

# British Theatre Guide

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

## Royal Shakespeare Company Collection

William Shakespeare

Royal Shakespeare Company

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When Gregory Doran became Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2013, he decided to produce all Shakespeare's plays without repetition and to broadcast them to cinemas.

The performances were also issued on DVDs, and this compendium of 35 works amounts to a magnificent record of his time in charge of the world's greatest company dedicated to the world's greatest dramatist, work for which he was honoured with a knighthood at the end of his ten-year tenure.

The series started memorably with Doran's own 2013 production—one of eight he personally directed—of [Richard II](#) starring David Tennant, followed by outstanding performances from Simon Russell Beale as Prospero in [The Tempest](#), a memorable one by a flatulent John Hodgkinson as Sir Toby Belch in [Twelfth Night](#) who farted beside we critics as he exited the stage and from David Troughton as [Titus Andronicus](#) and by way of contrast as Falstaff in [The Merry Wives of Windsor](#).

The great Sir Antony Sher, who died in 2021, is terrific as another Falstaff in [Henry IV](#), and as [King Lear](#), possibly the greatest achievement of the late actor's career, both directed by Doran, his partner on stage and in life.

While those productions attracted greatest attention, a lesser-performed work gives a measure of Doran's brilliance. In 2018 he presented [Troilus and Cressida](#) as a scathing satire with Evelyn Glennie's cacophonous score rattling the scrap metal hanging over the stage—a triumph in a difficult play whose two previous Stratford productions had been complete duffs.

Among the leading actresses, Lucy Phelps and Sophie Khan Levy make a beautifully complementary duo as Rosalind and Celia in [As You Like It](#), with the excellent Sophie Stanton as a world-weary Jacques.

The latter is an example of gender-fluid casting and feminist viewpoints that increasingly came to the fore at the RSC, mostly notably with Gillian Bevan as Queen (not King) [Cymbeline](#) and Claire Price as Petruchia, like a flame-haired Medusa, in [The Taming of the Shrew](#), with the marital martyr Kate played by a man. And in Erica Whyman's 2018 [Romeo and Juliet](#), Karen Fishwick plays a blazingly confident 13-year-old without whose energy her Romeo might still be pining in the pines.

I saw all the performances at the time, with the exception of *Henry VI*, the first part of which was not shown to a live audience but only screened due to the COVID lockdown. The reviews since late 2016 are still available on this web site. With 15 different directors, not all the productions are completely successful, but in my own rating system, 25 of the 35 productions merited four or five stars. Much of the credit goes also to the 16 different designers, among whom the brilliant Stephen Brimston Lewis, RSC Director of Design, leads the way, with beautifully crafted sets for the history plays, *The Taming of the Shrew* and others.

The selection sticks to the established canon. There is no place therefore for *Edward III*, written with Thomas Kyd, *Pericles* co-authored with George Wilkins, for *Henry VIII* or *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, largely by John Fletcher, although the latter was produced [within Doran's watch in 2017](#), nor for [Cardenio](#), Shakespeare's lost play re-imagined by Doran and presented two years before taking over the company.

The box set retails at £250, compared with around £160 for 26 plays in London's [Shakespeare's Globe Collection](#) including *Henry VIII*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, and £130 for 37 plays in the BBC Shakespeare Collection—all available at greatly discounted prices. Sadly, there is no accompanying booklet for any of the sets—how I would have loved to read an interview with Doran about how he chose to match particular directors with particular plays, or an overview of his time at the RSC by one of our leading scholars or critics.

The BBC offering, starting from 1978, includes wonderful performances from the greatest actors of the day including John Gielgud, Jane Lapotaire, Derek Jacobi, Claire Bloom and Antony Hopkins, but many of the early studio sets are crude by today's standards. The Globe performances are very much a product of their environment, all in a similar style and a representation of how the plays would have been seen in the author's own time: lively, rambunctious and with lots of interaction to please today's tourist-based audience.

There can never be a definitive production of any of the plays, let alone of the entire canon, but for the most comprehensive and diverse interpretation of Shakespeare today, the RSC collection is a marvellous affirmation of how our greatest playwright is still speaking to us now. It is, as Olivia has it in *Twelfth Night*, "most wonderful."

**Reviewer:** [Colin Davison](#)