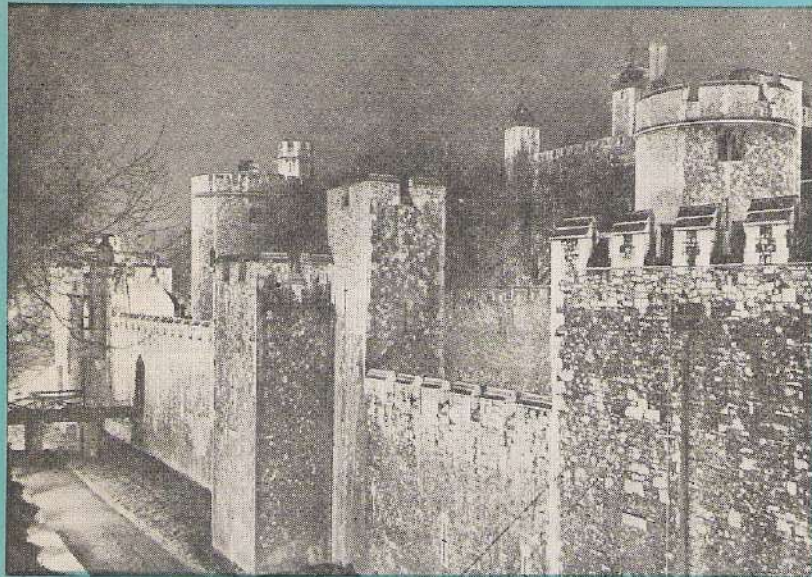


BRITAIN TO-DAY



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PRICE ONE SHILLING

CÆSAR, ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

By T. C. WORSLEY

SHAW, having the conviction of genius, felt that he could do anything. Only such a conviction could have persuaded him that he was able to write something as unsuitable to his particular talent as a pageant play. He was tempted to the idea as well by the contemporary taste for historical dramas; it was part of his plan of attack to indulge the ordinary audience's preferences in the matter of forms in order to produce a double shock when he turned it inside out. It was a trick that worked fairly well with melodrama, in *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*, and very well with domestic comedy, and with *Cæsar and Cleopatra* the shock tactics succeeded at the time. But now, perhaps, we begin to feel rather acutely the split between the dialectic which is his natural mode and the pageantry which he really despised. This shows up specially strongly when the play is put side by side with *Antony and Cleopatra*, which is in the highest reach of Shakespeare's genius.

Shaw one evening, Shakespeare the next, this is the fascinating collocation which Sir Laurence Olivier has arranged for us at the St. James's Theatre. Yet if the Shaw comes off so much worse, this is partly due to the producer, Mr. Michael Benthall, to whose striking gifts the Shakespeare play, with its colour and its passion, is particularly sympathetic, and the Shaw, I should suppose, a little antipathetic. So instead of marking the contrasts by emphasizing the differences, he has tried to find resemblances, to treat the Shaw as if it were, from the pageantry point of view, an equal to the Shakespeare; and in the result the Shaw is swamped and the values that could be got out of it are submerged.

The very opening, for instance, is ominous. It is one of the more skilful scenes in the play, for at one and the same time we have to be given both the historical background and a preparation for the Shavian treatment of history, which consists in "rubbing off the patina of time" and laying bare beneath it the modernness of the past. It is contrived by a group of soldiers talking over the battle that has just taken place. Their clothes and the setting are as much as we want of the "history"; then



VIVIEN LEIGH as *Cleopatra* in Bernard Shaw's *Cæsar and Cleopatra*



LAURENCE OLIVIER as *Mark Antony* in *Antony and Cleopatra*

their Shavian interchanges are made the more witty by contrast. But Mr. Benthall hardly allows us to hear a word. As if afraid that we might be bored, he pumps up incident and rush and scurry, and floods the speeches with them. Breathless soldiers dash in and out, semi-naked Egyptians tear to and fro, and the scene is over before we have gathered what it is all about.

Fortunately this is followed by a scene which establishes the Shavian point of view definitively—the scene in which Cæsar apostrophizes on his position in the world in front of the Sphinx between whose paws the little Cleopatra is hiding. This was beautifully played by both Sir Laurence and Miss Leigh. And from then on the play becomes a kind of battle between Shaw the dialectician and Shaw the parodist of pageantry, with Mr. Benthall coming down on the wrong side. One remembers individual scenes, but the development as a whole is lost. What is not brought out—and this after all is an important part of the play—is how Cleopatra grows in the course of it from a timid girl to the beginning of a queen. Individual scenes, and a few individual performances. Mr. Robert Helpmann has the great merit of being always superbly theatrical. He holds the stage even if sometimes (as in his Cæsar in the other play) he holds it wrong. But his Apollodorus here is a success, hard, glittering, mercurial. Sir Laurence himself draws a most convincing portrait of Cæsar, the aging leader wise ahead of his time; he brings out to just the right degree that touch in the character of the best type of late nineteenth-century patrician, which is an essential ingredient of Shaw's picture. His is so good a performance that the play is worth seeing for it alone.

Antony and Cleopatra is not often produced, primarily owing to the difficulties of casting. It also does present a good deal of mechanical difficulty, but the revolving stage with which the St. James's Theatre is equipped obviates much of this. Mr. Benthall has seized his opportunity in this play with great imagination, and has combined with the designers of the sets and the dresses (Mr. Roger Furse and Miss Audrey Cruddas respectively) to set this great masterpiece glowing and intense before us. Contrasting scenes revolve before our eyes, now where the Romans in their bright purple sit at their table in

front of the dark Doric columns, now where the Egyptians loll in their scarlet beneath slender Corinthians. Pace is not everything, even in pageantry (as we felt in the Shaw) but it is a great advantage never to be allowed to lag. Mr. Benthall has a special talent for catching the rhythmic outline of a Shakespearean play and conveying to us the whole great sweep. He imposes a grandeur from the start, and insists that it never flags.

This has the effect of carrying us successfully over details which are by no means all perfect. The casting of the smaller parts is not up to the standard we would naturally expect from a company directed by Sir Laurence Olivier. And then—a recurring trouble in the English theatre—the verse-speaking is not good enough. I always have the feeling in Mr. Benthall's productions that he himself feels the total effect of the verse, but has not yet learned how to insist on it in detail from his actors. (Actors to-day have not had the opportunities for getting the grounding in speaking that they would have had a generation or two ago. They look to the producer to help them in this.) But I must not give the impression that Mr. Benthall neglects all the details. He has a very sure sense of the dramatic within the scenes and misses none of the opportunities which this play provides.

The last Cleopatra we saw in London was Dame Edith Evans. This was by general consent one of her rare failures. She surprisingly did not transcend the strong flavour of her natural stage personality, and this came between the marvellous part and the audience. Miss Vivien Leigh's case in the opposite. She doesn't "rise to the height of this great argument"; for she is an actress on a small scale, and the part of Cleopatra is on the greatest. On the other hand she doesn't, by any personal mannerisms, or by trying more than she can manage, come between the verse and us. She speaks it out with a range that is even increased since we last heard her. It is a serious and determined effort to reach the height, prevented only by a lack of stature, and no actors or actresses can transcend their physical limitations. It is only fair to add, I think, that many critics found Miss Leigh more satisfying in this part than I did.

Sir Laurence Olivier, of course, is endowed by nature with

everything that an Antony needs. His appearance seems to me to be right to the last hair. He is just on the turn. The various opposite qualities that are noted in him by friends and enemies are all displayed in Sir Laurence. He has just the many-sidedness that makes you see at once why Cæsar can despise him, Enorþabus die for him and Cleopatra live for him. In the scenes of passion he is limited, of course, by his partner, but no one can rouse and rally his followers as Sir Laurence can, or breathe out the exquisiteness of such lines as

Where souls do couch on flowers, we'll hand in hand,
And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze ;
Dido and her Æneas shall want troops,
And all the haunts be ours.

There are many individual scenes, too, that I shall long remember from this production. Antony's reception by Cæsar and the Romans, for instance, the smouldering tempers round the conference table where pride and obstinacy make the path of reconciliation prickly; this scene very dramatically established the politics behind the play and the basis of quarrels to come. Then, one flash of passion of Cleopatra when she strikes down the slave who brings the news of the marriage of Fulvia. Antony's touching scenes with his page Eros (hastened by a justifiable cut) which Sir Laurence and Mr. Lyndon Brook brought off with great pathos. But the great thing about this *Antony and Cleopatra* is that, unlike the Shaw, it comes off triumphantly as a whole. Many of the details, it is true, are open to criticism, but in spite of them one feels in the finish that one has been led right through the heart of the passionate experience this great play offers. That is a great tribute to the producer.