

# Great Shakespeare Actors: Burbage to Branagh

## A Journey Through the Ages of Shakespearean Performance

For centuries, the works of William Shakespeare have captivated audiences worldwide, inspiring countless interpretations and performances. From the legendary Richard Burbage to the contemporary Kenneth Branagh, the greatest actors have brought Shakespeare's characters to life, leaving an indelible mark on the theatrical landscape.

### Richard Burbage (1567-1619): The First Hamlet

Widely regarded as the first great Shakespearean actor, Richard Burbage was a founding member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare's own acting company. Burbage's performances were renowned for their physicality, energy, and charisma. He is best known for his portrayal of Hamlet, a role he played over 200 times.

### David Garrick (1717-1779): The Restoration King

In the 18th century, David Garrick revolutionized Shakespearean performance with his natural and realistic approach. Garrick's Hamlet was characterized by its intense emotional depth and psychological complexity. He also popularized "star billing," promoting himself as a leading actor rather than just a member of a company.

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by Julie Fain Lawrence-Edsell

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## **Edmund Kean (1787-1833): The Romantic Hero**

Edmund Kean was a controversial figure, but his fiery and passionate performances left an enduring legacy. His Othello was particularly celebrated for its intensity and raw emotion. Kean's tragic life became the subject of numerous plays and films, cementing his reputation as a romantic hero.

## **Henry Irving (1838-1905): The Lyrical Giant**

Henry Irving was known for his elaborate and visually stunning productions, which often featured elaborate sets and costumes. His Hamlet was praised for its lyrical delivery and poetic interpretation. Irving's partnership with Ellen Terry, one of the greatest actresses of her time, helped to define the Victorian era of Shakespearean performance.

## **Laurence Olivier (1907-1989): The Renaissance Man**

Few actors have had as profound an impact on Shakespearean theatre as Laurence Olivier. A master of both stage and screen, Olivier's performances were characterized by their intelligence, sensitivity, and

charisma. His Hamlet in the 1948 film adaptation is considered one of the greatest Shakespearean performances of all time.

### **Kenneth Branagh (1960-Present): The Modern Master**

A contemporary actor, director, and writer, Kenneth Branagh has dedicated much of his career to Shakespeare. His adaptations of Hamlet (1996), Much Ado About Nothing (1993), and Henry V (1989) are critically acclaimed for their cinematic scope and modern relevance. Branagh's Shakespearean performances are known for their energy, wit, and accessibility.

### **Analyzing the Greats: Common Threads**

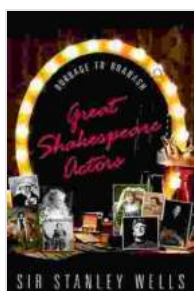
While each of these actors brought their own unique interpretation to Shakespeare's characters, they share several common threads:

- **Physical Presence:** Great Shakespeare actors possess a commanding stage presence and physicality that allows them to fully inhabit their roles.
- **Vocal Mastery:** They have exceptional vocal skills, capable of effortlessly delivering Shakespeare's complex language and conveying a wide range of emotions.
- **Emotional Depth:** Their performances are characterized by deep emotional understanding and sensitivity.
- **Intellectual Curiosity:** They approach Shakespeare's works with an inquisitive mind, seeking to explore the psychological and philosophical depths of the characters.
- **Commitment to the Craft:** Great Shakespeare actors are dedicated to their art, constantly honing their skills and striving for excellence.

## The Legacy of Shakespearean Performance

These great actors have played a vital role in shaping the legacy of Shakespearean performance. Their interpretations have influenced countless actors, directors, and audiences, ensuring that Shakespeare's works remain as vibrant and relevant today as they were when they were first penned.

From Burbage to Branagh, the greatest Shakespeare actors have left an enduring mark on the theatrical landscape. Their performances have illuminated the beauty, complexity, and enduring power of Shakespeare's words. By studying their techniques and exploring their contributions, we can continue to appreciate and celebrate the timeless artistry of Shakespearean theatre.



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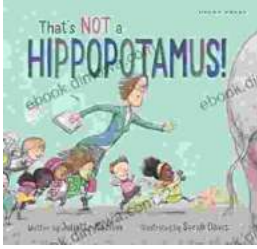
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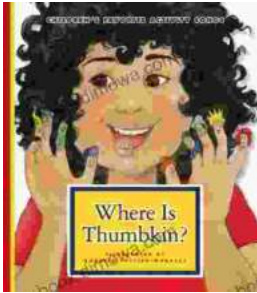
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