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Introduction

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THE essays in this book offer the actor's point of view. They describe how roles were conceived and worked on by the performer, and the decisions he or she made about characterisation and situation. In this process it is not always possible to distinguish the relative responsibilities of the director and the actor, or the extent to which the final effect was shaped by the production's physical circumstances, particularly stage and costume design. This introduction aims to give an account of the overall design and effect of the productions, and to set them in the wider context of the RSC's work in the 1980s.

All except one of the productions represented in *Players of Shakespeare 2* were conceived for the RSC's proscenium stages at Stratford-upon-Avon and the Barbican: the exception is the 1984 *Romeo and Juliet*, which toured Britain (from October 1983) before a short run of performances in The Other Place. Of the eleven productions, four were directed by Adrian Noble and designed by Bob Crowley. Five directors and six designers were responsible for the other productions. (Detailed production credits will be found on pages 200–2, below.) Their work shows a variety of responses to the challenge of the main houses in both locations: in the Stratford theatre the actor on the stage is confronted by a broad sweep of stalls with dress-circle and balcony receding into the darkness beyond; at the Barbican the expanse of the seating seems even broader, but the balconies lean inwards towards the stage. In The Other Place in Stratford and The Pit in London the actor is never more than a few yards from the audience (no more than 170 in number). The new Swan Theatre – used for Shakespeare for the first time with *Titus Andronicus* in 1987 – has yet another configuration, in which the audience (about 450) is visible to the actor and itself on three sides and on three levels. Each space presents its own challenges in performance technique and design, although the large stages and the two studios obviously have much in common. Generally speaking, designs for the proscenium stages give audiences a greater degree of spectacle than is

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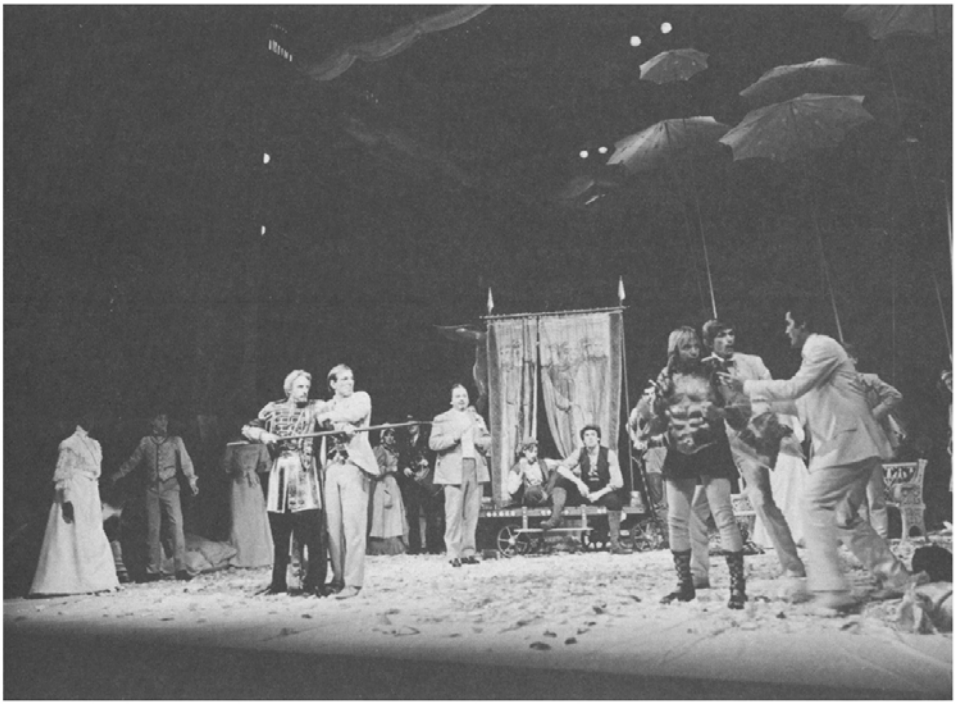
called for in the smaller spaces: the configuration of the houses, with audiences for the most part facing a large picture-stage, is felt to require visual effects that are grander and more varied than some critics and actors would welcome. At the same time the actors are obliged to adopt appropriate vocal and physical projection to cope with the proscenium houses.

The Stratford main stage is equipped with sophisticated lifting and flying equipment, and can accommodate productions with multiple scene-changes, but these facilities are not often used. Partly for economy's sake, partly because of the pressure of production schedules, there is rarely more than one setting in each production. Sometimes the designer's scope has been limited by the lack of space to store and manoeuvre settings: this is especially likely to happen at the end of the season, so that the designer of the 'last show in' can find that storage space and flying lines and lighting positions are in short supply. The 1984 *Love's Labour's Lost* offers an example.

This design, by Bob Crowley, consisted of a 'box' formed by cloths, on



1 *Love's Labour's Lost*, 1984, designed by Bob Crowley (Act 5, Scene 2)

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which blown-up images of parkland trees had been printed by a photographic process. The stage floor was strewn with leaves and a number of acetate panels suggested puddles. Two translucent statues ranged up one side of the stage and a clump of umbrella-like 'trees' stood behind a park bench on the audience's right (Fig. 1). These could be manipulated from below the stage so as to open or shut – in the last dying fall of the play they slowly closed as the characters left the stage. This set was 'soft' in that the walls could be stored in no more space than a normal backcloth. At the other extreme in terms of construction technique was Ralph Koltai's *Othello* set (1985), which appeared to the audience as a black box inlaid with areas of light and which could be divided halfway upstage by sliding panels whose edges seemed to be neon strips. The technique for achieving these effects was ingenious and delicate – plastic sheeting held in tension on frames, with an equivalent of a large fibre optic for the edging – and the flooring and side panels took up so much storage space that a trailer had to be parked outside the stage door to take the overflow of scenery from Stratford's barely adequate scene docks.

The construction of these two settings is described here to suggest the parameters within which the Stratford designers work. The nature of the designs can be affected by considerations of budgeting or simple organisation that have nothing to do with aesthetic, interpretative decisions. *Love's Labour's Lost* was 'soft' because there was no room for a more elaborate set made from wood and other materials. *Othello* was an ambitious box of light that needed the fullest possible resources. As with most Stratford main stage settings, the stage floor – which is looked down on from the dress-circle and balcony seats – was especially important. Almost invariably the actor is projected towards the audience on a tilted ('raked') platform and surrounded by scenery that competes with his costume for visibility. In some cases – of which David Ultz's 1984 *Merchant of Venice* designs were an example – the playing-off of actor against setting misfires. Ultz made the fabric walls of his single, permanent set so vivid that even the richly decorated toreador-like suits of his Venetians seemed lost against them. Mechanical elements such as the sliding lateral staircases and opening floor of the 1984 *Hamlet* can be impressive in effect but make the actors feel both insecure (they are afraid of falling off or being crushed) and overshadowed. It has to be said in defence of designers that actors are hard to satisfy in this respect: the parachute silk used in Bob Crowley's 1985 *As You Like It* was supposed to offer opportunities for a setting to emerge from the actors' work on the play, but the finished product, with its tall 'tree' of white silk

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centre-stage and a trough of water downstage, disturbed several performers by occupying what they felt to be the best positions on stage. After the transfer of the production to the Barbican, this setting was revised, omitting the water and modifying the use of the silk. At the same time changes were made in costuming that reflected the actors' and the director's changing perception of the play. In this case the director and designer were able to get round the problems caused by the need for advance planning of workshop time, which normally requires a set to be under construction before rehearsals have even begun: actors have often complained that few designs reflect the work they have done on the play.

Some of the RSC's recent proscenium stage settings have been criticised as excessively spectacular. It has even seemed from some elaborately built-up sets that a revival of Victorian stage spectacle has taken place. A case in point was Robin Don's set for John Caird's 1983 production of *Twelfth Night* which consisted of a hillside and a realistic tree that filled most of the stage behind the curtain line: with slight variation in the form of park gates and a wall that slid on from the side, this provided the permanent locale for the action. Some critics thought that the striking picture of the play's opening scene, reminiscent of Giorgione's *La Tempesta*, was not worth the inconvenience of staying outdoors and under the same tree for the whole play. Terry Hands's 1979 production of the same play, with designs by John Napier, had also used a single, outdoor setting – scattered with snow before the interval, and even more wintry in the second half of the play. The 'twelfth night' of the Christmas festivities was taken literally. But Hands's staging used an open platform that allowed the actors plenty of elbow-room and did not locate the events in such naturalistic surroundings. The steep hillside and uneven downstage floor in Caird's *Twelfth Night* meant that no one could make a running entrance or exit. Was this a subtle, directorial decision about the pace of life in Illyria or an accident unforeseen by the designer? All behaviour on stage is inescapably endowed with meaning, which it is the performers' and director's task to control: if the spectacle in this setting was at fault, it was not so much because it distracted spectators with what Ben Jonson scorned as 'shows, mere shows', but on account of the limitations it imposed on the rhythm of the performance.

In Bob Crowley's settings for two of the productions represented in this volume, *King Lear* and *Henry V*, impressive visual effects were achieved by simple means. In the tragedy a massive masonry wall halfway upstage swung back and opened up the full depth of the stage for the heath scenes;

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Edgar's first appearance as Poor Tom was made by bursting up through the boards of the stage, which became a loft by the addition of a bare lightbulb; a shallow trough of water at the front of the stage was uncovered during the interval and a lift was lowered in the centre of the stage for Edgar to lead his blind father across a plank on his way to the imaginary cliff. In *Henry V*, described by one critic as 'a triumph of minimalism', the forestage was widened to make a long narrow shelf across the whole width of the auditorium, with the proscenium arch stripped of its cladding to reveal the bare brick structure; a white traverse curtain, some ten feet high, stretched across the proscenium opening, was manipulated by the Chorus, who became the presenter of shows revealed in the 'magic box' of the deep stage behind. In one of the production's most moving moments, Bardolph, Nym, Pistol, and the Boy waved goodbye to the Hostess from a tall, narrow slit of doorway in the backscene, Quickly went down a ladder in the forestage trap, and an 'iron curtain' descended ominously: a brief blackout allowed the French court to appear in front of this barrier, which subsequently became the wall of Harfleur, complete with scaling ladders.

Such effects are 'minimalist' in the economy with which they are achieved, particularly in the small number of actors (compared with Victorian reserves of supernumeraries) and the use of space and lighting. They are, however, spectacular enough to worry some observers who feel that the audience's attention is thereby distracted from some necessary question of the play. Recent forays into the musical by RSC directors and designers (especially *Cats* and *Les Misérables*) have been thought to indicate an undesirable leaning towards showy effects at the expense of meaning. Perhaps with *Henry V*, where the theatre's resources are a topic of the choruses, the distraction is felt to be more allowable than in a problem play or a tragedy. In this play the very fact of putting history before an audience is itself heroic. The production also used its staging devices to write a series of question marks after grand and inspiring effects, particularly in the final moments when the battlefield, with candles glimmering beside corpses, was seen through a gauzy traverse curtain behind the tableau of Henry's triumphant diplomatic wedding. Other designers and directors had used the full depth of the Stratford stage in similar ways. A series of simple, striking objects set in a sharply receding plane can have a powerful effect: one recalls from earlier seasons the sight of Fortinbras's army dragging cannon across the back of the open space in Peter Hall's 1965 *Hamlet* or the retreating line of smoking torches as Richard was parted from his Queen in Terry Hands's 1980 *Richard II*.

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It is also fair to add that generalisations about the impact of spectacle are less useful than discussion of the interpretative manipulation of what is seen by an audience. It has been suggested that in *King Lear* Adrian Noble and Bob Crowley contrived an essentially 'transcendental' vision of the mad king and his fool in their first appearance on the heath, when they were seen in mid-air and in swirling mist, transfixed by shafts of light from the corners of the stage as Lear declaimed 'Blow winds, and crack your cheeks . . .'. To some critics spectacle of this kind is too readily an instrument of mystification. Others find 'an excess of pictorial invention' in the work of Noble and Crowley, who work closely together, preparing a 'storyboard' of the play's images. A definite sense of a Noble/Crowley *oeuvre* is emerging: water on stage in *King Lear*, *As You Like It*, and *Henry V*; a splintered stage floor in *King Lear* and the 1986 *Macbeth*; mirrors as entrances and exits in *Measure for Measure* and *As You Like It*. In all these productions there has been a readiness to explore each play's environment as a country of the mind. In *Measure for Measure* Vienna was a city formed on a crossway of two carpets, an iron tower dominated the back of stage at the audience's right and blue skies were revealed in the final scene as the walls of a box which could be entered through a huge mirror – recalling the pier glass in front of which the Duke disrobed himself and Angelo assumed his gown in the opening scene of the play. The Duke's narcissism (perhaps) and the looking-glass world of the play were objectified. In *As You Like It* the usurper's court was first seen under dust sheets, as though Celia and Rosalind had escaped to an attic; in the forest the court's chairs and tables were covered with white parachute silk unfurled from a huge circular aperture (the moon) at the back. This billowing material made a snowy, hostile environment into which the exiles ventured at their peril. Adam was in danger of being engulfed by it when Orlando decided to carry him a little further in Act 2, Scene 6 ('Yet thou liest in the bleak air'). For the sunnier second half of the play (divided at the end of Act 2) the white cloth was drawn up into a single column in the centre of the stage, and the floor and furniture, including a grandfather clock and a mirror, were reincarnations in green of those we had seen in more sombre colours in Duke Frederick's court. Corin and Touchstone sat on green dining chairs by the 'stream' as they discussed the relative merits of court and country. In the final scene of the play – in its Stratford version – Jaques made his exit through the mirror frame. By this setting and by casting the two Dukes and their entourages with the same actors, Noble and Crowley indicated that the country and court had more in common than their inhabitants might like to admit.

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Of the two productions of *Romeo and Juliet* – Michael Bogdanov's in 1986 and John Caird's studio production of 1983–4 – one offered an exception to the pictorial expressionism of the settings described above. Bogdanov's modern-dress Verona was dominated by a three-flight staircase on a revolve in the centre of the stage, behind which images of contemporary Italy were projected in black and white on a series of screens. There was plenty of open space for the actors to inhabit and the play's social milieu was conveyed mostly by props (including motorbikes, mopeds, bicycles, and a red Alfa Romeo) and costumes. The surprises of the interpretation were events, speeches, behaviour rather than pictures. At the Capulets' party Tybalt (Hugh Quarshie) obliged with a saxophone solo, Mercutio (Michael Kitchin) played showy riffs on an electric guitar, danced frenziedly with one of the girls, and then jumped into an ornamental pool. Before taking the potion Juliet calmed her nerves by playing the flute, creating a few moments of eloquent, private stillness. At the end of the play Bogdanov cut directly from the lovers' deaths to an ironic epilogue in which the Prince read the prologue from filing cards at a press

2 *Romeo and Juliet*, 1986, designed by Chris Dyer (Act 3, Scene 1): Tybalt's red Alfa Romeo is parked centre stage

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conference convened in front of the golden statues erected by the feuding parents: *paparazzi* and television crews scrambled for pictures and flashlights popped. The dead white of the stage and the bronze handrails on the stairs and side balconies suggested the expensive anonymity of bank and airport architecture, but there was no sense in which this was a Verona of the mind. In a world governed by the needs of big business (indistinguishable here from organised crime) romance and mystery had no place.

The studio production, directed by John Caird, was designed by Crowley, who brought to it his characteristic image-making. In a small space, and greatly aided by Brian Harris's lighting, it presented a Verona in which the tombs of the ancestors were always present in the rows of death masks fixed to the metallic back wall of the set: the tomb was quite literally a few steps down from Juliet's balcony. In the first moments the audience was presented with a glimpse of the dead lovers to underline the prologue's warning that their 'misadventur'd piteous overthrows' were to be enacted. Ever since David Garrick's version the prospect of staging Juliet's funeral has tempted directors: this production began with the solemn interment of both lovers. To one side of the upper level that served as Juliet's balcony hung a transparent cloth with an image of Christ; a cabinet let into the wall held both the friar's and the apothecary's drugs. The glistening leather of the young men's clothing, the glimmer of lamps and lanterns in semi-darkness and the subtle reflecting quality of the set's back wall created a sombre milieu in the night scenes. In Bogdanov's Verona Mercutio (Michael Kitchin) was a jaded, indignant realist, heavily dependent on the bottle and chronically hungover the morning after the party. His poetic world, corresponding to the society of the production, was witty, scathing but never sombre, except in the lines when Mercutio starts to talk about Mab making girls into women of 'good carriage'. In the studio production Mercutio's 'Queen Mab' speech, on which Roger Allam writes below, became a bitter, taunting assertion of the claims of one kind of poetic vision over other, more trivial perceptions: a fleering, dangerous night-piece.

Further, similar, comparisons between these two versions of the play might be made. The important point here is that the actors' performances were responsive to the environment provided by designer and director, who in setting up these conditions had suggested the direction to be taken by the actors' work. It is not always easy to distinguish between design that impedes the actors' exploration of the play, and that which excites them by opening up new approaches. The same discussion might be extended to costume, make-up and properties, which are to some extent more likely to

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be controlled by the actors' own ideas. It is now comparatively rare to encounter a Shakespeare production that uses Elizabethan dress: of the productions represented in this book, *King Lear*, the 1983–4 *Romeo and Juliet*, *Twelfth Night*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Henry V* used some approximation to the dress of Shakespeare's day. Designers seem anxious to avoid suggestions of 'fancy dress' or classical ballet: in male costumes breeches and jerkins (or doublets) are favoured. *Love's Labour's Lost* was set in the France of the impressionist painters; *Measure for Measure* seemed to be in the Vienna of *Amadeus*; *As You Like It* drew on current fashion; and *The Merchant of Venice* seemed to be in a world of Ultz's own making – half-accurate (Shylock's yellow cap) and half-invented (the 'suits of lights' worn by the young Venetians). Michael Bogdanov's predilection for modern-dress Shakespeare was evident in his *Romeo and Juliet*, which was set in modern Italy, with proper care for the observation of fashion – which may not be untrue to the Elizabethan view of Italy ('Report of fashion from proud Italy . . .' absorbs Richard II's attention). Sometimes anachronism is used to startling effect. In Noble's *King Lear* costume shifted to utilitarian, vaguely modern breeches, boots, and jackets as Lear's kingdom crumbled into civil war, but Kent's reappearance as himself in the final scene brought on a solitary figure in a stylish brocaded long-skirted coat of the kind worn in the play's opening movement. The *ancien régime* was suddenly recalled.

In some productions the use of music has been quasi-cinematic, underlining and commenting on the action and linking scenes more than has always seemed wise. Two examples: in Bogdanov's *Romeo and Juliet* the musical links suggested the episodic structure of soap opera; Ron Daniels's *Hamlet* had a more conventional score dominated in scenes of public power by clanging bells and in private scenes by a haunting reiteration of the traditional tune for 'How should I your true love know . . .'. In the comedies there has been a tendency to go for the grand musical finale, which sometimes suggests an over-anxious desire to make sure the audience leave the theatre feeling that they have had a good time.

So far this introduction has described something of the physical context of the productions on which the actors have written. Some of the most strenuous debate in contemporary British theatre is about the balance of power between director, designer, and performer. But a wider issue is that of the relationship between the actors' methods and those of the production. British actors are for the most part pragmatic rather than theoretical in their approach, and the dominant technique is psychological naturalism

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tempered (more or less) by a sense of style. The recurring effect in most of the productions discussed above is a clash between stylised, expressionist staging and realism in acting. At its best the result is not so much a clash as a counterpointing of stylised and 'real', but it is fair to say that British actors are rarely expressionistic or stylised in their own movement and speech. When the productions are viewed from abroad – from the vantage point of, say, Ariane Mnouchkine's work at the Théâtre du Soleil – they may seem too verbal, with a lot of lucidly loquacious characters managing to lead a busy life in spite of whatever visual effects may have been contrived. Psychological verisimilitude and wit have been achieved at the expense of a sense of danger or magic. The visual and aural magic of the productions can seem hollow. To some observers, the RSC's work seems excessively reverent towards the text: others think that the productions pay it too little attention, and there have been suggestions that standards of verse speaking have not so much changed as fallen in recent years. Such critics usually hold up the performances of the company's first decade in the 1960s as examples of how Shakespeare should be spoken. It has often been pointed out that the RSC is a production organisation rather than a troupe in the strict sense: actors often return, but the number and diversity of the RSC's undertakings make it appear to be a not altogether coherent conglomeration of separate companies. The English Shakespeare Company, formed in 1986 by Michael Bogdanov and Michael Pennington, has been seen as a return to the company ethos of the early years of the RSC, and its productions of both parts of *Henry IV* and *Henry V* recall the ensemble work of the history-play cycles staged in the 1960s and 1970s. Again, in some minds large-scale Shakespeare has been discredited by the excitement generated by such small-scale productions as those the RSC has toured or shown at The Other Place, and by the work of companies like Cheek by Jowl and Shared Experience. Some performances (and productions) have been accused of offering studio-size work in a large space. The touring productions and the new dynamics of the Swan have made it reasonable to ask whether we should continue to call the larger auditoria at Stratford and the Barbican the 'main' stages. Are they still sources of energy and innovation, or anachronistic hangars that need noise and spectacle to satisfy their patrons? Preference for different kinds of engagement between actors and audience has fuelled this controversy, together with doubts concerning the social effectiveness and desirability of the expensive 'main-house' shows. But the power and subtlety of much of the work done in these larger spaces is suggested by the essays in this volume,

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