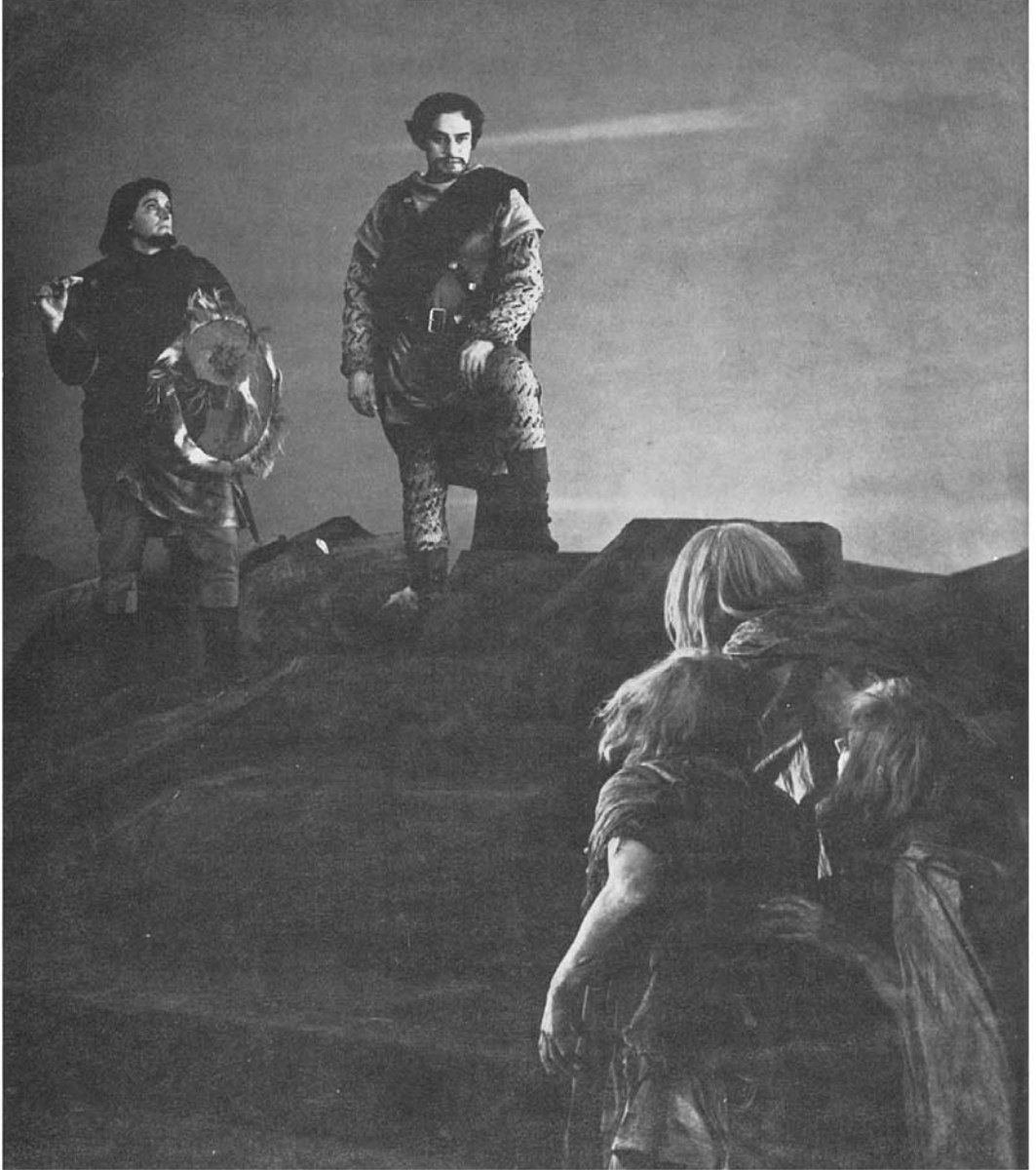


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Macbeth (Stratford 1955): Olivier in the title-role – the ‘human, living, physically present actor’ (see p. 6)

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Shakespeare in the Theatre

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To
GLEN BYAM SHAW

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Preface

This book derives from two assignments: the first to write, for *Shakespeare Survey*, an annual review of Shakespearean productions in British theatres during the years 1949 to 1956; the second to provide a similar, but this time oral, report on the season at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, for the theatre's summer school in the years 1971 to 1976.

The task differed in one all-important respect from that of the regular theatre critic, in that the reviewer was not working to an urgent deadline, constrained to telephone his report to his paper as soon as, or before, the curtain fell. He could revisit a production several times, checking and rechecking the details of his first impressions and, incidentally, discovering how widely even the most severely drilled performance may vary from night to night. He could discuss interpretations with individual directors and actors, and so unearth what motives had guided them to their most convincing, or most questionable, effects. He could relate one production to another, and play to play; and often the comparison would provoke wider reflections on Shakespeare's art and on the art of the theatre in general. From one point of view it is such wider reflections that might be expected to give the reviews something more than a purely ephemeral value. From another, what, if anything in them, may be of lasting interest is an almost opposite quality, which indeed I made it a primary objective to attain: namely the precise recording of supreme or characteristic moments in this most fleeting and insubstantial of all the arts. I hoped to do for Shakespearean actors of the mid-twentieth century something of what Lichtenberg did, incomparably, for Garrick, and Hazlitt somewhat less graphically for Edmund Kean: to preserve, in Hamlet's words, for 'the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure'.

PREFACE

Just as a whole year's playgoing generated impressions and convictions more settled and more complicated than could emanate from a single performance, so in a succession of years there grew up for me a vegetable empire of ideas such as can hardly develop for the regular reviewer, who is never allowed world enough and time. At the end of my first assignment I attempted to summarise these conclusions in a paper, 'Actors and Scholars', read to the International Shakespeare Conference in Stratford in 1958. The second assignment and a further period of maturing has made me want to amend and has enabled me to supplement that paper. My first plan was to collect in one volume all the material in the two series of reviews, the first published and the second not, on which my present conclusions are based. This, however, would make a cumbersome book; the earlier notices can be found in *Shakespeare Survey* or in *Shakespeare Quarterly*;¹ and the later set provided an abundance of examples. I have therefore decided to print only the second *in extenso* and to draw upon the first, by quotation or by extended reference, only as relevant to a particular point under discussion. On the other hand I have been drawn to expand what was the substance of 'Actors and Scholars' into three introductory chapters particularising the inescapable conditions imposed on any play first by the very nature of theatre and secondly by the form of dramatic writing, especially if it be in verse, and on the presentation of a classical play by the need in one sense to 'translate' it for a modern audience. In these chapters I have not avoided restatements of the obvious, for experience suggests that the obvious is often ignored or taken too much for granted. A fourth chapter sketches the historical context in which any modern British production of a Shakespearean play must be seen. These introductory chapters form as it were the theoretical part of the book, for which the reviews printed as chapters five to twelve supply the practical examples. The first four chapters also serve, with the final chapter, to generalise an experience that, as described, is confined to a limited span of six years and to no more than three theatres, though one of these is specifically dedicated to presenting exemplary productions of Shakespeare's works.

Some apology is perhaps required for my duplication of the title under which William Poel issued his collection of Shakespearean essays in 1913; but 'Shakespeare in the Theatre' is precisely what, as

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PREFACE

a concept, each of us is purporting to examine, and Shakespeare in the theatre is at once what Poel had actively presented and what I have tried to record.

The illustrations have been chosen to make particular points. It has become increasingly difficult to find photographs that give a general impression of a production. Such panoramas are now considered old-fashioned. What actors, and perhaps their fans, prefer are close-ups and intimate action-pictures, though these are not so useful to the historian of the theatre. It is with the object of preserving in the text as much as possible of a panoramic viewpoint that the names of the players of individual roles have been largely suppressed; but complete cast-lists of all the plays reviewed are given in the appendix.

My debts are very great, not so much to books as to conversations: with George Rylands who first instructed me, as a member of the Cambridge Marlowe Society, on how Shakespeare's words work; with Harley Granville-Barker who, in the autumn of 1934, generously allowed me to share his walks in the Bois de Boulogne; with John Dover Wilson, whose eager involvement in the theatrical experience made him the ideal companion at any performance; and with so many actors and directors, of whom the one who has perhaps meant the most to me is recognised in the book's dedication.

23 April 1978

RICHARD DAVID