

CLASSICAL PLAYS IN LONDON, FEBRUARY—JUNE, 1978

Some recent visitors to London have come home with tales of a city in the grip of a malaise, and characterised by shabby buildings and depressed people. Whether or not these analyses are true, London's reputation as the centre of the theatrical world has not been touched by them and in fact is probably still justified. Productions are very numerous and the general standard is high. In this essay I should like to offer fairly detailed descriptions of some productions of what might be called English "classical" theatre which I saw during a recent stay in London, and to draw a few tentative conclusions about theatrical trends there. In practice in this essay "classical" designates a single mediaeval play, and a number of works by Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. Since, however, the bulk of theatrical production in London *is* "classical," in the sense of offering well-trying works from the past, the plays dealt with here are to a degree representative. Of course, the statement that the bulk of theatrical production is classical, fails to take account of the many musical comedies and entertainments which continue to attract large audiences, but which ought not to be called "drama."

The Castle of Perseverance is one of the earliest of the surviving morality plays, having been written, probably, between 1400 and 1425. The production of 1978 was toured in various abbeys and cathedrals in the country in May and June. In London the venue chosen was the eleventh-century church of St Bartholomew-the-Great in Smithfield. The performers were experienced amateurs attached to universities and the audience seemed somewhat specialist too — more so than in the public theatres. Middle English drama had its origins in the liturgy, of course, but this attempt to return it to the altar was not entirely successful. *The Castle of Perseverance* has thirty-five speaking parts and requires at least six large mansions, features which make it dramatically almost the most complex of the English moralities and unfit it for performance in a moderate-sized church, especially if room has to be found for an audience too. Nevertheless, the use of the church allowed a spatial symbolism to develop. Belial's mansion — the traditional dragon's mouth of the cycle plays, leading down to hell — was at the end of the nave, furthest from the choir, while the mansions of Flesh, World and Covetousness were set up at other more or less visible points in the nave. In the fifteenth-century production plan for *Perseverance*, which still survives, Belial's scaffold is

placed in the north, traditionally associated with the devil, so the set designer had found an acceptable modern equivalent. In the plan the Castle is the centre, and the scaffolds of the sins on the perimeters of a circle, and they can therefore assail it from several directions. The production extended the spatial symbolism by erecting the Castle wall at the altar rail, and the virtues replied to the sins from seven separate romanesque arches in a row, rather like a series of saints in niches. The result was to underline the patterning which is a deadening feature of the play, to decrease the precariousness of Mankind's stand for virtue, and to reduce dramatic tension. After Mankind's death his Soul (played in this production by a small boy) is tried by God who sits on his throne and listens to the opposing arguments of his Daughters — Mercy and Peace for salvation, Truth and Righteousness for damnation. In the fifteenth-century plan God has a scaffold to himself, which is probably not employed before the scene of the Four Daughters. The modern production indicated the change to the heavenly sphere by setting up God in the Lady Chapel, at some distance from the body of the church. The Daughters and Anima, the latter guarded by the Good and Evil Angels, repaired there, followed by the audience in a body. Whatever its physical impracticalities, this arrangement had the advantage of reproducing a stage-movement and change of pace existing in the text and supported by the plan. Music and costumes for the production were authentically mediaeval; most of the sins and vices wore masks. A proper attention had been paid to the speaking of the lines. The language had been modernized rather than translated and the original verse forms were retained. It was, in fact, a competent, intelligent production, like many that can be seen in London. The idea of performing a morality play in a church is hardly innovatory and at St Bartholomew's it encountered some practical problems which were not entirely overcome.

I suppose that the London theatres will go on producing Shakespeare for as long as the American tourist remains a phenomenon — not that this commercial decision is necessarily based on an aesthetic misjudgment. The company that sets the standard is the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre and what I take to be their normal level of competence was established by their productions of five of the history plays: the three parts of *Henry VI*, *Henry V* and *Coriolanus*. One actor, Alan Howard, played all of the title roles, progressing from the sensitive, religious king, to the extrovert, idealised monarch, to the Roman man of iron — convincing evidence of the range which some talented actors possess. Other actors also played a number of roles in rapid sequence or in the same play. Graham Crowden performed most movingly as Gloucester in *Henry VI* and appeared soon after as Menenius in *Coriolanus*; Alfred Lynch played Edward of York in *Henry VI* and the Chorus in *Henry V*;

but most impressive was John Woodvine, who doubled in four or five minor roles in the *Henry* plays and played almost simultaneously Banquo, Subtle and Fainall. Woodvine was not acting "lines," as the Elizabethan and Jacobean players habitually did. His achievement nevertheless helps one to believe in the repertory of such a company as the Admiral's who in the 1594–1595 season offered 38 plays, of which 21 were new, without performing the same play twice in one month. Probably the RSC productions were more careful than those by Shakespeare's original company. They were probably more faithful to the written text, and they used moving scenery, particularly to represent sieges and battles, when such devices were known only in productions at court in Shakespeare's day. But the basic tools were the same — the actors' clothes, bodies and voices — and quite sufficient to produce an intense imaginative experience. To speak briefly of the effects of the individual plays: The three parts of *Henry VI* were performed over a span of two days, and this not only facilitated a grasp of the genealogies but also showed up inconsistencies of characterization and historical anomalies — not that these are of much moral or artistic significance. The violence and horror inherent in the action were also underlined. Perhaps because the psychological interest of events surrounding Henry's marriage and Gloucester's fall outweighed the violence, Part II, of the three parts, was the best received by the audience at the Aldwych. The production of *Henry V* was in some respects disappointing. Alan Howard seemed to over-play the guilt which Henry feels for his father's usurpation. This is surely only a minor feature of the characterization, expressed mainly in the prayer before Agincourt where it is in part a device for heightening suspense. Howard's emphasis on guilt, even in places where there were no lines to express it, may have been an attempt to adapt the play to modern expectations. Late twentieth-century man can presumably be relied upon to understand guilt; unqualified celebrations of victories won by courage and self-control may be outside his patterns of response. A striking feature of the production was that the whole of Act I was played in modern dress, probably a device for coping with the excess verbiage, the long investigation of genealogies and of Salic law. It was effective in that it indirectly helped to emphasize the change from passivity to activity, from indecision to decision which is the progress of the Act. The uncostumed rehearsal gave way to the play proper, and the assumption of battle dress by the English court had the effect of transporting them back in time. The modern dress was therefore imaginatively successful, though a rational accounting for it could hardly be expected. The chorus wore modern dress throughout, which suited his intermediary function. The scenes in which the Princess Catherine takes part — the English lesson and the courtship — which do not particularly

impress a reader, seemed to be especially appreciated by the audience at the Aldwych. If *Henry V* is the portrait of a man who retained his humanity in the face of victory, *Coriolanus* tells how someone found his humanity through defeat. The RSC production placed a proper emphasis on the transcendence of the central figure — in the first four acts through courage and in the last through loyalty and willingness to be sacrificed . . .

The history plays produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company therefore provided a standard for measuring other productions of Shakespeare in London. Less successful, as it seemed to me, was the Company's production of *The Comedy of Errors*. This was acted in turn-of-the-century costume — boaters and blazers — and set on a colourful Mediterranean waterfront, representing Ephesus. Dance, song, and acrobatics enlivened Shakespeare's dialogue — at least that was the opinion of most of the audience. The production seemed to embody a major theoretical issue which was also present in *Henry V* — the extent and the manner in which Shakespeare should be "translated" for modern audiences. However extraneous, the musical comedy devices contributed a bouyancy of mood which the text alone might not have procured, at least, not to the same degree.

Many visitors to London in summer take the opportunity to see *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, performed by the New Shakespeare Company in the Open Air Theatre in Regent's Park. Regency costume was used, as seemed appropriate, and the natural setting added a special confirmation to the poetry. The actors were competent, but not to the smooth professional standard of the RSC. On the other hand they performed with great freshness and liveliness and the audience was enthralled and at times enchanted.

I saw only one production of Shakespeare in London which failed on this essential level — the Prospect Company's *Antony and Cleopatra*, performed at the Old Vic. The cause of the failure is not easy to analyse. Externally it was a careful production, and it is not possible to name any single feature, such as cueing, pace, or movement as the fundamental weakness. Nevertheless, there was a sense of flatness and the characters' feelings did not seem real. The designer had gone to Tiepolo for his costumes — a further indication of the carefulness of the production — and had provided a Romano-eighteenth-century blend of great splendour. However the long cloaks and trailing sleeves hampered the actors' movements — evidence that even a good supply of funds can have its hazards.

Much above the level of the RSC's history plays, and one of the finest productions in London at the time, was the RSC's *Macbeth*, which was enjoying an extended run at the Young Vic. The Young Vic is theatre-in-the-round, with fittings reduced to a minimum — a venue which

contributed to the success of the production, but was not essential for it. Trevor Nunn, the director, had solved any problem of translation for modern audiences by the radical method of ignoring it, and aiming for the heart of Shakespeare's text. There were no straw hats or acrobatics, nor even, more appropriately, plaids and claymores. Costume had some overtones of the second World War, but this was not over-emphasized, and everyone except Duncan wore black or grey. Macbeth's regal pageantry, put on briefly in Act III, was a painful anomaly, but this was almost the only visual symbolism. There was little furniture or props, no scenery, no music. The focus was almost solely on Macbeth, his thoughts, feelings and acts. Ian McKellan is a first-rate actor, who knew how to exploit his physical ugliness in such a role and the experience of watching his Macbeth thus undistracted for two hours was a very powerful one. It was in fact "electrifying" and "intense," though I hesitate to use such adjectives. The production had a directness and reality which are difficult to convey. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* deals in part with the unreality of the theatre, particularly of Shakespeare, the difference between stage death and real death. The RSC *Macbeth* came as close as possible to annihilating this unreality. The virtuous gloom characteristic of audiences doomed to watching a few acts of highbrow drama from another age was just not in evidence. The actors communicated by an emotional shorthand which penetrated the time barrier.

I've dealt then, however briefly, with the nine productions of Shakespeare which I saw in London and which amounted probably to a little over half of what was available. At the same time, people were talking about a "Ben Jonson revival." There were three productions of Jonson in all — of *Volpone* at the National Theatre, of *The Alchemist* at the Aldwych and of *Bartholomew Fair* at the Young Vic. Now, anyone who has read the two playwrights with an open mind will know that a ratio of about fifteen plays to three, in an exceptionally good year for Jonson, is not at all an accurate representation of the difference in quality between them. In 1919 T.S. Eliot wrote that, "Of all the dramatists of his time, Jonson is probably the one whom the present age would find most sympathetic, if it knew him." Perhaps that statement was true at the time, but now it seems to me that it is precisely because he is unsympathetic that Jonson is not often performed. Even in London audiences now are constituted much as they were in Jonson's day. A small proportion are "understanders;" the rest want to be entertained, or to hear reasserted values in which they have always believed — courage, romantic love, patriotism and so on. Shakespeare fulfils the latter demand admirably. In all the ways that matter, he is a positive playwright, asserting the worth of mankind in the face of evil and suffering — a romantic.

Jonson, on the other hand, brings reality into a focus which can be almost unbearable when he is properly presented. He challenges an audience's comforting delusions. His imaginary worlds invite comparison with the real world and in this way glimpses of the truth are achieved. The disguises are removed from personal and social immorality. Coleridge's complaint about *Volpone*, that "there is no goodness of heart in any of the major characters" is true of most of the comedies. Jonson's major characters are tricksters or fools, self-deluded or deluded by others. It should be recognized, however, that Coleridge's remark does not constitute an objective criticism.

To be in the audience at the National Theatre production of *Volpone* was an exhilarating experience, but the director had not been faithful to the satiric realism which is the basis of the play. Morality had been sacrificed to magnificence wherever possible. The Olivier Theatre is not built on meagre lines. There is complex stage machinery and facilities for making up brilliant sets, and many were employed to construct the interior of Volpone's house. Costuming, especially of Volpone himself, was lavish, without falling into the error of the Prospect Company's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Paul Scofield acted the title role, with John Gielgud as Sir Politick Would-be and Elizabeth Spriggs as Lady Politick. The audience, I think, missed the irony of Volpone's apostrophe to his gold, which was downstage and almost of a splendour to justify comparison with the sun; the appearance of the dwarf, hermaphrodite and eunuch was an entertainment rather than a symbol; and the first two acts, in which Volpone and Mosca successfully gull Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino, were gratifying because the audience was safely identified with the two tricksters, and the signs of Mosca's self-interest and incipient treachery could be ignored. Of course, there are scenes in the middle of the play where Volpone does not appear in a very flattering light. He is, for instance, victimized at length by Lady Politick, that incessant talker, but Scofield played that in a resigned fashion which some of the audience may have recognized as characteristic of husbands; Bonario, too, catches Volpone on the point of raping Celia, but that contretemps was outweighed by the magnificent poetry in which he had previously courted her, and which is one sign that Jonson himself was not entirely impervious to his hero-villain's fascination. Bonario, in any case, was played by a chubby young man of a decidedly unheroic cut, so that his intervention was almost comic. (Jonson, of course, gives Bonario the line: "Forbear foul ravisher, libidinous swine" — but this, I believe, was as unintentionally comic as it was unintentionally unpronounceable.) The point is that Volpone is progressively and inescapably reduced in stature as the play goes on. After his false death in Act IV he can no longer appear as a

magnifico, but only in the dress of a court officer and, of course, the final reduction is the harsh sentence of the Venetian court. By playing down in the beginning the innate sordidness of Volpone's character, the National Theatre production made it unnecessarily difficult for the audience to accept the justice of the ending. The text gives ample opportunity throughout for the expression of the sordidness.

The ending of *The Alchemist* presents no problem for the producer. The audience is more than willing to accept the escape scot-free of Face and nearly scot-free of Subtle and Dol, after having admired their protean ingenuity over five acts. The critics, on the other hand, have for a long time regarded the ending of *The Alchemist* as immoral, or at least as a descent from the stringent mortality of Jonson's earlier comedies. It seems to me that that criticism — which in any case is moral rather than aesthetic — has no substance when it is set against the play in performance. Dol and Subtle vanish over the back fence — it is true — but with what reluctance, leaving behind that hard-earned loot? Presumably Subtle is in danger of returning to his condition before Face found him:

at Pie Corner,
Taking your meal of steam in, from cooks' stalls,
Where, like the Father of Hunger, you did walk
Piteously costive, with your pinched-horn-nose

(I. i. 24–28)

Face, too, undergoes a transformation in Act V which, except in that there is no condemnation to chains and imprisonment, is comparable with Volpone's reduction at the end. Volpone becomes a liveried servant of the court; Face is reduced from the colourful, mock valiant and moustachioed Captain to "smooth Jeremy," whose position before the play began was hardly better than Subtle's, and who was not outwardly distinguishable, except by being poorer, from his petty bourgeois neighbours like Dapper and Druggier. As he says himself at the end, "My part a little fell in this last scene/Yet 'twas decorum" (V. v. 158–9).

Far from idealising, the RSC production of *The Alchemist* at the Aldwych retained the vigorous Jacobean realism which is a feature of the script. Face, Subtle and Dol appeared in their "off-stage" clothes in the first scene, quarrelling and brawling around a table littered with half-eaten food. All of this had to be changed, of course, before the entrance of the first gull, Dapper. The incidental visual effects were an appropriate support for the language of Face and Subtle in that first scene, their hatred of each other and their possession of Dol in common. From the beginning there was no danger that the audience would mistake the created identities — the soldier and the virtuous, learned alchemist — for the play's level of reality and for this reason the production was superior to the National

Theatre's *Volpone*, where, as I have tried to show, the audience was caught up in the tricksters' fantasies. Beyond this, the RSC production showed what a virtuoso piece for actors *The Alchemist* is. Most readers of the script are aware of Face's actual transformations into the Captain, Lungs and Jeremy, and of his projected transformation into the Spanish count. It is less obvious from a reading that Subtle has his transformations too, of manner, if not of shape, which outnumber those of Face: he is reserved with Dapper, out of an apparent fear of the law; boldly utters fantastic nonsense to Druggier; is reserved out of assumed piety and learning with Sir Epicure; is aggressive, and wears a different costume when Ananias is present; and finally disguises himself as a Priest of Fairy for his second meeting with Dapper. The production at the Aldwych allotted to Subtle changes of costume for his meetings with each gull, more than the text demands, but very much in the spirit of the comedy. In addition, there were Dol's disguises as the lord's sister and the Queen of the Fairies which most readers remember, and Surly's unscheduled disguise as the Spanish gentleman. In the RSC production the entrance of each gull was precluded by quite radical rearrangements of the set by Subtle and Face, which, coupled with the costume-changes, made for considerable bustle. The cumulative excitement was almost overwhelming; the action appeared as a series of plays within the play, with "reality" — the tricksters being themselves as in Scene i — limited to brief intervening exchanges. An extremely fine sense of timing was required, almost as in dance, and it would be difficult to praise the actors' skill too highly. (Ian McKellan played Face and Trevor Nunn directed, so the same major people were involved as in *Macbeth*.) It is now a commonplace of criticism of *The Alchemist* to note that the action moves faster and the probability of exposure progressively increases until Lovewit's climactic return at the end of Act IV, which begins the resolution. Face, however, has further lines of defence.

Bartholomew Fair was put on at the Young Vic in mid-summer by the company attached to the theatre. Production was in modern dress, in accordance with a fairly well-established tradition. Quite a number of the play's Jacobean citizens can be made over into the modern idiom without much strain. That cloying couple, the Littlewits, was easily translated as the complacent young lawyer and his fashionable wife; Grace Wellborn became the debutante — a social type which has by no means disappeared from England, even today — and Cokes was seen as an Ascot youth, a less complex and less sympathetic Bertie Wooster. The Puritans gave more trouble, since the director could not or would not link them with contemporary evangelical Christians, and the audience had to transport them mentally back in time if they were to grasp the object of the satire. Overdo

was a totally unconvincing modern magistrate, but then Jonson's point in part was that he was a totally unconvincing Jacobean magistrate too. The people of the fair are ageless types which can be made contemporary with little effort. Edgeworth was sharply dressed in a business suit and horn-rimmed spectacles, which accounted well in modern terms for Overdo's mistaking him for a lost lamb among wolves. Nightingale was made into a pop-singer, in sequins and a pink shirt—a transformation which probably confirmed the audience in its negative opinion of pop-singers who work in fairs. All in all, the use of modern dress was a success.

The production as a whole was by no means a failure, but the modern costuming, however effective in itself, was in this instance a symptom of the director's obsession with the need to translate the text for modern audiences. For Jonson's masterly, innovatory and provocative induction was substituted a speech given by Leatherhead in which he apologised, by implication, for the age and obscurity of the dialogue. Jonson relies on vigorous characterization to capture the essence of the fair, but in the Young Vic production Ursula was a shadow of her Jonsonian self, and the appropriate feeling was created by eye-catching acts and devices — juggling, acrobatics, stilt-walking, a monocycle and a live piglet. The result was in fact an over-balance, an emphasis on fun at the cost of satire, an unjustified simplification similar to what had occurred in the *Volpone*, but with less restraint. As in *Volpone*, too, the ending gave trouble. The shattering by Quarlous of the characters' illusions left the audience feeling bewildered, since it had not been shown clearly enough beforehand that illusions were the basis of the characters' world.

Several conclusions, then, seem to emerge from this brief look at recent "classical" theatre in London. First, mainstream or "classical" drama, especially by Shakespeare, is being produced as frequently as ever. Secondly, directors for the most part are aiming at competent, rather than startling productions; they are using tried, rather than new ideas. This may or may not be desirable. The third point is that London audiences, no doubt like audiences elsewhere, and despite their fundamental wish to be comforted by the assertion of positive values, have a wide and unpredictable range of responses. The appreciation of the Catherine scenes in *Henry V* indicates that simple jokes, especially about nationality, were fairly sure to succeed. Brilliant staginess, even when divorced from much meaning, was also appreciated. (This was demonstrated by the production of Ferenc Molnar's *The Guardsman* at the National Theatre, which I have not discussed.) Nevertheless, the audience of *Macbeth* seemed to respond to a much deeper level of meaning. The fourth conclusion is that attempts consciously to adapt the classical English drama to modern tastes and prejudices are more likely to confuse audiences than to help them, and

that the best productions are based on a radical acceptance of the script left by the dramatist.

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