

# BRITAIN TO-DAY



*British Cars in 1951* . . . Grenville Manton  
*Modern Poetic Drama* . . . Stephen Spender

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## SHAKESPEARE PRODUCTIONS

By T. C. WORSLEY

THE Stratford season which ended in October made a special contribution to Shakespeare production—the kind which only an organization like Stratford could make. And it was one which is not likely to be repeated for many years. This was the playing in succession of the four historical plays which follow chronologically one on another. *Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV* and *Henry V*. In order to gauge the full effect of this, it was absolutely necessary to see the plays straight on end; and, seen so, the effect was very much more striking than even those who know the plays well would imagine. I myself was sceptical at the outset, I remember, about including *Richard II* in the cycle. In a programme foreword Mr. Quayle wrote of the four plays as having “possibly been conceived as one great play.” But *Richard II* is in fact stylistically very different from the other three, and it seemed to me that the result of trying to fit it in would be to distort it.

I still think the claim for the four plays as one great play is inadmissible. But having seen them in successive performances I was quite persuaded of the very great interest that comes from playing them in this way. And in fact in order to get full enjoyment from the two *Henrys* it is absolutely necessary to have not merely the events but the emotional atmosphere of *Richard II* alive in one's mind. All the politics of the later plays grow out of the politics of *Richard II*, and one needs to have the setting and the words in which those events took place echoing in one's mind all the time.

In the Stratford production (excellently conceived and executed by Mr. Anthony Quayle) the sense of continuity was held throughout by Miss Tanya Moiseiwitsch's permanent set, which was used for all four plays. And then again the same actors in the same parts pass from play to play. This in itself enforces a shift in the usual emphasis. Thus, *Richard II*, as it is usually given, concentrates exclusively on the interior drama of Richard's fate, and the production in that case is built round the personality of the actor playing Richard. But here, as much weight must be given to the rest of the action and to the other

characters, for Richard dies while they live on. Indeed when the plays are seen successively it is Bolingbroke who is the great central character, and in the production of *Richard II* this must be foreshadowed. Taking this into account we can now see that Mr. Michael Redgrave's Richard was a little undervalued. It was compared, to its disadvantage, with Mr. John Gielgud's of before the war, for this play opened the season and was inevitably treated as a separate play. But if we are to look ahead through the sequence, we see that it is impossible for the actor playing Richard to evoke too much sympathy for the king, as Mr. Gielgud was able to do when acting this play on its own. Mr. Redgrave's slightly less sympathetic rendering was perfectly adapted to the needs of a larger whole.

No less undervalued, though in a different way, was Mr. Harry Andrews' superb Bolingbroke. This won praise indeed, but it was the kind of praise that is given incidentally to a series of fine supporting performances. Yet in the three plays taken together Bolingbroke's comes out as a major role, and Mr. Andrews' really beautiful and noble rendering was an important contributory factor in the success of the whole venture. Indeed, those who saw him three nights in succession will remember his as the finest piece of acting of the year.

Perhaps the most difficult problem raised by playing these plays in a cycle is how to manage the relationship between Prince Hal and Falstaff. If the two *Henrys* only are played together it is comparatively easy. The rejection of Falstaff by the young King becomes the high moment of pathos. Our sympathy goes to Falstaff, and we are left with the feeling that the Prince was something of a prig. But when *Henry V* follows immediately and Henry has to be established as the pattern of an ideal hero, such a sour taste must be avoided. This was done by a shift of emphasis in the performance of both the Falstaff and the Prince. Mr. Anthony Quayle denied himself the opportunity for softening Falstaff, and thus avoided over-engaging our sympathy. His was a fine, richly comic Falstaff, but never for a moment—not even in the crucial moment of the rejection—was it sentimentalized. While Mr. Richard Burton—the very interesting young Welsh actor from whom a great future is expected—managed always to suggest some kind

of holding back from wholehearted participation in the antics of his companions.

These are the kind of ways—involving these shades and shifts of emphasis—in which special interpretations are enforced by playing the plays in a cycle; and they are of great interest in themselves. But even more interesting to me was the large impact of the whole as a whole. The effect was quite extraordinary: it was something much more than seeing a single play four times as long as usual. The panorama was, so to speak, four-dimensional. Not only a panorama of space, but of time too. We move over long stretches of history, we range over diverse walks of life, from the Court in London out into the streets, and out from there into the country, and beyond that into the wild distant Marches. But more than this the texture thickens all the time; echoes from the past fall one upon the other as the two *Henry*s roll on. History repeats itself but the great family names remain the same, the words of fathers echo in the mouths of sons and the accumulation of this kind of detail adds an extra dimension to the whole.

London has also seen two very different productions of *Othello*. Mr. Orson Welles's production, with himself in the name part, succeeded the Renaud-Barrault company at the St. James's. It is undoubtedly a mistake for an actor playing a main part to make himself solely responsible for the production as well. This *Othello* was not well cast, the production was ragged and uneven, and the set by Motley, though impressive to look at, did not prove very practical. Mr. Welles also took altogether too many liberties with the text. And yet overriding all these disadvantages was Mr. Welles's own performance. He is an erratic actor who cannot be depended upon to play equally well every night, but those who were lucky enough to see him at his best, as I did, received an unforgettable impression. A large man at any time, he had built up his appearance so that he seemed gigantic, a gentle giant at first, instantly able to command, but telling the wonders with which he had enchanted Desdemona in a deep, compelling, lulling voice. Then, since the rest of the acting was rather below standard, the duel between him and the Iago, Mr. Peter Finch, became isolated. Or, to change the image, it was like a bullfight, in

which this steely, relentless, hard-edged Iago gradually goaded the gentle bull into a roaring mad one. And what Mr. Welles achieved after that is something rarely seen. As his jealousy was pricked and pricked, he became absolutely terrifying, his great lumbering figure moving up from the back of the stage with a slow inexorability, really struck us with terror, impregnating the atmosphere with menace and doom, so that the inevitability of the tragedy was brought home to us in a way that I never remember before. Everything was concentrated on this effect, and I suppose one must say that, as a production of the play, this one was not a success. But when a chief actor imposes himself so hugely upon us, we tend to forget everything else. I should like to see Mr. Welles acting the part in someone else's production: for his seemed to me the ideal Othello in stature, weight and the sense of development, setting a standard which it is going to be hard not to apply to the disadvantage of smaller personalities when they attempt it.

Perhaps it was the comparison with him that made me think less highly than others of the Old Vic's *Othello*. Mr. Douglas Campbell, the young Scottish actor who took the part, has perhaps a more musical voice than Mr. Welles. But he has not the personality to make up for the present deficiencies in technique. Altogether this seemed to me a "junior" production, for the producer, Mr. Michael Langham, is inexperienced too. He is "of the school of" Guthrie, and boldly attempted the same sort of large scale, *mouvementé* production. Up till the difficult last act, he remained in control of his large forces and imposed his pattern on them. But the vices of this kind of production were more in evidence than its virtues. The ruling vice, I should say, is movement for movement's sake. It is as if this kind of producer, watching his effects, says at arbitrary places: "This is all too static; we must have more going on," and then either the principles themselves or some subsidiary characters in the background are set moving for no better reason than a dislike of repose. I hope some of our young producers notice how with the French actors at the St. James's it was exactly the opposite. What they know supremely well is how just to stand still and deliver their lines and yet never, by that, give an impression of dullness.