

# GUIDE

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## TO THE ARTS

Clive Barnes  
on Shakespeare

A Consumer's Guide  
to the Arts  
in Washington



studios and—largely, it must be added—British money. Is this a slight to America in general and American Shakespearians in particular? Papp thinks so, and has received publicity from speaking his thoughts out loud.

This BBC project—it is a working col-

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laboration with Time/Life Television—is potentially one of the most important things ever to happen to Shakespeare. There will be 37 plays spread over a period of six years. Starting next year for five years world television, via the BBC, will receive six plays a year, and in the sixth year, rounding off the series, there will be seven.

The series is budgeted at \$13.5 million and it seems that the American contribution (the business patrons are Exxon, Metropolitan Life, and Morgan Guaranty) will be about \$3.6 million. At that price, the series is a bargain for America. There is no way in which we could do our own series for anything like \$13.5 million—let alone the piffling sum of \$3.6 million spread over six years.

The BBC itself has put the series in charge of a South African-born producer, Cedric Messina, well regarded perhaps, but not one of the first theatrical names you think of in connection with Shakespeare. Faced with the rival claims of Britain's two great national companies, Peter Hall's National Theater and Trevor Nunn's Royal Shakespeare Company, the BBC appears to have declared a plague on both their houses, and are casting each play individually.

The 1979 batch consists—it is at present understood—of "As You Like It," which opens the season in Britain on BBC 2, the second national network, on January 24, and will include "Romeo and Juliet," "Much Ado About Nothing," "Richard II," "Julius Caesar," and "Measure for Measure."

Stars are planned for the season. Derek Jacobi (remembered as Claudius in Robert Graves' "I, Claudius" series) will, for example, play Richard in "Richard II," backed by John Gielgud as John of Gaunt. Robert Shaw, later in the series, is planned to play King Lear, while Michael York is set for Benedick in "Much Ado About Nothing," and all of the plays will feature major British actors.

At present, at least, Americans it seems are not included in the plans.

Now anyone with any sense agrees that financially this is a bargain for public television, and could potentially do an enormous amount for Shakespeare in public understanding. These programs are to be aired across the entire world, and their effect is almost unforeseeable.

Why are there objections to the plans? The economic arguments are nonsensical. True Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, sounded, in a letter to *The New York Times*, his dread concern that the British were imposing a quota on non-British productions, limiting them to 14 percent of air time. However, there is infinitely more American programming on British television than there is British programming on American airwaves. Taking the three major networks and public televisions, together with the major independent channels across the country, what has been called British "cultural dumping" doesn't amount to anything like 14 percent of the total program pattern offered America.

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It might be better for America if it did. Having lived first with British television for about 11 years, and then with American for 13, I have no doubt whatsoever which is the better. British television may be, generally speaking, garbage, but compared with the American variety, it is at least scented garbage. At times British television can divorce itself sufficiently from the ratings to produce works that sometimes look suspiciously like art.

No, behind all these American professional objections to the British series is both chauvinism and, as is usually the case with chauvinism, insecurity. American Shakespearians fear that they are not the equal of their British or Canadian counterparts. In the United States we do not have great classic repertory companies (or Shakespearean companies) to match Britain's Royal Shakespeare Company, its National Theater, the Prospect Theater Company, the Young Vic, or for that matter the Shakespeare Festival in Ontario, Canada.

Shakespeare is—I still submit—America's greatest playwright. But we treat him abominably. Partly this is cost—he calls for enormous resources, difficult to

supply in our under-subsidized theater—partly this is diffidence. We do not have a ready supply of Shakespearean actors because we give comparatively little Shakespeare.

The current season just ended saw only three major productions of Shakespeare in New York City—two in Central Park, chez Papp, and one by Frank Dunlop's new BAM Theater Company in Brooklyn. The season before—when Papp, chiefly for financial reasons abandoned the Bard for his Central Park excursions and revved a couple of productions already given in Lincoln Center—New York City had just one Shakespeare production, a somewhat shakily inferior "Romeo and Juliet."

This past season the Shakespeare Festival at Stratford, Connecticut, came up with a few weeks of a somewhat dogged "Twelfth Night." The season before the theater was dark, apart from a few touring attractions such as a road company of the musical "Grease." The best repertory company in the country—and that probably by a country mile—is and has been the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco—but I think that this season all it has offered by way of Shakespeare is an admittedly lively production of "Julius Caesar."

Washington, however, is rather better off, where the Folger customarily offers three performances of Shakespeare a year. And last season, of course, Arena gave its striking production of "Hamlet," directed by the Romanian Liviu Ciulea.

Now how are we going to take part in this grand Bardic feast supported by the British and its European neighbors? We do not have the money. We do not have the television traditions. Yes, you can point, sometimes accusingly, at the Theater in America series, sponsored by public television, all American series. But these productions

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were entirely based on existing stage performances. They were television realizations, not television creations.

The easy course for the British to have taken would have been to have done something similar. The BBC could have gone to Trevor Nunn of the Royal Shakespeare Company or Sir Peter Hall of the National Theater, or Robin Phillips

## THE SHAKESPEARE CONTROVERSY

### TV Is Bringing Him to Millions—Who Should Be in the Act?

by Clive Barnes

The other day I found myself in Visalia, California. Well that is not strictly true—no one ever finds himself in Visalia, California. You have to go there. I had gone to this fertile valley full of orange groves, vineyards and humidity set between Los Angeles and San Francisco to talk, of all things, about Shakespeare.

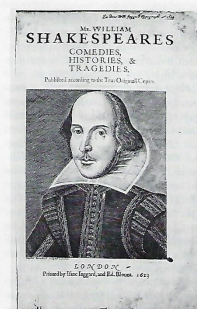
For reasons here more or less irrelevant, Visalia has decided to develop the California Shakespearean Festival and Performing Arts Center. With this in mind it had called a series of conferences, to which theater people and scholars flocked from all over North America. What Shakespeare would have thought of all this attention in Visalia, I shudder to think. But the old man's sense of irony must be fairly finely honed by now.

It was a useful conference—far more interesting than most affairs of this nature. I came away with a great deal of admiration for the sponsors of this ambitious plan, but also with two almost vestigial impressions.

The first was a certain difficulty I experienced in trying to persuade this North American audience—a fairly large contingent had come down from Stratford, Ontario, to show the Californians how Shakespeare flourishes in a colder climate—that Shakespeare was America's leading playwright. That indeed in terms of space, time and idiom, he meant as much to an American kid growing up in Brooklyn or Visalia as to an English kid growing up in Chelsea or Stratford-on-Avon.

I noticed that my view found strong support in the passionate and erudite advocacy of Dr. John Andrews, editor of the *Shakespearean Quarterly* and research director of the Folger Library. Yet the theatricals were more skeptical of my proposition. Many of them felt that Shakespeare was a foreign tongue spoken in an alien land.

My second vestigial impression was closely connected with the first. I felt that there was a certain diffidence on the part of the professional American theater—a diffidence I have often noticed before—in approaching Shakespeare. A feeling, never quite stated but never quite de-



The source of it all.

ried, that the British, or rather the English (the concept is that parochial) have an ineffable way with the Bard that we poor Johnny-come-lately colonials can never match.

Mark you I said it was a vestigial impression. No one is going to come out and say that aloud. Yet it seems to be a sub-text for many American Shakespearean readings. Consider the matter of accents.

So much American Shakespeare is spoken in cut-glass tones of an upper-class British accent, all steeled prisms, and vowels, that one must wonder why. I tried to explain to Visalia that in fact many scholars now believe that it is not American English that has changed its accent, but English English, and that in fact the accent of modern America is closer to Shakespeare than is the accent of modern England. You only have to hear Stacy Keach play Hamlet in a natural mid-American voice to see the force of such an argument.

Yet Americans, even, or perhaps particularly, American actors, are not easily convinced. They become defensive. And, as most people do when they first become defensive, they subsequently turn to the attack. This is what I think has happened with Joseph Papp, of the New York Shakespeare Festival, and certain of his supporters, such as the union leader Albert Shanker when faced with the prospect of the complete Shakespearean cycle coming to American public television, but produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation. And using British actors, British directors, British



A scene from "Much Ado About Nothing," the first completed production in the BBC's six-year series of all the Shakespeare plays. The programs begin early next year and will be presented over WETA-TV in Washington.

Photo: Folger Library

of Stratford, Ontario, or even one of the lesser-known English-speaking classic theaters and suggested a co-sponsorship

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deal for the complete Shakespearean cycle, a venture, incidentally, not attempted since Michael Bernthal undertook it for the now defunct Old Vic Company some 20 years ago.

The BBC decided against this. They wanted Shakespeare specifically for television and they were willing to put their money where their heart was. This could have been undertaken—at enormous loss—by, say, ABC, CBS, or NBC. But frankly if the idea had even occurred to those presumably admirable networks, it would have been lost under a smokescreen of projected Nielsen ratings.

Could the BBC have included star American actors in the series? Certainly. American actors—although foolishly nervous when it comes to Shakespeare—are as good as the best in the world. Take Stacy Keach, Sam Waterston and Christopher Tabor—three recent Ameri-

can Hamlets totally different from one another, but I would match them against any contemporary British trio. The BBC says it tried. Whom it tried with, it does not say. It does claim that the money involved was not sufficient to attract the top American actors.

Personally I somewhat doubt this—actors such as George C. Scott and James Earl Jones, and many others, have never shown themselves eager for the buck, and I suspect that the BBC never really seriously thought of American actors. Difficulties with Equity, working permits, etc., etc., probably made the whole thing too difficult.

There is another purely artistic point to be made here as well. Our best Shakespearean actors are developing a new style, an American style toward Shakespeare. The British actors, even if they are semi-American film stars such as Michael York or Robert Shaw, are still perfectly at home in the British Shakespearean tradition.

Think, for a moment, of the difference between Orson Welles and Peter Ustinov. Both are Hollywood stars—and both I believe live in Paris—but Ustinov would go into a British Shakespearean production like a hand to a fitted glove; Welles would seem like a gloriously sore thumb.

If we want our own Shakespearean cycle on television we must nurture our own Shakespearean tradition, accept our own way of doing Shakespeare with our own actors, our own methods. We must

contribute a different voice to the undervalued Shakespearean theme.

Here come a vital point, that is perhaps at the heart of Papp's frantic objections, and feelings of other Shakespearians across the country. This series—where probably more people across the world will see Shakespeare than ever before in history—may set such a rigid standard of British elocution and production styles, that we in the United States might never recover from that pattern. Audiences might henceforth demand that all our efforts be given with phony English accents and a whole sickly atmosphere of pseudo Merrie England.

It is a danger. Face it. Yet the chance of making Shakespeare available at such

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a price, and at such a level, must not be missed, nor should we be churlish about it. This series will stimulate our Shakespeare rather than stifle it—and when audiences, their appetites whetted by these small shadows, see real American interpretations of Shakespeare into our own version of his universal language they will be ready and will understand. Then one day we will have our own TV series that we can sell cheap to the British. The play is the thing, not nationalistic politics.