

## *Measure for Measure in Performance*

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While the popularity of *Measure for Measure* in the theatre has waxed and waned, its rich ambiguity has captivated the imagination of actors, directors, and audiences for centuries. This annotated stage history is a selective catalogue of critically significant or groundbreaking interpretations. No single production is preferred over any other; as Orson Wells observed in *Everybody's Shakespeare* (1934, 27), “Every single way of playing Shakespeare—as long as the way is effective—is right.” Each entry provides a brief summary of the production’s important aspects and references to eyewitness accounts, reviews, or insightful critical commentary for further reading. Ultimately, these productions illustrate the evolving historical arc of the play in performance.

### **1604. The King’s Men, Whitehall (London).**

A Revels office account book contains the only specific reference to the play’s performance in Shakespeare’s lifetime: “A play Caled Mesur for Mesur” by “Shaxberd” was performed on St. Stephen’s Night (the 26<sup>th</sup> of December) by “his Maiesties plaiers.” No eyewitness accounts have survived, and scholars can only speculate about the details. It was probably played on a bare stage with a curtained backdrop in the palace’s banquet hall.

*See:* Bennett, Josephine Walters. *Measure for Measure as Royal Entertainment*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1966.

Cunningham, Peter. *Extracts from the Accounts of the Revels at Court, In the Reigns of Queen Elizabeth and King James*

*I, from the Original Office Books of the Masters and Yeoman.*  
London: The Shakespeare Society, 1842.

Gurr, Andrew. *The Shakespearean Stage: 1574-1642.*  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

**1720. Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre (London).**

This production marks the triumphant return of Shakespeare's text to the theater after the adaptations of William D'Avenant (1673) and Charles Gildon (1700). The famous actor James Quin played the Duke with Mrs. Seymour appearing as Isabella. Jacob Tonson's 1722 acting edition, which was based on the same text, shows that the text was heavily cut but ultimately faithful to the original (Miles, 302). Eccles notes that the production made cuts mainly in 1.2 and 2.1, and added only eight lines at the end. These same cuts recur in later acting editions, suggesting that they may have been standard omissions (Gibbons, 52).

See: Eccles, Mark, ed. *Measure for Measure, A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare.* New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1980.

Miles, Rosalind. *The Problem of Measure for Measure.* New York: Harper & Rowe, 1976.

Shakespeare, William. *Measure for Measure.* Ed. Brian Gibbons. Updated edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

**1846. Sadler's Wells Theatre (London).**

As tolerance for indecency decreased in the nineteenth century, revivals of *Measure for Measure* declined. Despite this trend, actor-manager Samuel Phelps mounted this significant Victorian production of the play after its absence for nearly twenty years from the London stage. The text, however, reflected the times: Phelps expurgated bawdy language and added ten passages of verse. *The Athenaeum* wrote, "The comic portion of the plot was told well . . . not an offensive phrase was left, and the fun was not

the less for being deprived of its indelicacy.” *The Times* reported that “There was no slippery, shuffling work, but everyone spoke as if he thoroughly understood what he was saying.” Phelps’ character development sought to portray “the fullest possible expression of Shakespeare’s work, complete in all its parts” (Allen, 103), and the Duke became a figure of divine providence. This allegorical reading of the Duke would continue to develop well into the twentieth century.

See: Allen, Shirley. *Samuel Phelps and Sadler’s Wells Theatre*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1971.

Prompt Book. Ed. George Daniel. *Cumberland’s British Theatre*. London: John Cumberland, n.d.

Rev. of *Measure for Measure*. *The Athenaeum*. 7 November 1846.

“Sadler’s Wells Theatre.” Rev. of *Measure for Measure*. *The Times*. 5 November 1846, p. 5.

### 1893. **The Royalty Theatre (London).**

Rejecting theatrical realism in favor of carefully reproduced Elizabethan staging, William Poel revolutionized the performance of Shakespeare in the late nineteenth century. Rather than relying on massively ornate sets and elaborate costumes, Poel’s company performed in a partial re-creation of the Fortune Theatre and emphasized rapid pacing and poetic rhythm. *Isabella* was not in habit, and *Angelo* was charming rather than menacing (Miles, 307). The text remained heavily censored for taste. While Poel’s concept was novel, it “bewildered some members of the audience and overwhelmed others” (Nicholls, 51); it confirmed for dramatic critic William Archer the opinion that “there is no other play of Shakespeare’s in which so much of the dialogue is absolutely unspeakable before a modern audience.”

See: Archer, William. *The Theatrical World of 1893-1897*. London: Walter Scott, Ltd., 1895. 5 vols.

Nicholls, Graham. *Measure for Measure: Text and Performance*.  
London: Macmillan Education, Ltd., 1987.

Speaight, Robert. *William Poel and the Elizabethan Revival*.  
London: William Heineman, Ltd., 1954.

**1933. Old Vic (London).**

One of several productions of the play by Tyrone Guthrie, this revival, starring Charles Laughton as Angelo and Flora Robson as Isabella, demonstrated the play's dramatic potential. Laughton's "cunning oleaginous monster" and Robson's "uncompromising and splendid young Scotswoman" (Guthrie, 122) prefigured later pairings, notably the John Gielgud-Barbara Jefford duo of 1950. Guthrie wrote that his interpretation did not emphasize the "incense laden sexuality" (Guthrie, 122) of Shakespeare's text. *The Times* reviewer explained that Guthrie's production instead "quietly persuades us to apply principles that are not our own to these characters; and at once they cease to be either baffling or repulsive." Laughton gave "full value" to the horror of an intellect overthrown by passion and Robson's interpretation hinted "at an asceticism undergoing the decisive test which only the world can give."

See: "Entertainments: The Old Vic." Rev. of *Measure for Measure*.  
*The Times*. 5 December 1933, p. 12.

Guthrie, Tyrone. *A Life in the Theatre*. New York:  
McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1959.

*Theatre Arts*. New York: Theatre Arts, Inc., 1933. Vol. 18.

**1950. Shakespeare Memorial Theatre (Stratford).**

This landmark production by Peter Brook marks the theatrical resurgence of *Measure for Measure* in the post-World War II era. Brook's interpretation examined the coexistence of what he termed "Holy Theatre" (spiritual and psychological issues) and "Rough Theatre" (physical, violent, bawdy culture). *The Times* (10 March 1950) reported that John Gielgud's Angelo was "unsmiling, precise, and overwhelmingly confident"; his fall was precipitated

by something “coldly and deliberately vicious in [his] own nature” (10). Opposite the older Gielgud, a young Barbara Jefford lent a “saintly purity” to Isabella and Harry Andrews’s Duke conveyed “effortless authority [and] human warmth” (Gibbons, 59). Significantly, Brook could only realize his vision through major reshaping of the text (Weil). For example, to remove any ambiguity from the Duke’s role, Brook cut his castigation of Pompey in 3.2, his prolonged deception of Isabella in Act 5, and his outright proposal of marriage. The Viennese low-lives not only survived Brook’s editing, but thrived; to create the gritty backdrop of Vienna, they literally paraded before the audience. The climax of this production occurred in 5.1 when Isabella chooses to kneel and beg for Angelo’s life. Following Mariana’s plea, Brook instructed Jefford to stand silently for as long as she thought the audience could bear. The excruciating pause sometimes lasted as long as two minutes.

See: Berry, Ralph. *Changing Styles in Shakespeare*. London: George Allen & Uwin, Ltd., 1981.

Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1968.

David, Richard. “Shakespeare’s comedies and the modern stage.” *Shakespeare Survey* 4 (1951), 129-39.

Gielgud, John. *Acting Shakespeare*. New York: Scribner. 1991.

Rev. of *Measure for Measure*. *The Times*. 10 March 1950, p. 10.

Trewin, J. C. *Shakespeare on the English Stage: 1900-1964*. London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1964

Venezky, Alice. “The 1950 Season at Stratford-Upon-Avon—A Memorable Achievement in Stage History.” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 2 (1951), 73-7.

Weil, Herbert S. "The options of the audience: theory and practice in Peter Brook's *Measure for Measure*." *Shakespeare Survey* 25(1972), 27-35.

Worsley, T. C. Rev. of *Measure for Measure*. *The New Statesman*. 1 April 1950.

**1970. Royal Shakespeare Company (Stratford).**

Brook's production succeeded in shifting the focus of *Measure for Measure* to the Duke, and others subsequently took this concept much further; the character became transformed from a powerful ruler into an allegorical image of God the Father. This transition arguably culminated in another of Tyrone Guthrie's productions (1966): the Duke was "first a loving father and, eventually the Heavenly Bridegroom to whom at the beginning of the play [Isabella] was betrothed" (Nicholls, 53, citing a program note). In 1970 John Barton shattered this trend with a production "as far removed from the direct Christian allegory . . . as from Peter Brook's riotous low-life spectacular" (*The Times*). Rather than seeking clarity, Barton sought to maximize ambiguity and to work against resolution; he referred to this approach as "reality breaking in on convention." The result was that "none of the characters, including the Duke and Isabella, emerged unflawed" (Williamson, 167). Sebastian Shaw's Duke appeared as a "middle-aged academic who likes to think he understands human nature" (*Oxford Mail*); Irving Wardle wrote that the Duke was "sly, petulant, crafty, philosophic, resourceful . . . and in the end he is as much an enigma as ever." Estelle Kohler's Isabella suffered from a "sustained sexual nausea" and a belief "that her chastity, like that of Angelo, is corrupted by pride and that this pride must be punished . . . by pleading for the man she had accused" (Speaight, 444). Ian Richardson's Angelo was a violent, "savage child" reduced to "whimpering over his pile of law books" (Wardle, 12). Barton's concept resulted in a shocking yet innovative final scene: Isabella neither rejected nor accepted the Duke's proposal, but instead started silently into the audience. *The Listener* wrote that she had "silent rage written all over her high forehead and stubborn chin."

See: Speaight, Robert. "Shakespeare in Britain." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 21(1970), 439-49.

Rev. of *Measure for Measure*. *The Guardian*. 2 April 1970

Rev. of *Measure for Measure*. *The Listener*. 9 April 1970.

Rev. of *Measure for Measure*. *Oxford Mail*. 2 April 1970.

Wardle, Irving. "Stratford Integrity." *The Times*. 2 April 1970, p. 12.

Williamson, Jane. "The Duke and Isabella on the Modern Stage." *The Triple Bond*, ed. Joseph Price. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975.

### 1978. Royal Shakespeare Company (Stratford).

Barry Kyle's interpretation of this play featured dynamic individuals "waking up to their true natures" (*The Guardian*). While the production did not garner much critical acclaim, Kyle's choices distinguished him from his predecessors. The production had a bright, comic tone, in part created by Richard Griffith's richly humorous performance as Pompey. *The Times* wrote that Michael Pennington's youthful Duke was a "humorous romantic lead" whose self-confidence grew as the plot progressed. Paola Dionisotti's Isabella was a "mousy, dowdy, and unattractive" woman, whose "goal was the realization of the warm blooded woman hidden beneath her habit" (Nicholls, 79); she so enthusiastically accepted the Duke's first proposal that Kyle cut the second from the text. Jonathan Pryce's Angelo was a "twitchy grotesque, afflicted with nervous giggles and tight, fussy hand gestures" that expressed his hidden sexual frustration.

See: Billington, Michael. Rev. of *Measure for Measure*. *The Guardian*. 28 June 1970.

Cushman, Robert. Rev. of *Measure for Measure*. *The Observer*. 2 July 1978.

Trewin, J. C. "Shakespeare in Britain." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31 (1980), 153-161.

Wardle, Irving. Rev. of *Measure for Measure*. *The Times*. 28 June 1970.

### 1979. The BBC Television Shakespeare.

Between 1978 and 1985 the BBC produced Shakespeare's canon of dramatic works as a series of television adaptations. The series' guidelines severely limited artistic decisions: "the plays were to be set in Shakespeare's own time or in the historical period of the events . . . they were to be no more than 2 1/2 hours long, and they were to have 'maximum acceptability to the widest possible audience'" (Willis, 10-11). Despite these restrictions, Desmond Davis's *Measure for Measure* (Cedric Messina, producer) won significant praise from critics. This production of a virtually uncut text did not consider the psychological motivations of the principal characters but achieved, nevertheless, a straightforward vision of the play's moral complexity. Davis brilliantly exploited the camera's restricted point of view, transforming the play into a "series of one-on-one confrontations" (Phillips, quoting Coursen, 23). The Angelo and Isabella interviews (2.2, 2.4), for example, featured tight shots of the characters' reactions and emphasized the intimacy of the encounters. Early on a tracking shot from the perspective of Claudio, paraded about as a criminal fornicator, established Vienna as a dark and dirty city. Tim Piggott-Smith's Angelo was a "businesslike . . . arrogant, unattractive man" (Nicholls, 82), who found himself at a loss when confronted with his own emotions. Kate Nelligan's Isabella was primarily concerned with her chastity, for which virtue she was willing to sacrifice a life. The final scene of judgment played theatrically on a raised platform stage.

See: Charney, Maurice. "Shakespearean Anglophilia: The BBC-TV Series and American Audiences." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31 (1980), 287-92.

*Measure for Measure: a BBC Television production in association with Time-Life Television.* Dir. Desmond Davis. Ambrose Video Publishing, 1987.

“*Measure for Measure* on Screen: Adaptations and Analyses of Shakespeare’s Complex Morality Play.” British Film Institute ScreenOnline.

<<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/564851/index.html>>

Willis, Susan. *The BBC Shakespeare Plays: Making the Televised Canon.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.

#### 2004. **Royal National Theatre (London).**

Shakespeare productions are living, evolving organisms: as their environment changes, they adapt. Changing tastes sometimes force plays into a state of theatrical hibernation, but *Measure for Measure* has survived the winter. After post-1960s sexual liberation, Angelo’s indecent proposal and Lucio’s bawdy humor no longer compel audience members to leave at intermission. In place of sexual issues, political considerations have asserted their primacy: in an age of terrorism, insecurity, and violent religious extremism, questions concerning the nature of authority have risen to the forefront. Set in a war-ravaged Vienna, Simon McBurney’s 2004 production was “clearly about power: its contradictions, hypocrisies, perils, abuses, [and] psychopathologies” (*The Times*). TV monitors dominated the set; the prisoners were costumed in orange jumpsuits; for a moment, the face of United States President George W. Bush flashed on the screens. Benedict Nightingale found Paul Rhys’s Angelo to be a figure of totalitarian authority; he brought vicious order to a city “evoked by flesh, leather, bare-chested pimps, slatternly tarts, [and] violent cops.” Naomi Frederick’s Isabella was a “simple girl scared by her own sexuality,” but able to bring Rhys to the point of masochistic self-mutilation. A Machiavellian “master of realpolitik” (Hopkins and Orr, 99), David Troughton’s Duke worked his quiet manipulations

in the background only to become a public figure of unquestionable authority in the end. The Duke's line "what is yours is mine" (5.1.539) took on pointed significance when a scrim flew off to reveal "a small white room containing only one thing: a bed, with a rose on a pillow" (Hopkins and Orr, 100).

See: Hopkins, D. J. and Shelley Orr. Performance Review:  
*Measure for Measure*. *Theatre Journal* 57 (2005), 97-100.

Nightingale, Benedict. Rev. of *Measure for Measure*. *The Times*. 28 May 2004.

### A Note on Non-Western Productions

While there is a tendency among some stage historians to focus only on Western productions of Shakespeare's plays, the theatrical significance of non-Western productions cannot be overlooked. In the case of *Measure for Measure*, linguistic translation and cultural adaptation have resulted in several vibrant and provocative adaptations. Visiting British director Tony Robinson, for example, presented the play at the People's Art Theatre Company of Beijing in 1981. Since the biblical associations of the title were lost on a non-western audience, *Measure for Measure* appeared under the new title, *Please Step into the Furnace*. An allusion to a famous story of political corruption from China's Tang dynasty, the new title "instantly evoke[d] for a Chinese audience the notion of an official unwittingly caught in his own trap, defeated by his own nefarious designs" (Wakeman, 502). Still reeling from years of political unrest and the trial of the Gang of Four, the political issues of the play captivated a Chinese audience "accustomed . . . to clearly announced moral and political messages" (Wakeman, 502). One audience member commented: "It is a wonder Shakespeare could guess what the Chinese villains would do and say several hundred years later" (Wakeman, 501).

In his 1967 production in Bremen, Peter Zadek sought to substitute a "spirit of anarchy for play's consideration of justice" (Kennedy, 267). Instead of seeking to interpret objectively Shakespeare's text, he broke even with his fellow German Bertolt Brecht by seeking to stage subjectively "the images arising from [his] imagination from reading the play" (Kennedy, 267, quoting an interview by Roy Kift). In this

production, Angelo and Escalus physically fought over possession of the Duke's throne and Mistress Overdone became Vienna's ruler after citizens killed the Duke. In an even more ironic twist, Isabella was subsequently confined to a brothel. An engaging frontier of Shakespeare performance studies, foreign production has as much to teach Western observers about the values and perspectives of cultures that import the Bard as it does about his global appeal as a playwright.

See: He, Qi-Xin. "China's Shakespeare." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37 (1986), 149-59.

Kennedy, Dennis. *Foreign Shakespeare: Contemporary Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Kennedy, Dennis. *Looking at Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth Century Performance*. Second Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Kift, Roy. "Hoping for the Unexpected: The Theatre of Peter Zadek." *New Theatre Quarterly* I (1985), p. 329.

Wakeman, Carolyn. "Measure for Measure on the Chinese Stage." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 33 (1982), 499-502.

Zhang, Xiao Yang. *Shakespeare in China*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996.