CHAPTER I

Shakespeare, from stage to screen: a historical and aesthetic approach

THE HISTORY OF SHAKESPEARE PRODUCTIONS

In order to understand the aesthetic stakes of screen adaptation, this book first examines the theatrical presentation of Shakespeare's plays from the Renaissance to the present. Over the centuries, theatre progressively introduced elements and techniques that foreshadowed (or were appropriated by) cinematic devices. Pictorial elements established a separation between the actors and the audience, and used focusing processes that had certain similarities to film narrative techniques. Several stages, both historical and in terms of aesthetics, took place in the transition between the plays performed on the Elizabethan stage and their screen adaptations. The Restoration marked the beginning of this slow transition by introducing the first pictorial elements into Shakespeare's plays. Then, the eighteenth-century stage not only introduced the aesthetic of spectacle and 'tableau', but also established a physical separation between actors and spectators. Finally, performances in the nineteenth century put extreme realism on the stage and developed the processes of focus and fast changes between different concomitant plots.

It is important to define what we mean by 'realism' before moving any further. In literature, theatre and cinema, two meanings of realism co-exist. One concerns the content of the work, i.e. the subject matter. In this case, the realist play, film or text aims at reconstructing a certain social background by emphasizing its everyday aspects and banishing any idealist fairy-tale extravaganza. The other meaning deals with a representational form that seeks to give a convincing impression of reality, creating the effect of being 'just like life', whether the subject matter is quotidian or exotic in time and/or place.[1] Throughout this book, the term will be used in this second meaning.

[1] See Pam Morris, *Realism* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1–6, and Paul Cobley, 'Realist Representation', in *Narrative* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 88–116.

According to Nicholas Vardac, author of the seminal 1949 work *Stage to Screen*, the development of cinema was encouraged by the desire to go even further into realistic, credible presentation.[2] For Vardac, the stage aesthetic inaugurated at the Restoration, then asserted by Garrick and Irving, would have anticipated cinema techniques. According to Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, authors of the 1997 book, *Theatre to Cinema*, the processes used by cinema would not have been anticipated. The new medium would have simply borrowed certain techniques which were popular in the theatre at the moment of its emergence. In their 1996 book *Shakespeare: An Illustrated Stage History*, Jonathan Bate and Russell Jackson support this theory when they acknowledge the theatrical legacy of cinema: 'The appeal of spectacle combined with and legitimised by historical information and edifying morality was inherited by the early cinema especially in such "epic" films as D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1915).'[3] In any case, the two arguments concur in bringing to the fore the intimate relationship between the cinema and the nineteenth-century stage. Cinema gradually took over from the spectacular theatre productions of the time. At first, cinema lacked the technology to compete with the elaborate special effects of extremely realistic theatre productions, but at the time of World War I it certainly started to compete strongly with theatres as it acquired the same potential for visual illusion. In the following history of Shakespeare production, the major aesthetic changes that followed one another and extended into screen adaptations will be pointed out.

The Shakespeare stage, or the absence of realistic illusion

At the start of *Henry V*, the Chorus calls upon the 'imaginary forces' (Prologue 18) of the audience to go beyond the limitations of the stage and to create the battlefield in their mind's eye. Shakespeare's plays were, indeed, written for a very particular mode of presentation, far from film realism. At the end of the sixteenth century and the start of the seventeenth, Elizabethan popular plays were performed on an open-air stage, during the day, in a circular or polygonal construction in which the spectators stood in the stalls or sat in the galleries. All parts were played exclusively by male actors who occupied a bare stage where space and time were

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[2] See Nicholas Vardac, *Stage to Screen* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), p. xx: 'The necessity for greater pictorial realism in the arts of theatre appears as the logical impetus to the invention of cinema.'

[3] See Jonathan Bate and Russell Jackson, eds., *Shakespeare: An Illustrated Stage History* (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 118.

suggested verbally. This absence of a realistic frame avoided the need to change sets between scenes. Acting was, therefore, continuous, and the scenes of Elizabethan plays followed one after the other with fluid rapidity. Visual aids to imagination were minimal and inherent in the architecture of public theatres: a roof painted above the stage represented the sky and the divine; a trapdoor under the floor evoked hell. The presentation of the plays showed a constant distancing between the sign and its meaning, as well as an absence of illusionist intention. Music sometimes accompanied stage action to create a particular atmosphere. Music was used when heavy props were carried on stage, covering the noise of machinery and adding a spectacular flourish to the sudden apparitions.[4] However, musicians and singers always remained visible to the spectators, thus impeding any establishment of illusion.[5] Shakespeare plays included singing interludes which were always made visible and noticeable. The aim of these interludes was less to create emotion in the audience than to reveal the supposed feelings of the character(s) on stage after listening to the music or the song.

In his 1992 book, *The Shakespeare Stage*, Andrew Gurr advances, as the only concessions to realism, sponges filled with vinegar and hidden under the armpit to simulate wounds, the use of water and smoke, and the sound and visual imitation of thunderstorms.[6] Some props, such as pretences of trees or rocks, could also be brought on stage,[7] but their dramatic functioning was more a matter of metonymy than realistic imitation. According to Gurr, the large majority of Elizabethan plays were performed on a stage that was entirely bare, a challenge that called for the playwright's maximum linguistical skills.[8]

However, parallel to the public theatres, private indoor venues – such as the Blackfriars – opened for a more affluent audience. The performances were candle-lit, and used illusionist processes inspired by the masques of the time with elaborate sets and machinery. This aesthetic trend continued after the Restoration.

The Elizabethan public theatre, with its thrust stage, established a privileged relationship with the audience on three sides nearly encircling the action. Most spectators saw the play being performed in a metatheatrical set composed of other spectators. By its mode of presentation, Elizabethan

[4] See Cécile De Banke, *Shakespeare Stage Production Then and Now* (London: Hutchinson, 1954), pp. 79–80.
[5] See J. L. Styan, *The English Stage: A History of Drama and Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 99.
[6] See Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespeare Stage* (Cambridge University Press, 2nd edn 1992), pp. 182–6.
[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 191–2.   [8] *Ibid.*, p. 191.

theatre emphasized the breaking of illusion and the notion of shared ritual. The spectators attended both the play and the stage activity surrounding and creating the play. The boundary was blurred between art and life, between the actor and the spectator: both were united in the same communion of entertainment and imagination. The stage of the Elizabethan public theatres was characterized by its absence of separation between the space where the play was performed and the space occupied by the public. As opposed to the architecture of the Italian proscenium theatres, it did not feature any framing or encasing. The thrust stage put the actors in intimate contact with the audience. The difficulty of creating realistic illusion resided in the very proximity of the participants. According to Gurr, 'The players . . . lacked the facilities for presenting the pictorial aspects of illusion because they were appearing in three dimensions, not the two that the proscenium-arch picture-frame establishes.'[9] The physical reality of performance was, in fact, much too patent to create the illusion of simulated reality.

Elizabethan drama, therefore, played with the spectators and their permanent awareness of theatrical illusion. *Mises-en-abyme* (i.e. embedded structures) – which could take the form of masques or plays within plays – added a second level of dramatic action, while a Chorus, a Prologue or an Epilogue could directly call out the spectators and alienate them from the action. The actors' soliloquies and asides were conventions that established intimacy with the public while signalling the devices of theatre. The spectators intervened regularly during the performance, participating in the action with their own reactions.[10] Fiction was thus designated as such. The deceit and trickery that are part of acting were pointed out by the *mise-en-scène* itself.

A comparison between cinema and the Elizabethan stage reveals minor common points and major differences. In the cinema, as in the Renaissance theatre, scenes move on with great rapidity and fluidity. A film, like a theatre production in Shakespeare's time, can go quickly from a battle scene to a discussion behind closed doors inside a palace. Yet, cinema differs from Elizabethan public theatres in the absence of physical interaction between the actors and the audience, and in the high level of realism it can reach. Moreover, while the architecture of Elizabethan theatres allowed the spectators to see the action from different angles, cinema offers a single

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9 *Ibid.*, p. 180.
10 *Ibid.*, p. 226: 'Hisses or "mewes", as well as applause, were given freely, and not only at the end of the play.'

frontal viewpoint, and, through editing and camera moves, mandates how the action will be seen.[11]

The Restoration stage, or the generalization of the decorated set

In 1660, with the Restoration, English theatres reopened. They had been closed – at least officially – since 1642, following an edict adopted by the parliamentary opposition to the king. With Charles II back on the throne after his exile in France, the aesthetics of theatre and opera, very popular in continental Europe, started to spread into England. Charles II allowed women to go on the stage: female characters in Shakespeare plays were, from now on, played by actresses. Shakespeare's texts were revised and rewritten by William D'Avenant, an actor–manager who adapted them to the taste of a restricted audience, essentially composed of aristocrats. The theatres were private, indoor and lit by candles. The stage curtain, which was not present during Shakespeare's time, was introduced, but it was not used to create illusion. It was raised at the beginning of the performance and dropped only at the end of the show: the audience could still see the changing of sets between scenes.

The Restoration stage was still largely based on an intimate relationship between actors and spectators. It did not aim to reach a realistic representation of the action. Metatheatrical effects were still as numerous as they were before. Theatres had a very small capacity and the front stage still thrust out into the auditorium, as in the Elizabethan time. Each spectator was still very close to the actors, and attended a play performed among other spectators. However, the stage began to undergo some important transformations. The surface area of the apron (or thrust stage) was reduced in favour of the back stage, though the dimness of the light did not yet allow the actors to linger in a space that was too far away from the spectators.[12] The lighting was still limited to candelabra hanging from the ceiling and probably some front-stage footlights. But it already allowed for effects of chiaroscuro that delighted an audience fond of novelty. The reduction of the thrust stage was coupled with the introduction of music and pictures. Although the set elements were not physically present, they were painted on shutters at the back of the stage. These shutters were changed regularly

[11] See Michael W. Shurgot, *Stages of Play: Shakespeare's Theatrical Energies in Elizabethan Performance* (London: Associated University Presses, 1998), p. 17: 'The multiplicity of visual perspectives in an Elizabethan public theatre intensified the role of each spectator as an autonomous "maker of meaning".'
[12] See Hazelton Spencer, *Shakespeare Improved* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1963), pp. 51–5.

during the course of the play. This evolution was a step towards the Italian stage, also known as the proscenium stage, a direct legacy of the opera, in which the actor–singers had to face the conductor to follow the beat. The development of stage machinery and the frequent accompaniment of the acting with music, songs and dances also contributed to importing the aesthetic of opera into Shakespeare production.[13] In William D'Avenant's production of *Macbeth*, the three witches sang, danced and soared in the air thanks to a system of ropes and trapezes.[14] Some particularly melancholic soliloquies and dialogues could be accompanied by instrumental music to make emotions more intense.[15] However, this was still a long way from the time when music came from an unseen pit. The musicians who accompanied the action with their instruments stood in an upper gallery that the spectators could see. Musical moments were admittedly more frequent, but they remained in view.

The Restoration stage was the result of several influences, both English and continental. It was inspired by court masques, Elizabethan private theatres, French theatrical practices and Italian opera. It was still based on a very strong relationship with the audience, and did not work in the mode of realism. Yet, by introducing the first decorated elements, the Restoration stage was at the root of a trend that would continue during the centuries to come. The stage, which was above all a place of verbal enunciation, became a space where set design and music gained in importance after the Restoration.

The eighteenth-century stage, or the separation between actors and spectators

The eighteenth-century stage set a tradition that already foreshadowed filmic illusion. At the start of the eighteenth century, the system of painted shutters was developed. The shutters slid along rails to facilitate placement during the performance, and were positioned on the stage at various distances to create *trompe-l'œil* effects.[16] Painted landscapes or interiors seemed to get smaller according to the natural laws of perspective, and merged into a distant point on the horizon. The presentation of plays, therefore, began to strive to transcend the physical limits imposed by the stage, creating imaginary spaces.

[13] See Bate and Jackson, *Shakespeare*, p. 46.   [14] See Hazelton Spencer, *Shakespeare Improved*, p. 93.
[15] Curtis A. Price, *Music in the Restoration Theatre* (Anne Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press 1979), p. 7.
[16] See Styan, *English Stage*, p. 274.

As theatre-going started to become more popular, actor–managers sought to save space in order to increase the theatre capacity to accommodate increasing numbers of spectators. New seats took the place of a part of the front stage, the surface area of which was again decreased.[17] The actors then began to move away from the audience and insert themselves into more and more realistic scenery. This trend intensified in the middle of the century when actor–manager David Garrick wished to establish a complete separation between the actors and the audience. In 1748, he tried to prevent the spectators from sitting on the stage. This habit disturbed the actors in their movements, as they had to apologize each time that they bumped into a spectator. Theatrical illusion was thus compromised for a few seconds several times during a performance. However, the audience, tied to the tradition, resisted Garrick's innovating calls, which remained unheeded for fourteen years. They were finally successful in 1762 when Garrick increased the size of his theatre, the Drury Lane. The spectators, satisfied by the comfort offered by the new auditorium, finally accepted that they would no longer sit on the stage.[18] So, from 1762 onwards, dramatic action took place without any physical interaction with the public. For the first time, a virtual fourth wall was created between the stage and the auditorium. Audience passivity began to be encouraged. The actors played as if protected in a world of their own. They progressively left the front stage to merge into more and more elaborate tableaux.[19] This movement was then intensified due to the progress in lighting. In 1765, Garrick brought back a new technique from Europe. The candles were made more luminous by tying small tin reflectors on them that could be pointed onto different parts of the theatre. This process facilitated not only the lighting of action at the back of the stage but also variations in luminous intensity in order to suggest different times of day.[20] By focusing the audience's attention on a particular action, it anticipated the function of modern spotlights.[21]

In the eighteenth century, the curtain was used to hide the machinery and to prepare special effects without the audience noticing anything. It

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 277, and Richard W. Bevis, *English Drama: Restoration and Eighteenth Century 1660–1789* (London and New York: Longman, 1988), p. 195.

[18] See Cecil Price, *Theatre in the Age of Garrick* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), p. 95.

[19] See Iain Mackintosh, *Architecture, Actor and Audience* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 36.

[20] See Bevis, *English Drama*, p. 196, and Cecil Price, *Theatre in the Age of Garrick*, p. 81.

[21] See Russell Jackson, 'Shakespeare on the Stage from 1660 to 1900', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, ed. Stanley Wells (Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 195.

emphasized the impressions of surprise and realism, and worked in the mode of waiting and expectation. At the time, the curtain became the material sign of the separation between stage and auditorium, stimulating curiosity and the desire for disclosure.[22] When it is raised, it unveils a picture that lends itself well to realism. Painted scenery was naturally inserted in a rectangular stage, and revealed through successive disclosures. In the eighteenth century, the aesthetic of the tableau was clearly formed in relation to a pictorial vision of the theatrical stage. Garrick's avowed objective was to reach the highest level of emotion and realism. To achieve it, he exploited all the possibilities of stage machinery. He introduced visual and sound devices that made special effects more and more convincing. Paradoxically, it was through devices ever more ingenious and artificial that the theatre attempted to imitate life in the most believable way, by inserting the characters in scenery as real as the actors. With a window-pane at the back of the stage, Garrick even found a way of showing real passers-by walking in the street alongside the Drury Lane Theatre.[23] In his production of *King Lear*, the storm scene was interspersed with thunder and bright flashes of lightning, and took place in a tormented landscape painted on shutters. Theatre sets were conceived as gigantic painted frescos. The use of lighting simulated the faint light of the moon, the brightness of the sun and even volcanic eruptions. Between fairy magic and near naturalism, Garrick set a tradition that portended the theatrical evolution of the nineteenth century and the processes of film illusion. Garrick's merging of naturalism and magic is somehow predictive of modern cinema, in which special effects are usually not produced for their own sakes, but to make situations even more plausible and natural. This was not the case during the early days of cinema, as the newly created medium took two different directions: everyday naturalism and magical illusion. The naturalistic trend was introduced by the Lumière Brothers – originally photographers – who attempted to reproduce as faithfully as possible daily events such as a train arriving at a station or workers leaving a factory. The magical tendency appeared with Georges Méliès – a former magician – whose films focused on ostensible special effects, such as the famous shot of the rocket landing on an anthropomorphic moon. Special effects would progressively become less obvious and stylized, and would be designed to give a heightened impression of reality, thus eventually making the two aesthetic trends much harder to differentiate.

22 See Patrice Pavis, 'Rideau', *Dictionnaire du théâtre* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1980), p. 338.
23 See Cecil Price, *Theatre in the Age of Garrick*, p. 83.

The nineteenth-century stage, or the era of romantic realism

The nineteenth-century stage adapted itself to a more and more popular audience. Performances aimed at reaching the most credible realism through more and more spectacular means. At the start of the century, Charles Kemble's Shakespeare productions resorted to impressive human as well as material means. The character of Coriolanus in the eponymous play was thus surrounded by a crowd of one hundred and fifty extras. If Shakespeare used verbal rhetoric to create the impression of a throng around Coriolanus, this new theatre aesthetic used above all a visual and literal rhetoric.[24]

Between 1830 and the end of the nineteenth century, actor–managers reigned over the theatre. They cut and rewrote Shakespeare's texts in order to favour spectacle even more. Actor–managers considered Shakespeare plays as stories to be illustrated. The spectators felt the need for some visual help; so much so that they expected to see faithful reconstructions of history.[25] In the programme of the production of *Henry V* directed by William Macready in 1839, it was written: 'The narrative and descriptive poetry spoken by the Chorus is accompanied with Pictorial Illustrations from the pencil of Mr Stanfield.'[26] Macready also used a new illusionist process called the 'Diorama' to illustrate Henry's journey to France.[27] The 'Diorama' was a set fixed to a moving wall in the background, which unwound vertically or horizontally according to the actors' movements, giving the feeling that the characters were walking or running.[28] This mechanism foreshadowed the cinematic device of the lateral tracking shot in which the camera follows the displacing action. This move from verbal poetry to literal illustration was clearly seen in actor–manager Charles Kean's spectacular, realistic, historical productions.[29] Kean strongly believed in the educational virtues of his productions. To guarantee the accuracy of his reconstructions, he handed out to the spectators leaflets that summed up his historical research.

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[24] See Bate and Jackson, *Shakespeare*, p. 99.

[25] See Alicia Finkel, *Romantic Stages: Set and Costume Designs in Victorian England* (Jefferson and London: MacFarland, 1996), p. 33.

[26] Quoted by Finkel, *Romantic Stages*, p. 10.

[27] See George Rowell, *The Victorian Theatre 1792–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 16.

[28] See Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 81: 'The panorama unrolled as a single or double canvas from one side of the stage and was rolled up on the other; it was popular for depicting a journey or a change of natural setting, in Shakespeare as well as pantomime.'

[29] See Richard Schoch, *Shakespeare's Victorian Stage: Performing History in the Theatre of Charles Kean* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 53.

In the history of English theatre 1880 was an important date as it marked the complete disappearance of the apron, whose surface had been gradually reduced since the Restoration. The Haymarket Theatre in London was the first venue in which the actors played on a stage totally encased and protected from the spectators. Producer Squire Bancroft surrounded the stage with a golden frame, making it resemble a huge animated picture.[30]

Productions included extensive instrumental music to intensify emotion during the dialogues. Yet, in contrast to the Restoration and eighteenth-century stages, the musicians could no longer be seen by the audience. The pit music they produced did not belong to the world of the play. By convention, the characters were not supposed to hear it. This addition of music, which foreshadowed extradiegetic music in cinema, was a sign of the increasing taste for melodrama, a popular theatrical genre at the time, which used atmospheric music in relation to the action and the characters' feelings to facilitate the creation of emotion.[31] Actor–managers, in order to please a larger audience, offered a romantic treatment of Shakespeare's plays.

Romanticism, a term first used in literature, has extended to all artistic forms. It was originally an artistic movement that can be dated more or less accurately depending on the country where it took place, but the notion also covers a general aesthetic tendency in literature and arts that has survived well beyond the time of the movement itself. Romantic works generally put the stress on the individual, a melancholic feeling of loneliness, and personal emotions. They are based on a desire to escape in time and in space, reflecting a longing for the infinite and inserting human beings in wild landscapes. Frenzied grandiloquence and intense events are combined with a sinking into the mind.[32] Romantic works thus usually associate opposite genres, often uniting epic with intimacy, tragedy with comedy. The romantic movement, which historically wishes to free itself from conventions, does not accept the hierarchy of genres nor the classical rule of the three unities. In the nineteenth century, Shakespeare's plays, with their combination of tragedy and farce, were therefore considered as romantic dramas, and performed as such. Actor–manager Henry Irving used Shakespeare texts to produce extremely romantic *mises-en-scène* with

[30] See Richard Southern, 'The Picture-Frame Proscenium of 1880', *Theatre Notebook* 5.3 (1951), 60.
[31] See Finkel, *Romantic Stages*, p. 4.
[32] See Anne Souriau, 'Romantique/Romantisme', in *Vocabulaire d'esthétique*, ed. Etienne Souriau (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990), pp. 1248–51. See also the definition of 'romanticism' in *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, ed. Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray (Boston, MA: Bedford Books, 1997), pp. 350–3.