

A VIEW FROM
THE CROW'S NEST



Writings and Essays of
MURRAY ROSS

*‘There is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger's heart wrapped in a Player's hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute Johannes factotum, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country.’ **



* A quote from *A Groats-Worth of Witte* (1592), a pamphlet, posthumously published as the work of the deceased dramatist and playwright, Robert Greene, a contemporary of William Shakespeare. Shakespeare scholars are not in full agreement as to the actual writer that originally penned the insult and scathing criticism. Many feel it was based on Greene’s professional rivalry and jealousy of the growing reputation of Shakespeare—upbraiding him for his common class, upbringing, and lack of formal education. Notwithstanding Greene’s cryptic comments; popular culture, however, has fully accepted the “Upstart Crow” reference as having been specifically directed to William Shakespeare, thus the proliferation of the “Crow” metaphor in relation to all things Shakespearean.

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East of the Mountains  and West of the Sun

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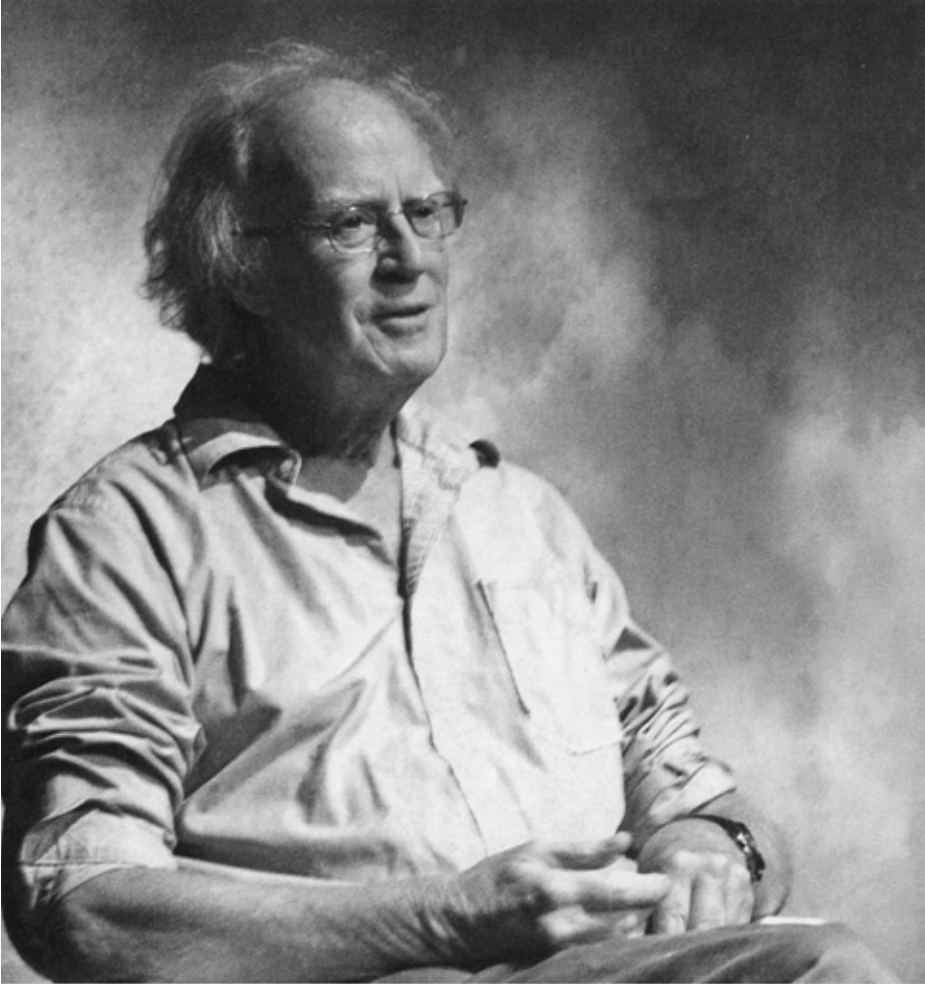
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MURRAY ROSS, A GREAT MAN, died at the age of 74 on January 3, 2017. Our classmate was one of the most energetic beings on earth, unusually gifted as a friend, a consummate lover of life, sharp as hell.

For over 40 years he led Theatreworks, the theater that Murray and his wife Betty founded in Colorado Springs. It became one of the leading community theaters in the country. Over the four decades Murray mounted 100 plus productions, many of which received raves. He built an audience of thousands, helped turn sleepy Colorado Springs into a cultural mecca and somehow also remained a tireless advocate for good. If you have a moment, check out Murray Ross' FACEBOOK page. Reading the responses of his staff, actors, theatre-goers, friends turned me into a faucet—My weeping went on and off and on again as I read of his positive effects on the lives of those he worked with. Stephen Booth, one of the great Shakespearean scholars of our era, wrote a review titled, “The Best Othello I Have Ever Seen.” By then Booth had seen thirty-eight productions of the play,

I remember him coming to NYC to cast for several plays. Often I'd stop working and go to see him direct his potential actors, giving them smart, thorough and utterly humane suggestions about what the role could mean, how it could fit into the drama, what the language could convey, then helping each of them—accomplished pro or relative novice—with what they were trying to do with the part. I thought even those who didn't make the cut appreciated his informed help. I remember sitting in his class on Macbeth, enjoying his kaleidoscopic energy, verbal acuity, the humor with which he taught, all suffused with the glee of a very young person who's discovering the joys of Shakespeare's myriad-minded words and hard-nosed conceptions of human depravity and also the joys of life itself.

What a delight the experience of his theatre was. He and Betty gave

Colorado Springs a gift that kept on and will keep on giving even after the superb, jolly, smart man is gone. I saw four of his productions, including Murray's great, sexy production of *Venus in Fur*. But my most powerful recollection involved the alternate-night stagings of *Antonio's Revenge*, an Elizabethan Revenge Play written in 1600. The next night, same cast, Murray put on *Hamlet*, probably first staged in 1599. I still can't get over his brilliant pedagogical strategy: At Theatreworks, at 6000 feet in Colorado, we were seeing what Elizabethan playgoers would see on the Thames' bankside: One night an overcooked melodrama, a stage littered with six or seven corpses in an excess of mindless butchery. The next night, Theatreworks presented timeless genius. Same genre, same cast. but probably the most compelling play ever written. Wow! I thought. Wow! I still think of Murray.

—Bob Seidman

PART I

SHAKESPEARE



“So we must admit Shakespeare is not for everybody—especially if you want your writers French, tidy, politically radical and twitter sized.”

BARDOLATRY PURE AND SIMPLE

BELIEVE IT OR NOT, some people actually think William Shakespeare is overrated. Voltaire, for instance. He said Shakespeare was an imaginative savage, whose plays would please only people in London and Canada. Jealous George Bernard Shaw dismissed him as a “narrow minded middle class man.” Leo Tolstoy called *King Lear* careless and bad. And it’s not just a few famous dead white males who feel this way. I’d bet there are many high school students who would agree with Tolstoy’s conclusion that Shakespeare “cannot evoke amongst us anything but aversion and weariness.” So we must admit Shakespeare is not for everybody—especially if you want your writers French, tidy, politically radical and twitter sized.

But Shakespeare is for all the rest of us, and more now than ever. He’s had a bull run with no down turns for the past four hundred years. He is a cultural astonishment—there is nothing and no one close to his sustained presence and influence. And that is not all your seventh grade English teacher’s fault. Nor is it the fault of capitalist hegemony, or the vanquishing march of the English language, or the collective will of the chattering classes, though all these have helped speed his progress. But I believe the real reason for Shakespeare’s supremacy and complete cultural dominance over the known world is just now becoming evident. And the reason is a simple one. The reason is that Shakespeare is God.

And what is God, you may have sometimes asked? I can tell you. He is all powerful. We have already established Shakespeare’s omnipotence, I believe (if not I can refer you to several Wikipedia sites on this matter). Shake-

speare is himself alone, and inimitable—everyone has read Shakespeare and yet he has no disciples like him. He is comprehensive; more so I think than Tolstoy, or the Bible or the Koran. He is surprising and of infinite capacity—the more we try to catch up with Shakespeare the further he gets from us. He is ubiquitous. You can hardly open your mouth without quoting Shakespeare, or a ghost of him, in nearly every paragraph, even if you don't know that's what you're doing. Though master of an art designed to disappear as soon as completed, Shakespeare is always with us: somewhere on the globe Hamlet is dying every minute, Romeo is seeing Juliet on her balcony, and the fairy queen is falling in love with an ass. All this literally happens all the time.

You will have noticed by now this is a bardolater speaking—the term was coined in the 19th century to describe the excessive adulation of Shakespeare, already prevalent more than a century ago. But I claim, like any true member of the faithful, there is no such thing as excessive love of the true God. Ben Jonson, his contemporary, friend, and chief rival, famously said he loved Shakespeare, but “this side idolatry.” Meaning he did not idolize him. I myself love him on the far side of idolatry, and I am not alone. Shakespeare is an easy God to love. He can ravish you with every line, every breath. He makes very few special demands on his faithful, leaving plenty of room for lesser immortals like Jonson, Marlowe, Chekhov, Ibsen, Pinter, Beckett and David Chase. You can still love them too. I do. To be a true Bardolator you must only acknowledge Shakespeare's complete supremacy over them all. This is not difficult.

I must admit that in the course of a lifetime there have been a few moments when my faith has wavered. Just recently it has been tested. We all knew it was time to do *A Midsummer Night's Dream* again this summer, but I confess I wasn't as excited about it as I should have been. I have directed this play more than any other: first on a hillside below the Fine Arts Center in 1981; twice with the Colorado Springs Symphony (fairies fluttering among the strings); again at THEATREWORKS in a production set in colonial Asia with Bob Rais committing an indelible 20 minute hari-kari; then back east at the American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, Virginia; and also down in San Antonio in a Latino setting. I've had much more fun with this play than ought to be allowed, so much that I wasn't feeling confident of new