

# Shakespeare *in*



# OBJECTS

*Treasures from the  
Victoria and Albert Museum*

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*Martin Droghda sculpsit Londini*

L O N D O N

Printed by Isaac Iaggard, and Ed. Blount. 1623.

# 1

“Devise, wit; write, pen; for I am for whole volumes in folio.”  
*Love’s Labour’s Lost* (1.2)

## The Shakespeare First Folio (1623)

At the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1622, a list of forthcoming English publications advertised: ‘Playes, written by M. William Shakespeare, all in one volume printed by Isaack Iaggard, in fol.’<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare had already been dead for seven years by the time the First Folio appeared in 1623. John Heminge and Henry Condell, actors in Shakespeare’s company, the King’s Men (previously the Lord Chamberlain’s Men), demonstrated their devotion to the memory of their friend and colleague by producing a volume of indisputable cultural (and ultimately financial) value.

Ben Jonson had published his *Workes* in Folio in 1616 to much mockery for his presumed bumptiousness in an age when the reputation of playwrights, though upwardly mobile, was far from secure. The Folio format relates to a large sheet of paper folded once to create two leaves, or four pages, and is therefore usually large (at least fifteen inches (38cm) in height) and impressive. At the time it was not a natural choice for playtexts, which were considered insufficiently respectable to warrant a handsome style of book usually reserved for Bibles and other important works.

The volume cost approximately one pound, probably less for an unbound copy, and was clearly something of a trophy for an affluent bibliophile. Past estimates of the print run have ranged from 250 to a thousand copies, with the consensus hovering at around 750. Roughly a third of the surviving copies are in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC, while the V&A holds three copies. Half the thirty-six plays it includes would be lost to us but for the efforts of Heminge and Condell and their publishers. Although many of Shakespeare’s plays had been available individually in inexpensive quartos, plays such as *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Julius Caesar*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest* had never appeared in print before. *Pericles* is omitted (and was not included until the second impression of the Third Folio in 1664).

The volume is dedicated to the brother Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, William and Philip Herbert. William Herbert had been Lord Chamberlain, responsible for regulating the professional stage, including supervision of the Master of the Revels, who licensed plays and theatres. The preliminary pages of early modern plays teem with commendatory verses and prefaces that tend to flattery and floweriness, but Heminge and Condell's epistle to their Lordships has a touching simplicity:

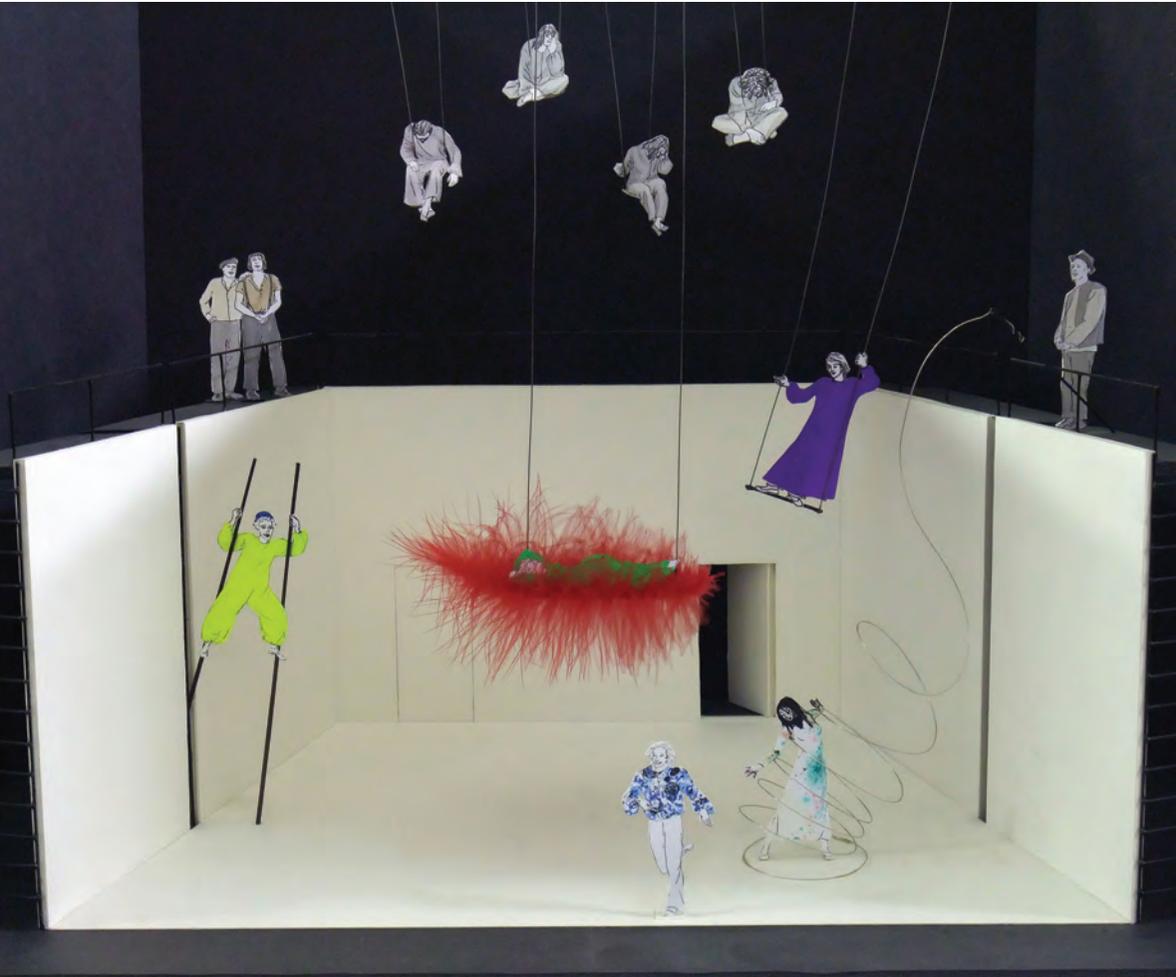
We have but collected them, and done an office to the dead, to procure his Orphanes, Guardians; without ambition either of selfe-profit, or fame, onely to keepe the memory of so worthy a Friend & Fellow alive as was our SHAKESPEARE.

Eulogies were contributed by Ben Jonson, and the poets Hugh Holland, Leonard Digges, and his friend and fellow translator, James Mabbe.

The editors have also endowed us with one of the few authenticated likenesses of the poet: the engraved head-and-shoulders portrait by Martin Droeshout that is endlessly reproduced and parodied. There are no such images of the two men who put together the First Folio. Their memorial stands in the former churchyard of St Mary Aldermanbury in the City of London, the parish in which they both lived and raised families. The church on the site was destroyed twice, once by the Great Fire in 1666, and again during the Blitz in 1940. Their names are inscribed beneath a bust of the man who left them both money in his will to purchase mourning rings, and whom they in turn would help to immortalise.

The V&A's copies of the First Folio were all bequeathed to the museum by nineteenth-century collectors. The copy illustrated belonged to John Jones (1799–1882), a wealthy tailor and army clothier, whose bequest also included a Second Folio (1632), a Third Folio (1664), and over a hundred paintings. The scholar and editor of Shakespeare, the Reverend Alexander Dyce (1798–1869), and the literary historian John Forster (1812–1876) also bequeathed First and Second Folios to the museum, along with extensive libraries and collections of paintings. Forster's First Folio lacks the famous title page, while the title page of Dyce's copy has been remounted.

1. W.W. Greg, *The Shakespeare First Folio*, p. 3.



“This green plot shall be our stage...”  
*A Midsummer Night's Dream* (3.1)

15

### **Sally Jacobs, set model for Peter Brook's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1970)**

Peter Brook's 1970 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* had a profound effect on a whole generation of theatre artists and audience members. It is still one of the most influential and frequently cited Shakespearean productions of the twentieth century, and Sally Jacobs' white-box set was key to its success.

Brook claims that he was surprised to find himself agreeing to the Royal Shakespeare Company's invitation to direct one of Shakespeare's 'prettier' plays. His last work for the RSC had been the hard-hitting and experimental *US*, examining the effect of the Vietnam War. Brook's original ambition was to make the magic in the play believable by mixing actors with Chinese acrobats, having been inspired by the performers he saw in the Peking Circus on their first visit to Europe. The acrobats were all dressed identically in white shirts and trousers which concealed their muscular bodies and 'vanished in anonymity, leaving in their place an impression of pure speed, of pure lightness, of pure spirit'.<sup>1</sup> When this proved unworkable, Brook asked Trevor Nunn to choose a cast for him from the RSC's company (including Frances de la Tour, Alan Howard and Ben Kingsley) and they began a period of intensive, unconventional rehearsal. Each day started with gymnastics, moving on to practising circus tricks, then singing and dancing, only reading the text at the end of the day when their bodies were exhausted. John Kane (Philostrate/Puck) and Alan Howard (Theseus/Oberon) discovered a facility for plate-spinning that allowed them to toss the magic flower (in the form of a spinning plate) from one to another on the tips of their 'wands'.

Brook and Jacobs developed the standard white-box set (widely used at Stratford at the time) into a fantastical gymnasium/circus space. Steel ladders from the ground ran up to a gallery where the musicians were stationed and where the actors waited when they were 'offstage', gazing down on the action, or providing sound effects and rough music. Trapezes were suspended from the ceiling and wire springs dangled down to form the Athenian wood in which the lovers and Mechanicals are

ensnared. Puck walked on stilts, actors dangled from trapezes, and Titania's bed became a giant feather suspended on wires (as shown here). The actors wore loose clothes (kaftans and bell-bottoms) in white, or bright, jewel-like colours that allowed them to contrast with, or blend into, the set.

The play literally began with a bang – a loud percussive crash – followed by the cast rushing on to the stage to take their positions. The production was intensely aural, scored by composer Richard Peaslee using autoharps, bongos and tubular bells to create unearthly, vibrant soundscapes.

Sally Jacobs recreated this model for the V&A to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the production, reusing some of the original model parts. The scene she created shows Puck (in luminous yellow) on stilts, Demetrius and Helena entangled in a wire thicket, and Oberon (in purple) on trapeze, while Titania rests on her feather bed attended by floating fairies.

1. Peter Brook, *Threads of Time*, p. 149.

“And make my image but an alehouse sign...”  
*Henry VI, Part Two (3.2)*

56

**Papier mâché bust of Shakespeare, produced to advertise  
Flowers Ales (mid-twentieth century)**

This likeness of Shakespeare was reproduced in large numbers in the twentieth century in a variety of colours, both in papier mâché and in ceramic form, and was used in inns and public houses to promote Flowers Ales, often with printed slogans such as ‘Pick Flowers Keg Bitter’. The image is based on the memorial bust of Shakespeare in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, by Gheerart Janssen, erected following Shakespeare’s death in 1616. The V&A cherishes this image of Shakespeare in recognition of the pivotal role of the Flower family in realising the dream of building a theatre dedicated to Shakespeare in the town of his birth. The founder of the brewery, Edward Flower, was a major financial contributor to the Shakespeare Tercentenary Celebrations held in Stratford in 1864. His son, Charles Edward Flower (1830–1892), who took over as head of the brewing firm after his father’s death in 1883, bought up land on the waterside in Stratford close to the site of the Rotunda built for Garrick’s 1769 Shakespeare Jubilee, and donated it to Stratford Town Council as a site for a Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. In addition to a cash sum of £22,700, he gave further land to create gardens around the theatre, together with the freehold of the nearby properties, whose rents could be used for maintenance of the building. Completed in 1879, the theatre opened with a production of *Much Ado About Nothing*. From then on, it was used for an annual Shakespeare Festival lasting for several weeks, with its facilities available for use by local residents for the rest of the year.<sup>1</sup>

A competition held to choose a design for the new theatre attracted twenty-five entries. The winning design by Dodgshun and Unsworth combined Tudor and Gothic styles, with pinnacles, turrets and ornamental chimneys, and featured ornamental striped red-and-white and chequered blue-and-red brickwork. The overall effect earned comparison with ‘a German fairy-tale castle’ and was in fact contemporaneous with Wagner’s Bayreuth, completed in 1876. Although initially admired, the design of the building went out of fashion. The interior of the theatre was a horseshoe-shaped auditorium with orchestra stalls, a dress circle

supported on pillars, and a gallery accessed from outside by a separate staircase. A library and art gallery were completed in 1881, linked to the dress circle of the theatre by a shallow arched bridge, and a tower housing offices and a water tank in case of fire was added in 1884. Unfortunately, the tower burned down before the water could be used to save the theatre when it was destroyed by fire in 1926. Only the library and art gallery were rescued and now provide access to the Swan, completed in 1986. The Swan occupies the space of the conference centre which had been created in 1932 from the burnt-out shell of the old theatre's auditorium.

Archibald Flower, nephew of the theatre's founder and Chair of the Governors, backed the Town Council's preference to keep the existing waterside site as the location for a new theatre, and launched an international competition for the design of the building. The winner was Elisabeth Scott (1898–1972), second cousin of Giles Gilbert Scott, architect of Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral, and great-niece of Sir George Gilbert Scott, who designed St Pancras Station and the Albert Memorial. In her acceptance speech, the architect declared herself to be a modernist, and the exterior of her building was uncompromisingly modern, softened only with patterns of pink and silver-grey bricks, the sole decoration being five carved stone panels above the main entrance. Materials of the finest quality were used throughout the interior, the only problem was the theatre itself: the fan-shaped auditorium created a distance between actors and audience which was very difficult to overcome. Many years later Festival Director W. Bridges-Adams wrote that Scott had created 'the theatre, of all theatres, in England in which it is hardest to make an audience laugh or cry'.<sup>2</sup>

1. See Marian J. Pringle, *The Theatres of Stratford-upon-Avon, 1875–1992*.

2. David Ward, *Transformation*, p. 9.





“Let her paint an inch thick, to this favour  
she must come; make her laugh at that.”  
*Hamlet* (5.1)

88

### **Leslie Hurry, headdress for the Gravedigger in Robert Helpmann's *Hamlet*, Sadler's Wells Ballet (1942)**

The jester's cap in dull red and yellow, trimmed with ivy, morphs into a grinning skull at the back, and indicates a great deal about Robert Helpmann's ballet of *Hamlet*. The production was created for the Sadler's Wells Ballet at the New Theatre (now the Noël Coward), London, on 19 May 1942. The premiere was presented to raise money for Mrs Churchill's Aid to Russia Fund.

An actor as well as a dancer, Helpmann (1909–1986) chose to choreograph *Hamlet* (playing the lead himself) to convince director Tyrone Guthrie (1900–1971) that he would be well cast in Shakespeare's play – an ambition he went on to achieve two years later. Helpmann worked out the ballet's synopsis with the assistance of the theatre director Michael Benthall (1919–1974), together contriving its structure to represent the confused recollections of the dying prince. Helpmann also consulted the composer Constant Lambert over the score, eventually choosing Tchaikovsky's *Hamlet Fantasy Overture*. The eighteen-minute production opened and closed with the dying Prince being carried off by four captains, the ballet's central inspiration deriving from Hamlet's famous line 'For in that sleep of death what dreams may come...' (3.1.66). This almost cinematic presentation distilled the essence of the play rather than telling it as a linear narrative, and included a then fashionable Freudian element as Hamlet confused his mother, Queen Gertrude (Celia Franca), with Ophelia (Margot Fonteyn).

This sense of confused identity, and duality, telescoping two characters into one person, was also evident in the role of the Gravedigger (initially performed by Leo Kersley), a 'Clown' in Shakespeare's texts, whose headdress also evokes Yorick, the late King's dead jester, whose skull he unearths. There is a similar sense of transience and change in the remainder of the Gravedigger's costume, of which one half appears to be an artisan's dress, the other a fantastically rich outfit. As the ballet critic and historian Cyril Beaumont wrote, this was 'a suggestion perhaps that Death knows no distinctions.'<sup>1</sup>

The headdress of papier mâché, plastic and paint was made by Hugh Skillen, and, like the whole production, designed by Leslie Hurry (1909–1978). Helpmann had been looking for a designer when his attention was captured during a visit to an exhibition of Hurry's paintings at the Redfern Gallery in London. Hurry was recovering from depression and the somewhat disturbing quality and colouring of the paintings captured the mood Helpmann hoped his dream-ballet would express in terms of dance and mime. Initially nervous, and having extracted the promise that he could pull out of the production if the designs did not work, the ballet established a second career for Hurry as a stage designer.

According to Helpmann in his funeral address for Hurry, having studied the music, Hurry designed the production in a week, creating a powerful set, predominantly in reds, oranges and crimson, with a deliberately distorted perspective. Barley-sugar columns forming a doorway stage right metamorphosed into a poisoned chalice and dagger-carrying hand, agents of destruction in the play, while the figure of a murderous warrior heralded doom and destruction. For this ballet the unusually detailed, overpowering set worked surprisingly well, and it was a deliberate choice that the dancers should appear dwarfed by their surroundings.

Within a month of the ballet's premiere, Hurry exhibited his designs for *Hamlet* at the Redfern Gallery (4 June – 4 July 1942), bringing the creative process full circle. After this ballet Leslie Hurry designed many stage productions, including two versions of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – directed by Tyrone Guthrie and Michael Benthall (1944) for the Old Vic Company, and by Peter Wood (1961) for the Royal Shakespeare Company – and Humphrey Searle's opera of the play for Covent Garden (1969).

1. Cyril W. Beaumont, *Leslie Hurry*, p. 9.