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Shakespeare: 1961-1962

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Survey

Shakespeare: 1961-1962

THIS article is not as pretentious as its title may suggest. It is merely a comment on the Shakespeare cult as it exists today; it is also a survey of the twenty Shakespearean productions in America and Great Britain which this writer has had the good fortune to see during the thirteen months from July 1961 to August 1962.

That in itself is a noteworthy fact: for if proof were needed of the amazing popularity that Shakespeare enjoys at present, this in itself would be sufficient proof — that one man, in the course of one year, could see twenty different performances of Shakespeare's plays on both sides of the Atlantic. There were of course many other productions which this writer did not have the opportunity to see.

Of the twenty, seven were in the United States: in New York, New Haven, Cambridge (Massachusetts), and Stratford (Connecticut). The remaining thirteen were in Great Britain: five in London, one each in Edinburgh, Oxford, and Cheltenham, and five in Stratford-upon-Avon.¹

¹ It is noteworthy that *Macbeth* seems to be the play most often produced at present. There were four major productions this year (London, New York, and the two Stratfords). Apart from *Macbeth*, the current taste seems to be for the comedies, and for the so-called "problem plays": *Troilus and Cressida* in particular. The history plays are not in favor at present, with only the Yale *Henry VI* seen by this writer.

SHAKESPEARE AT STRATFORD

Stratford, of course, is full of memories of Shakespeare. This lovely little town in Warwickshire, in the heart of England, draws tourists by the hundreds of thousands from all over the world. They come for one purpose mainly: to see the village where Shakespeare was born, where he grew up, where he studied his "little Latin and less Greek," and where he returned, wealthy and famous, to spend his declining years by the banks of the loveliest of rivers, the swan-filled Avon.

So full is this town of Shakespeare's memory that if it were in the Philippines it would long ago have lost its name: a law would have been passed changing it from "Stratford" to "Shakespeare." But the English have a deeper sense of history than we Filipinos have. We think nothing of changing the name of a town, or a city, or a province, or a river, or a street. That noble province in Luzon, known for centuries as Tayabas, is now called Quezon. The historic town of Misamis—one of the oldest in Mindanao—is now known by another name. The streets which people knew as Azcárraga and Avilés are now given different designations. And Pasay — but for the residents' vigorous protests — would today have been called Rizal City. We keep changing our names: the British retain theirs. London will always be London, and Oxford always Oxford, and Stratford will always be Stratford as long as it exists.

Alas, the English too have their foibles. They have preserved their sense of history, but they have not preserved their sense of awe. Poetry readings are held in the new Anglican Cathedral at Coventry. Canterbury Cathedral, where Henry VIII destroyed the tomb of Saint Thomas à Becket and where the Protestant reformers destroyed the glass windows because they depicted the lives of the saints, is now full of the tombs of people who are best forgotten. Westminster Abbey is similarly a forest of marble monuments. Its north transept is now sacred to Gladstone and the politicians, its south transept sacred to poets and writers, and even Longfellow, who was not English and who did not die in England, has his statue in the church from which the statues of the saints have long been banished.

So is it at Stratford. The church of the Holy Trinity is now sacred to the memory of William Shakespeare. The church register, where his baptism and burial are recorded, is displayed in a glass case along the wall. His grave, and those of his wife and members of his family, are the most prominent objects in the sanctuary. His statue commands the altar from the sanctuary wall. Hundreds of thousands come to this church every year. Many of them took photographs. But in July 1962, when an American tourist insisted on taking pictures without paying the fee, the Anglican Vicar forbade all photography within the church: instead, the attention of visitors was directed to the picture postcards which are for sale. For booklets and postcards are on sale within this church where once upon a time William Shakespeare — or at least his forbears — had knelt to pray.

For all that, it is a lovely church, and its spire, illuminated at night, is reflected upon the waters of the Avon.

This idolatry of Shakespeare is not entirely barren. The best memorials to him are not the desecrated church nor the innumerable taverns named after him, but the carefully preserved timber houses and the lovely gardens which have prevented Stratford from looking entirely commercial. There are, moreover, those living memorials to Shakespeare's dramatic genius — the Shakespeare Institute and the Royal Shakespeare Memorial Theatre.

The Shakespeare Institute is a center for graduate studies and research affiliated with the University of Birmingham. Headed for the past decade by Allardyce Nicoll, the Institute attracts students from all over the world every summer to hear eminent scholars lecture upon Shakespeare and upon various aspects of Elizabethan and Jacobean literature.

The Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, a corporation under royal patronage, is one of the most financially successful ventures in the world. Its yearly festivals, which lasted only a week at the beginning of the century, are now prolonged from April to December. Daily performances (except Sundays) of an ever changing repertory are played to crowded houses, the tickets being booked well in advance. An instance of this fact

occurred only recently. When it was announced that, for reasons of health, Paul Scofield's *King Lear* would have to be postponed from September to November, thousands of pounds' worth of tickets (it is said) had to be refunded.

This theatre, now so successful, had humble beginnings. In 1769 the great Shakespearean actor, David Garrick, organized a "Shakespeare Jubilee" at Stratford. It lasted three days, was dampened by foul weather but enlivened by horse-racing and fireworks. No Shakespeare play was produced. In 1864 — Shakespeare's Tercentenary — the Mayor of Stratford, Edward Flower, organized a Shakespeare Festival in a temporary pavilion. *Twelfth Night* was performed, with Charles Dickens in the audience. In 1874 Charles Flower proposed the building of a permanent Memorial Theatre. The proposal was badly received, the national subscription for funds failed miserably. But the Flower family — local brewers — donated land and money, the theatre was built, and the yearly festivals began in 1879.

It is amusing today to read of the press notices that greeted these early attempts to honor Shakespeare at Stratford. One London critic in 1879 said that "the whole business of the Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon is a solemn farce calculated to puff up a few local nobodies with a mistaken idea of their own importance." And even in 1928, when the theatre had burned down and its rebuilding contemplated, another London critic called the new theatre "an insult to Shakespeare" and "a monster to overwhelm the romantic neighborhood." Nobody now remembers the names of these critics, but the theatre which they attacked is alive, and great actors—like Olivier and Gielgud and Scofield — have not disdained to act in it. Some of the seasons at Stratford have been more than usually memorable. Everyone still talks of the 1951 season when the cycle of chronicle plays was performed in chronological order, with the same actors sustaining the identical roles in all the plays. In this manner, the chronicle plays became one connected dramatic epic: from *Richard II*, through the two parts of *Henry IV*, through *Henry V* and the three parts of *Henry VI*, and ending with *Richard III*.

The current season at Stratford is somewhat uneven. *Macbeth*, a great play, is badly done. But *Cymbeline* and *Measure for Measure*, which are horrid plays, are superbly produced. The most brilliant productions at Stratford today are *The Taming of the Shrew* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: the former a rollicking delight, the latter sheer magic. To these five plays a sixth will be added in the winter, when Paul Scofield—fresh from his triumph in New York as Saint Thomas More in *A Man for all Seasons*—will return to Stratford to play *King Lear*.²

The Royal Shakespeare Company has extended its activities beyond Stratford-upon-Avon. It is now playing in three different places and in four theatres simultaneously. The main section, at Stratford, devotes its energies almost exclusively to Shakespeare. A second section is playing a repertory of Brecht, Pinter, and Strindberg at the Aldwych Theatre in London's West End. A third section performs in a small theatre on the Thames called the Mermaid, which this writer has not visited. A fourth section is playing *Troilus and Cressida* at the Edinburgh Festival.

This last section created a minor sensation upon arrival in Edinburgh by attacking the poor facilities in the theatres. Peter Hall, Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, conducted a press conference in which he excoriated the British playhouses in sweeping un-Shakespearean anticlimax: the theatres, he said, are "inadequate, ill-equipped, badly designed, and no good." He went into detail: "To bring a company of fifty actors and find there is nowhere they can wash off their body make-up is pretty awful." He added that this was not peculiar to Edinburgh but was true of the rest of Britain. We quote this for a special reason which will become apparent later; but we should also add that some of the new British playhouses (like that at Stratford, or the new Belgrade Theatre in Coven-

² Acting honors in the current Warwickshire season should go to Paul Hardwick's Bottom, Ian Holm's Puck, Clive Swift's Cloten, Vanessa Redgrave's Imogen, Eric Porter's Iachimo, Derek Godfrey's Petruchio, Tom Fleming as the Duke in *Measure for Measure*. The costuming, on the other hand, leaves much to be desired. The apparel designed for *Measure for Measure* is in the worst possible taste.

try, or the newest of all—Sir Laurence Olivier's amphitheatre in Chichester) are the ultimate in luxury.

SHAKESPEARE IN LONDON

In London at the present moment (the summer of 1962), Shakespeare is playing in two places. One is that venerable seat of Shakespearean productions, the "Old Vic" on the south bank of the Thames. The other is a new venture: Shakespeare in the open air in Regent's Park.

The "Old Vic" (more properly the Royal Victoria Hall) has seen varied days. At one time it descended to the less-than-respectable status of a music hall, not unsuited to its unfashionable location. It regained respectability when it became the first theatre in the world to produce the entire canon of Shakespearean plays. Like the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, the Old Vic is now under royal patronage; and like the other, it too is divided into three parts: the main section is in London; a second section toured the United States in the spring of 1962; a third section, headed by Vivien Leigh, went to Australia and the Far East, unfortunately by-passing the Philippines.

Of the London Old Vic productions, this writer has seen only two: *Julius Caesar* and *The Tempest*. One critic called the Old Vic's *Tempest* "somnolent," a judgment not altogether unjust. The main difficulty is Prospero (Alastair Sim) who is made to sound like a venerable Jewish rabbi. But the Old Vic's *Caesar*, despite a weak Brutus, is a good production. One of its virtues is the sensitive handling of the growing rift between Antony and Octavius. Another is the brilliant performance of Cassius, played by Robert Eddison who also plays Trinculo in *The Tempest* as well as the title-role in the London *Macbeth*.

The open air performances at Regent's Park can be characterized in three words: light-hearted, effervescent, brilliant. There have been three plays this summer: *Midsummer Night's Dream* in July, *Twelfth Night* in August, *Love's Labour Lost* in September and late August. The lovely gardens at Regent's Park form a natural setting to these light comedies; and the inexpensive but tasty suppers provided in a nearby pavilion add to the pleasantness of these evenings.³

³ Acting honors in the Regents' Park productions should go to Patrick Wymark's Bottom, to Frederick Bartman's Malvolio, to Mary Steele's Olivia, and the rest of the *Twelfth Night* cast.

One serious defect in these London productions—both at the Old Vic and in Regent's Park — is the poor handling of the songs. In Shakespeare's plays the songs perform an important function. Lucius is made to sing just before the ghost appears in *Julius Caesar*; Desdemona sings the Willow Song and Ophelia her snatches of ballads just before their respective deaths; the fairies sing a lullaby in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Imogen is awakened by "Hark, Hark, the Lark" in *Cymbeline*; and Ariel in *The Tempest* and Feste in *Twelfth Night* are both perpetually singing. That these songs are supposed to be sweetly sung is seen from the very first words of *Twelfth Night*: "If music be the food of love, play on." But the songs are badly done at the Old Vic and poorly done in Regent's Park, and "Hark, Hark, the Lark" is slaughtered at Stratford-upon-Avon. But where the song is well sung, as in the fairies' lullaby in the Stratford *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the music has a transforming quality which can only be called magical.

OXFORD AND CHELTENHAM

We have been speaking, so far, of professional performances. But student performances also abound in Great Britain. The students at Oxford produced *Hamlet* in the most impressive of settings: the cathedral quadrangle behind Christ's Church College. The ghost scenes, performed above in the parapet, were very effective. But open air productions in the English midlands are at the mercy of the weather. The night we saw the play (through the courtesy of Mr. Antonio Manuud), it was blowing a gale. The cold wind and intermittent rain were not too much for the actors, but they were too much for this writer who had to admit defeat in mid-performance and retire to Campion Hall for a hot bath and thick blankets.

At Cheltenham the students of the University of Birmingham produced *Romeo and Juliet*: an unfortunate production which one Welsh writer somewhat unkindly described as a successful attempt to turn poetry into prose.

STRATFORD, CONNECTICUT

The British Shakespeare Festival at Stratford-upon-Avon is now duplicated in at least three places in the New World.

One is the Canadian Shakespeare Festival at Stratford in Ontario. A second is the American Shakespeare Festival at Stratford in Connecticut. A third is the New York City Shakespeare Festival in Central Park.

The Connecticut venture is officially called "The American Shakespeare Festival Theatre and Academy." Organized in 1951, it began production in 1955. This heavily endowed theatrical corporation has built its luxurious theatre in a picturesque location on the banks of the Housatonic River, where the well-kept lawns afford pleasant picnic grounds for the crowds that come to see the performances. The flags of many countries wave from the various flagpoles of the polygonal building, the Philippine flag being among the most prominent.

There is a certain inconsistency in the policies at Stratford, Connecticut. Off the stage, there is a certain amount of affectation of old English customs: heavy furniture in the lounge; strolling "minstrels" on the lawn, dressed in Elizabethan costumes and singing "Greensleeves" and other old English airs; and so on. On the other hand, on the stage, there is a deliberate attempt to de-anglicize Shakespeare and make his plays both "modern" and "American." Lawrance Langner, Chairman of the Board, has explained this cultural nationalism. He says that the objective at Stratford, Connecticut, is "to develop an American Shakespeare type of presentation" in which "the drawing room accents of British Shakespeare are replaced by the more vigorous if less mellifluous tones of American English."

This policy of an Americanized Shakespeare was adopted upon the advent in Connecticut of the triumvirate who now direct the activities of the American Shakespeare Festival. The triumvirs are Jack Landau, John Houseman, and Rouben Ter-Arutunian. They have explained their policies as follows: The American audience, they say, is "a hitherto untrained audience"; consequently, "the meanings of Shakespeare's words and situations" must be conveyed, not through Shakespeare's lines, but through "vital robust acting." The emphasis in such "robust" acting must be on "characterization" and not upon "ele-

gant diction." The result of this policy, Mr. Langner admits, is — in his words — "more meat but less music."

In keeping with this "more meat" policy, the actors and actresses of the 1961 season were recruited not from the ranks of experienced Shakespearean actors, but from Hollywood and Broadway. Thus, Lady Macbeth was played by Jessica Tandy, who had appeared in the film *Forever Amber*. She had also acted in the Broadway production of Tennessee Williams' *Streetcar Named Desire*. The role of Macbeth (and of Hector in *Troilus and Cressida*) was given to Pat Hingle, who had acted in Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin-Roof*. He has also appeared in the films, *On the Waterfront* and *Splendor in the Grass*. The role of Rosalind in *As You Like It* and of Helen in *Troilus and Cressida* were played by Kim Hunter, who had also acted in *Streetcar Named Desire* and in *Darkness at Noon*.

If the directors' objective at Stratford, Connecticut, has been to make Shakespeare sound like Tennessee Williams, they may be said to have admirably succeeded. There is a certain advantage in this more-meat-less-music policy: it makes the plays "alive"; that is to say, there is plenty of bluster and movement on the stage. Whether or not such movement is equivalent to dramatic action is a matter in dispute.

The dispute may be reduced to three heads. In the first place, there are those who would deny the major premise that the American audience is as ignorant as the Connecticut directors believe. In the second place, there are those who mourn the loss Shakespearean music. Take away the music of words, and what is there left of poetry? In the third place, it might be asked whether Shakespeare's relevance to contemporary problems might not be brought out better by sticking close to his text than by changing him to suit a preconceived notion of modernity.

This last point might be illustrated by the Connecticut version of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* and by comparing it with the Royal Shakespeare Company's version of the same play at Edinburgh. In Connecticut, the play was modernized in its setting. The Greeks and Trojans were changed

into Northerners and Southerners of the American Civil War, with the corresponding military uniforms of blue and gray. This transposition of the historical setting was not an original idea. It had been tried previously by Tyrone Guthrie in his *Old Vic* production of the play which toured New York in December 1956. In his production, Dr. Guthrie changed the setting to the First World War, with Germans and Allies replacing the Greeks and Trojans, and with cannon and bayonets replacing swords and spears.

All this sounds very clever in theory, but it runs the risk of making nonsense of the play. How does one conduct individual combats — by challenge and counterchallenge, which are of the essence of the play — behind a barrage of artillery? How explain the sulking of Achilles, the emphasis on individual prowess, and the death — as tragic as anything in Greek tragedy — of the great Hector? As for Helen of Troy, it is of course possible to portray her merely as a modern "strumpet playing on a honky-tonk piano": but if she was merely that, how explain the ten years of war in which the nations battled and died for her possession? "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?"

The Connecticut producers were guilty of an even graver fault: they not only stultified Shakespeare's play; they also made it sordid. In their hands, *Troilus and Cressida* became a merely cynical play.

What a contrast between the *Troilus and Cressida* of the American Shakespeare Festival and the same play staged at Edinburgh! At Edinburgh the stage was bare; the theatre was admittedly inadequate: but what a grand performance! Peter Hall and his actors, adhering closely to Shakespeare's text, gave the play a dignity, an integrity, a profundity, and a magnificence that one usually associates with Aeschylus.

Admittedly, *Troilus and Cressida* is a difficult play to perform. It is a play about vile things — ambition, selfishness, treachery, lust, cynicism — all the vile things one can imagine: but it is not a vile play. It is a bitter and a savage attack upon the corrupt morals of a society interested in

nothing but "wars and lechery." It is as savage and as bitter as anything in Juvenal; more savage perhaps than anything else in literature. But it is an indignant play: it is not a cynical play. It is a tragedy in which the heroic Hector is slaughtered by the corrupt Achilles, and in which the inexperienced and naive Troilus is betrayed by the corrupt Pandarus and the faithless Cressida. It is not one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, but it has its own greatness, not unworthy of the author of *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. What a misreading to change Shakespearean tragedy into pornography!

SHAKESPEARE IN THE COLLEGES

But there are other Shakespearean productions in the United States, less lavish than those at Stratford, Connecticut, but far more satisfying. In the fall of 1961 the undergraduates at Yale produced the Third Part of *Henry VI*, a very fine production. Earlier, in the summer, the students at Harvard produced *As You Like It* at the Loeb Theatre, described as "the most modern theatre in America." By an unusual coincidence, this writer saw the Harvard *As You Like It* with the same companion with whom he had seen Katherine Hepburn's *As You Like It* in New Haven eleven years earlier. This invited a comparison between Miss Hepburn's old-fashioned production, with clumsy stage-scenery but with sparkling acting, and the push-button but less sparkling production at the Loeb. But it is unfair to compare a student production with that of a professional company like Miss Hepburn's. Such student productions abound in the United States. There must be few colleges where Shakespeare is not produced at least occasionally.

IN CENTRAL PARK

The man behind the New York Shakespeare Festival in Central Park is Joseph Papp, founder and producer. The plays are open to the public gratis, but the bill is enormous. The current productions this summer (*Merchant of Venice*, *Tempest*, and *Lear*) will cost some \$212,000, of which the City of New York is contributing \$100,000. Mr. Papp is raising the balance from public subscription.

The fact that these productions are supported from public funds has led to a complication. Shortly before the *Merchant of Venice* was to open, the Jewish rabbis raised a protest against what they considered an "anti-semitic" play. The large Hebraic population of New York City made such a charge politically awkward, but a compromise was reached whereby the *Merchant* was allowed to play in Central Park but was barred from television.

THE MERCHANT ON SECOND AVENUE

It is ironic that a protest should have been lodged against precisely the play which in the past year was among the best Shakespearean productions in New York. It opened in January 1962 at the Gate Theatre on Second Avenue and Tenth Street, and closed on March 4th after sixty performances. The staging was simple: a double platform, with doors on the lower and windows on the upper stage. Close these doors with wooden shutters, and you were outside Shylock's house. Open them, and you were on the Rialto. Replace the shutters with golden grill-work and you were in Portia's palace in Belmont. Bring in the dais and you were in the courtroom. Replace the dais with a bench and you were in the moonlit garden. Or have the actors glide across the stage with poles, and they became gondoliers gliding along the Grand Canal in Venice.

The acting was similarly vivacious and imaginative. Portia in Belmont was the Renaissance princess wooed by many princes; Portia in the courtroom was a young and hesitant lawyer who won more than a lawsuit. Shylock was a very human Jew, monstrously selfish and cruel, but also monstrously wronged. This was excellent Shakespeare, and the chief credit for it belongs to Boris Tumarin who directed it and also played Shylock.

ZEFFERELLI'S ROMEO

When the Old Vic toured the United States in early 1962, they had three plays in their repertory: *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*. It was

their *Romeo and Juliet* which excited the most comment both in London and New York.

It was directed by an unusual person, new both to Shakespeare and to the English language. He was an Italian director of opera, Zefferelli by name. He conceived the play in operatic terms — not unlike the “vivacious acting” of the Connecticut Festival. Also, like opera, he believed in massive stage sets and painted scenery. Such sets make scene-shifting difficult: consequently, the play had to be cut to suit the scenery. Entire scenes were thus omitted, and one Shakespearean scholar remarked that the play, as presented, could be understood only by those who already knew the play by heart.

Furthermore, in keeping with the policy of vivacious acting, the love scenes were treated with the realism of the films. Thus, the beautiful balcony scene was not played in the traditional manner, with Juliet in the balcony and Romeo on the ground. Such romantic distance is alien to the realism of the films: so Romeo was made to climb the wall, and the balcony scene was played with the lovers in each other's arms.

Of course this made nonsense of the lines, which imply distance. But the movie-like realism “went over big” with the New York audience which went wild with applause. But this probably means little. American audiences today are generally partial towards British productions. Gone are the days when Edmund Kean was pelted with rotten eggs and tomatoes in the Park Theatre in New York (1825), or when Macready (1849) was pelted with bottles, chairs, and quantities of asafetida in the Astor Place Opera House. On that occasion the New York Police had to fire into the crowds to quell the disturbance. Twenty rioting civilians were thus killed, and more than a hundred policemen were injured with the rocks that the mob had thrown.

WANTED: LADY MACBETH

We are less unruly today, but we are also less dramatic. Of the three performances of *Macbeth* which this writer has

seen this past year, not one was really good. The worst was that at Stratford, Connecticut. Not much better was that at Stratford-upon-Avon. Only the Old Vic's *Macbeth*, seen in New York, managed to preserve the sense of depth and magnificence which the text undoubtedly has. But even the Old Vic production was not entirely adequate. It is difficult to find a good *Macbeth*; it is even more difficult to find a good *Lady Macbeth*. The search should continue.

One qualification must be made to this statement. Fay Compton's sleep-walking scene (at Stratford-upon-Avon) is excellent. She plays most of the scene sitting down on the floor, and she renders the triple sigh with convincing realism. But apart from this scene, one looks in vain for a good *Lady Macbeth*. The days of Sarah Siddons, or Ellen Terry, or Judith Anderson, seem to have passed.

These are some of the productions seen in the thirteen months just past. In retrospect many scenes stand out as delightful or memorable. But the one performance which, as a whole, seemed most inspired was *Midsummer Night's Dream* at Stratford-upon-Avon. It was a night of magic, and it seemed natural, after such a performance, for the lone theatre-goer to take a stroll in the moonlight along the banks of the silent Avon. Standing on the footbridge, in mid-river, one could see in the distance the church spire reflected on the waters. The lights in the Memorial Theatre were out. In the sky the moon was full. And in the river the swans had stirred and were silently gliding on the water. It is on such an occasion that one realizes, perhaps, why Ben Jonson, who knew Shakespeare well, should call him a swan. "Sweet swan of Avon," he said; then added: "He was not of an age but for all time."

MIGUEL A. BERNAD