

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

Being Shakespeare

Jonathan Bate

Illuminations for Ambassador Theatre Group and Act Productions in association with Sky Arts

Released 8 March 2012

Simon Callow's [acclaimed solo performance](#) of *Being Shakespeare* by Shakespeare scholar Jonathan Bate was filmed at Trafalgar Studios and is now available on DVD in a version soon to be screened by Sky Arts as part of its Shakespeare season that begins in April.

Despite what the title may suggest, Callow isn't "being Shakespeare" in the sense that he was "being Dickens" in a previous show (and on *Doctor Who*); he tells the story from the outside rather than talking to us as the playwright, weaving together the man's life from a combination of the sparse real facts about his life, information about what life would have been like for Shakespeare at that time and excerpts from his plays.

There is a danger of creating a narrative from such information as it takes details that can only be speculative and posits them as fact, or at least creates a compelling story to fit the facts. Quotations from the plays may indicate something about Shakespeare's life and thoughts, but by being selective you can find evidence for many contradictory Shakespeares, possibly none of them the real one. Information about the society in which he lived may bring us closer to the man, but when we are told that he made stories up to tell to his mother as a child and how he felt at the death of his son, we are straying into fiction—but then Shakespeare himself never let historical (or geographical) facts get in the way of a good story.

What it does do effectively, however, is lay down feasible conditions for how the glovemaker's son from Stratford-on-Avon could have become the Shakespeare who wrote some of the greatest theatrical works in the English language. While it isn't marketed as such, in some ways it feels like an intelligent counter-attack on the continuing conspiracy theories about the authorship of the plays. Bate's script is intelligent and complex and even quite funny at times.

Callow's performance is magnificent; a real theatrical tour-de-force as he slips effortlessly between delivering facts as a very entertaining history or English literature lecturer and performing some of Shakespeare's greatest characters with total conviction. We get glimpses of Callow's Lear, Macbeth, Falstaff, Romeo, Henry V, Hamlet, Richards II and III and even a bit of Marlowe's Faustus, plus a few multi-character scenes such as the very funny section of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* between Bottom, Peter Quince and Flute. The whole thing is tied together neatly using the "seven ages of man" speech recited by Jacques in *As You Like It* as a framework.

The DVD is just a straight recording of a live performance, but as it is a one-man show the camera can stay mostly in close-up on Callow without feeling we are missing out on something. There are some minor blips on the sound but nothing to distract from the performance, and generally it works well as a TV version of a stage play.

There are one or two nice extras on the DVD. The main one is an interview with Callow talking about the creation of the show, which is interesting, plus he performs three of his favourite Shakespeare sonnets.

So while it doesn't totally convince as history, this piece is still fascinating for the version of Shakespeare that it creates and is also entertaining to watch. So if you don't get to see Callow perform this live—or even if you do—this DVD gives you a chance to see one of our finest actors playing many of the great roles all at once.

Reviewer: [David Chadderton](#)