

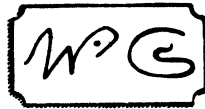
SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

AN ANNUAL SURVEY OF
SHAKESPEARIAN STUDY & PRODUCTION

12

EDITED BY
ALLARDYCE NICOLL

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THE OPEN STAGE: ELIZABETHAN OR EXISTENTIALIST?

BY

GEORGE R. KERNODLE

Stage scenery—the visible image of the solid fabric of the universe—seems to be going out of fashion. The existentialist *avant garde* no longer see the universe as solid. The lone barren tree in *Waiting for Godot*—the one reminder of an objective world—is not substantial enough for a man to hang himself on. Williams' hot tin roof is a platform projecting into the audience's lap, with Brick, Big Daddy, and the Cat caught up in the glaring searchlight of a criminal investigation, with no walls around them and only insubstantial suggestions of ceiling and light shutters. Their souls are bare, perforce; there is nowhere even their faces could hide. Anouilh's Joan of *The Lark*, and the characters of Berthold Brecht, are living in no more substantial a world than the characters of Saroyan—they are demonstrations of an idea pieced together of fragments taken from many places and times. Hence they need only fragments for their settings. The arena stage, where ordinary plays are stripped bare, is the latest fashion.

The new way to play old plays is to put them on a bare open stage, with little or no setting. Hamlet at Stratford, Molière's Don Juan in Paris, Wagner's men and gods at Bayreuth, stand alone in spotlights or surrounded by phantoms of the mind. Black cloth creates a great formless void out of which the characters suddenly appear from nowhere, play their moment, and disappear into nothingness again. Is this just bringing old plays up to date? Or is it a return to the great open platform of Shakespeare's theatre? Is this a rediscovery of the one true way that the great ages have always produced plays, free from the ornamental trappings of baroque scenery? Leslie Hotson declares that the Shakespearian stage was the same kind of open arena stage surrounded by audience on four sides that we know. Modern arena productions have merely opened our eyes to the fact that this is the only great way to play. Richard Southern is bringing out books on the open stage in medieval and modern times. Alfred Harbage insists that we are recovering the true Shakespearian stage when we put the actor before the audience without the distraction of scenery. When he saw Jean Vilar present Molière and Shakespeare in Paris on an open platform, backed by solid black, he felt that at last the true stage had been found. Yet, tempting as it is to identify the past with the present, the analogy will not hold. The Shakespearian stage was not a blank open platform, on which a lonely soul was spotlighted in an empty, insubstantial universe. We have not returned to the Shakespearian stage, but have invented a new form of stage. We use a new form of stage because we want to say something quite different.

Jean Vilar's platform stage in Paris for this Théâtre National Populaire is not at all a re-discovery of the simplicity of the Renaissance theatre. It makes a modern existentialist character out of the classic hero. Molière's Don Juan against this eternal, timeless black becomes a sceptical modern lone soul before an earth and a heaven he does not believe in, meeting disconnected fragments of his irresponsible past, seeing incredible reminders of the celestial world that like

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lightning pierce through his black shell. He lives only in his inner mind and only half believes what he sees. He grimly sits unmoved when his father, his wife, and the figure of the statue itself break through the outer void to upbraid him. Even at the end, hell has no scenic reality, but is only the pulsing, flashing spotlight of his own mind. Finally the Don, like all the other phantoms, plunges into the darkness from which they come. There is no scenery because they tread in no real world. As Harold Hobson said, reviewing the production in London, "Their little lives—our little lives—emerge out of no past, and they vanish into no future. It is a solemn thought, and strangely moving, even if we philosophically deny its validity." Molière created no such grim lonely modern soul. His Don brazenly and gaily tried to deny all earthly and heavenly claims, but the scenery gave a solidity and continuity to the father, the wife, and the commander, and just as brazenly showed that those claims had a reality that could not be denied.

The Stratford Hamlet of 1956 was an even more lonely existentialist hero—a desperate individual wandering in a disconnected universe, a universe with no meaning or continuity of its own. He moved on a free open platform with only a black velvet background. One isolated dark piece of cloth hung from an undefined point in mid-air, obviously a mere device for the eaves-dropping scenes. Here was no Denmark, no Middle Age, no tangible world at all, but only the lost modern soul standing exposed under a strong spotlight. There was no question of the King's guilt—he was merely one of the many disconnected figures that floated in out of the darkness from many directions and disappeared again into the meaningless void. There was no political question at all, as none of the figures that impinged on Hamlet had any continuity. Only the inside of Hamlet's mind existed—all else was fragmentary, flowing, unfocused. When Fortinbras arrived there was nothing for him to take over, unless he came to expose his own naked soul. Even Hamlet's costume, until the critics' protest grew too loud, was an anonymous shapeless black felt that made him look like a pathetic bell-hop disconsolately looking for his space ship. He was as much a lost tramp under the empty milky way as the two tramps of *Waiting for Godot*.

Such a production makes of Hamlet a very exciting, even terrifying, modern figure. But the effect is very, very different from what Shakespeare's audience saw. When Shakespeare spoke of something rotten in the state of Denmark, there behind the actors, unchanging during the whole play, was a symbol of the realm. When he spoke of the dangers to a state if a king is killed, there on the stage was a large, three-story symbol of the throne. When Ophelia or the King prayed, there was a large symbol of an altar-tomb, with a heavenly throne and an angels' gallery above. When Tamburlaine and Romeo defied the stars, there were the stars, very visible to the audience in a canopy-heavens.

Shakespeare's background was not the bare machine for playing imagined by twentieth-century scholars, themselves brought up in an age of functionalism. It was a complex symbol, combined out of several age-old medieval symbols. For centuries kings had been presented to the public, whether real kings in public ceremonies or actor-kings in plays and pageants, in a throne backed by a symbol of the realm. That symbol combined elements from the pageant-castles, from the city gates, from triumphal arches, from the choir screen of the church. The throne was framed by columns supporting a canopy, a 'heavens'—exactly the same kind of pavilion-canopy used to frame an altar or a tomb. Heavenly singers proclaimed the divine praises of the king, and often a figure of God sat on a heavenly throne to endorse the earthly king below. The Elizabethan stage had absorbed all these medieval symbols. Its background

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structure resembled a castle, a throne, a city gate, a tomb, and an altar. It was a symbol of social order and of divine order—of the real ties between man and king, between heaven and earth.

The true historical prototype of the modern open stage is none of the larger Renaissance theatres but the mountebank theatre that dates from the Middle Ages. That stage was free and empty, uncluttered by symbols of social or cosmic order for the simple reason that the medieval mountebank, peddling his snake oil and entertaining on the streets, was the first completely isolated individual. He had no place in medieval society. He was an outcast, a vagabond. Everyone else had a place—a set place—and all the other stages of the time had elaborate scenic symbols of the temporal order. Noah spoke from his ark, Herod from his throne. God spoke from a heaven firmly planted on the top of a tower or castle or mountain. Saints and Virtues spoke from windows and galleries, directly above the earthly stage of men. The Gothic people believed in the reality and solid continuity of the cosmic order, the political order, and the world of virtues and values. Their stages were more than platforms for actors; they were visualizations of their basic philosophy.

The Renaissance saw the emergence of the great individual—not a lone existentialist individual trying to create his own subjective values in a meaningless and fragmented universe—but a homeless medieval vagabond intruding on a street corner—but a confident, princely individual. The stages of the Renaissance were platform stages, but they all had very solid, three-dimensional symbols of order at the back of the open platform.

Marlowe's Tamburlaine stepped out onto the new open stage of London a free man, proud and glorious. He defied the fates, and broke all the bounds and limitations of medieval order. Medieval men had felt they were subject to an inexorable Fortune. But Tamburlaine bragged that he held the fates bound fast in iron chains and himself turned Fortune's wheel. He was at home on an open free platform. But he did not despise the institution of monarchy. His freedom consisted in the ability to make himself king of city after city. The imagery of the play is filled with references to crowns. There, at the back of his free open platform, was a stage façade that symbolized a king's throne, backed by a city-castle and topped by a heavenly throne. The very 'heavens' or canopy over Tamburlaine's platform stage was no functional roof to keep off London's rain but a symbol of great antiquity of the sacred dignity of a throne. Tamburlaine's glorious freedom was asserted in a series of scenes of conquest and coronations. That background symbolized in turn the different cities that he conquered, and each city served as a background for a coronation, of himself, his attendant kings, and his Queen. Tamburlaine could assert his individuality to the fullest because on his open platform he was backed by a colourful, banner-decked symbol of monarchical order.

Simon Eyre, the hero of Dekker's *Shoemaker's Holiday*, one of the earliest heroes of capitalism, had broken away from the bonds and customs of medieval economy. He did not remain a master-shoemaker supervising his shop-home of apprentices and journeymen. Like many another Englishman of the sixteenth century, he ventured into speculative trade. He bought a shipload of merchandise and became a very rich trader. But he did not break completely with his shop. He was free to step out of line as an individual, but the old institutions supported him. He was made Lord Mayor and gave a banquet for his faithful men, and the king himself came and sat at his table. Dekker found the Elizabethan stage a perfect expression of his play. At the back of the free open platform was a symbol of home, city, and king. Simon's family and men,