

## DIRECTING PROBLEM PLAYS: JOHN BARTON TALKS TO GARETH LLOYD EVANS

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G.L.E. John Barton, you are, I think, one of the few directors who have produced all of the so-called Problem Plays. Do you find this a useful label?

J.B. No, I don't really. I hate categorising plays, and find it difficult to say what is a tragedy, what is a comedy, what is a romance, etc. But if I did, I think I would link *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* with *Twelfth Night*. I believe that they carried through something that was coming to the boil in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, i.e. Shakespeare's very conscious split between the 'happy-ever-after' world of romantic comedy and his sense of what life and people are really like. I see it in *As You Like It* to some extent, and even more so in *Twelfth Night* where what happens at the end to Malvolio and Belch and Maria is set against the conventional romantic ending given to Olivia, Orsino, Viola and Sebastian. That sense of reality breaking in on convention goes further in *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure*, where a wry sense of what life's really like and what people are really like is at odds with what the story-line dictates. I think that *Troilus* is a much profounder, more complex, and richer play. If I had to align it with any, I suppose I would do so, as other critics have done, with *2 Henry IV* and with *Hamlet*. I mention those two partly because of the common disease imagery in the three plays. I think that there is also a difference in Shakespeare's overall attitude in *Troilus*. I take it to be on the whole wry, tolerant and accepting in

*Twelfth Night*, *All's Well*, and *Measure for Measure*, and to be more disturbed and disillusioned about human beings and human life in *Troilus*, which seems to me to lead towards the extreme disillusion of *Timon*. So I personally would hesitate to group the 'problem plays' together, but I would also hesitate to put labels on them at all. When directing such plays, I do not think 'Are they tragedies or comedies?'. Such a question does not arise when I am trying to bring them to life in the theatre. Nevertheless, there are of course certain common features which the three plays share. They are magnificently summed up in *Angel with Horns*. A. P. Rossiter's summary of the peculiar quality of the plays is, for me, the most perceptive and helpful piece of critical writing yet made about them.

G.L.E. I understand what you are saying and, indeed, I agree with it. I'm interested that although you're not prepared to come down absolutely on one side or the other about this, you do, in effect, make a distinction between *Twelfth Night* – and I presume plays of that ilk – which you refer to as wry, tolerant and accepting, and *Troilus and Cressida* which you describe as disturbed and disillusioned. Do you think that it's quite fruitless to ask the question why this happened? In your heart of hearts, do you think that there is a personal reason inside Shakespeare for this, or has it something to do with the conditions of the theatre at the time, or what?

J.B. I think one should be very suspicious of

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drawing autobiographical conclusions about Shakespeare. But, even so, I do have a picture of Shakespeare himself, which I mostly derive from his sonnets. These confirm what I feel about him in studying his plays. They show him responding to the common subject of love in so many different ways; sometimes he's humorous and frivolous, sometimes romantic and idealistic, sometimes sardonic to a degree, sometimes hurt, sometimes disillusioned, sometimes cynical and sometimes savage. Whatever the date span of the sonnets, I see him responding in them to love in such totally different ways, that I feel that his response to everything in life was shifting, unsettled, volatile and uncoded. I doubt if there was a simple historical and autobiographical development in him. I think that the subject matter of a given play rather dictated his attitude, but I also believe that there is some autobiographical content, not in terms of hidden biographical detail, but in overall mood and tone. I certainly believe that his sense of what life and men are really like increasingly made him break forms and conventions.

G.L.E. Can I go back now to *Troilus and Cressida*? When the Old Vic revived *Troilus and Cressida* after the First World War, *The Times* said it was inevitably dull, and when Charles Laughton played Angelo to Flora Robson's Isabella, T. S. Eliot lamented in a letter to that paper, about the small audiences. How do you account for the lack of popularity of these plays till round about 1935?

J.B. Well, I think the popularity of a particular play depends enormously on its being well done by a given group of actors and a director. But I think also something of the taste and climate of the age comes into it. For instance, the Victorians loved *Romeo and Juliet* and totally dismissed *Troilus*. Today, however, I think anyone would agree that to bring off a *Romeo and Juliet*, to make an audience sympathise with those two characters and that world, is far harder

than to bring off a *Troilus*. I think that the sardonic, wry, realistic portraiture of human beings in the play is much more in tune with the taste of the last twenty or thirty years than it was in Victorian times. I think there's no doubt whatsoever – and it's something I've often discussed with my fellow directors – that a certain play can become more or less viable at a given time. I think, for instance, that it's very difficult to bring off *Richard II* today. I think that a self-pitying King, indeed the very subject of a King's fall, has far less import than it would have had for the Elizabethans. I think that modern taste, the modern response to life, immediately makes *Troilus* a popular play in a way it never was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I myself believe that it's one of his greatest plays, but that may be because of what I am, rather than of what the play is. I would hesitate to make an absolute judgement, but it's extraordinary to me that anybody could think of *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, as being a better play than *Troilus and Cressida*.

G.L.E. Would it be right then to say that the kind of society we've got today is more amenable to a rather darker-hued production of a play, even of a comedy, than, let us say, forty or fifty years ago; that it's easier to put on, let us say, even a *Comedy of Errors* or *Love's Labour's Lost*, or *Twelfth Night*, with a wryness in it, even possibly, a disillusion in it – that it's easier to do this kind of thing today than it was?

J.B. Oh, I think it is, very definitely.

G.L.E. In the 1930s there were protests at, of all places, Melton Mowbray, and indeed Buxton, about performances of *Measure for Measure*. Now the revival of interest, certainly for scholars and critics, in the play, was due to the work of Wilson Knight, R. W. Chambers, and Muriel Bradbrook. The Wilson Knight interpretation, most particularly, is of course very much a religious interpretation. In your 1970 production of *Measure for Measure*, in which

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Ian Richardson played Angelo, and Sebastian Shaw played the Duke, were you reacting against such religious interpretations?

J.B. Not primarily. I read the critics, but basically what I try to bring out in a play is what I myself find in it. I think that, without doubt, one has to take religion into account in that the religious background is strong in the play, but – may be this is just a matter of personal taste – I don't like taking a symbolical or allegorical or philosophical or metaphysical view of the play, mainly because I'm a director working with actors. What I have to do is to answer their questions about the individual characters: what is his intention? what is he really doing or thinking, or feeling behind a given line? When a director explores a play he is bound, primarily, to be doing so in terms of character and psychology, even though he may – indeed must – remind the actors that this is not necessarily what Shakespeare always demands of them. The exploration of character is not the only objective of rehearsals, but it is at the heart of the acting tradition in England, and one has to work within that tradition. There are, for instance, two ways in which one can look at the Duke; one can take him as a symbolic figure, but it's very difficult for an actor to bring a symbolic figure to life. If one is rehearsing *Measure for Measure*, rather than just studying it, one has to answer questions about what the Duke's really like, and what's going on inside him, and that leads to finding out about a human being rather than defining an allegory.

In practice, I did not find any particular critic especially helpful about the play. Critical opinion is usually as diverse and divided as a series of productions of the same play by different directors would be. This is particularly true of *Measure for Measure*, where critics in the last thirty years have been totally divided on the question, for instance, of how we are meant to view the Duke. I find this division of

opinion more significant about the play than any one particular view of it. I in fact made an abstract for the actors of the views of some ten critics, and suggested that the truth might lie somewhere in between. I urged that if they depended on one view only, e.g. Wilson Knight's, they would be taking too narrow a view.

One thing, however, did seem to emerge in rehearsal and performance. It has often been pointed out how, on reading the play, one finds it splitting down the middle. At the point Isabella leaves Claudio after her interview with him in prison, and is left alone with the Duke, the level of the writing changes. The Duke for the first time goes into prose, and into plotting the bed-trick; and the play, which has in the first half been poetically intense and psychologically subtle, is then worked out on a lower, almost fairy-tale level. The change is obvious enough in the study; but in the theatre, I think that the difference disappears. This is because the actors, if they have brought their characters to life in exploring the first half, can carry through that life into the play's more superficial resolution. I felt, in fact, that what seemed a problem in the study largely melted away in the theatre, when those characters were embodied by living actors.

G.L.E. Yes ... I don't know whether you quite realise (perhaps you do) what a great shock you gave quite a lot of people because, in your production, Isabella quite firmly did not agree to marry the Duke. I would be very interested to know why this was so – if indeed you intended it to be so. It seemed so deliberate that I must believe that it was an intention. Now, did she in fact not agree to marry the Duke because the Duke was older than usual (as indeed he certainly looked), or because she couldn't forgive him for pretending that Claudio was dead and was, as it were, indulging in a kind of feminine umbrage; or was it because Isabella found sex repugnant?

J.B. Well, all those thoughts occurred to us in rehearsal, but that's not quite the way in which we tackled it. Again, what we did was to ask the question 'What would Isabella have done when the Duke made his proposal?' Shakespeare himself leaves it open-ended in the sense that he gives her no lines whatsoever in reply to the proposal. This is a situation which comes up again and again in rehearsal: Shakespeare doesn't provide a certain answer and one has to find one. One tends to do so by trying to deduce what a character's response would be from everything that we know about that character elsewhere in the play. What I actually intended was that Isabella's response should be open-ended. I suggested to Estelle Kohler, who was playing the part, that she was in no state at that moment to accept the proposal, and I asked her to reject it and yet think about it. The last thing that I presented on the stage, when everybody had gone off at the end of the play, was Isabella wondering, puzzling about what she should do.

G.L.E. The evidence seems to be that in the past Parolles was regarded as one of the greatest comic characters, as indeed I believe Shylock was. Would you agree that audiences nowadays don't find him as funny as apparently they did in the past . . . Parolles I mean, not Shylock?

J.B. No, I wouldn't agree with that at all. I think that whether he is funny or not depends simply on how good the actor is who plays it. There are many parts in Shakespeare which may seem to be dreary if they are not brought alive by the individual talents of the actor. But provided that Parolles is well acted, I am sure he is still funny in the theatre today.

G.L.E. I remember with a great deal of pleasure—I don't know whether you do—Guthrie's production of *All's Well*. I felt both affronted and delighted at the same time. I suppose it could be said, although I wouldn't necessarily say so myself, that Guthrie seemed to be implying, in the way he directed the play,

that it could not really appeal to a modern audience, so something pretty drastic had to be done; so, for example, he introduced an amount of farcical business, including a microphone. Some might say that this kind of behaviour clashed with, for example, great performances such as Edith Evans gave us as the Countess Rousillon. Do you think that *All's Well* is viable to a modern audience—without gimmicks?

J.B. I certainly came to think so after doing the production. At first I was afraid of directing the play, and hadn't originally been going to do it. I had to take it over quickly because a director dropped out. I remember saying to the actors at the outset, 'Let's try and trust this play, explore it and find out how it works, and stage it simply without gimmicks.' We then found after a couple of frightened, doubtful weeks, that the play was coming alive. I believe, from that experience, that the play does work without jazzing-up, though I wasn't sure whether it did when I embarked on it. I ended by thinking the play much finer and more cohesive than I, or, indeed, most people had ever suspected. I think that what Guthrie did was brilliant; but he was always more a man of immense theatrical imagination, a giver of great delight, rather than someone who really tried to explore the content of a play. I think he overlaid plays with much creative invention but did not always try to realise their actual contents. As far as gimmicks are concerned, I think the question is whether an individual piece of business is an inventive overlay, or whether it's a truthful bodying-out of what's implicit in the text. But perhaps in the end it rather comes down to a question of taste.

G.L.E. Would you agree that the difference between Guthrie's attempt to make *All's Well* speak to the twentieth century and your own (or indeed the Royal Shakespeare Company's attempt to make a play speak to the twentieth century), is between what you've described as

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Guthrie's inventive overlay and what you would accept as a matter of principle? Does that make sense? In other words, whereas Guthrie seems to try to speak to the twentieth century by a kind of sensationalism, or theatrical effect, you personally, and the Royal Shakespeare Company, would attempt to make Shakespeare speak to the twentieth century on the basis of a certain attitude, a certain set of principles, a certain philosophy about the twentieth century, that you yourself or the Company have?

J.B. I never personally think very much about the twentieth century. I simply read the play intensively in the study, and then work on it in the rehearsal room by responding to what the actors offer. My response is as often intuitive as it is analytic or rational. I say 'Wouldn't it be good if . . . ?' and then try to test a particular idea in terms of whether it tallies with what I take to be the play's meaning. I never consciously take a twentieth-century approach to the play. It's very difficult to define the process that goes on in the rehearsal room: instinct is a great matter – directors and actors work together on instinctive ideas which bubble up from day to day, which they then test with their reason. We sometimes cut things out because we think they are an overlay on the text, and sometimes leave them in, hoping and trusting that they are an embodiment of something implicit in the text. This process is certainly influenced by the fact that we are people living in the twentieth century. But as often as not we also try to modify our modern responses by asking 'What does Shakespeare *really* mean here? Are we distorting him by doing something which we *want* him to mean, because it appeals to us?'

G.L.E. Do you regard the ending of *All's Well That Ends Well* as a cynical one, or do you think that Bertram has learnt from experience? Indeed, what has he learnt?

J.B. I don't think Bertram's learnt very much; he's grown up a bit, he's learnt to value

Helena more than he valued her at first, he's seen through Parolles, but he's still a pretty selfish and stupid man. I think that 'cynical' isn't quite the right word for the ending: the tone is more one of a worldly tolerance of people. There's no certainty that Bertram and Helena live happily ever after. Bertram ends with a couple of very spare lines which don't tell us much: 'If she, my lord, can make me know this clearly, / I'll love her dearly ever, ever dearly.' Their surface meaning is clear enough, but in the context of the whole scene, they also contain shame, awe of the King, and a resolve, at that moment, to make the best of things. Whether Bertram did in fact love her dearly ever is something which is surely made questionable by all we know of him from the play as a whole. And the end situation is well summed up in the text itself when the King says 'And if it end so meet / The bitter past, more welcome is the sweet.'

G.L.E. May I turn back again to *Troilus and Cressida*? Do you agree with Oscar Campbell and Alice Walker that it's a comical satire? Now, some of the satire in your production was brilliant, but it could be argued that it would be possible to produce it as a tragical satire – that is, with Hector and Troilus as tragic heroes. In your estimation, what kind of satire is it? Tragical or comical?

J.B. I think there is satire in it, but I certainly don't think for one moment that the play is basically a comical satire. I think that people in it are too raw, too hurt, too bruised for it to be labelled on that superficial level. It is also comical, heroic, tragical, romantic – as a whole, it is a mixture of all these things. There is no play which I would less willingly tie down with a label. It continually invites a varying response. For much of it, it asks us to respond comedically, and at times one is drawn to say 'Ah, a "black comedy!"' But what happens, by the end, to Troilus and Cressida and Hector is not comic. The contrast, for instance, between



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what Hector professes and aspires to and what he does seems to me to be very sad. And I feel a great compassion for what becomes of Troilus and Cressida. If I had to give it a label, I would say it was closer to tragedy than to anything else, but I just don't believe those labels are useful. I've never understood myself what exactly it is that defines a tragedy; I don't think that way. *Troilus and Cressida* is unique and brilliant and resists labelling; one confines it terribly, and minimises its richness if one tries to categorise it.

G.L.E. And yet, don't you think that Shakespeare himself would have had, in the Elizabethan way, a rather more formal notion of the kind of play he was writing? I agree with you that it is very difficult, and indeed probably for us not profitable, to think in these rather strict terms of Tragedy, Comedy, History, and so on, but is it not possible that Shakespeare himself would have been more inclined to than we are? If so, in what direction do you think his imagination would have been going in *Troilus and Cressida*? To make people laugh, or to make them feel bitter, or to make them, in fact, cry?

J.B. I think he was trying to do all these things. I think there are bits of the play which are very comic, even farcical, bits that are very moving, bits that are horrifying, bits that are epic, and bits that are domestic and trivial. I think that he invites a much more mixed and complex response than other dramatists. One can categorise Jonson, for instance, far more easily than one can Shakespeare. I think that's true of Shakespeare throughout his career, but never more true than with *Troilus*. I think that it is one of his greatest plays precisely because of the way in which he invites in the course of a single play all the different kinds of response one can have in the theatre, which are normally isolated from one another. He invites tragic, comic, satiric, intellectual and compassionate responses almost at the same time. I believe that is how he himself responded to life. This

shiftingness of view is also embodied in the play's presentation of character. There is a very remarkable difference between the declared intentions of the characters and the actual deeds done by them. Again and again a character enunciates certain intentions and beliefs which are confounded by his actions. Hector in the Trojan Council expresses a moral view of what the Trojans should think about the rape of Helen, but immediately after makes a volte-face for the slenderest of reasons. Cressida's declaration of faith and truth with Troilus is broken by what she does with Diomed. Ajax is presented as an oaf and a lout; and yet he is the one person who, in the Greek camp, utters a simple expression of grief and compassion for Hector's death, which is something one wouldn't have expected from what one sees earlier in the play. Again and again, a character who seems to be foolish or cruel or stupid turns up with something completely the opposite to one's first view of him; and that seems to me to be not a chaotic view of human nature, but a truthful and realistic one. It is something which Shakespeare tapped in a way that no writer before him had done, except fitfully.

G.L.E. Do you mean something more than the old critical concept of appearance and reality? Is there a difference between your words 'declared intention' and 'action done' and this critical concept?

J.B. I think there is a connection, though I haven't actually thought of it. I only want to make the simple point about the shiftingness of most of the characters. We see it around us all the time in life; we all say we believe something, and then in practice we do something quite different. This is of course a fact which most dramatists take into account to some extent, but I think no play exemplifies it so fully as *Troilus and Cressida* does.

G.L.E. What about the later Jacobean dramatists – Massinger, Marston, and so on? Do you feel that they may have learnt something from

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Shakespeare in this respect? I'm thinking of plays like *Women Beware Women*, which are rather later than the plays we are talking about now. Do you feel that these may have been influenced by Shakespeare in this particular context?

J.B. Yes, I do think so.

G.L.E. Despite the obvious theatrical differences which would tend to produce a different kind of play at a given time, I sometimes feel that, in fact, certain thematic pressures that Shakespeare has in this kind of play, do go forward. We tend to think of Shakespeare being wiped away by these later Jacobean dramatists, but I don't think he is, and I'm interested to know what you think.

J.B. Yes, I think that's quite true. But I think also that when Shakespeare wrote his plays he often did things that no other dramatist had done and I think that this particular way of looking at people is both something new and something quite essential in his view of life. It is even more remarkable in one of the plays Shakespeare wrote soon after *Troilus*: in *Othello*, the Moor himself shifts from one point of view to another within the context of a single speech (for example, 'let her rot and perish and be damned tonight, for she shall not live; no, my heart is turned to stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand. O, the world hath not a sweeter creature, she might lie by an emperor's side and command him tasks.' Or 'My relief/ Must be to loathe her' followed a few lines later by 'If she be false, O heaven mocks itself, / I'll not believe it'.) Of course, Shakespeare had done this earlier, as with the character of Richard II (in III, iii), but I have come to notice that it is often one of the most central facts about the way in which he presents character. I notice it particularly in the rehearsal room, where it often gives the actor great difficulty. The counsel I offer, 'Accept the inconsistencies without trying to iron them out' may be good; but it sets the actor great problems.

G.L.E. Would you be prepared to agree that the kind of difference between *Troilus and Cressida* and the other two so-called 'problem plays', which you yourself are insistent upon, is indicated by the difference between Thersites and Lavache? Have you anything to say about those two characters? It seems to me that there is something of the Fool in Thersites, but he is 'not altogether fool'; he is much more and much less than Fool, and that this in itself indicates a difference.

J.B. Maybe I would say that the difference in intensity in the two characters marks a difference in the two plays. They are both immensely disillusioned and sardonic. But Lavache doesn't probe very deeply, whereas Thersites is anguished by what he sees life to be – 'Still wars and lechery, nothing else holds fashion'. I think that Thersites's passion, and his whole response to life, is much more extreme, much more violent than it is in Lavache.

G.L.E. As you know, the general tendency of modern criticism of Shakespeare has been to stress the options open to critics and directors. This emerged at the 1971 Shakespeare Vancouver Conference. Nevertheless, nearly all the critics and directors choose a particular interpretation when they are writing their criticism or directing their play, and therefore exclude all others. Do you think it is possible, or even desirable, for a director to present a play in such a way as to leave all the options open? Or is this just a pipe dream?

J.B. I think it's certainly impossible, and I question whether it's desirable. It's impossible because, as I've said, you have to be specific with actors. Actors have got to know what effect they're trying to make with a given line, what they mean and what they feel. When one reads the play in the study one can say again and again of a given line, 'I'm not sure what Shakespeare intends here; it could be this or it could be that'. But, however unsure one may be, one can't leave things uncertain for the

actor; he has to be specific. When there is a textual crux, where there are many editorial explanations, one's got to choose a specific reading for the actor to play. I think that what a given actor or director does with a play is very like what a given critic does when he is writing about it. He selects what seems to him the most important points, what seems to need bringing out the most, and in so doing he is very, very selective; he cannot write down everything. That is not even possible in a variorum edition. A given piece on a play is only the tip of an iceberg. And so it is in the theatre, especially with a dramatist as rich and complex as Shakespeare.

In practice, I think that the theatre's work is actually more open-ended than the critic's for a completely different reason. Whatever the actor and director decide that they are trying to do, they can't completely control the audience's response. I've often found that where an actor and myself have set out to define something, it has meant something quite different in performance to someone who was seeing it, and, indeed, something quite different to different members of the audience. To sum up, I think the only point at which the play can be said to be absolutely open-ended is when it exists as a mere text waiting to be performed or studied.

An example of an audience's response taking something in a different sense from what an actor and myself intended is the interpretation of Achilles which Alan Howard and I attempted in *Troilus*. We were attacked for presenting Achilles as an effeminate homosexual, which was something that had never entered our minds. We saw him as bisexual, a view which is surely embodied in Shakespeare's play and is also the view which an Elizabethan audience would have taken. Shakespeare shows him both with Patroclus and in love with Polyxena. What we did do was show him *playing* at effeminacy and homosexuality in order to mock and outrage the Greek generals. The real man we saw as

embodied in the aggression and destructiveness which surges from him when he confronts Hector ('In what part of his body shall I destroy him?') and when he finally appears on the battlefield. We hoped that we had made that plain enough, especially as Alan played most of the part with great vocal virility and power. But if it came over to members of the audience differently, then one must allow that what they thought they saw was perhaps of more weight than our intentions.

G.L.E. May I, as a final question, ask you to think yourself back into either the area of preparation for the production of a play, or, if you like, the period of rehearsal of the play, and ask you this question? As an academic and also as a distinguished theatre director, do you find that your academic knowledge of the plays, and indeed of the criticism about the plays, and *your* theatrical know-how, are in any sense at war? If you do, can you say what the nature of the war is? If you don't, what is happening in a rehearsal?

J.B. I think that they are deeply different. I think that, whatever one thinks about the play academically or privately, it becomes something completely different when one's working with the living actor. When I work on a play, I first of all read and think about it very hard. But when I go into rehearsal, my initial step is to say to the actors 'Do something; let's put the scene on its feet; you give me something and I will respond to it'. I find that when I do that, new thoughts come that have never occurred to me in the study; I call into question things that I had previously believed, or decide that they are wrong for a particular actor because his persona cannot embody it. Studying and directing a play are completely different experiences. I think the critic exists in an at times enviable isolation where there is just himself and the text and he can respond directly to it. Whereas a director is responding to individual human beings, to the invention and



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imagination and instincts of the individual actor, and that's the raw material he's got to deal with. He has to accept it, before he tries to mould it. And though his previous knowledge of the play helps him in defining it, in shaping it for the actor, the basic starting-point is not just a text. It's a text plus the creation and invention of the actors; which makes it a completely different experience.

A production of course gives a more impure, but possibly a richer and more complex reading of a play than a critic can provide. A book or an article consists of what the critic wants to say. A production, being a complex of design, music, movement, business, direction, and all that suggests itself in the voice and personae of the actors, is never one man's vision. It is a kind of anthology on the play made by all its

participants. It is thus less precise than what the critic offers, and thus less easily pinned down. I always find after doing a production that it contains things which do not represent my preferred view of some detail in the play, but which are rather interpretations arrived at in rehearsal as the best solution to a particular problem for a particular actor. I don't regret this. A production finally belongs to the actors and not to the director, who is more a chairman than a dictator. All directors find their initial views modified by the independent interpretative powers of the actors they work with. I find I learn more from the actors than I could ever do by reading a variety of critical opinions.

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## 'ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL'

NICHOLAS BROOKE

*All's Well* exercises a recurrent fascination for criticism, because so many things about it are of striking, and contemporary, interest. Yet despite that fact (or possibly partly because of it, because it can be difficult to correlate 'contemporary' with supposedly 'Elizabethan' interests) the play never quite takes, never quite seems to work. The problem – it's always called a 'problem' play in one sense or another – is just what 'working' should, for this play, consist of. This paper has no more specific title because its aim is simply the play itself, not any single aspect of it; but if it is to have a well-ending, it must respond to G. K. Hunter's challenge that 'criticism of *All's Well* has failed, for it has failed to provide a context within which the genuine virtues of the play can be appreciated'.<sup>1</sup> That is an ambitious aim, and the ambition in my love (of the play) thus plagues itself and must take refuge in the obvious scepticism of Shakespeare's title; a perfectly satisfactory conclusion is hardly probable, however much I believe it to be possible.

Scepticism, at least, will be generally granted to the play (unless 'cynicism' is preferred). Scepticism about *what* is more difficult. Presumably about romance, since in one sense or another it certainly enacts a romance plot. Not merely does girl get boy, but she also achieves a social rise of a kind usually thought of as rags to riches, or servant to princess, on the way; and she uses a pretty potent magic (of obscure kind) to do it – curing the King. But it has to do with the nature of this play that my terms have already become inappro-

priate. Helena is socially inferior, but she is a gentlewoman and certainly not in rags. Bertram is a count and a ward of the King, but he is not a prince. The social distinctions are stressed and yet reduced in scale: a folk tale which usually thrives on extremes of contrast is modified into perception of social niceties; and it is when made nice that such distinctions are apt to be most offensive.

The modified social pitch is given at once in the opening prose dialogue between the Countess and Lafew:

In delivering my son from me, I bury a second husband. (I, i, 1–2)

'Son' and 'husband' mark a domestic pitch, still more remarkable when they discuss the King:

*Countess.* What hope is there of his majesty's amendment?

*Lafew.* He hath abandon'd his physicians, madam; under whose practices he hath persecuted time with hope, and finds no other advantage in the process but only the losing of hope by time.

(II, II–15)

This King is a sick *man*, with incompetent doctors. There is respect but no hint of royal glamour in the dialogue, and none ever arises in the play. The plain language does have a suggestion of courtliness in the balanced clauses, but that is its only elevation. It contains at once a touch of sententiousness, of riddling, and of the kind of elegance that

<sup>1</sup> ed. G. K. Hunter: *All's Well That Ends Well*, The Arden Shakespeare (1959), introduction, p. xxix. All quotations are from this edition.