

# American Shakespeare: Permanent Repertory Groups Are Rare In the U.S., but a Tradition Is Growing

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By WILLIAM PACKARD

It has only been in the past 10 years that the American theater has set about producing the plays of Shakespeare on a serious, permanent repertory basis. This is an important beginning, and it indicates that we are finally trying to find some way of getting an authority and an authenticity into our own productions of Shakespeare.

Other world theaters, of course, have their own continuing tradition which guides them in the staging of their great plays. The Japanese theater has an almost 600 year tradition behind each of its poetic Noh plays; and the French have their Comedie-Francaise, with an unbroken tradition which goes all the way back to Moliere. In modern times, the Moscow Art Theater, founded by Stanislavsky in 1898, still preserves the spirit of Chekhov in its work; and the more recent Berliner Ensemble can trace its disciplines back to the original ideas of its founder, Bertolt Brecht.

But unfortunately, we have had no such continuing tradition for producing the plays of Shakespeare. The Elizabethan theater itself was so pestered by plagues and fires and Puritans that it left very little record of how the great plays were actually staged; and so our scholars have had to reconstruct the details of this theater through their research and speculation. But at best, all of this information is of scant help to the practicing actor. Take "Hamlet," for example. We have no way of knowing what Shakespeare himself intended, or how Richard Burbage originally played the part. And through the years, there has been an almost exasperating variety of approaches to this one part—from David Garrick, John Philip Kemble, Beerbohm Tree, Forbes Robinson, Edwin Booth, Edmund Kean, and Henry Irving—right on up to our own century.

## Some Modern Interpreters

And within the past 50 years, there has been even more diversity of interpretation—from such outstanding actors as John Barrymore, Leslie Howard, John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, Maurice Evans, Alec Guinness, Paul Scofield, Michael Redgrave, Burgess Meredith, Richard Burton, Peter O'Toole, Fritz Weaver, Christopher Plummer, Anthony Quayle, George Grizzard, Alfred Ryder, and Robert Burr—to mention only a few of the modern actors who have offered us their own versions of Hamlet.

And yet, for all the genius expended on this one great role, we still have no way of knowing which Hamlet is the real Hamlet. But then, who does know? When we turn to the library for assistance, we discover that scholars and critics have made this into one of the most disputed issues in all literary history. Through the centuries, a host of theories has sprung up, trying to account for the inconsistencies and contradictions within Hamlet's character.

The German poet Goethe saw Hamlet in anguish, because his noble nature "sinks beneath a burden which it can neither bear nor throw off"; Coleridge, on the other hand, saw Hamlet as a "man of thought" whose chief weakness is his disposition for philosophy; and A. C. Bradley said that Hamlet is afflicted with some sort of congenital melancholy, a neurasthenia which keeps him from doing what he has to do. In modern times, Ernest Jones advanced the Freudian view, that Claudius has already acted out Hamlet's unconscious by killing the father and marrying the mother, and therefore Hamlet is held helpless by his own psyche—and this is the view that influenced Laurence Olivier in his film version of "Hamlet."

T. S. Eliot, however, suggested that we ignore almost all the critical theories about "Hamlet," because, he said, there is no "objective correlative" to the overwhelming feelings in the play; and therefore, Eliot concluded, the play itself is most certainly an artistic failure. And recently, some European critics—the Polish critic Jan Kott, and the Russian film-maker Grigori Kozintsev—have offered a new view: That Hamlet is caught in the corruption of the political and social orders, and so is the unwitting victim of an imposed situation.

Well, it is true that every age does tend to interpret the plays of Shakespeare according to its own moods and attitudes. And yet no matter which critical theory may happen to prevail at any one time, the fact remains that without some sort of a continuing tradition, the production of Shakespeare will always be a makeshift and an arbitrary business because actors do need a guiding style, some sense of the conventions they are supposed to be representing up there on the stage.

It has only been within the last 100 years that England itself set about producing the plays of Shakespeare on a permanent repertory basis. The Old Vic began serious productions of Shakespeare in 1912; and since that time, a great many regional repertory companies have taken root in almost every major English city.

One of the most important theaters in England today, the Royal Shakespeare Theater at Stratford-on-Avon, was founded in 1879, but its early work tended toward a 19th century view of the bard, complete with dramatic lighting effects and picturesque tableaux—so much so that when the theater burned down in 1926, George Bernard Shaw sent a congratulatory telegram to the board of directors. But the theater was rebuilt and reopened in 1932, and in 1960, 27-year-old Peter Hall assumed artistic control and set about giving new life and urgency to Shakespearean productions. He even established a London branch of the Royal Shakespeare Theater at the Aldwych, where experimental contemporary plays could be done.

Because of the many opportunities of performing Shakespeare in their own country, English actors have developed a remarkable sense of ensemble playing, and this is a distinct advantage; but even so, many English productions of Shakespeare are still based on some critical theory or interpretation, on some entirely new way of seeing a play.

When the Royal Shakespeare Theater visited America recently with Peter Brook's production of "King Lear," starring Paul Scofield, Brook said that his direction had been influenced by the Polish critic, Jan Kott. Kott's book, "Shakespeare: Our Contemporary," makes Shakespeare into a cynical social realist. Shakespeare's view of history, according to Jan Kott, is neither very pleasant nor very meaningful:

"There are no gods in Shakespeare. There are only kings, every one of whom is an executioner, and a victim in turn. There are also living, frightened people."

This view is certainly interesting and contemporary, but it does tend to belittle the tragic stature of the characters. And if, as Jan Kott says, "King Lear" is an exercise in the grotesque, then Lear himself becomes more and more ridiculous in his terrible disintegration; only the fool is in tune with the times, because "The fool knows that the only true madness is to regard this world as rational."

An alternative to basing a production on some current theory is to have a pooling of talents, by getting together the most able performers available. Such was the all-star production of "Hamlet" a few seasons ago. The cast included both British and American actors: Richard Burton, Hume Cronyn, Eileen Herlie and Alfred Drake; and the play was directed by John Gielgud, who has probably performed Hamlet more often than any other living actor. The production, and Burton's portrayal, was characterized by intelligence and understatement; in fact, Gielgud staged the play in rehearsal clothes because, he said, no performance of "Hamlet" can ever really be definitive, and each new run-through of the play is in some way a new approach to the part.

Outside of England, the interest in establishing permanent Shakespearean repertory companies has been gradual. One of the most important theaters is to the north of us, in Canada, where the Stratford, Ontario, Shakespeare Festival is celebrating Canada's centennial this year. At the Festival Theater this summer, there will be productions of "Antony and Cleopatra" with Christopher Plummer and Zoe Caldwell; "The Merry Wives of Windsor"; "Richard III" with Christopher Plummer; and a non-Shakespearean production, Gogol's "The Government Inspector."

### Regional Companies Emerging

In our own country, regular productions of Shakespeare's plays have heretofore been restricted to college and university theaters. That is, until very recently, when there began to emerge a slowly growing interest in regional Shakespeare companies—such as the San Diego Festival, and the Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival. And in the East, we have two relatively new theaters—the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Connecticut, and the New York Shakespeare Festival in Central Park.

To inaugurate the Stratford, Conn., Shakespeare Festival, the great French director, Michel St.-Denis, came to New York to give a series of lectures in 1958 (these have since been gathered together in book form as "Theater: The Rediscovery of Style"). In his talks, St.-Denis emphasized the importance of form: American actors, he said, should not try to impose their own insight or motivation onto the plays of Shakespeare, before they have learned to let the plays speak for themselves, through the text itself, through what Shakespeare actually set down.

And since its founding, the Connecticut Festival has tried to heed this advice of Michel St.-Denis, by setting up a rigorous training program for American actors—and the school now conducts year-round classes in acting, voice, fencing, body movement and style. Recently, the Stratford Festival announced its 1967 summer repertory—"A Midsummer Night's Dream" to be directed by Cyril Ritchard; "The Merchant of Venice" with Morris Carnovsky as Shylock; "Macbeth"; and a non-Shakespearean production, Anouilh's "Antigone."

The second Shakespeare Festival in the same vicinity, the New York Shakespeare Festival, was originally conceived and fought for by Joseph Papp, who battled the intransigence of officialdom and finally won his dream of free Shakespeare performances in Central Park. Today, with the excellent technical facilities of the new Delacorte Theater, Papp continues to produce free Shakespeare plays for a youthful, enthusiastic audience in the open air of the park—beside a spacious lake, beneath the old stone castle which serves as a weather station. In addition, the New York festival sponsors a mobile unit which tours the various city parks and produces Shakespeare's plays in both English and Spanish; the Festival also participates in a program of performances in the New York City school system.

### Imaginative and American

The Central Park productions are contemporary, realistic and American. In the summer of 1966, Joseph Papp produced a new staging of "Richard III" directed by Gerald Freedman. The production was forthright and imaginative, and the interpretation was derived from the style of the play itself.

In Freedman's words: "Richard III has the formlessness of a nightmare. It is a blood-thirsty melodrama whose characters have few, if any, ennobling qualities and its hero is an avowed villain, power mad and unscrupulous."

And the interest in regional Shakespeare repertory companies is continuing. Joseph Papp has been in Los Angeles, meeting with Gregory Peck and other civic leaders, to discuss the possibility of setting up a free Shakespeare theater in that city.

All of this recent activity reflects a growing awareness of the deep need for a continuing tradition and a guiding style in producing the plays of Shakespeare. Our own American actors are no longer intimidated by their English colleagues, in approaching the great comedies and tragedies and histories of Shakespeare. And now a whole generation of our actors is receiving a thorough training and familiarity with the entire canon of Shakespeare's plays. In the next 10 or 20 years, we should look forward to seeing some truly remarkable, authentically American productions of Shakespeare.