

Professor John Russell Brown, who died peacefully on 26 August at the age of 91 after a short battle with relapsed prostate cancer, was a leading figure in the study of Shakespeare and theater. In the preface to *Shakespeare's Plays in Performance* (1966), he set out an agenda that was followed through in his many essays, reviews and books: "Why are Shakespeare's plays so actable? How do they draw and hold their audiences? How can we gain an impression of performance from reading a text? How should the plays be staged in our theaters to present the fullness of Shakespeare's imagination?" His answers to these questions, set out in the elegantly combative *Free Shakespeare* (1974), were developed over the years but were consistently grounded in that sense of *fullness* in the playwright's work.

He was born in 1923, the younger son of Russell Alan Brown and his wife Olive Helen Golding, in Coombe Wood, Somerset. After Russell's service in the Great War the couple started a pork butcher's shop in Bristol, and it was expected that John would take over the business in due course. His elder brother David was destined for the church and eventually became Bishop of Guildford. Both boys went to school at Monkton Coombe, and John always said his time there gave him his undying love of the English countryside. Sent to Clevedon for their summer holidays, they laughed so loudly at the shows on the pier that they were given free tickets to encourage an audience. This may have been John's first experience of the theater. It certainly foreshadowed his commitment to what he insisted was "the theatrical event," the active collaboration between playwright, actors and audience.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, he joined the Fleet Air Arm. Invalided out (fortunately for him, as the ship he had been on was later sunk with all hands), he was sent to Scotland where he learned to service Spitfires. After the war he read English at Keble College, Oxford, receiving the degrees of MA and B.Litt. In 1951 he was one of the first group of talented young scholars appointed as Fellows of the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon, set up that year by his mentor Professor Allardyce Nicoll as a bridge between the theater and the academy. From 1955 to 1963 he was lecturer and subsequently senior lecturer in the Department of English, and became the first head of the new Department of Drama in 1964, a post he held until 1971. In the 1960s Drama was establishing itself as a distinctive and valued discipline in British universities, and the title of his inaugural lecture as Professor of Drama, "A University and the Theatre," reflects the innovative nature of the undertaking. In Birmingham he met Hilary Baker, and they were married in 1961.

He left Birmingham in 1971 to take up the post of Professor of English at Sussex University. From 1973 to 1988 he was also an associate director and literary manager in Peter Hall's new team at the National Theatre, an appointment that helped to set a standard for the active relationship between academic expertise and theatrical practice. In his own words, he was 'resident researcher and critic,' seeking out 'plays that excite me,' and an invaluable support to the team in identifying old plays and fostering new talent for the company's repertoire.

In the university context his teaching influenced many theater workers, as well as scholars and critics in the wider worlds of scholarship and drama. In 1982 he moved to the State University of New York at Stony Brook as Professor of Theater Arts, where he was artistic director of Highlight Theater. From 1985 to 1997 he was Professor of Theater at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. From 1985 to 1989 he was artistic director of the University of Michigan's Project Theater. In the course of his career he held a number of prestigious lectureships and appointments as a visiting professor at universities across the world, as well as serving on advisory committees and boards for the Victoria and Albert museum, the Theatre Museum, and the Arts Council of Great Britain. From 2000 to 2008 he was Visiting Professor of Theatre at Middlesex University and from 2008 to 2013 he was honorary Visiting Professor (subsequently emeritus) at University College London. Later in his career he visited theaters in Japan, South Korea, China, and India, taking workshops and classes: in 1997 he directed *King Lear* (in Hindi) in New Delhi. These visits led to the writing of *New Sites for Shakespeare: Theatre, the Audience and Asia* (1999).

John Russell Brown's experience in professional as well as university theater as a director informed a flow of publications that once prompted his wife Hilary to remind him of the admonition from Ecclesiastes (12.12) that "of making many books there is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh." He was undaunted by the challenge. Over the course of five decades, his work ranged from influential book-length studies to scholarly editions of plays, alongside editions designed to orient readers towards the plays as texts for performance. There were anthologies of critical essays; student guides to individual plays; the collaborative *Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*; and numerous stimulating interventions in the debates about the ways Shakespearean performance should be approached.

Free Shakespeare was a direct and sometimes confrontational questioning of "director's theatre" and the domination of interpretation through scenic and other means by a "concept." The arguments for freedom included a dissenting report on Peter Brook's 1970 RSC production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, already on its way to canonization as turning point in Shakespearean staging. What was newest in Brook's *Dream* was "the use of rehearsals for playing with the text" to arrive at an interpretation that suited the director's "own interests and the actors with whom he is working." The result was "a limited, eccentric, single-minded (and rather simple-minded) interpretation." This was fighting talk, summed up in the plea for an actors' company that would dispense with the very words "production," "designer," and "director." There was an element of nostalgia – though not of antiquarianism – in the image he proposed of Elizabethan performance as less like "a well oiled machine" and more like a football match, where "the actor's skill was always wholly on trial" and "the quality of play was part of the play."

The notions of freedom, and those of "interplay" between audience and stage and the openness of the dramatic text, recur throughout Brown's writing, connected in *William Shakespeare: Writing for Performance* (1996) with the insistence that "Shakespeare's relationship to his characters was free and generous, and he was bold enough to follow them into an amazing range and depth of experience." Brown never proposed the inherited scripts as a restrictive set of implicit instructions to be deviated from at a director's peril, but his rejection of all kinds of "concept" productions did not chime with the determinedly political tendencies of much academic and theatrical work of the 1970s and 1980s, and his lack of interest in "theory" made him (frankly) unfashionable in many eyes. But at the same time the vigorous writing and firm convictions about the vitality of the plays in performance were always stimulating.

As a critic describing performances he had a gift for the illuminating phrase. Reviewing Laurence Olivier's *Othello* at the National Theatre in 1964 he observed that "in execution the most original element was Olivier's sensuousness... Olivier also gave a sustained impression of physical power even in relaxation, as if Othello practised weight-lifting weekly in a gymnasium." This was "a demonstration of the huge opportunities Shakespeare has provided for an actor who is at once realistic and histrionic." In a final note, anticipating the line taken so forcefully a few years later in *Free Shakespeare*, Brown suggested that "as so often in the past, and actor rather than a director had created his own kind of Shakespeare." Passing on the gift of free interpretation was consistently the guiding principle of a life devoted to the vitality of the script in the theater.

John Russell Brown is survived by Hilary, who is a potter, and three children: Alice, an architect; Sophy, a painter; and Jasper, a management consultant. By his colleagues in the academic world and the theater he will be remembered as a trenchant and persuasive speaker and writer, and a kindly and supportive colleague. His energies and warmth and his commitment to the drama in all its forms influenced many directors, actors, scholars and critics in Britain and beyond.
