



Verdi's Shakespeare: Men of the Theater

Garry Wills

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A dazzling study of the operas Verdi adapted from Shakespeare- and a spellbinding account of their creation. In *Verdi's Shakespeare*, Pulitzer Prize winner and lifelong opera devotee Garry Wills explores the writing and staging of Verdi's three triumphant Shakespearian operas: *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Falstaff*. An Italian composer who couldn't read a word of English but adored Shakespeare, Verdi devoted himself to operatic productions that authentically incorporated the playwright's texts. Wills delves into the fast-paced worlds of these men of the theater, focusing on the intense working relationships both Shakespeare and Verdi had with the performers and producers of their works. We see Verdi study the Shakespearean dramaturgy as he obsessively corresponds with his chosen librettists, handpicks the singers he feels are best-suited to the roles, and coaches them intensely.

With fascinating portraits of these artistic giants and their entourages, sharp insights into music and theater, and telling historical details, *Verdi's Shakespeare* re-creates the conditions that allowed Verdi to complete his masterworks and illuminates the very nature of artistic creation.

Verdi's Shakespeare: Men of the Theater Details

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From Reader Review Verdi's Shakespeare: Men of the Theater for online ebook

Katie Koso says

An extremely good analysis if you're an opera buff who wants to broaden their knowledge of why Verdi interpreted Shakespeare the way he did. If you're more of a Shakespeare fan than you are an opera fan, the book may be more opera-focused than what you're looking for.

Discussions of music theory are less technical than that of other books I've read on the same subject--he assumes you're a music fan, but not holder of a music degree. It was simple enough to be understood by a mere dabbler in the subjects, but the conclusions reached about Verdi's works were scholarly and illuminating even to a long-time fan.

I can't recommend it enough to a Verdi fan who loves Macbeth, Otello, or Falstaff!

John Uzzi says

The material on the Opera was difficult for me.

Steve says

A fascinating short review and appreciation of Verdi's three Shakespeare operas--Macbeth, Otello and Falstaff. It gives me much to consider and appreciate next week when I hear Riccardo Muti conduct soloists and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus in a concert version of Falstaff. Viva Verdi!

Henry says

A really fun book.

Jess says

Did not finish. It's really hard to read a book about opera that is not written by a musicologist. When a historian and "Verdi Enthusiast" starts writing a survey of three operas and their Shakespeare counterparts, and there is very little about the music, it can become very dry. Especially if you care more about the music than the libretto. All of the cultural history and the actual history of the operas' development from a Shakespeare play into the opera is interesting, but I needed....more. The way that Verdi orchestrated so much of Otello and Macbetto (and Falstaff, but I sort of hate that opera and didn't get that far) is SOOOOO IMPORTANT! And it just wasn't there.

Blech. I can't talk too badly, I wouldn't be able to write such an undertaking.

Ed says

Well, this is odd. I have read (or at least looked at the pages of) much of what Garry Wills lists in his brief bibliography for "Verdi's Shakespeare". The three volume "Operas of Verdi" by Julian Budden, check. All four volumes of the hoary "The Elizabethan Stage" by Chambers, on that shelf right over there. Both volumes of "Verdi's 'Otello' and 'Simon Boccanegra' in Letters and Documents", yep. Plus "The Verdi-Boito Correspondence", the usual stack of biographies: Mary Jane Phillips-Matz, Budden again, Charles Osborne, etc.

Wills' strength is putting the two giants of the theater together--Verdi loved Shakespeare although he didn't read English and would have done "King Lear" and possibly even "Hamlet" for the lyric stage if time and his health permitted.

Recommended for those who know either the plays or the operas and are interested in Wills' always useful and sometimes brilliant reflections on creativity.

Matt Good says

Wills exams two masters of their fields - arguably the two best to write in their field and influential years after their deaths. Verdi wrote three operas based on Shakespeare - Macbeth, Otello and Falstaff. Despite the plays having been written hundreds of years earlier and in a language he did not speak, Verdi loved Shakespeare's plays. Wills examines the Shakespeare based operas one-by-one, noting the circumstances under which Shakespeare and then Verdi wrote them. His thesis is, roughly, that both men were constrained by and yet flourished under the limitations of the theatres in which they worked. Wills is quite well researched - I learned many new and interesting details. I haven't read Shakespeare in a long time, so this is no surprise but I was not expecting to gain new insights into Verdi. I only wish Wills had looked more into Verdi's life-long obsession with and ultimate failure to compose Re Lear. There is scholarship in the area and I'd be curious to know Wills' insights given the intelligent things he writes here.

Rachel C. says

Garry Wills - I haven't read a book by him since freshman year, when our whole class was assigned "Lincoln at Gettysburg." (Which I thought was pretty dull, in case you're wondering.)

The subject of this book was infinitely more interesting to me - in theory, at least. Unfortunately, the treatment was bone dry and very academic. I found it difficult to follow the analysis even though I know Shakespeare's Macbeth and Othello quite well, and have seen both onstage as plays (multiple times each) and as operas (once each*). The Falstaff section was pretty much a lost cause, as I was familiar with neither the opera nor the source plays.

You'd probably get more out of this book if your background is in music rather than lit crit, and particularly if you've studied opera. You might, for example, be able to make sense of passages like this:

There is first the tonality, the rare and remote key of A flat minor; when there are more than four flats in the signature, one may be certain that Verdi means tragic business. Then, there is the rhythm of the descending scale, which proceeds steadily enough, indeed, but has each note prefaced by a sharply accented triplet of semiquavers on the off beat. Add to this a syncopated accompaniment in the bass, and introduce the whole by a double-dotted descending chromatic scale from dominant to tonic, and you have this complex piece of simplicity.

So, yeah, not for the general public. I'm surprised this was published as a book and not as a paper in a scholarly journal.

*Saw Othello at the Met this season. It really shows off a soprano. Renee Fleming was exquisite.

Mary says

Well written and very interesting. I knew enough about Othello, MacBeth and Wives of Windsor to enjoy the book even though I haven't seen Verdi's operas.

Cuilin says

Ready to teach Macbeth.

Spiros says

It's instructive to compare this book, in which Wills calmly and cogently examines the conditions in which three of Verdi's major operas were composed and performed, and the manner in which they reflected and diverged from their original source material in Shakespeare's Macbeth, Othello, and Merry Wives of Windsor, with the previous book I read, When That Rough God Goes Riding, in which Greil Marcus attempts to...well frankly, I'm still not sure what Marcus was trying to do, but it had something to do with Van Morrison.

While I am well versed in Shakespeare criticism, or at least in the lesser discipline of "Bardolitrty", I know virtually nothing of opera. And yet, even when Wills threw in obscure (to me) technical terms, I was still able to follow his points.

Kt says

Best suited for readers who are already familiar with both the plays and the operas.

Sergey says

an interesting view in verdi and shakespeare
