SHAKESPEARE AND GORDON CRAIG

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In studying the drama, we should never forget the fundamental fact that the theater is a playhouse—or, in other words, a house in which to play.

Why is it that people go to the theater? If you ask them, they will answer frankly that they go to the theater to enjoy themselves; and that, of course, is the only proper reason. But this answer is not so thoughtless as it might at first appear. When people say that they go to the theater to enjoy themselves, they mean quite literally that they go to enjoy *themselves:* they do not go to enjoy anybody else.

People do not go to the theater to enjoy the emotions, or the simulated emotions, of the actors; but to enjoy *their own* emotions, as these may be aroused and stimulated by what they see and hear. They do not go to the theater to enjoy the ideas of the dramatist; but to enjoy their own ideas, as these may be suggested to them by the proceedings of the play.

It is never possible for one person to enjoy the emotions of another person, any more than it would be possible for a wife to suffer the physical pain of her husband's toothache. To enjoy emotions which originate in anybody else, we must first catch them by contagion so that they become our own. And it is the same with intellectual ideas. An idea set before us as the thought of someone else will remain unenjoyable so long as we continue to consider it externally and say, "That's what *he* thinks: but it doesn't affect *my* life and doesn't mean anything to *me*." To enjoy an idea that has been proposed to us, we must first adopt it into our own minds and make it there a focal point for further intellectual activity.

"All architecture," said Walt Whitman, "is what you do to it when you look upon it. All music is what awakes from you when you are reminded by the instruments." The necessary basis of self-enjoyment is some exercise of our own activities—physical, sensory, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual. We enjoy ourselves in proportion as these activities are directed toward the universal end of making something out of nothing; and the keenest ecstasy arises only from a process so creative that it raises us, for a little moment, to the stature of the gods.

So long as people seated in a theater remain conscious of the fact that there is a physical division between the world behind the footlights, where the actors are, and the world before the footlights, where the spectators are, the play has not yet really begun to be. So long as they remain aware of the fact that they are looking at something outside of themselves and listening to something outside of themselves, the play has not yet "come alive," as children say. A play springs into real existence only when, so to speak, it pours itself over the footlights and begins to happen in the auditorium, or when —to reverse the point of view—the people gathered out in front seem to swarm up over the footlights, to enter the room which is exhibited upon the stage, supposing that the stage-set shows a room, so that they feel themselves to be among those present with the other actors, listening to a conversation which, conceivably, they themselves, at any moment, might interrupt, and participating in the passage of an action in which they themselves, presumably, might, at any moment, assume an active and determining part. It is only when this illusion of personal participation in the play has been established that the gathered spectators are permitted to enjoy that vicarious experience of life, to furnish which is the one great function of the theater.

It follows logically that every artist of the theater—whether he be a dramatist, an actor, a stage-director, a scene-designer, or any other of the many and various contributors to the collaborative making of a play—should endeavor at every moment to make the drama seem to happen as little as necessary on the stage, and to make it seem to happen as much as possible within the imagination of the gathered public. "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter," and an analogous axiom may also be applied within the visual sphere. Nothing we can listen to or look at can ever satisfy us so completely as the imagined sight and sound of something that we have created by ourselves, within ourselves, and for ourselves.

The main reason, among many, why William Shakespeare deserves to be regarded as the greatest dramatist who ever lived is the fact that he exercises the faculty of arousing, stimulating, and sustaining the imaginations of a thousand normal-minded theatergoers of any century or any country to such a degree that they feel themselves, after the vicarious experience of life through which he leads them, to have created, in their own imaginations, even more of the drama than he has set before them actually on the stage.

Shakespeare, in emphatic contradistinction to the journalistic playwrights of the present day, refuses to deal with picayune details of human experience which must be narrowly pigeon-holed in place and time before they can be understood. He looks at life, not particularly, but generally. As Ben Jonson said of him, "He was not of an age, but for all time"; and his stories, for the most part, seem to happen not in any special place but everywhere. He conceives of experience in terms of eternity, and is interested only in those aspects of humanity which were, and are, and evermore shall be. And, when human experience is so conceived—as something that refuses to be catalogued within confining Kantian categories of space and time—it cannot matter in the least whether or not clocks actually struck in ancient Rome or whether or not Bohemia was actually a desert country by the sea.

Also—and this is a point which was denied throughout the nineteenth century and is scarcely, even now, beginning to be reaccepted—Shakespeare possessed, in the Elizabethan theater, an instrument which was far more potent in its appeal to the imagination of the public than our elaborate and complicated theater of the present day.

Shakespeare had no scenery, in the modern sense. His theater had no roof. His plays were acted in the afternoon, by natural sunlight; and he had no means of darkening his stage. His women characters were played by choir boys. His actors when playing *Julius Caesar* wore the clothes of Sir Walter Raleigh. Gentlemen sat on the stage, and interrupted the actors when they were displeased.

But what of all these little matters? These apparent disadvantages were really advantages. Whenever Shakespeare desired to paint a perfect stage-picture, as in the fifth act of *The Merchant of Venice,* all he had to do was to write his lines so eloquently that his auditors would be required to imagine what he had in mind, and he could rest assured that the effect could not be impeded by a bungling scene-painter, a negligent electrician, or a pinochle game among unionized stage-hands who are paid ninety dollars a week to turn their backs upon their business. When he desired to darken his stage, he did not have to wonder whether a member of the electrician's union would yank a switch too hastily or too tardily, not far enough or else too far. In 1607, Richard Burbage, playing *Macbeth* for the first time—with the London sunlight of three-thirty in the afternoon beating down upon his forehead—read the line, "Light thickens; and the crow makes wing to the rooky wood." In the real sense, twilight was created in the imaginations of a thousand auditors by the speaking of two words; and the entire stage was darkened by the run of open *o*'s in the remainder of that single sentence.

The murder scene in *Macbeth,* which is one of the darkest passages in drama, was played in 1607 on a bare platform under the natural light of the sun at the summit of the day. But, what of that? Lady Macbeth had said, "It was the owl that shrieked—the fatal bellman which gives the stern'st good night," and everybody in the audience knew that, in reality, the stage was dark.

As a result of a remarkable series of scientific and mechanical inventions, an extraordinary development in practical stagecraft took place throughout the last three-quarters of the nineteenth century. In this particular period, it happened that all the arts were drenched with realism and that even the dominating figure in the modern drama—Henrik Ibsen—surrendered to the current of the times and deliberately turned himself into a realist. As a consequence, through the eighties and the nineties of the nineteenth century, the theater prided itself upon its prowess in imitating actuality; and even the plays of Shakespeare were yanked down from the lofty categories of all time and anywhere at all, and pigeon-holed, by realistic scenery, into a series of successive little lodgments into the lower categories of where and when.

For instance, when Sir Henry Irving, who was, beyond all question, the foremost British actor of his time, undertook a reproduction of *Romeo and Juliet,* he became obsessed with the utterly unimportant fact that the story had been said to happen in Verona.

Shakespeare—who had never visited Verona, nor even Italy—had repeated this detail only because it had happened to be mentioned in the text of the Italian novel which he was frankly stealing as the basis of his play. But Irving sent photographers and draughtsmen to Verona, to bring back authentic records of actual buildings which had been standing there at the imagined period of the tale of *Romeo and Juliet*.

As a background for Mercutio's witty line about his own death-wound—"No, 'tis not so deep as a well nor so wide as a church-door; but 'tis enough, 'twill serve"—Irving erected a realistic set in which Mercutio was required to wave his right hand at an actual well-head and his left hand at the punctiliously reproduced portico of an actual church in Verona; and, while the spectators were admiring, according to request, the realistic scenery, Mercutio died unnoticed, and so did the scene, and so did William Shakespeare.

In the eighteen nineties, a youth named Gordon Craig, who was the son of Sir Henry Irving's leading lady, Ellen Terry, was a minor actor in his company. Also, he happened to be, by nature, a painter, a sculptor, an architect, and several other different varieties of artist. He respected the fine performance of his mother as Lady Macbeth, but decided that the production of the play was wrong in principle. Shakespeare's tragedy of *Macbeth* was just as primitive, just as primordial, just as universal as the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, which happened to be written two thousand years before. *Macbeth*, therefore, should not be dated punctiliously in the year 1000 A.D., nor placed precisely in Inverness or any other tiny place in tiny Scotland.

Mr. Gordon Craig has now been recognized, for a quarter of a century, as the foremost theater-artist in the world, and the most successful of practical producers, Stanislawsky in Russia, Reinhardt in Germany and Austria, Appia in Hungary, Duse in Italy, Poulsen in Denmark, have paid tribute to him.

Until the current season, Gordon Craig has never condescended to imagine and design a stage-production for the United States; but, since he happens to regard Shakespeare's tragedy of *Macbeth* as one of the greatest dramas of all time, he was readily persuaded by the most idealistic of our American producing managers, Mr.

George C. Tyler, to project the really marvelous production of *Macbeth* which is being shown, this season, in the leading cities of this country.

Defining *stage-designment*, first of all, as any arrangement of lines, plane surfaces, solid forms, colors, lights, and shadows which may be used as a background for a play, Mr. Craig declares that the sole purpose of stage-designment is to assist the actors in communicating to the imaginations of the spectators the intention of the dramatist. Every scene must be dominated by a certain emotion, whether it be a sense of hilarity or pathos or cynicism or horror or good humor or fearsome foreboding or ribaldry or tragedy; and the sole purpose of the scene-designer, at any moment, should be to fortify the appeal and intensify the effect of the dominant emotion. Furthermore, so far as the spectators are concerned, this result should be achieved subconsciously instead of consciously. They should remain unaware of the practical means by which their imaginations have been stimulated.

Mr. Craig himself has formulated this principle in his famous statement that the best scenery cannot be seen and that no scenery is good which attracts attention to itself. It is a principle which is very easy to understand, because what he really advocates is a return of the theater to Shakespearian simplicity. "Back to nature" has always been the slogan of every forward-moving revolution; and Mr. Craig is trying to liberate the imagination of the playgoer from those narrow categories into which it was "cabined, cribbed, confined" by the artificial stagecraft of the nineteenth century, and to allow it, once again, to enjoy an unimpeded scope.

In his current production of *Macbeth*, which represents, it must be said in passing, the highest point which has ever yet been touched by Shakespearian production in the English-speaking world, Mr. Craig has done his utmost to permit the gathered spectators to *create* the play within their own imaginations, as Shakespeare himself desired them to do in 1607. For instance, the great murder scene is played in a shadowy and fear-compelling set that is painted entirely with lights and shadows. There is nothing on the stage to localize the scene in Scotland nor to date it in any particular period. We are in the presence, only, of stark murder; and we can think of nothing else except the human conscience tortured by the disintegration of the human soul. Nothing is discernible upon the stage which might possibly distract attention from the faces and the voices of the actors. In consequence, the imagination of the gathered public is allowed an unimpeded opportunity to realize the enormity of a primordial experience projected by the very greatest of poetic minds.

In Gordon Craig's production, Macbeth and Banquo are first revealed upon a high-arched bridge, from which they look down upon the three witches, who—according to a literal interpretation of one of Banquo's lines—appear to have bubbled up out of the earth. After this weird scene upon the blasted heath, illumined only by intermittent lightning, it is Mr. Craig's idea that Macbeth, on his victorious return to Forres, should be overwhelmed at once with a stabbing sense of the magnificence of the royal court.

Consequently, for the scene beginning with King Duncan's line, "Is execution done on Cawdor?", Mr. Craig has endeavored to force the gathered spectators to imagine the most magnificent throne-room in the most magnificent palace that ever was. All that he actually erects upon the stage is a tall flight of perfectly simple steps, set dead center and receding gradually from the curtain line. At the top of this tall flight of steps is placed a single chair. It is a golden chair; and in it is seated a gray-bearded man who is wearing a golden crown. To his right hand and to his left—and on the same lofty level on which is based the seating of his throne—stand half a dozen courtiers, magnificently robed. Each of them holds in his right hand a towering staff, from which depends a gorgeous banner; and all the lights which Mr. Edison can manufacture are drenched diagonally across the drooping of these splendid-colored banners.

Macbeth, covered still with mud and blood, returns from battle and enters on the lower level of the stage. He looks upward at the royal pageant; and something clicks in him and us. His eyes climb the steps of that simple stairway, one by one, until they reach the golden throne; and we know that, after that psychologic moment, no power upon earth or in the eerie air, can ever prevent Macbeth from climbing that alluring stairway, step by step, and toppling the gray-bearded Duncan out of his isolated chair, and sitting high upon that golden throne himself, with all the gorgeous banners in the world streaming down around him. This effect is produced by Mr. Craig—in concrete terms—by nothing more than the erection of a simple flight of steps and the flinging of a diagonal downward light across a flock of banners.

ADAPTING INSTRUCTION TO PUPIL ABILITY

RUTH MARY WEEKS

The Kansas City high schools group their English students in "A," "B," and "C" sections by intelligence tests plus their previous English records. This is better than unsegregated classes, but is not satisfactory, since neither grades nor intelligence tests indicate precisely the students' deficiencies in reading and writing. We teach composition one semester and literature the next. Therefore we feel that composition classes should be segregated by tests on the subject matter to be taught therein, and that literature classes should be grouped by tests on reading speed and comprehension. However, standardized tests in reading and composition are lacking for the high school years; and so we try to handle our roughly segregated groups so as to give the whole section something within its power and liking, and yet allow for the individual differences within the group. Paseo is a new school, and we cannot do everything at once. Therefore we have centered our first efforts on devising the method in literature of which I wish to speak.

We decided that the bad taste of our superior students came from insufficient reading of good books; and that our poor students found reading hard because they had not read enough to make it easy. Extensive reading thus seemed the prime need of all our groups. How to provide extensive reading was the next problem. First came the question of time in which to read. Our long school day, coupled with a study of our students' leisure, proved that two or three hours a week outside of school was all that we could ask for English work. We saw that the students must read in the English class period, if they were to read enough to develop either ease