PUTTING SHAKESPEARE IN A PROCRUSTES' BED

Stuart Robson as Slender in The Merry Wives.

Pray you, uncle, tell Mistress Anne the jest, how my father stole two geese out of a pen, good uncle.

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Samuel Phelps (1804-1878) as Cardinal Wolsey in Henry VIII.

My endeavors
Have ever come too short of my desires.

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Louis James as Caliban in The Tempest.

All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!

Junius Brutus Booth (1796-1852) as Richard III.

Slave, I have set my life upon a cast,
And I will stand the hazard of the die.

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His Plays Have Stood a Cruel Test, Racked or Sawed to Fit the Hour's Changing Fashion

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INDISPUTABLE evidence of Shakespeare's greatness as a playwright is afforded by the fact that his plays have held the stage throughout three centuries, although the physical constitution of the theatre has been utterly altered in the interim. It is an axiom that the structure of the drama in any period is conditioned by the structure of the theatre in that period; for, to get his work before the public, the playwright, first of all, must fashion his plays in such a way that they will fit the sort of theatre that is ready to receive them. The popularity of Shakespeare during his own lifetime is an evidence of his ability to adapt his genius to the exigencies of the Elizabethan theatre; but it is surely an astounding fact that, after three centuries, his plays should remain almost equally popular in a theatre that is totally different from its Elizabethan prototype.

For purposes of illustration, let us select some typical great play of the contemporary period, such as Ibsen's "Hedda Gabler" or Pinero's "The Thunderbolt," and let us imagine it enacted in the Globe Theatre on the Bankside in accordance with all the customs of the Elizabethan stage. It will be evident at once that the modern play would be rendered meaningless under these conditions. Yet, though Ibsen and Pinero could not be acted successfully in Shakespeare's theatre, Shakespeare can still be acted successfully in the theatre of Ibsen and Pinero. And, looking forward now instead of backward, is it not reasonable to suppose that, if the physical conditions of the theatre shall once more be changed completely in the next 300 years, both Ibsen and Pinero may be rendered obsolete, but Shakespeare may still persist as an actually acted dramatist?

In the entire history of the drama only three playwrights have been able to endure a drastic change in the conditions of theatrical production. These three are Sophocles, Euripides, and Shakespeare. The "Oedipus King" of Sophocles is still regularly acted in the repertory of the Comédie Française; and, though the stage is set with modern scenery, and the chorus has been gathered out of the orchestra and placed upon the stage, and the actors are no longer masked and stilted, and the language has been changed, and a roofed and lighted theatre has been substituted for the sunlit hollow of a hill, the tragedy remains overwhelmingly appealing, and, acted in our modern manner, puts our modern plays to shame.

Since the plays of Shakespeare have continuously held the stage throughout three centuries of change in the physical conditions of the theatre, it may safely be assumed that, merely as a playwright, "he was not of an age, but for all time." Yet, on the other hand, two statements should be made emphatically: First, that the dramaturgic craftsmanship of Shakespeare can be properly appreciated only when it is studied in reference to the physical conditions of the Elizabethan theatre, and, second, that his plays are most effective on the stage when they are produced with some approximation to the customs of the type of theatre for which they were originally fashioned.

The main features of the Globe Theatre on the Bankside are now so generally known that it will be necessary only to summarize them briefly. A generation before the time of Shakespeare, the usual place for producing plays was the courtyard of an inn, at one end of which a platform could be hastily erected; and Shakespeare's theatre was merely a more developed inn yard, with the inn itself abolished. The stage was a platform at one end of the yard; and it was surrounded on three sides by standing spectators. There was no roof over the heads of these spectators; and plays were acted in the afternoon, under the unchangeable illumination of the sun. The yard was surrounded, like a Spanish bull ring, by tiers of boxes, in which more well-to-do spectators were seated. The essential fact to be noted in this type of building is that the theatre was an out-of-door theatre and that the dramatist was impeded from employing any effects which were dependent on artificial illumination.

The stage itself was divided into three sections, which were put to different purposes of stagecraft. These three sections may be called, for convenience, the fore-stage, the back-stage, and the upper-stage. The fore-stage was an absolutely bare platform projecting openly into the yard. No scenery, no furniture, no properties could be employed upon it, and it was therefore used by the Elizabethan playwrights only for the sort of scenes which did not need to be localized in either place or time. Any incident which could tolerably be imagined to happen anywhere and anywhen was played upon the fore-stage; and, in such scenes, the actors were required to rely entirely upon the medium of dialogue.

The fore-stage was divided from the back-stage (or "inner room," as it was sometimes called) by a hanging tapestry, or "arras." Behind the arras, set pieces of furniture could be set up while the dialogue was being conducted on the fore-stage. Then the arras could be drawn aside, and both the fore-stage and the back-stage would at once be merged imaginatively into what may be called the full-stage. Juliet's bed, or Macbeth's banquet table, which had been prepared behind the arras during a scene of conversation on the fore-stage, would now, when the curtain was withdrawn, serve as a concrete fact to localize the full-stage in both place and time. Scenes on the unfurnished fore-stage were usually confined to two or three actors at a time, but scenes on the furnished full-stage were often used to call together nearly the entire company.

The upper-stage was an open balcony built over the back-stage; and it could be used at any time when it seemed desirable to perform a scene upon two levels. Thus, the upper-stage (or "upper room," as it was sometimes called) could be employed with equal service as Juliet's balcony or as the station of a commandant supposed to stand upon the walls of an embattled city.

The essential fact to be noted in this type of stage is that it allowed the playwright the utmost liberty in handling the categories of time and place. No scenes, in any way, were localized to the eye except such scenes as were set upon the full-stage, with a fixed background of furniture and properties. Shakespeare could change his place and change his time as often as he wanted by the simple expedient of emptying his stage and then repeopling it with other characters. On the other hand, it must be remembered that he could never work a scene up to a "curtain fall," because he had no curtain to ring down; and that—to cite a single but significant detail—he could never kill a character in tragedy without devising some means for having the dead body subsequently carried off the stage in full view of the audience.

The narrative method of Shakespeare was suited absolutely to this type of stage. Shakespeare built his plays not in five acts, nor in four or three, but in an uncounted sequence of scenes. The arbitrary division of each of Shakespeare's plays into five acts, with which the modern reader is familiar, was imposed upon the playwright by his eighteenth-century editors, who, knowing nothing about the Elizabethan theatre and assuming that every good play must be constructed in five acts, presumed to cut up Shakespeare's narrative in the interests of a falsely founded theory.

There is every reason to suppose that the plays of Shakespeare were originally acted, from the outset to the end, without any intermission; for otherwise it would be impossible to understand the famous phrase in the prologue to "Romeo and Juliet" about "the two hours' traffic of our stage." In this connection it may be interesting to point out that, though the narrative structure of the Elizabethan drama differs radically from that of the contemporary play, it coincides almost exactly with that of the contemporary moving-picture. Our moving-pictures, with their swift facility for changing time and place and their equipment for the easy exhibition of a story in an uncounted sequence of scenes, have carried us back to the freedom and amplitude of narrative that was enjoyed by Shakespeare.

Shakespeare never localized a scene, in either time or place, unless he needed to; and, whenever it was really necessary to anchor an incident in actuality, he achieved his purpose by describing the desired setting in the lines. Toward the close of "The Merchant of Venice," for example, he made his auditors imagine a moonlight night in the gardens of Portia's Belmont by talking about gardens and singing about moonlight so eloquently that not even the apprentices in the pit could resist the impetus of the impression. On the modern stage we produce the same effect by assaulting the eye instead of by besieging the ear; we employ painted scenery and modulated lights, and we delete all description from the lines. Our means are less literary and more pictorial; but they are no more efficacious than the means of Shakespeare.

The first great test of the endurance of Shakespeare on the stage came in 1642, when, at the outset of the great Civil War, an edict of the Roundhead Parliament put a stop to the presentation of stage plays and killed off with a single dagger-thrust the great Elizabethan drama. This edict was enforced for eighteen years, or an entire generation. Almost without exception, the poets and the artists of England were on the side of the Stuarts, who patronized the arts, and against the side of the Puritans, who smashed cathedrals; and, during the long ascendency of the Roundheads, these enlightened Royalists were condemned to live in exile in enlightened France. There they became accustomed to the theatre of Corneille, Racine, and Molière—a theatre which, particularly in the hands of Molière, had become at least embryonically modern.

When the cultivated class was at length restored to power in England, in 1660, it immediately called for theatres; and patents were granted speedily to Thomas Killigrew for the King's Theatre, in Drury Lane, and to Sir William Davenant (reputed falsely to have been an illegitimate son of William Shakespeare) for the Duke of York's Theatre, in Lincoln's Inn Fields. But after an interim of eighteen years the tradition of the old Elizabethan inn yard had been lost; and the new theatres which were built in 1660 were constructed in accordance with the converted tennis court of Molière.

The theatre of the Restoration was roofed and lighted, and it was supplied with the sort of scenery that could be furnished by a backdrop and wings. A very important fact, however, must be pointed out with emphasis, namely, that the Restoration theatre maintained the old traditional distinction between the fore-stage and the full-stage. The Restoration fore-stage was an empty "apron," accessible by a proscenium door on either hand, surrounded by spectators on three sides, and practicable only for the enactment of such incidents as were not localized in place or time.

To make the plays of Shakespeare fit the Restoration stage, with its new customs carried home from France, it was not really necessary to do violence to the Elizabethan text; yet, because of a momentary change in taste, induced mainly by a contemplation of the "classical" Racine, Shakespeare fell into disfavor for the next half century, and was regarded generally as a barbarian whose work was hopelessly behind the times. "Romeo and Juliet" was rewritten by Thomas Otway in a version which more "classically" set the scene in ancient Rome; "Macbeth" was turned by Sir William Davenant into an opera, and John Dryden supplanted Shakespeare's untutored "Antony and Cleopatra" with an entirely new version of the same material, entitled "All for Love." In justice to Dryden it must be said that, although "All for Love" is inferior to "Antony and Cleopatra" in creative and poetic power, it is, according to the exigencies of the Restoration stage, a better built and more consolidated play. From the single point of view of stagecraft, the great Restoration poet, in this instance, succeeded really in making more modern the Elizabethan narrative of Shakespeare.

Although, in the eighteenth century, the greatest actor in the history of the English stage played many parts attributed to Shakespeare, the plays in which these parts were shown were grievously maltreated. Garrick played "King Lear" with a fabricated "happy ending." He played the part of Romeo in the costume of an English gentleman of the eighteenth century; yet this last anachronism should, logically, be excused, because in Shakespeare's own theatre the actors habitually wore the costumes of their own country and their own time, regardless of the place and period of the story.

Shakespeare, despite all momentary accidents of custom, held the stage without appreciable difficulty until the second half of the nineteenth century. But, half a century ago, the continuity of his establishment upon the stage was drastically threatened by the most revolutionary change in the principles of stagecraft which had been devised in all the centuries since Æschylus wrote plays for ancient Athens. With the introduction of electric lights, the fore-stage was abolished, and the stage was reduced utterly to a picture in three dimensions exhibited behind a picture-frame proscenium. This revolution in stagecraft was of great advantage to the modern realistic dramatists, since it permitted them to localize their scenes in place and time by a direct and incontrovertible appeal to the visual imagination; but it was, correspondingly, of disadvantage to romantic and poetic dramatists, like Shakespeare, who had dealt largely with scenes unlocalized, and had appealed primarily to the ear instead of to the eye.

Toward the close of the nineteenth century, the endurance of Shakespeare in the theatre was put to the most appalling test. In this period those passages which had been airily devised to be acted on the fore-stage, "out of place, out of time," were presented on a stage incumbered with realistic scenery which pinned them down to a definite place and a definite hour. The leader of this momentary heresy toward a realistic presentation of an essentially romantic playwright was the great actor, Sir Henry Irving. In Irving's production of "Romeo and Juliet," when Mercutio spoke his dying quip, saying humorously that his wound was "not so deep as a well nor so wide as a church door," he waved his right hand and his left at an actual well and an actual church door which were standing on the stage, insistent to the roving eye. No artifice of stagecraft, in any period, could have stood further from the imaginative intention of Shakespeare than this literal transcription of the text.

The method of Sir Henry Irving, which was supported in America by the late Augustin Daly, has been maintained until the present hour by Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree. Sir Herbert, in producing the platform plays of Shakespeare, drowns the stage with realistic scenery, assiduously localizing incidents unlocalized in either place or time. Like Daly and like Irving before him, Sir Herbert cuts and rearranges Shakespeare's text in order to make it fit the realistic stage, and sacrifices the swift sweep of the Elizabethan narrative in order to force it to fit the conventions of the Victorian theatre. Nothing could be less Shakespearean in spirit than Sir Herbert Tree's production of "Henry VIII.," which the present writer viewed in London in the Autumn of 1910; and the fact that the Elizabethan text is still undeniably appealing when submerged beneath the sumptuous scenery of this modern actor-manager must be accepted as a final evidence of Shakespeare's greatness as a dramatist.

In the last few years, a determined movement has been made by apostles of what is generally known as the "new stagecraft" to restore to Shakespeare an approximation to the general conditions of the stage for which his plays were originally fitted. The leader of this movement in England and America is Granville Barker. In his production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," which Mr. Barker presented in New York a year ago, he restored the sharp distinction between the fore-stage and the back-stage, and substituted a summary and decorative background for the detailed, pictorial scenery of the Victorian period. By these reversions to the customary traffic of the Elizabethan theatre, Mr. Barker was enabled to re-establish the continuity of Shakespeare's narrative, and to present the original text, without cutting and without rearrangement, within "the two hours' traffic of the stage."

It will be noted that what is commonly called the "new stagecraft" is really a reversion to the old stagecraft of the Elizabethan theatre. No one can deny that the most emphatic way to demonstrate the effectiveness of Shakespeare in the theatre is to produce his plays with due consideration for the conventions of stagecraft to meet which they were deliberately fashioned. It would not be possible, nor would it be desirable, to re-establish at the present time all of the foregone conditions of the Elizabethan theatre; but we should remember always that the plays of Shakespeare were devised to be presented in accordance with the conventions of the Elizabethan stage, and that we may best appreciate his power as a playwright when his plays are presented with some regard for the physical conditions of the sort of theatre for which they were originally planned.

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Ada Rehan as Viola, Catherine Lewis as Maria, in Twelfth Night.

Maria. Will you hoist sail, Sir? here lies your way.
Viola. No, good swabber; I am to hull here a little longer.

Photo by Sarony

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George Rignold (1838-1912), as Henry V. at the Battle of Agincourt.

Courtesy of Laura K. Hudson.