

## Directing Shakespeare in America

***Directing Shakespeare in America: Current Practices.* By Charles Ney. London UK, New York NY: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016. Pp. 362.**

Charles Ney's *Directing Shakespeare in America: Current Practices* is an illuminating and much-needed resource for directors, scholars, students, and Shakespeare aficionados. Between 2004 and 2015, Ney interviewed a veritable "who's who" in the American Shakespeare scene. He selected 65 directors to participate in this study, an impressive feat as these are among the most prolific practitioners and artistic directors in the United States. Any of the interviewees in Charles Ney's book could be the subject of an entire monograph, but Ney demonstrates a remarkable ability to curate this wealth of wisdom in a way that is compelling and easy to follow. Rather than presenting the interviews as self-contained essays, he has taken the much more useful approach of extracting and collating advice from each interviewee and organizing it based on topic. He identifies common approaches and creates convincing categories in which each director can be viewed. The book is engaging as a straight read-through, but it's equally useful for the reader that wants to skip ahead and explore concise essays on various topics, such as approaches to table work, or how to navigate tech and previews. These practices are invaluable for directors of Shakespeare, but can be more broadly applied as resources for directing any kind of live theatre.

A prolific director himself, Ney no doubt has his own informed opinions about how to approach directing Shakespeare, and yet he manages to serve as a fair and impartial conduit for each interviewee's ideas. He transmits a variety of approaches without prejudice, saying "... there is more that can be learned by setting those judgements aside" (28). He is present in this work, not as a director, but as a keen scholar organizing a chaotic cacophony of ideas. Still, his underlying tone in this book is that of a person with great reverence for the artistic process and great respect for a diversity of approaches. Part I includes an introduction to each director's career and attempts to identify their major beliefs and aesthetic sensibilities. Part II focuses on preproduction, how the director prepares to work with designers and actors. Part III explores the various approaches to rehearsal, with focuses on table work, staging, speaking the language, and middle stage rehearsals. Part IV, titled "Finishing the Production," explores tech and dress, as well as the added element of the audience.

Ney intends this book "to be a framework in which to view an individual's work" (1). It accomplishes that and much more. A director can read Ney's book and apply this framework to their own process. For example, a "Shakespeare as a Contemporary" director takes artistic license to promote the text's relevance to the present. Conversely, an "Original Practices Director" works as a "director archeologist," using Elizabethan staging practices to reveal possibilities in the text (31). The "Invisible Director" aims to "erase the traces" of the director (31) while the "Interpretive Director" actively attempts to collaborate with Shakespeare while putting forth a strong artistic vision for the play. For each of these approaches, Ney provides examples of specific directors' processes. Categorizing directors based on their theoretical or practical approaches is challenging, but Ney makes convincing arguments for his breakdowns, while acknowledging that any individual director will defy those at times, based on the practical demands of their production or the nature of collaboration. These approaches are sometimes contradictory in a way that feels invigorating, as Ney creates a dialectic between powerful voices.

The book then presents a breakdown of the common elements of production – selection, casting, concept, table-work, rehearsals, tech, previews, performance, etc. – and each section offers reflective advice from a number of directors. Ney doesn't allow the discussions to become a collection of disconnected essays, but curates this information, extracting relevant information and placing it in appropriate sections. He develops useful categories and identifies major themes in each chapter. He sometimes identifies which approach is dominant, but never which approach is right. One can assume, based on the success of the interviewees, that every approach delineated has merit. The reader is invited to pick and choose. He manages to contextualize without getting in the way. These directors' voices shine through.

Ney's contribution is unparalleled, in part because of his specific focus on the rich community of directors in the United States. A 1990 book by Ralph Berry called *On Directing Shakespeare* featured 12 interviews, including Trevor Nunn and Peter Brook, with no specific geographic focus. *The Routledge Companion to Directors' Shakespeare*, edited in 2008 by John Russell Brown, includes interviews with 31 directors (4 of which were American), and each chapter focused on a different director's approach. Nancy Taylor's 2005 book, *Women Direct Shakespeare in America*, focused on feminist performance theory in practice during the 1990s. Elizabeth Schafer took a similar approach in 2000 with her *Ms – Directing Shakespeare: Women Direct Shakespeare*. Countless instructional books exist that focus on directing Shakespeare, but each of those only focuses on one author's specific approach.

Ney's book astonishingly avoids privileging one approach over another. This is a study that attempts to truly capture diverse approaches and contextualize them. Each interviewee generously throws open the doors to their process and the result is instructive. There were moments when I craved more examples from specific productions to illustrate points, or to more clearly set up the contrast between directors, but I understand this would have made things lengthier and perhaps cumbersome. This book is an effective snapshot of an incredibly diverse body of work and a must read for Shakespeare directors, scholars, and enthusiasts.

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*The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*  
Volume 29, Number 2 (Spring 2017)  
ISSN 2376-4236  
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