known to Shakespeare's colleagues and playgoers. From here, the room opens onto a display highlighting *The Tempest* as it was performed in 1610-11 at the Blackfriars Playhouse. A major portion of this section emphasizes the artifice of the early modern theater and the sumptuous special effects that have attended later productions and adaptations. Here, one finds a cannonball from the Rose Playhouse excavation site, once used for backstage thunder sounds, as well as video clips from both Peter Greenaway's luxuriant *Prospero's Books* (1991) and the Metropolitan Opera's 2011 production of *The Enchanted Island*.

The maritime theme continues in the subsequent hall, which focuses on what may have been the first performance of *Hamlet* outside Europe: aboard an East India Company vessel off the coast of Sierra Leone in 1607. Because the diary of the ship's captain disappeared during the nineteenth century, the remaining evidence presents at best a tantalising mystery (as the curators put it) inviting visitors to compare the trapdoor and rear entrances of an outdoor playhouse to the deck of a ship.

Alongside these speculations are dozens of translations and adaptations of Shakespeare from around the world, from the nineteenth century forward. Editions in Arabic, Bengali, Czech, Mongolian, Russian, Setswana, and Swedish are accompanied by video clips from performances in a variety of tongues, illustrating how “1607 Sierra Leone production or not” Shakespeare has found audiences in a variety of languages and cultures beyond England.

The middle portions of *Shakespeare in Ten Acts* highlight the critical elements of gender and race that have accompanied productions through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We do not know the name of the woman who first played Desdemona in 1660, but she opened a pathway for other women who would act in Shakespeare’s plays. Alongside Vivien Leigh’s costume from her seductive RSC portrayal of Lady Macbeth in 1955, one finds a color print from an 1846 *Romeo and Juliet* starring both Charlotte and Susan Cushman (the former playing Romeo, supposedly, but not actually, to protect the reputation of her sister), as well as photographs from the distinctively feminist Sphinx Theatre Company, responsible for both *Lear’s Daughters* (1987) and *The Roaring Girl’s Hamlet* (1992).

Two rooms later, the exhibition focuses on actors of color and of non-European backgrounds performing in Shakespeare’s plays. Centering on Ira Aldridge’s 1833 performance as Othello at Covent Garden, the display includes an 1826 portrait of the actor, known as “The African Roscius” during his tour, as well as a presentation of various critics’ reviews. Looking ahead, the exhibition also showcases Paul Robeson’s twentieth-century performances and political activism. (A striking comparison to the hostile reviews of Aldridge is a 1957 letter written by Laurence Olivier, who effectively blocks Robeson from playing Othello, suggesting he’d play the role instead.) The curators illustrate, both with these materials and other, more recent documents pertaining to multicultural actors and colorblind casting, that Shakespeare has been and will continue to be the site of both racial tension and activism. Positioned among these latter two sections are displays on the William Ireland forgeries of 1795 and the “deposition” of the 1681 Nahum Tate version of *King Lear*, both attesting to eras of “Shakespeare craze” and a concern with textual authenticity.

The final three areas of the exhibition showcase the latest and current “acts” of Shakespeare on stage. Decorated with production photographs, a white-box room evocative of Peter Brook’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1971) foregrounds the newness of such an abstract and minimalist aesthetic over against the romantic and fanciful renditions of the Victorian era. Evidencing the historicist’s approach is a focus on Mark Rylance’s 2002 *Twelfth Night*, a wall projection of clips from this production brings the period costumes (also on display) to life, leaving viewers hungry for the full performance. The final section in this exhibition showcases the Wooster Group’s 2007 *Hamlet*, which involves creative uses of film and digital media to gloss, echo, and accompany Richard Burton’s *Hamlet* (1964).

Two tragedies accompany visitors throughout the duration of this stunning exhibition, *Hamlet* and *Othello*. Although this might dismay admirers of Shakespeare’s less famous comedies, the curators successfully illustrate how both these works stand, and have stood, at the center of a variety of artistic, cultural, social, and political issues, issues that have buffeted the Anglophone world off and on for 400 years. Particularly in its inclusion of the Wooster Group’s production, *Shakespeare in Ten Acts* also makes a commendable effort to bridge the technological artistry underpinning the Blackfriars *Tempest* of 1610-11 to the digital experimentation of today’s world. With so many rich connections to be made, it’s a shame the coordinators didn’t opt for a more specific hashtag



than *#Shakespeare* in order to register centrally their visitors'™ comments, thoughts, and conversations, yet another act of Shakespeare in the twenty-first century.

An [exhibition catalogue](#) is available for purchase through the British Library for £25.00 in paperback and £40 in hardback.

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