Introduction

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'The RSC contacted various parole boards round the country and arranged for me to meet two murderers – on separate occasions – two men who'd served their time and were back in society.' Thus writes Sir Antony Sher in his essay later in this volume on a stage in the process of preparation for his performance of Macbeth – murderer, regicide, infanticide. Like all the actors whose reflexions on fourteen Shakespearian roles make up this book, Sher's task takes him on a journey to rarely trodden areas of experience at the furthest reaches of human feeling and behaviour. Few of us have killed a king, wielded magical power that allowed us to wreak vengeance on our enemies after a twelve-year wait, been instructed to kill our uncles by our fathers' ghosts, enjoyed an *alter ego* existence as the globe-circling (in forty minutes) servant and companion to the Fairy King, come face to face with an identical twin brother after half a lifetime or, while pretending to be a statue, been reunited with a husband after sixteen years of supposed death. Coming to terms with the extraordinary demands that the performance of a major Shakespearian role makes, reaching out to discover, and encompass, and communicate the extremes of experience that it explores, requires a sensitivity and breadth of imagination, a responsiveness to the nuances of poetic language, and even a level of physical fitness that are easy to take for granted as one is swept up in the process of observing and responding to a performance.

The essays that follow offer some insights into the ways in which this series of important Shakespearian performances came into being: into the balance of instinct and judgement, of artistry and technique in the creation of the role; into the rewarding (and sometimes less rewarding) aspects of developing a relationship with the audience; into the sheer hard work of preparation and rehearsal; and into the delicate issue of how the actor's conception of the character relates to the world that the director and designer have established for the production. Of their conceptions of the characters they were chosen to play, and the ways

in which they were realized in performance, the essayists may speak for themselves; it is the task of this Introduction to try to characterize in general terms the productions within which their performances were to be seen.

If one considers the options in fairly broad and general terms, there are basically four main routes followed by modern Shakespeare directors in creating a world in which a play's events may seem plausibly to take place: the setting may present an historical recreation of the period of the play's composition – or, perhaps, of the period in which its events, historical or fictional, take place; it may offer the play boldly in modern dress; it may place the play in an historical period somewhere between Shakespeare's time and that of the production; or it may avoid the issue of historical period altogether, either through the evasion of period-specific images or through multi-period eclecticism and anachronism. It is immediately conspicuous that none of the productions dealt with in this volume strictly follows the first route and only *Macbeth* unequivocally follows the second, though *A Midsummer Night's Dream* comes close. The other ten productions represented here all take a version of either the third or fourth routes. Among those choosing a setting between Shakespeare's time and our own, the period most favoured by this particular group of directors (and in this they are perhaps not altogether unrepresentative of current trends) is the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: the productions of *Twelfth Night*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *Othello* dealt with in the following pages all belong very firmly in those few decades. *The Tempest* is there too, though less consistently and clearly, with *The Comedy of Errors* set a few decades later, in the world of 1930s and 1940s cinema. The remaining five productions followed the fourth route of escaping from any precise sense of specific period, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Timon of Athens*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* achieving this largely through a sort of eclecticism; *Hamlet*, though it gave a general impression of the Jacobean, by avoiding period-specific images; and Ninagawa's *King Lear*, by offering the play in a setting largely (but not exclusively or consistently) invoking an earlier era of Japanese history (and theatre), and thus presenting British audiences with the least familiar environment, perhaps, of any of the productions represented in this volume.

James MacDonald's production of *The Tempest* was created to tour, most of its venues being in towns without permanent theatres, so that it travelled, like many earlier productions in the RSC regional touring

tradition, to sports halls and leisure complexes and community centres, to anywhere, indeed, suitable for the erection of its 'module' – which included everything, as those involved with these regional tours are fond of saying, from the set and the auditorium (with all its seats), to the iron and the ironing-board. In London and in Stratford, however, it played what at the time were the RSC's principal studio spaces, the Pit and the Other Place, both soon to be vacated and the Other Place closed, lamentably, as part of the devastating RSC reorganization of 2000–1, the Thatcherite version of a 'Cultural Revolution' known as 'Project Fleet'.

MacDonald's version of *The Tempest*, the last RSC Shakespeare production to be seen at the Other Place, was, then, an example of 'studio Shakespeare', that genre in which the Company has achieved some of its most notable productions of recent decades, but which, with the loss of its studio spaces, is (temporarily, one must hope) now beyond its reach. Its set was basically a white platform curving in wave-like undulations to a steep slope at the back, down which Ariel made gracefully speedy entrances and on which Trinculo and Stephano struggled in drunken clumsiness. The platform presented actors to audience in close proximity, and allowed Philip Voss's Prospero to engage spectators directly in his long narrative recollection in the play's second scene. Behind it, on a white back wall, video images were projected – of rolling, and sometimes crashing, waves, or (for the masque) of ripening corn, or (for the pursuit of Stephano and his companions at the end of Act Four) of a chase through undergrowth filmed at ground level. These projections created what many thought an eerie, dream-like background to the action (and others, of course, thought a tiresome distraction from it). A musical score of 'mouth-music', performed to nonsense syllables by six singers visible throughout the performance and acting as Ariel's attendant spirits (though dressed in the black sweaters and trousers of stage hands), provided a haunting mixture of other-worldly sounds, sometimes of ethereal beauty, sometimes of incessant, rhythmic threat, and insisted that the isle was indeed 'full of noises'. The costumes of most of the visitors to the island seemed to place the action somewhere in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century and the evening dress, complete with top-hat, which Prospero, as 'sometime Milan' (v.i.86), donned for the final scene was fairly specifically of 1900 or so; but his and Miranda's everyday island garb might have belonged to any (or none) of several decades on either side of that, while the costumes and behaviour, as well

as the physique, of Trinculo and Stephano alluded directly to the films of Laurel and Hardy. In this engagingly puzzling non-specific world, then, of shifting temporality, of realistic images made unreal and distant by two-dimensional video projection, and of abstract music eerily performed by physically matter-of-fact stage functionaries, Philip Voss created the performance of Prospero about which he writes in the first essay of this collection.

That little excursion to the world of film in the Stephano and Trinculo scenes of James MacDonald's touring production of *The Tempest* at the end of 2000 had been a much more extensive cinematic tour earlier in the year in Lynne Parker's production of *The Comedy of Errors* on Stratford's main stage. *Casablanca*, *The Road to Morocco*, the Keystone Cops, Harold Lloyd – the allusions were pervasive. The evening began with the Duke's arrival in Aegeon's cell – where the sound of dripping water echoed ominously (and melodramatically) – by a lift straight out of film-noir, and reached its farcical climax, before the arrival of the Abbess and the dénouement, with a Mack Sennett chase that involved the entire cast, street-Arab-salesman First Merchant, comic-Cossack Second Merchant, B-movie-sex-siren Courtesan, pantomime camel, and even a medieval knight in armour, Sir Walter Blount, and on occasions Falstaff too, from the *Henry IV* plays performing next door at the Swan Theatre.

Within this allusive and unreal world, the visitors from Syracuse, David Tennant as Antipholus and Ian Hughes as Dromio, established a relationship of master and servant that contrasted a touching human immediacy and interdependence with the insubstantial world of celluloid memories in which they existed. They had, one realized, been together on their eastern Mediterranean wanderings for years, these two, finding amusement in the absurdity of their little wit-combats and reassurance in their cheerful familiarity with each other to help them deal with the strangers, and the strangenesses, they encountered on their travels. Long acquaintance, too, had made them well-practised in their little stage routines – partaking of the elegant picnics, complete with check napkins, that Dromio produced from his suitcase, or acting as feed and front man for the big set piece on Nell, she of 'an ell and three quarters' (III.ii.115) – tape measure of course ready to hand to demonstrate – in breadth. As the glorious coincidences of the romance dénouement separated Dromio from his master-friend, one watched with some apprehension his only solo scene with his new companion,

his twin brother, in the final moments of the play. And here, once more – and absolutely rightly for this production – the film motif took over again; for it was not with that touching final couplet that the production ended, but with a little dance between the Dromios, to the Laurel and Hardy theme tune.

Michael Boyd's 1999 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, also for Stratford's main stage, in more or less modern dress, presented the court of Duke (or, it rather seemed, Dictator-Chairman) Theseus as a grey, frosty, totalitarian world, where his fiancée Hippolyta sat glowering in bitter captive resentment. Here Aidan McArdle's bespectacled and bowler-hatted Philostrate prompted polite, soulless applause at their leader's pronouncements from courtiers who stood, wrapped in great overcoats and fur hats against the cold (meteorological and spiritual), in an obedient semi-circle before the semi-circular grey walls of the set. The move to the forest began with the production's very first intimations of colour, as plastic flowers thrust their way through the floor of the stage following the mechanicals' exit after their first rehearsal, and a fur-hatted and rather clerkly lady courtier bent to pick them, Philostrate sidling up behind her as she did so; the sexual energy which transformed that moment as Philostrate and the clerkly lady stripped each other down to release Puck and the First Fairy/Peaseblossom is described in Aidan McArdle's essay.

The forest where they dwelt was an unpredictable and disturbing world of many trap-doors, through which ladders pretending to be trees would ascend and fairies with horrible hair-styles and alarmingly twitchy and disconcertingly random gestures would erupt; while from the flies swung Oberon's plastic-covered armchair-throne or a bedstead purporting to be a bank where the wild thyme blows. On the latter Titania and Bottom would later make their vertical interval exit in braying, thumping ecstasy. Presiding over this fairy kingdom was Nicholas Jones's intense and dominating Oberon, little hieroglyphic tattoos on his shaven head producing a curiously mesmerizing effect, trying in vain to control the wild and wayward Puck of Aidan McArdle, quintessentially 'rude' (as the actor calls him in his essay), rushing round with a watering-can and a wheelbarrow full of potting compost as he planted love-in-idleness, and its antidote, in the groins of his victims.

The Illyria of Lindsay Posner's 2001 *Twelfth Night*, also a Stratford main house production, was a very English place. Matilda Ziegler's Olivia was mistress of a country mansion in the years just before the First

World War, ancestral portraits on the walls (with a couple of Aubrey Beardsley prints that were presumably her own addition to the collection), grandfather clock ready to upbraid them all with the waste of time, parlour maids in black dresses and white aprons much in evidence, and a stifling sense of Edwardian mourning about the place. Malvolio became the petty-minded, domineering butler rather than the steward, and Maria his declared below-stairs enemy, the housekeeper. The social realism of it all extended even to Feste, a music-hall comedian with flappy-soled oversize boots like Little Titch, whom a tweedy and aggressively alcoholic Sir Toby had obviously brought back down to the country from one of his periodic jaunts up to London, along with a rather dandified man-about-town version of Sir Andrew.

Such was the precision of it all that one could even imagine that 'Count' Orsino might be one of the younger sons of the monarch, with his own establishment and parkland adjoining Olivia's. Like many a younger royal he had been assigned a military career, so that when Zoë Waites's Viola arrived – a very plausible distant cousin, perhaps, from another European royal family – it was as a military cadet in high-collared uniform and hair combed flat that she presented her Cesario at Olivia's gate. But although the production was firmly rooted visually in the Edwardian social world, in its exploration of the sexual tensions and ambivalences of the relationship between Olivia and Viola it was altogether modern in its approach, the energy and volatility of the emotions being explored, set against the repressive conventionality of the society in which this was happening, providing a most interesting and revealing contrast. It is of that relationship and of the issues that it raises about love, and desire, and sexuality that Zoë Waites and Matilda Ziegler write in their essay.

Meanwhile, at much the same sort of date as we were asked to imagine these Anglo-Illyrian events taking place, Antony Sher's Leontes, on the other side of Europe, was beginning to suspect that Alexandra Gilbreath's Hermione was unfaithful to him – for in Gregory Doran's production of *The Winter's Tale* for the RSC's 1999–2000 winter season at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre we were again in the world of European monarchy immediately before the First World War. This was now, however, what seemed to be a Romanov court where a priest of the Orthodox Church in ceremonial regalia would open and read the oracle declaring Hermione's innocence. The production opened with the royal family at the back of the stage acknowledging a crowd that

could be heard cheering – as it were from somewhere below this kingdom's equivalent of the Buckingham Palace balcony – and with a parade downstage of the royals that was accompanied by the sound of whispering (heard only by the audience over the tannoy). This came, one realized, from inside Leontes's own head, the beginning of that process that would convince him that 'Sicilia is a so-forth' (I.ii.218). The set for the Sicilian scenes was a long, panelled state-room, the sides of which moved symbolically in for Leontes's soliloquy 'Nor night nor day no rest' (II.iii.1 ff.) and into which a huge throne was brought for Hermione's trial, Leontes stumbling up its steps to read out the indictment against her with pitiful inarticulacy and hesitation, fumbling with notes and spectacles, while his court cringed in embarrassment. The journey to this moment of destructive, and self-destructive, madness is explored in Antony Sher's essay.

It was a central part of Sher's intention (and achievement) to make Leontes's destructiveness seem to derive from aberration rather than evil, and thus to make his final forgiveness acceptable; it was likewise central to Alexandra Gilbreath's immensely dignified portrayal of Hermione that, in spite of all her suffering, one never lost sight of her love for her husband and was prepared, therefore, to believe that she would so unhesitatingly embrace him in the reunion of the final scene. That love was evident as she put out her hand to him for support in rising from the ground where he had flung her in the scene of his first accusations (II.i), and in the way in which she left the dock in which she stood for the trial scene, filthy and dishevelled from her incarceration, her prison dress bloody from childbirth, to walk across to his throne, her hands held out to him in eloquent appeal to his former love. Alexandra Gilbreath's essay explores some of the means she used to present so powerfully Hermione's extraordinary dignity in this scene in spite of her physical degradation, and to maintain a remarkable vocal control while nevertheless making manifest Hermione's fiercely turbulent emotions and majestic anger.

For the final scene that little prisoner's dock reappeared, now silvered with candlelight as Hermione stood, madonna-like in her statuesque stillness, prior to the moment of resurrection and of reunion with Leontes. This was played with a quiet, subdued intensity, so that our awareness of the 'wide gap of time' (V.iii.154) that had been lost, wasted away in grief and isolation, was very sharp and clear, even as we watched the first tentative beginnings of the process of restoration.

Twelve months after *The Winter's Tale*, Gregory Doran again directed Antony Sher in an RSC winter season production, this time in a version of *Macbeth* for the Swan Theatre in Stratford, moving his setting from the elegant formalities of the early twentieth-century royal palace where the romance had been set to the grimness of what seemed to be the Balkan battlefields of the century's closing decade for the tragedy. This was a harsh, dark, brutal world, all combat gear and bayonets, but one which, we learn from Antony Sher's essay, was arrived at late, after an earlier intention to present the play in a Jacobean setting. The influence on the production of Trevor Nunn's celebrated *Macbeth* at the Other Place almost a quarter of a century earlier was both declared and palpable, the design achieving in the slightly larger Swan Theatre something of its studio predecessor's brooding darkness and intensity, qualities that seem to evade productions of this play in larger spaces. The jangling harshness of the battle scenes, with Macbeth as ruthlessly conquering warlord, contrasted powerfully with the fierce introspectiveness of the central relationship, a marriage of long duration, one knew, its childlessness a constant source of pain to both partners. To remind him of their dead baby was clearly Lady Macbeth's well-tried means of emotional blackmail, though use of it to provoke regicide was no doubt a new departure.

The king to be killed was the late Joseph O'Conor's white-haired, sweet-faced old Duncan, frail, gentle, and thoroughly saintly, and the horror and brutality of his murder were vividly caught in the moment when he looked out, contented and benign, from what was apparently his bedroom window above the Swan stage before retiring for the night and Macbeth entered simultaneously below to continue the process of psyching himself up for the kill. The murder destroyed the Macbeths' marriage: Lady Macbeth winced visibly at her dismissal 'till supper-time' (III.i.43) as Macbeth began the journey towards self-loathing isolation that ends in what Antony Sher calls the 'bunker scenes' of the play's final stages – the lonely and terrible journey that he charts in his essay.

Michael Boyd's 2000 production of *Romeo and Juliet* for Stratford's main stage began, not with the Prologue but with a fight, a chair being smashed onto the stage from behind one of the curving, grey, featureless walls of the set before an actor even appeared. We then saw the first of the Capulet/Montague brawls, fought with yob brutality and including the banging of the face of one of its participants against the

wall, leaving a blood-stain, centre-stage, that would remain through the evening. The mayhem was halted by the Prologue, spoken by David Tennant's Romeo (or, as his essay suggests, perhaps by his ghost), entering, as the belligerents froze, through the auditorium. At the end of the evening he would make his final exit, with Juliet, again through the auditorium, rising from the grave to do so. From the first, then, this was a production that invited our particular attention to Romeo. The set's curving grey walls, a narrow passageway between them, presented the play in the bleakest, the dourest, of environments. On the top of one of them Juliet appeared for the balcony scene, looking rather as though she were peering over a prison wall; the same space was occupied by the ghosts of Tybalt and Mercutio in the second half of the play, presiding in awful determination over the journey to catastrophe.

This was, then, never going to be one of those versions of *Romeo and Juliet* that might have been a comedy but for a few spots of bad luck along the way: a sense of doom and hopelessness hung over it from the start, along with a constant threat of violence. The dress of the young people would have allowed them to pass unnoticed on any modern city street; Prince Escalus, on the other hand, old and frail, his legs looking almost as spindly as his walking stick in the tight hose of a costume that seemed more or less Elizabethan, was a figure from the past, irrelevant in his pathetic inability to control the destructive energies of Verona. These were personified in his kinsman Mercutio, obsessively jealous of Romeo, trying, with a kind of savage possessiveness, to taunt him away from heterosexual relationships, fiercely (and prophetically) vengeful in his final curse of 'a plague a'both your houses' (III.i.99). It is of Romeo's escape from this male world of grimly bawdy humour and constantly threatened sexual violence, to the fleeting moments of doomed happiness with Juliet, and thence to the tomb and to a ghostly posterity as a legend in a love-story, that David Tennant writes.

When Michael Pennington stepped onto the main stage at Stratford as Timon in Gregory Doran's 1999 production of *Timon of Athens*, he was the first actor to do so since Paul Scofield in 1965. The production offered us a decadent, even rather sleazy, Athens, with costumes that offered little firm sense of a particular historical period – touches of Restoration dandyism here and there, rather a Dickensian look to the scene of Timon's creditors hammering at his door, a massage parlour setting for one of Timon's servant's appeals for funds, and something of a 1960s night-club atmosphere for Timon's first banquet, with a Duke

Ellington musical score, Timon's masque a high-camp drag act, and Apemantus, in sunglasses, addressing his reductive commentary into a microphone.

The transition to the second half was via a skeletal suggestion of the outline of a city, Timon's curses as he turns his back on Athens ringing in our memories through the interval as they had just been ringing so splendidly, and shockingly, round the theatre. The curiously simple structure of the second half of the play – the sequence of visitors to Timon in his self-imposed exile all, in turn, sent on their way, energetically cursed – was reflected in a boldly simple set. The stage was left entirely empty right to the strikingly toplit bare brick of the back wall, with only a pit, downstage centre, that served Timon, naked now except for a loin-cloth, as cave, as digging ground in his search for sustaining roots, as accidental gold-mine, and finally as grave. From here he lambasted the whores, from here he derided Apemantus (whose day-tripper status as misanthrope was emphasized by a sun-hat, shades and a beach-towel), from here, profoundly impressively, we heard his farewell to Flavius and his epitaph. It is, as Michael Pennington writes, 'the great atmospherics of the second half' that we value in this play (and that make the actor want the part), and the production, and the performance, left no doubt of their theatrical power.

We had been waiting a long time, and through several rumours of its immanence at Stratford, for Simon Russell Beale's Hamlet, and he had given remarkable performances of two of the role's major derivatives, Konstantin in *The Seagull* and Oswald in *Ghosts*, before, in the summer of 2000, it came, in a production by John Caird, to the Lyttleton stage of the National Theatre, and thence (and back again) to a number of touring venues, national and international. The dark and subdued costumes suggested the Jacobean in a vague and unobtrusive way, though about Claudius's regal robes there was a hint of the priestly, perhaps of the Orthodox priestly, an idea that was carried further in the lamps and crucifixes and chandeliers that appeared at times from the flies. The play began in near darkness, with figures descending from candlelit niches in the semi-circular rear wall of the stage, before a vertical slit opened at the back, then a horizontal one near its top, the brilliant white light behind them forming a cross. Should one, one wondered, be thinking of the apse of a church, or even of the Last Judgement on a tympanum. Through the bottom of the cross a figure with a suitcase entered; he would turn out to be Horatio, visitor to Elsinore, entrusted