

BRITAIN TO-DAY



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In the Scientific Age	THE EDITOR
The British Family To-day	GERTRUDE WILLOUGHBY
In the 1930's. IV.	STEPHEN SPENDER
English Church Music	DYNELEY HUSSEY
Hydro-Electric Power in the Highlands	IVOR BROWN
Mr. Gielgud's Lear	T. C. WORSLEY
Ham House	SIR PHILIP HENDY
Films—A Classic Escape	DILYS POWELL
The Science of Welding	C. W. BRETT

PRICE ONE SHILLING

MR. GIELGUD'S LEAR

By T. C. WORSLEY

THE production of *King Lear* by Mr. Anthony Quayle and Mr. Gielgud—following very closely the notes of the late Harley Granville-Barker—has been a fitting climax to the highly successful season at Stratford. To those who remember what Stratford used to be like before the war, bearing all the sad traces of a struggle against apathy and poverty, the change that has come over the scene in the last three years is truly extraordinary. And it is by no means only a question of finding there now the leading London actors. The whole scale and style of production has been transformed. The Stratford stage is a large awkward stage and the auditorium is acoustically difficult. Instead of being frightened by this, the present director has boldly tried to seize the opportunities which size offers. The plays are mounted by our leading designers: and the greatest care is taken with every detail: of the small-part acting: of the pageantry: of the stage-management generally; and the result is that the productions now (though naturally one may not always like certain details or conceptions) are always of the highest class.

For this we are indebted primarily to the vision and energy of the director, Mr. Anthony Quayle. The ground may have been broken by some of his predecessors (Sir Barry Jackson, for instance), but it is he who has brought the whole standard at one leap to a point where Stratford now takes its natural and rightful place as the leading Shakespearean theatre of the world.

The *Lear* exemplifies all these qualities. It would remain a remarkable production, even if it were not, as it is, graced by one of the great performances of our generation from Mr. Gielgud as the King. One fellow critic even found all the subplot too well established, and this is anyhow a tribute to the kind of care for detail I have mentioned, the recognition of the importance of all the parts and details if a Shakespearean production is to make its maximum effect as a whole. The settings and dresses are by Mr. Leslie Hurry, who has subdued here a natural taste for the fashionable romantic-horrific, and

has dressed it in glowing Renaissance colours which effectively emphasize the majesty of the court. The permanent set sacrifices a good deal to the advantages of providing a central entrance, and one's criticisms of the details of direction can often be traced back to this evocative but immovable structure, cutting the stage square in half from front to back. But once given this, we can admire the ingenuity with which this structure is treated, notably the portcullis that drops its teeth down behind to make a menacing background to the scenes in the last act.

The qualities we find in Mr. Gielgud's Lear are the qualities that have long been admired in his acting, brought by the size and nature of the part and by Mr. Gielgud's increased experience, to their height. Any actor is limited by his natural endowments, and Mr. Gielgud is artist enough not to try to transcend his. He cannot be, as actors in the past have been, a terrifying Lear; he can scarcely be a toweringly majestic one. But the note of pathos he can strike more clearly, easily, touchingly, than any other living actor, and then again he has pre-eminently the ability to bring alive the complicated, subtle pattern of complex human personalities. These two gifts combined make a Lear that moves us to-day as perhaps no other could. The straightforward tyrant of the beginning—wayward, wilful, almost pettish—enlarges, widens and deepens even as he disintegrates into a madness which throws across the screen of his mind the multifarious facets of a human history, all disordered. And then he moves out again into another simplicity, a different one, when he wakes from his long sleep. It might be a criticism of the opening scenes that they are played a little too young, but there are a number of extremely telling small touches to bring out the picture of an old man so accustomed for so long to having every whim indulged on the instant that to be crossed is, literally, more than he will be able to bear. And we particularly admire in these opening scenes the way he grasps at any sop which will allow him to deceive himself, only to keep bringing himself violently back against the solid evidence "Who put my man in the stocks?"

The opening of the storm scene was spoiled for me by the one false touch in the production: background music from the loudspeakers which drowns all too effectively the opening speech,

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leaving us only with the picture to look at of the disordered King and the excellently played fool (Alan Badel), clutching at his knee and managing to convey in his haunted eyes alone—no need, you see, for all those rain noises and rumbles—the cold, the wet, and the fright as of a child whose world has collapsed over his head. But when the pother stops in the panatrophe, and Lear comes down from the platform where he plays this opening, Mr. Gielgud soon regains his ascendancy.

Perhaps the perfection of this performance is in the last act. The sub-plot, as I have indicated, has been played throughout with a ferocious intensity. Of the two sisters, Miss Maxine Audley has given an icy white coldness to her Regan, and Miss Gwen Frangçon-Davies a red-haired fury to Goneril, and Mr. Paul Hardwick's Cornwall is merciless. I don't ever remember seeing the scene in which Gloucester's eyes are put out more convincingly and horrifically done (and here I think I trace the hand of Mr. Quayle, co-producer with Mr. Gielgud: he always has a faultless touch in the handling of the Shakespearean melodrama). The importance of this resides, of course, not only in the effectiveness of the scene itself; but the weight of its terror lies heavy on the blind lonely figure of Gloucester (Leon Quartermaine) as he is guided stumbling through the succeeding scenes. And it tells most of all at the entry of the mad Lear hung with garlands when the blinded and the maddened sit together on the bench, and in truly terrible fashion the King edges towards a recognition of his old courtier ("I know thine eyes well enough"), a fore-parody, as it were, all cruelly out of focus, of the recognition of Cordelia that is to come. That scene, where the King wakes from his long sleep to find her beside him, is quite beautifully done with Miss Peggy Ashcroft, most touching of Cordelias, to raise the pathos to the highest bearable pitch, and Mr. Gielgud portraying here a kind of trustful simplicity that carries in it echoes of some memory from childhood: and this note is sustained most musically in the lovely "Come, let's away to prison" speech.

I hope I have managed to imply how profoundly Mr. Gielgud manages to convey the physical change in his character through the progress of the play. That his speaking of the part is as nearly perfect as we are likely to hear in our generation goes



King Lear at Stratford-upon-Avon: JOHN GIELGUD as *Lear*, ALAN BADEL
as the *Fool*