

## I

## The art of the theatre

As Lady Macbeth, Vivien Leigh had certain shortcomings; but the intensity of her scenes with Olivier, then her husband in fact as well as in the play, was one of the elements that made Glen Byam Shaw's 1955 production at Stratford an outstanding theatrical experience. Yet two eminent Shakespearean scholars, who had made major contributions not only to textual studies but as expositors of the import of Shakespeare's plays, could agree, as they sat together in the stalls waiting for the play to restart after the interval, that they preferred not to see Shakespeare acted. Though their confession shocked me, it would not at that time have seemed particularly strange or reprehensible to the majority of academics. Twenty years later the climate has changed, at least superficially. That Shakespeare's plays were written for the theatre, and only in the theatre develop their full impact, has become the commonplace of criticism. Specialist studies have been written on how the plays work in the theatre, and on the close and complex relationship between author, interpreter and audience. Nevertheless I suspect that much of this is no more than lip-service, and that scholars who in theory acclaim Shakespeare the theatre-artist are still unable to accept the implications of that theory or the conditions that the staging of a play in a theatre inevitably imposes on the playwright's art.

These conditions may be categorised as being, broadly, the consequences of three characteristics of the art of the theatre: it is multi-dimensional, it is live, and it is ephemeral. Though some of the consequences are all too obvious, it may be as well, for the sake of thoroughness, to spell them out in some detail.

The label 'multi-dimensional' conveniently covers two peculiarities of the theatre, that its spectacle is stereoscopic and that it may employ a variety of media to create or to reinforce its effects. The

## SHAKESPEARE IN THE THEATRE

first of these elements was particularly strong in Shakespeare's theatre, which, with its multiplicity of levels and playing-areas and its refusal to localise any one of them very precisely, was able to make the most of visual juxtapositions and contrasts or, in other words, of the implications conveyed by the stationing of the actors in relation to each other and to the audience. Of the effects produced largely by these means the most obvious but by no means the least powerful are those known as 'coups de théâtre': the sudden appearance of Marcadé, the black-clad messenger of death, to still the riot of gaiety at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost*, or of Achilles bringing doom to Hector in *Troilus and Cressida*. Equally it may be something much less blatant, a mere shift of perspective in the course of a scene or in the arrangement of the actors on the stage that may signal a turning-point in the action. In a review,<sup>2</sup> '*Twelfth Night* at the Old Vic', Virginia Woolf remarked that 'Perhaps the most impressive effect in the play is achieved by the long pause which Sebastian and Viola make as they stand looking at each other in a silent ecstasy of recognition.' Such effects may be imagined and to some extent appreciated as one reads the text of a play. Occasionally attention is drawn to them by a stage direction, as in the famous 'Holds her by the hand silent' as Coriolanus at last yields to his mother's entreaty that he should spare Rome. Much more often they are not made explicit in the text at all, and in any event they depend for their force upon a visual presentation. A ready example is the eavesdropping scene of which Shakespeare, not alone among dramatists, was so fond. Certainly, in the scene of Malvolio's self-betrayal over the forged letter that he takes to be a declaration of love from his mistress, Olivia, the presence of the witnesses is kept before the reader by their explosively indignant interjections. It is, however, the actual sight of the three jack-in-a-boxes, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Fabian, popping up in turn to deliver their uncontrollable execrations and as quickly diving down to escape Malvolio's notice, that gives the scene its punch. In *Love's Labour's Lost* each of the four lords, who have made a compact to study and to renounce the frivolities of love, successively reveals to his fellows that he has broken his oath and has fallen in love. Shakespeare here (characteristically) pushes the eavesdropping gambit to its limits by stacking the eavesdroppers three deep, but there is nothing in the text before

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-28490-5 - Shakespeare in the Theatre  
 Richard David  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

#### THE ART OF THE THEATRE

the final *dénouement* to remind a reader that it is a triple mine that is eventually to explode. The visual dimension is here essential.

There are plays in which the presence on stage of a character who is silent, or even unseen, is what rivets the attention. Prime examples are Lady Teazle behind the screen in *The School for Scandal* or, in *The Wild Duck*, the presence of Hedvig behind the shut door of the attic where this family pet is kept. Something of the same effect derives from the suggestion that just off-stage, through the entrance through which the Macbeths have lately passed, lies the body of Duncan whose murder is as yet unimagined by those who give a good morning to the murderers. This scene also offers an example of the enormous effect that may be contributed by a silent, or almost silent, character: in this case the accessory, Lady Macbeth, listening to the prevarications and overacted protestations of the weaker partner in the crime, her husband. Her presence, until Macbeth's elaborate description of the corpse drags from her the cry 'Help me hence, ho!', can easily pass unnoticed by the reader. In the theatre her tense watchfulness can never be overlooked; and Glen Byam Shaw's production of 1955, already noted, demonstrated superbly how director and actor can, quite legitimately, develop and bring out the irony of such a purely physical and visual effect.<sup>3</sup> Of many other instances in Shakespeare, where a vital comment is made on a scene

1 *Henry IV part 1* (Stratford 1975): At Glendower's – Worcester as silent witness



## SHAKESPEARE IN THE THEATRE

by a silent witness, I cite only Worcester, the fanatical leader of the rebels against Henry IV, whose presence, mute save for a single outburst, throughout the scene in which his partners, Glendower, Hotspur, and Mortimer, wrangle and vainly dream, is an index of the misdirection of their enterprise and of the disaster to which it is doomed.

In the other sense of 'multi-dimensional', in the multiplicity of means that in the theatre may converge to support a dramatic illusion or to make a dramatic point, Shakespeare's stage was poorer than our own. It could indeed command spectacle, movement, music, all important elements in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that Wagner rightly saw as uniquely the product of the theatre. But the nature of the Globe, open to the sky and staging its plays in full daylight, and the paucity or crudity of mechanical inventions in that age, deprived it of some of that power of suggestion that is so important a weapon in the armoury of the modern theatre, above all through the manipulation of lighting. That Shakespeare would have welcomed these accessories, had they been available to him, is clear from his constant resort to what may be called atmospheric effects to reveal or achieve his purpose, even though the 'atmosphere' has to be laboriously created by the actors' descriptions or mime. The dominating influence of the moon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is notorious. The heat of noonday that brings on the quarrel in *Romeo and Juliet*, or the baleful onset of night in *Macbeth* and *Troilus and Cressida*, are equally strong determinants of the action. I have heard complaints that to implement Shakespeare's stage directions, implicit in the text of these scenes, through actual lighting effects is to duplicate the artifice that the dramatist has himself employed, and so perhaps even to weaken or destroy his intended result. Such criticisms are sometimes justified, for instance in the first storm scene in *King Lear* described on p. 101 below; but in general I do not think that the chance of strengthening an effect clearly intended by Shakespeare should be forgone simply because of the risk that a director, with all these extra stops at his finger-tips, may use them to excess. The one essential provision is that the sophisticated machinery of the modern theatre be used with such discretion that other vital qualities of Shakespearean drama, notably its speed and flexibility, are not crowded out.

THE ART OF THE THEATRE

If Shakespeare's stage lacked the extra dimension that can be provided by the modern lighting-plot, it possessed, and used, another powerful instrument of suggestion: music. The more utilitarian entries of music, for example in fanfares and alarms, need no comment, though the drum, at first distant, that heralds the initial appearance of Macbeth also casts a shade of foreboding over the witches' preparations to meet him. Again, some of the songs have little dramatic purpose in the active sense: they are there in their own right, as decorations or as interludes. Yet 'Tell me where is Fancy bred', whether or not its persistent rhyming to 'lead' is intended as a hint to Bassanio in his choice, should lend an air of musing and of fancy to his deliberation; and the songs of Ophelia, Desdemona, and Lear's Fool, to say nothing of those of Feste and Ariel, have even more obviously the function of creating atmosphere. A particularly striking example is the spirit music and the Welsh song provided by Glendower and his daughter, which, with Worcester's sour presence already referred to, add so much fatality to the rebels' conference in *Henry IV part 1*. Other instances of this use of music are the night-piece that sets Lorenzo thinking of the music of the spheres and that spreads over the last scene of *The Merchant of Venice* a golden haze to which the tart note of the quarrel over the rings adds no more than an agreeable touch of dissonance; and, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the eerie music of 'hautboys under the stage' that signals the departure of the god who has hitherto protected Antony. Even such a mesmeric use of music may seem unsophisticated in comparison with those of which the director Peter Brook is the modern master, for example the extremely simple but hypnotising electronic sounds that pointed his 1955 production of *Titus Andronicus*. But Brook's procedures, considered from the point of view of their effect upon an audience, are essentially of the same kind as Shakespeare's, and twentieth-century elaborations of musical techniques should be welcomed, with the same reservations as I have applied to the elaboration of lighting, as an intensification, not a betrayal, of Shakespeare's own methods of presenting his dramas.

Film and television can command at least as many of this kind of resources for the manipulation of the audience's response as can the theatre proper, and they use spatial relationships with something if

## SHAKESPEARE IN THE THEATRE

not quite all the significance that they assume in the theatre. Yet even in these respects the photographic media are at a disadvantage. Because their audiences are less involved, more external to them, the manipulations are more easily recognised as manipulations and the response to them is not so ready and uninhibited. The spatial relationships seem more contrived, for the scale is less a natural one. On the stage the measure of all things is the human figure, the actor, and the audience adjust their perceptions to the actor approaching and receding, and to changes in the relative positions of several figures, as they would to similar phenomena encountered in everyday life. In film or television the scale is a private construct of the director or of the machine that transmits the image: it may be expanded or contracted at will and without warning. Though flexibility and intimacy are essential features of Shakespeare's theatre, the camera's recurrent shifting of focus may be distracting, the 'frame' of the picture may seem an arbitrary and awkward restriction, and the imposed intimacy of the close-up may strike the spectator almost as an invasion of his privacy. He may feel that his attention is being not so much invited as extracted from him. Or at least this may be so when the material presented was not designed for the screen but on the human scale of the theatre, from which it has been merely transposed to the newer medium.

The factor that most surely demarcates film and television from theatre is, however, that the art of the theatre is 'live'. In so describing it I mean to call attention to the very founding of that art upon the human, living, physically present actor. The advantages gained from this physical presence are obvious and enormous. The reaction of one human animal to another human animal is more immediate, more visceral, as well as more complicated, than his reaction to an inanimate object, to a representation of a human being, or even an actual beast of another species. The presentation of the man Hamlet, with all his implications, by a great actor on a stage is a more direct, a more comprehensive, and a more stirring communication than is to be received from the most sensitive reading of the text in the study or, indeed, from the same actor in a film. There are, however, some disadvantages of the theatrical medium that simply have to be accepted as the necessary concomitants of the advantages.

A basic quality among those that make an actor 'great' is a

#### THE ART OF THE THEATRE

personality, potent and compelling, that imposes itself on others and wins from them not necessarily sympathy or liking but a rapt attention and (in the literal sense of the word) admiration. This is what is meant by 'star quality'. Particular personalities, however, do not always affect all observers in the same way: that which attracts one man will repel another, and the more potent the personality the greater will be the reaction to it in either direction. It is only to be expected that a great actor will arouse very various responses among his audience and among the critics. A more serious disadvantage is that physical performance by an actor will, in one sense (in another, as will be seen, it does the opposite) fix the interpretation with too great rigidity, by ruling out options that another actor, with a different personality or physical make-up, would bring to the role. And here some consideration must be given to the whole problem of casting a play.

In 'Shakespeare and the Players',<sup>4</sup> I examined, in greater detail than is necessary here, the nature of the company for which the bulk of Shakespeare's plays were written. The essential fact is that it was a repertory company and one whose membership was, by modern standards, quite extraordinarily close and continuous. With the major exception of the funny man (Kempe till 1599, Armin from that time until after Shakespeare's retirement) the actors of the chief male parts remained the same from *Richard III* in the early 1590s until at least ten years later; and even though Phillips, Pope and Sly all retired or died in the early years of the new century, the lead, Richard Burbage, continued to head the company for another decade and more. Shakespeare wrote his plays for these particular actors, employing their particular skills and their particular mannerisms to achieve his purposes, and imagining effects that each of them was particularly fitted to bring off. This might suggest that perfect modern performances of his plays could only be realised if exact equivalents could be found, among modern actors, for Burbage and Condell, William Shakespeare and Richard Cowley, 'old stuttering Heminge'<sup>5</sup> and the rest. That is a *reductio ad absurdum*; and it would be naive to suppose that Shakespeare's imagination was wholly tied to the physical and mental characteristics of his acting partners. As a practical man of the theatre, moreover, even if he had no thought of a more distant posterity (and I suspect that he did), he

## SHAKESPEARE IN THE THEATRE

must have envisaged other performances of the plays, in revivals in later years and on tour, for which alternative actors would have to be found.

Now inasmuch as the theatre is live, it is of necessity also practical. Even the most ambitious and well-heeled theatre management knows that to find the 'ideal cast' for any play is as much a practical impossibility as to reincarnate Burbage and his fellows, and the impracticability increases by geometrical progression if more than one play is to be presented by the same company. An ideal Hamlet could not, ideally, play any other character. And what, judged by whose standards, is 'ideal'? In 1976 an actress of the highest distinction and a director of equal status attended at Stratford the same two performances, in succession, of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Troilus and Cressida*. One found Miss Annis perfection as Juliet and impossible as Cressida. The other exactly reversed this judgment. In any case the actors are live humans, with personal characteristics, feelings, quirks of behaviour that cannot, even in performance, be wholly trimmed to fit. Every cast must be a compromise.

This is not in fact as much of a second-best as it may sound. There is no one right way of playing Hamlet the Dane or, indeed, *Hamlet* the play. There are as many possible Hamlets as there are good actors. The pattern set by Irving and then modulated by those of Forbes-Robertson and Gielgud has conditioned three generations of playgoers to a hawk-faced, Pre-Raphaelite, organ-toned hero. It is evident from contemporary descriptions and portraits that Burbage, Betterton, and Garrick played the part not at all in that vein. It is probable that the performance of Burbage, approaching middle age, a trifle portly, and by Elizabethan standards an uncommonly naturalistic actor (note Hamlet's advice to the players) was much more like Finney's than like Gielgud's. But though Burbage's was the original Hamlet, approved by the author, those of Irving, Forbes-Robertson, Gielgud proved, by the readiness with which they were accepted, that they too could claim to be 'right'. This is not to deny that some performances, or some elements in some performances, are demonstrably 'wrong' in that they go against the implicit or even the explicit indications in Shakespeare's text. I find it impossible to square with that text a Richard II (or a Bolingbroke) who is wholly sympathetic, a Prince Hal who has wincingly to cocker himself up to the



THE ART OF THE THEATRE

pitch of kingship, a Hamlet who is a tough Machiavel or an Othello who is utterly damned. In the next chapter I shall be giving some examples of how Shakespeare gives instructions as to the mode in which a character is to be played, sometimes as to the style and tempo of particular speeches. To disregard these instructions is to go against the grain of the play. In general, however, the spectator should not come to the theatre with a preconceived idea of what the personages of the drama should look like or how they should behave; to come with an open mind, to begin (at least) by giving credit to director and actors for serious intentions and for some intelligence and skill, to remain receptive to what they may have to show us about the play, however unexpected that may be, is a better recipe not merely for enjoyment in the theatre but also for the acquisition, if only through negatives, of a richer understanding of the play.

At the International Shakespeare Conference at Stratford in 1974 the only production available for the visiting scholars to see was *Measure for Measure*, directed by Keith Hack, in which the Duke appeared as a pompous and painted showman, Isabella as a hysteric, and Angelo as a teenage puritan. Next day the lecturer, and his chairman, took much pleasure (and time) in demolishing this production and in inveighing against the director as an ignorant and unintelligent exhibitionist. Indeed the production was in one sense a failure, in that the reading of the play that it proposed did not stand up in the theatre; but the proposition was by no means unintelligent or uninstructed. Hack had seized upon the fact that a modern audience is liable to find the Duke incredible and Isabella odious. What, he asked, if that were Shakespeare's intention? What happens if the attempt to win sympathy for these characters is abandoned and they are played in the expectation that they will arouse derision or repugnance? The answer is that the play becomes a Jonsonian satire, but one more cynically nihilist than any of Jonson's; that sympathy for Isabella, even when her most sympathetic lines are cut ('Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once; And he that might the vantage best have took Found out the remedy') keeps breaking through; and that the scenes between her and Angelo, in whatever mode they are played, are enormously powerful. The result of that experiment was negative, but far from valueless.

The failure of an actor's physical appearance or acting personality

## SHAKESPEARE IN THE THEATRE

to match the spectator's preconception of the role is the commonest cause of disappointment in the theatre. Sometimes it is rather the actor's human personality overlapping the acting role, the excrescences of mood, habit, behaviour, or personal superstition that, escaping from behind the theatrical mask, provoke in the critic a sense of something discordant. An actor 'hath . . . hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions' as much as a Jew, or a critic. They should, indeed, be kept within the bounds of his art, but to lop them too severely is to impoverish the humanity of the actor, the quality that above all gives to live performance its very force and immediacy. The Stratford season of 1976 offered two striking examples, in different kinds.

Donald Sinden is one of those masterful actors who can visibly control an audience. He can raise a laugh or (more difficult) quell it with equal decisiveness. In *Much Ado about Nothing* his Benedick, at least in the scenes where Benedick is *solus*, was played to the gallery, becoming broader and coarser as the season progressed. Given an actor as boldly extrovert as this, given that the writing of the part invites this sort of treatment, given that the direct, uninhibited reaction of audience to stage is one essential ingredient of theatre, the performance was not objectionable. This is clowning, a recognised part of the actor's equipment, and a respectable one provided that it is governed by what Shakespeare himself, through Hamlet, says of it: 'Let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them, for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the mean time some necessary question of the play be then to be considered.' Sinden never allowed clowning to exceed these bounds, always held it (just) under control; and it was much to his credit that, good actor that he is, he would drop this boisterousness the moment Beatrice entered and soliloquy became dialogue, tuning his style to something much more intimate and unemphatic that meshed with Judi Dench's more introverted mode of playing.

In parenthesis it may be said that playing to the gallery may derive from other motives than the mere desire to show off. Ian Richardson is, indeed, another actor who is able to manipulate and (as an actor should) enjoys manipulating an audience's reactions. His Ford, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at Stratford in 1975, I