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## The RSC Restored

FROM EARLY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, serious theatre people in England like Bernard Shaw and Granville Barker were calling for a national theatre there modeled on the distinguished government-subsidized theatres of Continental Europe. Nothing much came of the idea until the 1950s, when Labour Party governments began subsidizing British theatres in a significant way. Then suddenly in 1960 there were *two* government-funded major theatres, the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Neither was created from scratch. The former was based on the Old Vic Theatre Company, founded in 1912 by Lilian Baylis in an aged music hall in a working-class London neighborhood to bring culture—primarily Shakespeare—to the masses. (She survived because of low rents, low budgets, and her ability to persuade stars to perform at the Old Vic for scale wages.) The latter was based on the Stratford Festival, founded by the great eighteenth-century actor David Garrick. Arts festivals were certainly not common in Garrick's day. Nonetheless, he planned a jubilee in Shakespeare's birthplace to be held in the summer of 1769, with parades, speeches, banquets, recitations, and performances. As is common in England, the weather did not cooperate, inundating the festival and washing out many of the events. The idea of a Shakespearean festival survived, however, so that by the late nineteenth century there were regular performances every summer in Stratford in a splendid (indoor!) theatre.

The luckless 1769 gala set the stage for the ups and downs that have always dogged the Stratford Festival. Along with flooding, fire has taken its toll, but the Festival recovered, performing in some seventeen different venues in Stratford over the centuries. In the 1960s, flush with government money and boosted by enthusiastic critics and audiences, the Royal Shakespeare Company established an alternate base in London at the Aldwych Theatre, then moved in 1982 to a brand new building with two theatres at London's Barbican Arts Centre, and then added a third London theatre (the Mermaid in Puddle Dock) in the early eighties to match its Stratford operation, which had also grown to three performance venues. Then Margaret Thatcher and her successors cut government funding for the arts, and for just about everything else, so that the RSC London base dwindled to just the Barbican theatres,

and then to nothing. Stratford productions toured Great Britain, including London, but more and more the RSC began to look like just another regional theatre company. Furthermore, Stratford is not even a major city, and with no airport and situated at the end of a branch railway line, nor is it easy to get to.

Something had to be done. Whatever the politicians may think of it, the RSC is a major cultural treasure not just for England, nor even just for speakers of English, but for the entire world. (Last year I saw an RSC performance in Tokyo, which the company visits regularly, and where there is even a theatre modeled on the Globe.) Michael Boyd, Artistic Director of the RSC since 2003, announced two bold new plans: First, the RSC would put on all thirty-seven of Shakespeare's plays in the 2006–07 season, about half their own productions and the rest from visiting companies, including not only some strong British troupes but also foreign ones like the Berliner Ensemble, the Ninigawa Company from Japan, and the Washington Shakespeare Company from Washington, D.C., one of our best. (Unfortunately, Canada was unrepresented; the Stratford, Ontario, Shakespeare Festival is the best in the Western Hemisphere.)

The other revitalization scheme was a £100 million fundraising drive to rebuild Stratford-upon-Avon's Royal Shakespeare Theatre and the attached smaller space, the Swan Theatre. The former, completed in 1932, is a proscenium space out of keeping with contemporary staging practices for Shakespeare; there are now thrust stages everywhere, including the restored Globe on the South Bank of the Thames in London, which have demonstrated that Shakespeare works best on an open stage with minimal scenery and fluid, fast-paced staging. (Granville Barker himself had experimented with open staging, but the idea did not catch on until much later.) A platform stage was shoved through the proscenium of the RST back in the seventies, but the result was a mere hybrid, yielding none of the intimacy and flexibility of the Globe. The current reconstruction will create a thrust stage auditorium seating just over 1,000 people. The aim is to transform the relationship between artists and audiences, reducing the distance from the furthest seat to the stage from 30 to 15 meters, focusing attention on actors and text rather than on pictorial display.

The Swan Theatre, only twenty years old, already has a good thrust stage; the reconstruction will mainly be devoted to improving its foyer and toilets. Both theatres will benefit from improved and enlarged backstage areas, administrative offices, lobbies, and restaurants. Improved exterior walkways and meeting spaces will take better advantage of the lovely site on the River Avon.

The fundraising drive was 85 percent completed as of last summer, drawing on government at all levels plus private sources. Those who imagine that the RSC will simply close down until all the work is completed in 2010 do not know the company. At the cost of only £6 million, they have constructed a large temporary theatre down the

street, the Courtyard, approximately the size and shape of the proposed new RST. The results are so good that I was disappointed to learn that they plan to tear the place down as soon as the main theatre is rebuilt. Seating in the Courtyard is surprisingly comfortable, the sightlines are good, and the staging (see below) can be outstanding. The acoustics are a bit hollow, resulting from a lot of bare steel and plywood (which could easily be modified), but the dialog in the three plays I saw at the Courtyard was always audible. Badly designed theatres are so common in our time that it would be a shame to lose a good one; perhaps the Courtyard could be dismantled and rebuilt elsewhere.

The inaugural productions at the Courtyard Theatre last summer were of Shakespeare's three *Henry VI* plays. There was a time when any mention of these early works would have to be modified by the phrase "rarely performed" (and, if the writer were honest, "rarely read.") Not only have there been major productions in England of the trilogy in every decade since the sixties, however, but they have typically been produced in order to establish or restore a theatre company's reputation. Peter Hall's adaptation in the early sixties, the two-part *The Wars of the Roses*, helped put the RSC on the map. Terry Hands's productions in the late seventies of the trilogy plus *Henry V*, all starring the matchless Alan Howard, revived the National Theatre at a time when its finances were shaky and the move to the new South Bank theatre complex stalled. Adrian Noble's version, *The Plantagenets*, helped the RSC through the rough days of the late 1980s described above. Michael Boyd originally directed *Henry VI, Parts I, 2 and 3* and *Richard III* for the RSC in 2000, winning both Olivier and South Bank Show Awards for best director; these became the basis for the latest version, with a mostly new cast.

Why did Shakespeare's early history plays, so popular when they were written, lose favor (even Coleridge, a great Bard booster, did not like them), then suddenly become all the rage again? The answer to the former part of the question is simple enough: they lack starring roles. The eponymous Henry VI was a weakling whom Shakespeare depicts with sympathy, but who has no charisma. The plays were written before the Lord Chamberlain's Company, to star Richard Burbage, was formed. Burbage probably played in the *Henry VI* plays, but not in the title role; he would have appeared as Richard Gloucester, the future Richard III, thus inspiring Shakespeare's later play of that name. (Note how *Richard III*, definitely a star turn, has always been popular even though it is actually a sequel to *Henry VI, Part 3*.) In later years, a theatrical manager would put on a Shakespeare play only if it provided a good starring role for himself (most companies were run by a celebrity actor) or for some other famous performer. The *Henry VI* plays with their clear, powerful conflicts plus brilliant pacing and momentum are potential crowd-pleasers, but they are ensemble pieces. Once Shakespeare became aware of Burbage's talents, he began to write star vehicles instead, the sort of plays that we now think of as typically Shake-

spearean, though the early history plays are no less masterful in their own way.

Thus, in modern times only a subsidized company like the RSC could do justice to the *Henry VI* trilogy, not only because of the large permanent troupe of trained and talented actors, but also because of its appeal to a serious audience who seeks more than ephemeral entertainment. Finally, where the Elizabethan audience was fascinated with English history because of a rising sense of nationhood, their counterparts today are fascinated with it because that sense of national identity is in peril. The *Henry VI* plays plus *Richard III* depict terrible times in English history, but they end happily, and they embody a fervent theme of the need for a strong, centralized government and a sense of national identity. An English person in, say, the Victorian era, would not need these lessons, but someone in Tony Blair's aimless, splintered, subversive (to the United States) country can take them as a warning.

The Courtyard Theatre is more than twice the size of The Swan, yet Boyd's production lost none of the intimacy and immediacy of the smaller space, which it resembles in layout—a low thrust stage, deeper than it is wide, with a smallish orchestra (“stalls,” as the British say) and three galleries surrounding the stage on three sides. The only unusual element in the staging was in Boyd's use of the vertical dimension: steel scaffolding up center provided a small upper stage to represent castle walls, etc., while thirty-foot ladders at the four corners of the auditorium gave unusual acting spaces for individual performers from time to time. Actors and props flew in and out, sometimes slowly and grandly like the coffin of Henry V at the beginning of Part One, at other times swiftly and spectacularly like the soldiers on ropes in the battle scene in Part Three. (The program listed Matt Costain as “Director of Rope Work”!) Regal entrances like that of Henry VI himself were done by having the actor descend from the flies in a gold picture frame, a simple abstraction that was a key to the production as a whole, which was emblematic and ahistorical. Actors wore long black or white coats, actresses long gowns. King Henry VI and his successor Edward IV wore crowns, some characters wore crucifixes, and many wore white or red rose emblems identifying them as Yorkists or Lancastrians.

Neither antiquarian nor jarringly modern, then, the production always strove for clarity and conflict, with the focus on the actors rather than on directorial touches. Edward Hall (son of Sir Peter) directed a version of the plays four years ago entitled *Rose Rage*<sup>1</sup> that displayed his directorial brilliance—all-male cast, set in an abattoir, battles depicted by chopping real animal entrails, beheadings by chopping red cabbages. It was a stunning production, the best I had ever seen of the *Henry VI* tragedies, but Michael Boyd's more straightforward rendering surpassed it with its glorious acting. Despite the doubling and tripling of roles, the cast for the three plays was huge, yet even the smallest moments had performances that were direct, beautifully spoken, and

<sup>1</sup> Reviewed in *The Hudson Review*, Vol. LV, No. 4 (Winter 2003).

emotionally honest. For example, in Part Three, King Henry encounters a son who has killed his father, then a father who has killed his son. Whenever I had previously watched the little scene it came off as formulaic and obvious (as it does on the page), but Keith Bartlett as the father and Lex Shrapnel as the son were so moving that all the horror of civil war seemed distilled into two minutes of stage time. The moment was all the more poignant because the two had played Lord Talbot and his son John in Part One, a brilliant stroke of double casting when you consider that the trilogy was never intended to be played as one big ten-hour play.

Another bit of effective double casting involved John Mackay as the Dauphin in Part One and as Jack Cade in Part Two. The former was hilarious—whoever knew that there was comic relief in the grim *Henry VI* plays? A tall string bean of a man, Mackay played the Dauphin in a long curly blond wig as a swaggering, preening, flouncing ninny, quickly alternating bravado and terror. I wondered how such a distinctive looking actor could contrast this foolish dandy with working-class Jack Cade. In the event, although he dropped the wig he did not change much, depicting Cade not as some grubby, surly lout (as he is usually played) but as an affected bounder, flying in on a trapeze, then aping his betters with mock-elegant speech and style even as he was beheading them.

The cast of the trilogy was so consistently strong that it seems unfair to single anyone out, yet I must mention powerful Katy Stephens, who played both Joan of Arc and Queen Margaret, and Jonathan Slinger, a gangly redhead with a big, slanting mouth and mischievous eyes, both funny and terrifying as Richard Gloucester. (He is scheduled to star as Richard III in January.) Standing above all the performers in the trilogy, however, despite the consistently high acting standard, was Chuk Iwuji in the title role. It is hard to make much of a mark with such a weak character, so that most actors playing him whom I have seen were unexceptional even though thoroughly competent. One tends to remember who played Talbot, Joan of Arc, Richard Gloucester, Richard Plantagenet, or Jack Cade rather than the Henry. But Iwuji, a Nigerian who trained in the United States but has acted mostly in England, brought such depth of feeling to the role, such honest piety and simplicity, that he is the one I remember this time around. The moment when Henry explains how he became king at the age of nine months was especially moving, delivered without a trace of self-pity, but instead with pity for his divided and suffering country. The performance was a reminder that Henry VI was considered a saint in Elizabethan times. There was a lovely story going around that when Iwuji got to Stratford to start rehearsals, he was shocked to find his face on all the big *Henry VI* posters, up there beside the likes of Ian McKellen, Patrick Stewart, and Harriet Walter on posters for the other shows. Iwuji proved that he not only belonged on that poster, but that his face will adorn many others in the future.

Another history play I encountered in my Stratford sojourn was *Henry VIII*, which really is rarely performed. Because it ends with the baptism of the future Queen Elizabeth I, and a lengthy prediction (probably written by John Fletcher, Shakespeare's collaborator here as in *Two Noble Kinsmen*) by Cranmer of the glory of her reign, *Henry VIII* has the reputation of being more ceremonial than dramatic. In fact, although it softens Henry's character by ending well before the beheading of Anne Boleyn, the play pulls no punches in depicting the vicious politics in his court: the conflict between the Duke of Buckingham and Cardinal Wolsey, Buckingham's execution, the nasty divorcing of Queen Katherine, the fall of Wolsey, Henry's marriage with Anne, and finally the birth of Elizabeth. There is as much intrigue and excitement as in the *Henry VI* plays, though, unlike them, it does end happily.

*Henry VIII* was performed as part of the Complete Works Festival not by the RSC but by an outside group, the AandBC Company. Despite the awful name (my computer screen fairly shouts its disapproval), they are an outstanding troupe, fully worthy of the RSC, with their production equaling that of the *Henry VI* trilogy. A brilliant idea for the show was to perform it in the nave of Stratford's Holy Trinity Church, where Shakespeare is buried. When Cranmer baptized the infant Elizabeth (played by a real live baby recruited from the Stratford populace), he used the very font that was probably used for Shakespeare's own baptism.

We sat on either side of the nave (the rest of the church was not used), with the performers, tennis court style, playing between us. The arrangement was good for confrontation scenes but a bit awkward for the few intimate ones. There are also many public scenes in the play, which were staged to use the theatre spectators as the public. For the party scene at Wolsey's, we were even served wine, while a recorder played Renaissance music and actors danced. This was followed by real fireworks outside the church, visible through the ancient Gothic windows, creating a merry moment in a play full of grim politics. Generally, the visual and aural aspects of the play were splendid—beautiful period costumes by Ellen Cairns looking terrific in the medieval surroundings, the shadowy church itself, and the lovely music by David Stoll using a male choir, a female solo singer and later a duet, a lute, percussion, a recorder, and the church's organ.

The acting of the play matched the designs and music with, once again, fine ensemble work. Every actor was not only beautifully spoken but also interesting looking, recalling the great portrait drawings Holbein did of Henry's court (and his famous painting of Henry) even though there was no attempt to make the actors actually look like their real-life counterparts. There is nothing more exciting onstage than the relaxed still figure of an actor in period costume, speaking lines with deep understanding and emotion. It is worth more than all the directorial cleverness that abounds these days with Shakespeare.

This principle was borne out in the unsuccessful productions I saw at

Stratford, both very pictorial, both played on the modified proscenium stage of the old, unreconstructed RST: a *Romeo and Juliet* set clumsily in the Spanish Civil War, and a *Tempest* set at the North Pole, which defeated even the virtuoso Shakespearean actor Patrick Stewart. These were examples of “concept” production, which the critic Roger Gross once described as “the dullness of the bright idea,” the clever visual concept that looks intriguing in an avant-garde theatre magazine but is a bore in the flesh because it stifles the acting. The Complete Works Festival was a laboratory for comparing different styles of Shakespearean production. Though I saw only a fraction of the Festival, I am willing to bet that the rest of it will also demonstrate that Shakespeare wrote for the actor, not the director or the designer.