

BRITAIN TO-DAY



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PRICE ONE SHILLING

THEATRE—AT STRATFORD

By IVOR BROWN

THE visitor to Stratford-upon-Avon this year will not get the usual quantity of plays. There are only to be five productions, so that the weekly repertory will offer but five opportunities to see a different play instead of the usual seven or eight. And even that quota will not be fully on view until July, when John Gielgud as "vexed Lear" will round off a programme which includes *Measure for Measure*, *Henry VIII*, *Julius Caesar*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *King Lear*. But if quantity is to seek, quality is not. Never in my experience has Stratford had a stronger company than that which includes John Gielgud, Anthony Quayle, Harry Andrews, Peggy Ashcroft, Gwen Frangcon-Davies, Rosalind Atkinson and the very young Barbara Jefford. Nor do the leaders alone supply the excellence: the minor parts are being given distinction by arriving players well chosen and well directed. Any part played by Michael Gwynn always stands out as vivid and original.

Anthony Quayle has collected what I believe is the largest company of trained actors ever seen at Stratford. This means that especial attention can be given to the crowd scenes, for which Shakespearean drama gives abundant scope. Crowd scenes can become tiresome if there is mere reliance on mass and noise. Collect a horde of untrained "supers" and turn them loose to murmur or roar "Rhubarb, Rhubarb," which

was the convenient recipe for simulating vocal tumult on the stage, and the effect may be large, but it is not convincing. Crowds in real life are composed of individuals, different people with different characters, and if a stage crowd is made up with genuine actors instead of with anonymous "supers," say soldiers from the local garrison or eager citizens of the town volunteering for the job, the result is likely to be far more persuasive.

That is where Anthony Quayle, who directed *Julius Cæsar* along with Michael Langham, who made a name at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, is on strong ground. He has a crowd of eager young professionals who can take intelligent direction and so the crowd scenes at Stratford this year are notable. Peter Brook, who directed *Measure for Measure*, and Tyrone Guthrie, who directed *Henry VIII*, have both a great flair for this kind of theatre. Brook wished especially to portray the bawdy heat and squalid licentiousness of Angelo's Vienna, and he has made the streets and *bagnios* of the city come luridly alive. Guthrie's sweep of pageantry in Tudor London surrounded a Holbein King Henry with a fine cavalcade of notables as well as with an urgent clamour of the commons.

But it was in *Julius Cæsar* that the crowd-work was conspicuously brilliant. Of course the Forum scene always demands a great parade of mass-emotion, but in this case the mob is a fascinating assembly of distinctive individuals and it is noteworthy that players of rank, such as Miss Rosalind Atkinson, are important and unselfish members of it. On the first night there may have been some natural over-eagerness, so that Mr. Quayle's own finely rhetorical Antony was in danger of being submerged. But that was easily toned down and the result is such a skilful congregation of clamour, such a landscape of volatile passions, that I do not remember to have seen a production of *Julius Cæsar* that was more plausible or more exciting.

This Roman tragedy has been rather neglected on our stage of late years. It does suffer from some decline in tension after the Forum scene, and it has the possible disadvantage of containing three principal male parts; that should not be a handicap, where there is a good spirit of team-work, as there is at Stratford, but it naturally leaves the determined "star" in

doubt as to which to choose. At one time the protagonist usually took Antony; then came a vogue for making Brutus the focus of attention: in this case Cassius has been John Gielgud's very interesting choice.

I have not counted the lines allotted to each part by the author, but, at a guess, Cassius has the most. Yet the role is frequently under-cast. The resolute and rhetorical Antony has all the plums of the Forum scene and the hesitant Brutus, often described as a preparatory study of Hamlet, is the most sympathetic of the trio; his perplexed nobility is made most poignant as he sees his ideals and his fortunes crash together. The lean and hungry Cassius, a less exalted spirit than Brutus, is rarely selected by the principal player.

But in this case John Gielgud amply justifies his preference. For Cassius is a noble Roman with human limitations which should, well rendered, make him the most intimately drawn figure in the play. Brutus, presented with great dignity by Harry Andrews, is comparatively simple: his practical judgment of men and affairs is unequal to the desperately difficult situation in which he, a natural philosopher rather than a military statesman, is trammelled. The reluctant murderer, killing for Rome's and duty's sake, goes to his doom with no flaw but his own excessive generosity to the unscrupulous Antony. Had he denied free speech and fair play to one who would certainly abuse the privilege all would have been well. He dies with the familiar tribute to "the noblest Roman of them all" well earned.

But Cassius, also an idealist and far more acute in his sense of men and affairs, has his vices of suspicion, jealousy, and even dishonesty. He is a "perturbed spirit" on a lower moral level and for that reason an immensely interesting character. Gielgud brings out all the conflict of impulse in the unhappy man who sees the republican cause wrecked by the excessive altruism and high-mindedness of Brutus. All I can say of Gielgud's performance is that it made me see the play, as well as the man, as I had not seen it before. The balance of the three roles was so well observed and maintained and the pathos of Cassius' distracted mind was so strongly limned that my sympathies were held by him in a most moving way.

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Mr. Donald Wolfit has courageously added to his repertory Massinger's historic melodrama *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (1625). The part of the villainous and properly thwarted snob, toady, and bully, Sir Giles Overreach, was once lifted to the heights by Edmund Kean. Kean's final scenes, in which Sir Giles blusters, rages, and is finally overwhelmed with a seizure, were so tremendous that even the sophisticated Lord Byron fainted and had to be removed. Nobody was carried out of the theatre and ambulances were not standing ready when I saw Mr. Wolfit play the part at Richmond. (The place was most suitable since Kean spent his last years and was buried in Richmond.) But his performance was extremely powerful and entirely gripped the whole audience.

This raises the question of the susceptibility of audiences. Mrs. Siddons, like Kean, could throw her spectators and auditors into panic and collapse when she played a tremendous scene. Would we be so easily bowled over to-day? I think not. While I am most ready to admit that the great tragedians of that period had exceptional powers, I surmise that they were playing to people more accustomed to be absorbed in a theatrical display than we are nowadays.

They went prepared to be "knocked all of a heap" and probably enjoyed the process. The modern cinema-fed audience, used to far more entertainment and also to ubiquitous criticism of entertainment, is tougher, more detached, more critical. Going to the theatre is less of an occasion. The contemporary audience, instead of giving the players a simple and whole-hearted participation, is more aloof. It asks to be shown: it suspends judgment. The public at Richmond were obviously held and even fascinated by Mr. Wolfit's able and vigorous histrionics. They did not appreciate his work the less because they did not fall to the floor and require tots of brandy to bring them round.

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Few plays in recent times have divided the critics more than T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, a state of affairs which was probably very good for the box-office, since the play was thus helped to be a theme of general argument. The performance in

London at the New Theatre was very different from that given at the Edinburgh Festival by the company which recently registered a huge success with it in New York. The text had been a little altered and the performance very greatly changed—chiefly in the direction of making it more human and realistic.

Rex Harrison, replacing Alec Guinness, was a much more ordinary medical man of the suave, successful Harley Street type. Consequently he dominated the situation less and made it a little hard to understand why people paid so much heed to him. But he made the piece more credible to me; it had ceased to be the Mystery Play which Guinness had made it. Margaret Leighton was exquisitely rather than deeply appealing as the girl Celia, whom the intrusive psychiatrist condemns to martyrdom, while Ian Hunter and Alison Leggatt were much truer to life than the previous players. Here was a veritable picture of two middle-aged people facing the second half of their married life in mutual exasperation.

This view of the new production is not, I think, generally maintained; perhaps it depends on whether you regard the play as a misty poetical masterpiece of the intellectual mountain-tops or not. If you feel that *The Cocktail Party* is full of cryptic message, the first rendering, which went from Edinburgh to America, is the better because more unworldly: if you take the piece as a nearly realistic study of modern types and modern medicine, then the London presentation is the more persuasive.



Wood Engraving
By JAN GAASTRA