

COMPTE RENDUS / BOOK REVIEWS

L.W. CONOLLY

The Shaw Festival: The First Fifty Years.

Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2011. 312 pp.

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During its first fifty years (1962-2011) The Shaw Festival has been blessed with superb “house” photographers. Two in particular have been responsible for creating a stunning visual archive of the Festival’s complex production record: Robert C. Ragsdale created most of the images through the 1979 season and since then David Cooper has been the company photographer. Scott McKowen, graphic designer for Festival publications for some twenty-six seasons (including world-class house programs for 200 productions, 40 covers of which are seen on two full pages in the book), had the critical task of selecting the hundreds of photographs for this new publication, *The Shaw Festival: The First Fifty Years*. His design of the book, with the myriad illustrations bringing productions to life (or, for those who have seen productions at the Festival, rekindling memories of these unique theatrical experiences), has contributed enormously to the impact of this record of fifty years.

But be not misled: this is not a coffee-table volume of photos, as striking as the visual impression of the book is. Certainly, the text would mean far less without its illustrations; one odd result of the completeness of the photo selection (at least for me) is wanting more of them! I suspect all frequent patrons of the Shaw Festival will remember stage moments or actors in roles not shown in photographs. But to reiterate, this is not primarily a picture book, as essential as its illustrations are; it is much more than that.

The Shaw Festival: The First Fifty Years is an extraordinary explication and balanced chronicle of each of the fifty years, from its beginning in 1962 with four staged readings of *Don Juan in Hell* and four performances of *Candida* in the Court House Theatre by amateurs to 2011 with the Festival’s four performance venues and eleven productions; from a relatively unknown regional operation in the 1960s to a world-class institution with one of the finest ensemble acting companies to be found anywhere—and arguably one of the great repertory theatres on the planet. Since its inception the Festival has staged some 400 productions, involving, as the preface notes, “more than two thousand actors, directors, designers,

stage managers, technical directors, musicians, choreographers, and administrative staff” (3). In addition, countless volunteers have made the Festival a crucial part of the Niagara-on-the-Lake community, and seven artistic directors have guided the Festival, with only three (Paxton Whitehead, Christopher Newton, and Jackie Maxwell) collectively responsible for forty-two seasons. In 1965 the Festival’s mandate was “Shaw and his great contemporaries.” In 2000 it was expanded to include plays written about the period of Shaw’s lifetime, and, in recent years, especially under Maxwell, more emphasis has been given to new plays that might touch on the mandate.

The Shaw Festival’s history is a complex and varied one, with many highs and some definite lows. So who could most effectively tell this fascinating story? One can imagine several potential perspectives: Dan H. Laurence, for years the doyen of Shaw scholars and for some time the Festival’s literary advisor, would have had no doubt vivid remembrances of his time with the Festival (and in particular his disagreement with Newton’s wish to excise Shaw’s Epilogue in *St. Joan*); Ronald Bryden (a former critic), a later literary advisor, would have offered an elegant account thanks to his wonderful prose style (his essays often graced Festival programs) but without the opinionated perspective of Laurence. But both had passed when it was time for this half-century report. Long-time artistic directors like Newton (now retired but still active as a director) could have brought an insider’s insights to his twenty years on the scene.

But only one person truly had the background, knowledge, and objectivity to tackle this daunting challenge: Leonard W. Conolly, who has a long history with the Shaw. He has been seeing productions there for over thirty years; for almost twenty years he has served as a consultant to the Festival (termed by them as a “Corresponding Scholar”), which actually qualifies him as a member of the company and thus, thanks to his proximity to Niagara-on-the-Lake (he is on the faculty of Trent University), encouraged him to see as many Festival productions as possible (a privilege that he has taken to heart). In full disclosure I should confess that for a dozen years I too served as a Corresponding Scholar and, although I had known Len for almost twenty years prior to those years, became much more aware of his Shavian chops and his ability in general as a drama scholar and as an expert on Canadian theatre (although he was British born and educated)—co-editor of the respected *Oxford Companion to Canadian Theatre*. His Shavian efforts include several superb books on Shaw, many essays and public lectures on the subject, the position of President of the

International Shaw Society, and literary advisor to the Shaw Estate. In a section on "Sources" at the end of his book, which follows three useful appendices, Conolly writes about the principle source for this wide-ranging book—the Shaw Festival archive located at the University of Guelph. Although he does not take credit here for its existence, in fact he was instrumental in persuading the Shaw Festival in 1983 to make Guelph the official repository for its archives. The Shaw has continued to make annual deposits to what since 1999 has been appropriately known as the L. W. Conolly Theatre Archives. The details in the book are made considerably more accessible thanks to its appendices: "Artistic Directors and Board Chairs," "Shaw Festival Production Records," and "Shaw Festival Touring Productions." Leading into Conolly's text is a two-page chronological summary of the "Festival at a Glance."

Conolly's knowledge of the Shaw's history is deep and nuanced. He knows its archives better than anyone (he does write about other important published and unpublished sources, but without the Conolly Archives this study would have been almost impossible and certainly less complete). Conolly carefully terms his effort as a history, not *the* history. Perhaps so, yet one cannot imagine a more complete analysis and chronicle of these years. Appropriately, Conolly structures his study chronologically around the terms of the seven artistic directors, with overviews for each time period followed in most of the seven chapters by a production-by-production analysis (with some key diversions). Not surprisingly, the two longest chapters are those that focus on Newton's and Maxwell's reigns. The final chapter (on Maxwell) includes a useful discussion of the Festival's changes since 2003, including a new focus on original plays, plays by women, and Irish plays. Along the way, in all chapters, Conolly also discusses the work of hundreds of artists. I feel especially remiss in not talking about the many wonderful actors whose work I've personally admired at The Shaw, but, alas, it is not possible to do so; the same is true with directors of daring and care that have worked often for The Shaw; and designers of great artistry and accomplishment. An excellent index allows the reader to create histories of these many individuals. The book, written with clarity, great charm, and a real freedom from bias, bestows much careful attention on all aspects of the Festival's components. The result belongs in the hands of most readers of this journal and even more playgoers—and not just Canadian—who, as I have, will cherish the names of their favorite theatre artists for themselves or meet them for the first time. What a joyful and invigorating trip this is.

PETER DICKINSON

World Stages, Local Audiences: Essays on Performance, Place, and Politics.

Theatre: Theory Practice Performance.
Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010. Hb 272pp.

KIM SOLGA

Peter Dickinson's *World Stages, Local Audiences* is a book I really, really wanted to like. It takes significant risks in style and structure. It is personal and invested. It is compelled by the same kinds of questions—about political performance, social justice, community affect, and cultural change—that motivate a great deal of my own work. It is relentlessly eclectic in its choice of primary sources, examining everything from the Beijing and Vancouver Olympics to the drama of Tony Kushner to the media spectacles of professional soccer. It is a scholarly nomadology (136-175)—a term I suspect Dickinson won't mind me applying here—as well as a book with real heart. And yet, for all that, it doesn't really work.

That does not, however, mean you should not read it. As a document of contemporary performance and as a thoughtful exegesis of the kinds of ethical struggles that mark so much of our labour in the peripatetic discipline(s) of theatre and performance studies, it is one of the most comprehensive texts I've encountered in a long time. Dickinson begins by marking his debt to a variety of scholars that readers will not be surprised to find among the book's fellow travelers—including Jill Dolan, David Román, and José Muñoz—and suggests that his project in the book will be to think through the ways in which "events played out on the world stage (wars, acts of terror, religious gatherings, natural disasters, sporting contests, human-rights protests) can never be interpreted apart from the local constituencies to whom and through whom they are being mediated," while also considering some of the ways in which local works speak (effectively and politically) to global urgencies (7). He then attempts to walk the talk in four chapters and a coda that develop these central concerns in remarkably different ways: by comparing "Olympic showcases" and other cultural engagements with the games (chapter one); by reading the politicized spectacles of same-sex marriage "in North America and beyond" (chapter two); by reading Tony Kushner through David Beckham's global wanderings (chapter three); by thinking about queer mourning through the work of two women artists (Paula Vogel and Margie Gillis) whose brothers died of AIDS (chapter four); and by encountering his own limits as a spectator in the face of climate change (in the coda).