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Review Article:
The Making of Shakespeare

Shakespeare's Theatre. By Peter Thomson. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983. Pp. 138. $22.75

Elizabethan Popular Theatre: Plans in Performance. By Michael Hattaway. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982. Pp. ix, 234. $27.95.

Shakespeare Refashioned: Elizabethan Plays on Edwardian Stages. By Cary M. Mazer. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1981. Pp. xi, 267. $44.95.

Every Inch A Lear: A Rehearsal Journal. By Maurice Good. Victoria, B.C.: Sono Nis Press, 1982. Pp. 230. $16.95.

The Making of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. By David Selbourne. London: Methuen, 1982. Pp. 327. $29.95.

"Straight" Shakespeare is the *ignis fatuus* of stage history. All productions are inflections, if not interpretations; all styles will veer towards plain, or tuppence coloured; all acting must be based on convention, yet know ways of diverging from convention. The dialectic of Shakespearean productions always contains these oppositions, and many more. Current scholarship has little interest in trying to exclude the "other" side from the dialectic: it is fascinated with the "how" of production, seeks habitually to create a new synthesis, and is disinclined to argue for a True Line of legitimacy. It suits, after all, our contemporary sense of benign eclecticism as we contemplate the past. (As a music critic observed recently, curiosity towards the past has replaced passionate conviction.) The result is that theatre history today inclines to modify the bold theses of the past, and to scrutinize more closely the practical details of theatre work. The present clutch of books on Shakespeare in production illustrates these trends.

Routledge's new Theatre Production Studies offers two books on the Elizabethan stage. Peter Thomson's *Shakespeare's Theatre* comes in two parts: a digest of what is known and surmised about the Globe and its players; a study of three plays which concentrates on the practicalities of production. *Twelfth Night* is focused on music. The chapter takes off from music (who played it, with what instruments) to properties, costume, casting (the allocation of parts by voice, as baritone and contralto-type), scenery, dancing. Though too brief, this chapter presents well a facet of *Twelfth Night*. *Hamlet* is aproached via the actor, discussed here both as metaphor and as physical presence. In the end, the "actor" motif conditions our sense of the great play:

> A well-ordered duel was an image of harmony to its Elizabethan spectators, but Claudius and Laertes have scarred this image before the scene begins. This bout, carefully rehearsed by actors who know how to fence, is an image of *disorder*. For Claudius, it promises an ending; for Hamlet, it is at best a means to an end. Using the same characters, each has plotted and acted in a different "play"—but the queen's death figured in neither. We are left, when the stage has been cleared, with a sense that they have been collaborating in a greater play, in which their parts were written beyond their knowledge. (p. 134)

The *Macbeth* chapter concentrates on the stage-hands' responsibilities. Generally, the demands made on stage hands increased during the Jacobean era, and the number of hands may have increased too. Thomson lists their responsibilities here on a scene-by-scene basis. They include sound effects (as drum, knocking, cry of women), lighting effects (as taper, torches), properties (as branches, Macduff's hat, table spread with food and wine), and costume (armour). A deal of work here, and it is helpful for us to assess the duties involved in even the most scaled-down production. *Shakespeare's Theatre* confronts the reader at all points with the realities of production.

Michael Hattaway's *Elizabethan Popular Theatre* is a more ambitious affair. Like Thomson, he offers a resumé of Elizabethan staging practices and conventions. He then, however, goes on to illustrate his material with five popular plays, of which our staging records are notably deficient. They are *The Spanish Tragedy*, which Hattaway approaches via its "architectonic design"; *Mucedorus* (the exploration of convention); *Edward II* (drama documentary); *Doctor Faustus* (ritual shows); and *Titus Andronicus* (strange images of death). It is a fascinating and wide-ranging collection, and I applaud Hattaway's pluck in going for *Mucedorus*, which although immensely popular in its day has left behind very little that we can get at in the way of stage reconstruction. As Hattaway says, *Mucedorus* "neatly illustrates the

difficulty of making a separation between popular and courtly drama" (p. 130); James I saw it in 1610.

It is, in fact, Hattaway's central contention that "Popular drama... is...sophisticated drama" (p. 3), that "the value and popularity of this drama owe something to its traffic between the academic and the demotic" (p. 1). Hattaway's primary engagement is with convention. He tends to see all drama as playing with conventions, as a process of nuanced distancing from what has lately been established as the agreed form of discourse. Much of this calls for a delicacy of allusion that is, alas, unprovable today; but I'm sure Hattaway is right to promote a sensitive awareness of convention as a central given of the Elizabethan playhouses. His *Mucedorus* chapter ends with a logical coupling:

> No one could claim that *Mucedorus* has much in the way of literary or even dramatic merit. It is a gallimaufry, a pleasant pastime—reassuring in its romantic view of the world, amusing in its exposure of those very conventions of romance. We can see why Shakespeare called his pastoral romance *As You Like It.* (p. 140)

Elizabethan Popular Theatre becomes an enquiry into the vital essences of five plays, and Hattaway consistently provides fresh and illuminating vistas. He does not hesitate to quote (when available) from contemporary productions, when they throw light on a staging point. For example, *Titus Andronicus* poses a major problem: should its brutalities be presented symbolically or realistically? Hattaway goes to Peter Brook's production (Stratford, 1955) and Trevor Nunn's (RSC, 1972) to establish his conclusion that "naturalism of presentation is quite inappropriate." (p. 190) This is the right empirical method, to find out what works and what does not work, and I only regret that Bogdanov's *The Spanish Tragedy* (National Theatre, 1982) came too late to be considered here. Hattaway leaves us with an enhanced sense of the staging issues in five major texts.

"On or about December 1910 human character changed": thus Virginia Woolf's famous pronouncement on the birth of the modern era. It happens to work rather well for theatre history. In 1911 Beerbohm Tree, the leading actor-manager of the Edwardian era, reached the apogee of his career with the Coronation Gala performance of *Julius Caesar's* Forum Scene, with a crowd of 250 supers. In 1912, Harley Granville Barker produced *The Winter's Tale* at the Savoy, an event now seen as the first Shakespeare production of modern times in England. The period was, as Cary M. Mazer says, "a cultural and theatrical watershed between the values of high Victorianism which preceded it and those of the postwar years which followed it." (p. 1) This watershed, as it affects Shakespeare and his contemporaries, is the subject of Mazer's book.

Its primary value is that Mazer will have none of the old black-and-white perceptions of an era in which the decadence of spectacle, "upholstered Shakespeare", was overthrown by the surging forces of the new, led by Granville Barker. Mazer does not view stage history as a struggle between good and evil for the souls of the audience. Rather, he sees the new and old as co-existing, "engaged in perpetual conflict but sharing many common assumptions and underlying principles." (p. 1) There is no sentimental veneration of Poel's Elizabethan revival here: "Edwardian Elizabethanists...recycled contemporary values." (p. 63) Indeed, Mazer regards Elizabethanism as a coterie movement with very limited impact. Equally, he is sympathetic to and well-informed on Tree (a precondition, this, for writing intelligent history on the period). Tree's posthumous misfortune is to be remembered for having introduced live rabbits into his Athenian wood. It has become a by-word for vulgar naturalism. And yet, we learn from David Selbourne's account that Peter Brook, no less, brought a live rabbit along to the rehearsals of his *Dream*, evidently toying with this startling innovation. (Brook discarded the idea; the cast couldn't get on with the rabbit.) Does not this subterranean alliance between Tree and Brook affect our perception of history?

Mazer has written a dense, superbly-researched work of historic revisionism. It is not easy reading; but it does, in my view, lay to rest a number of misconceptions and crudities of judgment with which the history of the Edwardian era is encrusted. The careful analyses here of stage practices and assumptions establish at all major points Mazer's case: that the innovators of the Edwardian age redefined rather than discarded pictorialism, that the age saw a dialectic between old and new, rather than a contest (won by the new). The refashioning of Shakespeare, with its swings between austerity and spectacle, continues to this day. (In which, as I write, spectacle is clearly gaining the upper hand again in the latest productions of the RSC: the Stratford/Barbican *Tempest* of 1982/3 featured an opulant beached galleon that was an open homage to Beerbohm Tree's *Tempest* set, 1904).

Always the problem of re-making the play remains, and we are now learning much more of that secret process. The book-of-the-rehearsal is virtually a new genre, one that is surely destined to grow in importance. We have currently two specimens of the genre to hand, fascinating not only in themselves but for the contradictory statements they appear to make concerning the rehearsal process. About the productions there is room for dispute but not dispraise. Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the most famous Shakespearean production of modern times; it went around the world in the early 1970s, astonishing audiences wherever it played. Robin Phillips' *King Lear*,

with Peter Ustinov in the title part, is probably the most distinguished production seen in Canada for many years. It played in Stratford, Ontario, for a limited season in 1979, again in 1980: it was, I believe, a sell-out from first to last: it remains a great pity that it did not cross the Atlantic to play in London, as Phillips planned. But it was certainly the most weighty achievement of Stratford, Ontario in the 1970s, just as Brook's *Dream* was the RSC's most brilliant success. How do they compare, as seen by the rehearsal-watchers?

Two more unlike books, describing parallel situations, can scarcely be imagined. Maurice Good was the understudy to Ustinov's Lear. He has played at Stratford, Ontario through several seasons, and he knows the score intimately. This is an actor's book, an insider's book; Mr. Good comes across as warm, sympathetic, understanding. He is on good terms with Robin Phillips, and with Peter Ustinov (who contributes a foreword). No clashes or bitterness emerge. This is the story of a happy Company, devoting itself with full consciousness to the creation of a Company masterpiece. As a result, *Every Inch A Lear* is a superbly enjoyable book from first to last, and I recommend it warmly. David Selbourne's account of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the work of a writer (indeed, a playwright), not an actor. Although Brook originally invited him to attend the rehearsals, Selbourne seems not be have been close to him, and indeed to have made his critical attitude plain. There is no record here of a relationship between Selbourne and any of the actors. What emerges is a daily journal, in which Selbourne attends (but does not participate in) the rehearsals, and watches with mounting distrust and antagonism Brook's methods. The journal is a revelation of sourness; on some days, Selbourne records that he stayed away from rehearsals out of sheer weariness of spirit. It is emphatically not an enjoyable book. And yet, it is full of insights. The record of an embittered and hostile outsider, it demands to be taken on its own terms as the codicil to an astonishing theatrical success.

What Selbourne makes clear is that for much of the rehearsal period, this production seemed on course for disaster. Brook was profoundly dissatisfied with his actors' work, and the atmosphere was tense and uncomfortable. "I again saw, in his taut gait and cold expression, something which boded ill for the actors: tension, frustration, suspicion." (p. 89) Soon, Brook was lashing the actors: "This is a descent into suburbia." (p. 93) "Only if I create the circumstances, can you do interesting work." On this, Selbourne comments: "He is pronouncing them puppets of the theatre of directors, and blaming them for it." (p. 95) There were crises. Hermia broke down under Brook's attack, dissolving into tears. "The actor playing Bottom, David Waller,

lost his temper. Pushing the spirits aside, he broke out of his role and began shouting that he did not know what he was doing." (p. 147) Unsurprisingly, the next rehearsal saw "a day of dulled effort in the wake of crisis and climax." (p. 147) It is not pleasant to read; and yet one realizes that Brook's method is based on self-examination to the point of crisis, followed by self-renewal.

What a contrast is Phillips' method! He believes in creating a good atmosphere, and seems generally successful in securing it. There are jokes, praise ("You were terribly good"), an avoidance of confrontation. The Company has a deal of fun—their handbell at rehearsal, jolly and extravert, is a neat contrast to Brook's drum, menacing and primitive. Of course it helps to have Peter Ustinov around. As he gets out of his litter, he grunts "Hate these night trains". Reflecting on the problems of Lear, he points out that he has had three daughters, "a better preparation for the part than anything Stanislavsky imagined." (p. 224) One can't see Ustinov in a Brook rehearsal. Still, all credit to Phillips for bringing together a Company that enjoyed itself. There is nothing in Good's journal that corresponds to Brook's lacerations.

Both directors are committed to discovering the core of the play. Brook is now a textual purist; he altered or cut no word in his *Dream*. Still, Selbourne notes: 'There are no gratuitous 'improvements': but metal plates and rods have made an appearance." (p. 20) This was Brook's way of eliciting the "magic" which he saw as the primal energy in the text. Phillips, directing a great actor, was happy to back Ustinov's central insight into the role. "Peter said that the play is about senility... 'The terrible thing about senility is that it's not consistent. One can break out into lucidity, and then just run out of steam.' ". (p. 223) In their attitudes towards matters technical, Brook and Phillips are poles apart. Phillips loves light and shade, "We see too much in the theatre": Brook values the harsh consistency of house lights full on. Here is a lighting rehearsal for *King Lear*:

> Work is proceeding toward its conclusion in setting the lamps for the final scenes of the play. Four very casual voices interfuse, blended to low-level intimacy. The short collaborative comments are ground down by long hours of conjecture in the dark. It's that curt, blasé, but very accurate exchange of Master and Mates, a tight focus of command on the bridge of a ship finally homing after a long voyage. I love this jargon of Lighting Design: 'Pile On...', 'Goose Up...', 'Sneakout...' (p. 109)

Brook, on the contrary, consciously shuns Goose Ups and Sneakouts. "Just as he seems to have no vocabulary of his own gesture and intonation, with which to display his intentions to the actors, so he avoids the 'man-of-the-theatre's' professional *argot*." (p. 197) So "moving "downstage" is simply "coming nearer." In the cliché Brook

detects the enemy. What can we conclude, other than that there are more ways than one to Rome? But I leave the last word with Brook, for the brutally penetrating paradox with which he castigates his players: "Everything is permissible, except suiting the action to the word." (p. 57)