

THE TEMPEST

FOREWORD BY SIR JOHN GIELGUD

As a very young actor, I was engaged in the early 1920s to play the part of Ferdinand for a few performances at the Savoy Theatre in London by Robert Courtneidge, whose daughter Rosaline was to play Miranda. Courtneidge presented a short Shakespeare season every year starring Henry Baynton, who was then a popular provincial actor with a romantic appeal. Following the examples of Sir Frank Benson and Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Baynton decided to give prominence to Caliban, finding, as did most managers and actors at that time, that Prospero was merely a tedious old bore. I have never found him so. (Benson hung upside down, with a fish in his mouth, while Tree staged a final tableau in which he was left desolate on the island watching the receding ship as it sailed back to Italy.)

A few years later, Tree's daughter Viola went into management and presented a very unhappy production of the play, which I had gone to see with high hopes but in which I was sadly disappointed. The Prospero was Henry Ainley, previously outstanding as Malvolio and Leontes under Granville Barker, but apparently bewildered in attempting Prospero, despite a sonorous delivery in his beautiful voice, and perhaps distracted by an Ariel (a charming but unsatisfactory musical comedy actress named Winifred Barnes) who flew about and hovered above him on a wire. The Caliban, a fine actor, Louis Calvert, was made up to look like an animal, and walked about on all-fours. Only the young lovers (Joyce Carey and Francis Lister) shed a few moments of beauty and romantic style, while the scenery, evidently resuscitated from Tree's version of the play many years before, did little to rescue a disastrous failure.

When I first attempted the part of Prospero at the Old Vic, in 1930, I was only 26, but extremely fortunate in my director,

THE EVERYMAN SHAKESPEARE



Harcourt Williams, and enormously helped by the imaginative skills of Leslie French and Ralph Richardson, who were Ariel and Caliban respectively. I became increasingly devoted to the play, and was to act Prospero in three subsequent productions on the stage under three fine directors, George Devine, Peter Brook and Peter Hall, over a number of years. Finally, two years ago, I played the part again for the director Peter Greenaway, in his controversial film entitled *Prospero's Books*, a most fascinating and rewarding experience. Each time, I had to re-examine my previous performance, but tried to profit by the different ideas of the directors, actors, and designers with whom I came to be associated. Since I have never directed the play myself, I have always been too busy concentrating on my own part to examine in detail the scenes in which Prospero does not appear (both the conspiracy scenes of the usurping lords, and the low-life comedians who conspire with Caliban to destroy Prospero). The long dialogue between Prospero and Miranda at the beginning of the play is something of a problem for the actors and audience alike. The speeches are long and involved, though so essential to the understanding of the plot. Curiously enough, I felt that this was one of the most successful scenes in Greenaway's film, greatly helped by the closeups, angles of the camera, and its visual beauty.

I once spent a somewhat exhausting half hour discussing the play with Jonathan Miller when we chanced to meet at Nice Airport while we were both waiting to board a plane. I had recently seen his production of the play at the Mermaid Theatre in London, in which he seemed to have concentrated on the colonial implications of the 'still-vex'd Bermooths', and he was derisive of all the 'magic nonsense' as he called it, so naturally we argued to little purpose. I was greatly taken by a suggestion of Professor Glynne Wickham, with whom I talked at Bristol when we were giving the play there. He thought that Shakespeare intended the end of the play to flatter the new king, James I; that, in the masque, Iris was to represent Queen Elizabeth (referring to the famous 'Rainbow' portraits of her), Juno for James's Queen, and that Ariel is finally freed to ascend into Heaven, as a kind of John the

Baptist, to herald the deification of Prospero, celebrating his triumphant welding of England and Scotland into a single kingdom.

The play is, of course, intensely difficult to stage successfully with so many possible pitfalls to be avoided. The shipwreck should surely be very simply suggested and the speeches must be audible despite the competition of the background storm. I am sure that Ariel should be acted by a boy or a very young man, though at various times, at the Vic and Stratford, both Elsa Lanchester (Charles Laughton's wife) and Margaret Leighton were very successful in the part. The lovers must combine youth and beauty with style and breeding, and the comics kept in reasonable check, not forgetting their sinister intent. The late Arthur Lowe was a superb Stephano in the Peter Brook production. Jack Hawkins, Denis Quilley and Alec Clunes all played Caliban in productions with me, all fine performances, though I felt Richardson surpassed them all. Needless to say how important it is to mingle the fantasy, songs and magnificent language – both poetry and prose – with the powerful suggestions of evil, repentance and forgiveness which bind the whole play together. And then, in the epilogue, the beautiful fable is crowned with a poignant simplicity and charm.

Sir John Gielgud

SIR JOHN GIELGUD's first stage appearance was playing the role of the Herald in *Henry V*. He has since appeared in such diverse Shakespearean roles as Hamlet, Shylock, Antony, King Lear, Prospero, Julius Caesar, and Richard II, and directed productions of *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Twelfth Night*, among many others.