OURS AS WE PLAY IT
Australia Plays Shakespeare
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Introduction

If you and I now start playing poker, we’re using the elements of poker that have served for the last five hundred years. But the reality is nobody else’s reality. It’s ours as we play it.

Peter Brook

Shakespeare in Australia: unfinished business
One definition of ‘play’ has no usual association with theatre: the space provided within a mechanism for the movement of its parts. It is this definition of play that I conjure as a prompt and model for my exploration of Shakespeare in performance in Australia. Shakespeare’s plays make constant reference to theatre, to audiences, to histrionic practice, to performance, and to art. From the most obvious instance of the play-within-the-play, to the eavesdropping scene, to the subtlest discourse on ‘seeming’, to uses, both comic and sinister, of disguise, Shakespeare’s plays engage constantly and consciously with the predicament of theatre. This is Shakespearean metatheatre and it is this metatheatre that provides a space of play for the ‘moving parts’ of actor’s bodies and audiences. This is because, in performance, each moment of metatheatre has the capacity to direct the actors’ and audience’s awareness towards themselves as participants in a specific performance event, in a specific time and place. Thus metatheatre offers a space of play for living cultural idiom, and therein the possibility of specific
meaning and perennially renewable pertinence. The driving force of this book is a belief that metatheatre is what can make the reality of the play ‘ours as we play it’.

In Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins touch upon the special significance of metatheatre in post-colonial productions by pointing to Derek Walcott’s A Branch of the Blue Nile – a Trinidadian appropriation of Antony and Cleopatra. Gilbert and Tompkins see Blue Nile as characteristic of other ‘post-colonial reworkings of Shakespeare’ by virtue of ‘Walcott’s interest in metatheatre as a way of examining the problems of developing a performance aesthetic specific to the needs of the local culture’. They go on to explain that

Metatheatre reminds us that any performance stages the necessary provisionality of representation. Although often playfully postmodern as well as strategic, it should not be seen as simply part of the postmodern intertextual experiment. By developing multiple self-reflexive discourses through role playing, role doubling/splitting, plays within plays, interventionary frameworks, and other metatheatrical devices, post-colonial works interrogate received models of theatre at the same time as they illustrate, quite self-consciously, that they are acting out their own histories/identities in a complex replay that can never be finished or final. In all this, the question of how Shakespeare might be fully appropriated remains disturbingly relevant.²

The insight that metatheatre has the potential to be purposive in a political sense, and not simply a postmodern aesthetic device, impels my study. However, the apparent discomfort with Shakespeare expressed in Gilbert and Tompkins’ final sentence merits a moment’s attention. The notion of ‘fully’ appropriating
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Shakespeare seems inconsistent with the authors’ prior recognition that drama – and most pointedly post-colonial drama – is necessarily a kind of unfinished business. Most post-colonial scholarship would exclude a so-called ‘straight production’ of Shakespeare from this special category of unfinished business. Yet there is a strong case to be made that Shakespeare’s plays are rife with the above-listed characteristics of metatheatre, and, as a consequence, also ‘illustrate, quite self-consciously that they are acting out their own histories/identities in a complex replay that can never be finished or final’ nor, I would add, fully appropriated.

The problem with the goal of ‘full appropriation’ is that it designates the plays’ historical provenance, ownership and ultimately, meaning, as elsewhere. It belies the fact that the ongoing life of the plays as drama is and always has been the result of successive ploys of appropriation – none of which can be completely fulfilled, finished, or final. The Tempest proves an excellent instance in point: a play over which imperialist agendas have lost much of their appropriative control in the wake of the new uses found for it. The Tempest’s potential to question the act of colonisation, muted perhaps for centuries, has made it the play for exploring such systematic abuses of power in the post-colonial era. As a consequence, the kind of cultural work the play is used to perform has undergone a complete reversal. The Tempest is now indelibly layered with the cultural and political exigencies of our time. It would be difficult to imagine a contemporary production of The Tempest which did not engage with the problematic nature of colonisation. Caliban’s dimensional and speaking subject-hood on stage is impossible to stifle. In the past, producing a plainly repellent Caliban to legitimate Prospero’s domination was the status quo and understood as an inherent meaning of the play. In the present, it would be seen as a perverse, even irresponsible, interpretative exercise. Such a reversal alerts us to the pragmatism of theatre; meaning is as much a function of the
use to which plays are put as an essential ingredient. The reason why Shakespearean drama is unfinished business in the Australian context is that Australians still have uses for it.

To argue that Shakespeare’s plays are necessarily unfinished business requires a specific understanding of the ways in which performed drama makes meaning within culture – ways that differ vitally from those in which printed literature makes meaning. My work concerns the vexed question of how Shakespeare’s plays make meaning in performance, but resists the equation of their ‘perpetual relevance’ with the extraordinary prescience of the author or universal themes latent in the text. I base my argument on the theoretical position that ‘meaning’ in theatre is constituted by the qualities of a particular (and passing) encounter and not by the fulfillment of a hallowed original intention. In this vein, meaning is generated by intersections between the imaginative plenitude of the play-text and the conscious exigencies of the cultural moment in which it is performed. In this notion of ‘cultural moment’ I include all the moments which the cultural present holds dialogue with, reacts to, enfolds, and draws upon. James C. Bulman has formulated this intersection as

…the radical contingency of performance – the unpredictable, often playful intersection of history, material conditions, social contexts, and reception that destabilises Shakespeare and makes theatrical meaning a participatory act.  

Proclaiming the ‘unpredictable’, the ‘playful’ and the ‘participatory’ in theatrical meaning liberates the scholarly task from the constraint to privilege textual meaning over what I will call ‘performative meaning’. Yet this also problematises the analytical endeavour. If the text is not the source from which meaning is derived in a linear, exegetical manner, then what is the legitimate starting place for study? W. B. Worthen outlines some ramifications
for scholarship by challenging our understanding of the sources of meaning and ‘force’ in performance:

...performance always takes place in present behaviour; throughout its stage history the ongoing vitality of Shakespearean drama has depended on the ability to fashion Shakespeare’s writing into the fashionable behaviours indigenous to the changing tastes of the stage.\(^5\)

When we attribute ‘force’ or ‘power’ to a performance, say, of Ophelia’s ‘mad’ scene, we are applauding that performance’s capacity to make vivid a contemporary, perhaps even local, conception of madness because that is the only kind of madness that ‘works’ – for a contemporary audience. The same might be said of any scene of pleading, grieving, cruelty, or love. Our own behaviours and knowledges of behaviour are as much the rubric for truthful, authentic, successful, or powerful performance as the play-text itself. To return to Brook’s succinct summation: ‘the reality is ours’, not that of some hazy historical provenance.

Shakespeare’s plays are preoccupied with what it means to act in both its senses – to take action and to perform. In accordance with Worthen’s insight, we can assume that the content of these ‘behavioural genres’ in the context in which the play is performed will influence the meaning of the play just as much as the script does. Performance and text are, therefore, co-active in generating performative meaning. Worthen clarifies his radical formulation when he points out that ‘acting isn’t determined by textual meanings but uses them to fashion meanings in the fashions of contemporary behaviours’, and furthermore that performance can never accurately recover meanings inscribed in the text because ‘theatre does not cite text; it cites behaviour’.\(^6\)

I would like to take this idea a step further by localising the popular analogy of the stage as the globe. If the stage is a
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microcosm of the world, then the ‘fashionable behaviour indigenous to the changing tastes of the stage’ must be deeply inflected by the particular part of the world in which the staging takes place. This has been confirmed for me repeatedly in my discussions with theatre practitioners who work in touring companies. The way in which a single production means, makes sense, or has force, differs noticeably from one audience to another, but even more from one location to another.

Roy Luxford, Producer for the widely touring British theatre company Cheek by Jowl, described to me ways in which he has seen plays affect different audiences and, conversely, the way different audiences affect productions. In 2004 Cheek by Jowl took a production of *Othello* to fourteen countries, including Nigeria. Nonso Anozie, who played Othello, is of Nigerian descent. Luxford perceived that this, among other aspects of the production, had a particular import in the Nigerian context that in turn influenced the nature of the relationships within the play:

[A] lot of the references in the text about magic were very strongly picked up upon by the audiences and the fact that in Nigeria, a black man in that position is not uncommon, whereas I think that there is still a hang up in the whiter world of seeing a black man playing this character...particularly when you have Desdemona [Caroline Martin] who we cast as incredibly petite, white, and quite ‘English rose’-like, – so the contrast both in their skin tones but also physically – Nonso was six foot six and Desdemona was about five foot something – so I think the reaction between those two characters was markedly different in Nigeria than it was elsewhere. And also, on an individual basis, if you’re playing it in a country that is predominantly black, it’s a very different scenario to if you’re playing it say, in the UK or in Hong Kong. That was a very different scenario where there aren’t many people of
African descent in Hong Kong at all. So their relationship changed quite dramatically.\(^7\)

Intimately connected with this tendency of the cultural context to influence the internal dynamics of the performance, Luxford also noted distinct differences in the response that the production generated from place to place. In Nigeria:

there was a much more vocal response because that is their culture of theatre-going. You know, they interact very vocally with actors on stage...So it was quite, it wasn’t boisterous, but it was a vocal scenario in which to perform the piece.

It’s curious, in New York, the biggest reaction to Othello and Desdemona was when Othello actually slaps Desdemona down to her knees and I think that had perhaps had reminiscences of the Mamet play, *Oleanna*, about that whole male–female relationship. That was quite an interesting moment because really, for New York audiences, for a man to slap a woman in that scenario is, you know, quite personal to them. And in London that actually didn’t have such a resonance, which was really bizarre, because you’d think it would be about the moment when he strangles her, but in New York it was really the moment about a piece of physical abuse.\(^8\)

A more local observation of the re-calibrations of emphasis which take place as a production tours was provided by Australian actor Robert Alexander when describing the Bell Shakespeare Company’s *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar*:

I can tell you that audiences do subtly vary throughout Australia...to take a production of *Richard III* from Sydney to Canberra – the reaction in Canberra was utterly different.
And one can only assume that they know more about politics with a hatchet – they certainly laughed more.

*Julius Caesar* as well. When Mark Antony did his funeral oration in Canberra, they received it in a different way than Sydney audiences did. If we think of one city as cottoning onto manipulation and the humour of political audacity, do we also think that they might actually receive something that is more moving or sentimental? I'm not quite sure about that.9

These accounts reflect recognition that a performance is not a self-contained entity, that it is permeable to its contexts, and that the meanings it creates are generated through encounters with living culture. Such a realisation keeps astride of the recent theoretical movement called ‘presentism’. Presentism, eschewing new historicism’s emphasis on the inaccessible otherness of the past, posits continuities in the way that Shakespeare makes meaning through history. One element of this, as articulated by Terence Hawkes, is through play:

The essence of playing lies in a symbiotic relationship with the audience neatly characterised by the metaphor of the trumpeter. Adjustable, responsive, shifting position to ‘get an echo’, it’s far more concerned to interact with the material reality of the spectator’s world than to impersonate a different ‘reality’ on the stage. In order to operate, it needs constantly to elicit a reaction so that it can acknowledge and reply to that with an unrehearsed flow of repartee, which itself invites and inspires further reaction and so on.10

The participatory and contingent nature of theatrical meaning remains one of theatre’s continuities from Shakespeare’s period to
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our own. The possibility of laughing at the contemporary political ironies elicited by a play’s action is perennially the promise of that play’s performativity. This was no less the case in Shakespeare’s period than it is in our own, albeit that the contemporary significance is utterly our own. Shakespeare’s plays are rife with such portals of performativity which, by generating different realities in different contexts, actually signal the multivalent performativity of the play.

Having nominated a focus on Shakespeare as contemporary performance, it may seem strange that this book confines discussion to theatre, excluding film and other contemporary media. The reason is aligned with my emphasis on examining the interaction of the plays within particular cultural contexts. A theatre production takes place at a time and in a location. In this respect all theatre, even the most stylistically avant-garde, shares the conditions of the theatre for which Shakespeare wrote by virtue of being a specific live and living event. A film, in contrast, is characterised by permanently fixed content that can be replayed anywhere on an infinite number of occasions. As Douglas Lanier has pointed out, film, as a preservable and repeatable cultural entity, can be subjected to the close-reading protocols of text. Film thereby harbours the potential to take on text’s monumental authority:

...even as these media have democartised access to performances they have also shaped our sense of them. Video and film have encouraged us to assimilate performances to the condition of texts, stable artifacts rather than contingent, unstable, ephemeral experiences.\textsuperscript{11}

Despite being a book, \textit{Ours As We Play It} moves in a contrary direction by paying special attention to the conditions of theatre.
Performing a response

This book examines three of Shakespeare’s plays in performance: *Hamlet*, *As You Like It*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The criterion for this selection of plays is in keeping with my mode of inquiry: these are the plays that have enjoyed multiple productions in the past two decades, in parts of Australia where I have spent time, and of which I have an experiential awareness of culturally specific ‘behavioural genres’. Each chapter commences with a brief glance at the play’s wider legacy in the Australian or international context before exploring some cultural preoccupations that can be seen to intersect with that play across a number of recent Australian productions.

Part I examines Company B’s 1994 *Hamlet* directed by Neil Armfield, Pork Chop Productions’ 2001 *Hamlet* directed by Jeremy Sims, Bell Shakespeare’s 2003 *Hamlet* directed by John Bell and State Theatre Company of South Australia/Queensland Theatre Company’s 2007 *Hamlet* directed by Adam Cook. Two inter-linked cultural preoccupations lead my inquiry. The first is masculinity: I ask what it is about the Australian context that conspires repeatedly to fuse the question of Hamlet’s masculine social role with the question of his madness. I then take up the issue of metatheatre in *Hamlet* and ask what conceptions of theatre and play each production drew upon to make the Player’s Tale (act 2, scene 2) forceful. (This reference is to W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet* in S. Greenblatt, W. Cohen, J. E. Howard and K. E. Maus, eds, *The Norton Shakespeare*. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent references to Shakespeare’s plays are also to this edition.)

Turning to *As You Like It* in Part II, I embrace Robert N. Watson’s insight regarding the linguistic violence with which Arden is constructed and appropriated by characters in the play. This leads me to ask how Australian productions have conceptualised Arden as wilderness or pastoral; colonised or shared space; literal or figurative space. It also leads to recognition of Rosalind’s
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extraordinary rhetorical stature and to the question of how performance constitutes, and reviewers respond to, this stature in Australia. These questions about Arden and Rosalind are pursued through the legacy of the play in Australia and across three productions: Sydney Theatre Company’s (STC) 1996 production directed by Simon Phillips, Company B’s 1999 production directed by Neil Armfield, and Bell Shakespeare’s 2003 production directed by Lindy Davies.

Part III takes up *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, in recent times the most popular play on the Australian stage. Against a backdrop of the play’s international production history, special attention is dedicated to the Sydney Theatre Company’s 1997 production directed by Noel Tovey; the Australian Shakespeare Company’s touring productions commencing in 1988 and directed by Glen Elston; Bell Shakespeare’s 2004 production directed by Anna Volska; and Company B’s 2004 production directed by Benedict Andrews. I ask how the play’s magic is given a performative reality by specific cultural traditions and conceptions of ‘the magic of theatre’. I also examine how the hierarchies of gender and social order in the play are used to fashion meanings that operate within identifiably contemporary and Australian understandings of power.

The questions I raise for discussion of each play have been largely shaped by what I have discovered as I researched each production. In an attempt to grapple with both the macrocosmic cultural operations of each play in production and with the minutiae of the practices of dramatic interpretation, my research has included a wide range of activities.

First among my adventures was attending rehearsals and performances and interviewing actors and directors. In moving between rehearsal and performance, what became clear to me about theatre practice is well summed up in a comment by Gay McAuley:
...every theatrical signifier was like the tip of a semiotic iceberg, with depths of meaning beneath the observed surface. I began to realise that most spectators who see a performance only once, see a very small part of what is there.\(^\text{13}\)

In the case of productions where I observed the rehearsals, I was an audience member with a privileged perspective on the growth of the performance – a perspective that exerted force on my interpretation. I had been a party to the entire evolution of a decision to lower the voice or to sit down on a particular line. My ‘inside knowledge’ cultivated in me a sensitivity to what actors hoped to ‘mean’ in particular scenes – a sensitivity which conversely occluded my awareness of what that scene might convey to the audience in general. I also became aware that meaning is a fragmentary experience for everyone involved in its production, that being a party to one kind of meaning can entail exclusion from others. For these reasons I sought a broader base for my speculations about how performance makes meanings in culture.

The explicit aim of my book to comment upon how performances of Shakespeare’s plays make meaning in the broader Australian context demands that it take into account discourses other than those specific to the enclosed world of theatrical culture. To this end I also sought out the material traces left by performances: to my direct rehearsal experience and interviews with theatre practitioners I added archival research. Theatre archives, in themselves, offer a curiously composed performance of meaning. Filed together in one box it is common to find designers’ sketches of costume and set, scale diagrams of the lighting rig, prompt copies of the script complete with lighting and sound cues and stage directions, inventories of items to hire, pages of photographic proof-sheets, an audio or audio-visual recording of the performance, press releases and parcels of reviews.
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Because I was already very familiar with the productions themselves, reviews were less a source of information about the production and more a source of information about its reception within a particular cultural context. As a consequence, reviews are used throughout this book critically. In some instances comments from reviews are proffered to reinforce my observations. In other instances, however, I take issue with the reviews by identifying the codes of moral, social, and cultural authority that they invoke. In Part II in particular, I point out the questionable bases of the authority assumed by reviewers to appropriate the ‘real’ Shakespeare as a yardstick for a particular performance. Another respect in which archival research has proven valuable is in offering prompts to my memory of the performance experience. Looking at photographs and, in some instances, watching audio-visual recordings of a performance has provided me with conduits back to the moment of performance.

The final dimension of my task has been endeavouring to link the foregoing forms of creative and popular public discourse with critical scholarly discourse. To reflect the sequence of my research activities, I offer this discussion last. Rather than beginning with scholarly approaches to the plays or theoretical approaches to performance, I have chased up the veins of inquiry prompted by my experiences of the play in performance, my contact with its various participants, and the preoccupations evident in discourses of reception. This has produced a theoretically wide-ranging set of sources. I have drawn upon works of literary criticism, Shakespeare in performance, theatre history, performance theory, gender studies and cultural theory. Each strain of thought has contributed something to my understanding of the meanings available from the play-text and the manner in which meaning is produced within and around performance of Shakespeare’s plays.

Ours As We Play It is itself a performance. It engages in a temporally bound and situated moment of making meaning. As
text its life will perhaps be understood as less ephemeral than a staged moment of meaning. Yet, as in a staged moment, the meaning in this moment of writing (or this moment of reading) involves drawing opportunistically on culturally inflected personal experiences and pre-established conceptions of the form ‘book’. There are rubrics, patterns, contemporary fashions of thought and discourse in place that, actor-like, I invoke to mean, to do things, to be performative.

Framing the book as a performance is my response to the problematic nature of writing about theatre. Theatrical performance is a fractious subject for traditional scholarship because theatre is not endurably present as an object to be pored over and known. Writing about the theatrical event is, to some extent, always writing about the self and indeed, performing the self in(to) a moment past. While a scholar of critical literature, fiction, or cell biology has her object of study perennially before her; the scholar of theatre performance has only the traces the event has left on herself, and the material artifacts previously described. Traditional modes of documentation see writing about performance as an effort of recovery and preservation; as if the performance is a thing, hanging in the air before its student and able to be consulted. From this comes the accusation that writing about performance is a totalising endeavour. However, Barbara Hodgdon delineates a brave new tack. Hodgdon looks at the discourses that surround the performance event and, instead of seeing them as secondary, derivative discourses, sees them as integral to the way in which the performance makes meaning:

Rather than assuming that the performance text itself contains or produces immanent meanings, or focusing on the marks of its making and its makers, I want to consider its status as an event constituted by the concrete conditions of its spectators. For it is in the ‘discursively saturated materiality’
of the historical circumstances in which a performance is seen that it makes its demands for narrative intelligibility.\textsuperscript{15}

My book is similarly interested in the manifold ways a theatrical event is constituted; before, during and after, with the acknowledgement that the study itself is an attempt to constitute the events as well as grappling with their constitution. For this reason, \textit{Ours As We Play It} is conceived as a performance in conversation with performance and as a collection of lived moments rather than a totalising and definitive critical edifice.

Shakespeare in Australia: invasion or space of play
This book is concerned with Shakespeare and performative meaning in the contemporary Australian context. As such, it grows out from a number of scholarly approaches and differentiates itself from others. The study’s uniqueness inheres in aiming to combine wide-ranging speculations about cultural history with a detailed analysis of the practices of dramatic interpretation. In this two-fold profile it takes up the example of some excellent shorter articles mentioned throughout my chapters, but as a book-length work permits a uniquely detailed and comparative mode of scholarship.

Of particular value have been essays, books, or critical editions of plays that lend significance to choices made in performance while also performing a detailed critical reading of the text. These ‘Shakespeare in Performance’ collections and critical editions have been useful in offering accounts of the sense made of a particular scene or line of text across many productions and periods of history. An example, of which I make use in Chapter 1, is the advent of the now-standard interpretation of Hamlet’s anger in the nunnery scene as being prompted by his perceiving the presence of Claudius and Polonius.\textsuperscript{16}

Another kind of study that informs the design of this book is the type of article and essay that focuses on a particular place and/
or period of producing Shakespeare’s plays on stage. *O Brave New World: Two Centuries of Shakespeare on the Australian Stage* constitutes a collection of such studies contributed by scholars from around Australia. Together, these essays flesh out an analytical account of patterns of production and reception of Shakespeare in Australia. *O Brave New World* is couched by its editors as a kind of starting place for investigation of Shakespeare in Australia:

…no attempt has been made to undertake any systematic analysis of Shakespeare on the Australian stage. The aim of this book is to begin to correct this sorry state of affairs. The volume does not try to be complete and comprehensive, but to be impressionistic, and to encourage further work by offering a variety of approaches and pointing to areas of interest and research potential.¹⁷

I take up this invitation, accepting with it the recognition that the term ‘Shakespeare in Australia’ conceptualises a relatively new discourse, a discourse in formation. Prior to the 1990s Shakespeare studies was a discourse defined chiefly by geographical origins. To take part in that discourse was, as an Australian scholar, to assent to working at a remove from the source. Works such *O Brave New World* and Michael D. Bristol’s *Shakespeare’s America, America’s Shakespeare*, published around the turn of the millennium, signal a postmodern awareness that cultural production is culturally contingent and, most refreshingly, that meanings worth examining are made outside of Britain, using Shakespeare.¹⁸

Also pertinent to Australian Shakespeare scholarship is the post-colonial scholarship that problematises the pre-eminent place of Shakespeare within Australian culture. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkin’s book *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* has already been mentioned as offering insight to the role of Shakespearean metatheatre in post-colonial contexts and as taking
up the issue of how Shakespeare might be pro-actively appropriated. An earlier example of clearly articulated challenge to the ostensibly unquestioned place of Shakespeare in Australian culture is the collection of essays called *Shakespeare’s Books: Contemporary Cultural Politics and the Persistence of Empire* edited by Philip Mead and Marion Campbell. This collection is defined by Campbell as ‘not about interpretations of Shakespeare’s texts, but about the uses that past and contemporary societies make of those texts’. While I strongly dispute this division of ‘interpretation’ from ‘uses’, I acknowledge a debt owed to *Shakespeare’s Books* for pinpointing the hitherto invidious division between the work of cultural criticism and Shakespeare scholarship:

For professional cultural critics…who are neither ignorant nor indifferent but actively contestatory in their relation to Shakespeare, conservative critics reserve their greatest contempt. This debate is worth engaging in because it puts content back into the name of Shakespeare and destabilises his supposedly monolithic and univocal significance. This obliges all of us who engage in the debate to consider both the historical and contemporary conditions of Shakespeare’s signifying power, and the costs of either reinforcing or eliminating his cultural, educational and theatrical pre-eminence.

As these examples illustrate, the possibilities offered by post-modern cultural theory and theories of performativity decentralise the source of authority in Shakespeare studies. Geographical centres and margins – once the self-effacing assumption of Australian Shakespeare experiences – are recalibrated. Rather than being a derivative, second-hand kind of activity, the production of Shakespeare in Australia is gradually being recognised as a constitutive dimension of the ever-burgeoning field called ‘Shakespeare’ and as such, merits scholarly attention in its own right.
In the past thirty years, the subject of ‘Shakespeare in Australia’ has received increasing amounts of critical attention. Unfortunately, in debates about the rightful or wrongful place of Shakespeare in Australian culture, performance activities, education, and popular perception are often conflated as one oppressive freight. In this blurry polemic ‘Shakespeare’ emerges an emblem of cultural imperialism. But what is this ‘Shakespeare’? Often the word ‘Shakespeare’ comes to stand for a particular use to which a text – which is by its nature volatile, ambiguous, indeterminate, polyphonic, metatheatrical – has been put. Without question, this ‘Shakespeare’ has promoted oppressive imperialistic modes of thought. This ‘Shakespeare’ ought to be criticised, resisted, exposed, and even patrolled in any culture that cherishes its own vitality. The problem with this ‘Shakespeare’ is that it does not exist as a discrete entity. The actual experience of oppression, boredom, or injustice that a critic attaches to ‘Shakespeare’ is often the ineffable and affective colour of a moment past. Consequently, the attempt to deconstruct this ‘Shakespeare’ builds the monolith anew before beginning.

Despite their often exclusive preoccupation with the ‘uses’ to which Shakespeare is put (few cultural critiques examine the words of the plays in detail) critics of the growth of Shakespearean drama in Australia conceptualise Shakespeare chiefly as textual rather than performative: a text-bound, text-preserved, entity. Shakespeare is seen as a book, which, like the British, usurped space in this continent. This produces a generalising discourse about cultural imperialism, which makes an important contribution to our understanding of how literature operates within culture. However, this discourse falls short of accounting for the very distinct ways in which dramatic performance makes meaning within culture and, especially, the way a particular culture is always implicit in and necessary to performative meaning. It is a paradigm which
understands the operation of text and performance as a simple set of power relations whereby performance cites the text: the meanings of the text ‘govern’ performance and the performance re-produces, disseminates, and therefore naturalises the imperialistic meanings of the text. Within this paradigm, the legitimate mode of resistance is also conceived as text-centric: politicised appropriations of the text: rereadings and rewritings. As a book, Shakespeare is a manageable cultural nemesis.

The present book is under-girded by an entirely different understanding of the way performance makes meaning in a cultural context. An invaluable insight offered by Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is that ‘Performativity…lives in the examples’. While Parker and Sedgwick are not referring explicitly to theatre, W. B. Worthen has articulated convincingly the relevance of the concept of ‘performativity’ for theatrical performance. Worthen argues that the dismissal of theatrical performance as an important instance of performativity by the disciplines of critical and cultural theory relies, once again, on an oversimplified paradigm of theatrical meaning: theatre as proscenium arch, theatre as the citation of text, theatre as a one-way transaction. But if, as Worthen suggests, performance fashions meanings from what is at its disposal – from what exists in the cultural moment in which it takes place – it is not at all surprising that the performance of Shakespeare has been used in Australia to perpetuate imperialistic habits of thought. Imperialistic habits of thought were and are here to hand in the cultural context and we have co-opted Shakespeare to performatively ‘mean’ them. Demonstrably, many other living facets of the contemporary cultural context have found their way into processes of ‘meaning by Shakespeare’ in Australia: problematising the status quo in race and gender relations, questioning the place of learning, challenging militaristic patriotism and so forth. To conflate ‘Shakespeare’ as a static icon of cultural imperialism
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with what the Shakespeare play has meant, can mean, and will mean in performance is too broad a stroke of criticism to be of any real use.

Accusing Shakespeare of cultural colonisation is a form of cultural critique that relies upon an oversimplified notion of the practices of production; as if ‘meanings’ intended by some nebulous early-modern sensibility were somehow disseminated in an inert Australian culture like a disease. By contrast, *Ours As We Play It* sees meaning in theatre not as transmitted, but as negotiated as part of the creative, contractual work of culture. Furthermore, if the force and authority of Shakespeare’s plays are not seen as inhabiting the text, then the accusation of cultural imperialism becomes a slip-knot without an object. What or who is doing the colonising? The easy target is the name of the ‘canonical’ author; but what if what we are registering as a postmodern, post-colonial scholarly community is not a common enemy – yet another invader – but an enemy within? What if what we register when we look at the performance history of Shakespeare in Australia is a tendency to put plays to uses that, in retrospect, highlight our own cultural projects and prejudices? And if this is so, how better to identify those toxic ideologies and crippling cultural assumptions than to investigate the uses to which we have and do put Shakespeare in Australia? The ubiquity and continuity of Shakespeare in performance is the very condition of its usefulness as a barometer of social, ideological, and political change. With this lens, *Ours As We Play It* examines practices of producing Shakespeare in Australia and suggests that it is feasible to see Shakespeare’s plays operating in Australian culture, not as an occupier of space, but as a space of play.