



Shakespeare and the Modern Director

JONATHAN MILLER

One of the questions I'm often asked is which Shakespearean play interests me the most. I find that difficult to answer because my experience has been that the play I'm working on at a given time is the one that most thoroughly engages my attention. For me, and I suspect for most directors, it is work on a play that makes it interesting. It seems to expand into a universe of its own, so that at that time no other play seems to matter. This doesn't mean, of course, that work on one play excludes consideration of all other plays, because one of the things I've always felt is that when you're doing one of Shakespeare's plays it's advisable, if not inevitable, that you use the other plays as prefaces and checkpoints, as reminders of and guides to Shakespeare's characteristic preoccupations.

On the whole I don't subscribe to the view that each play should be wrenched out of context or used for something that is relevant to our own time. I'm against the idea of using Shakespeare for relevant purposes. I'm not opposed to modernizing the presentation, because once a way of presenting Shakespeare becomes "canonical" it becomes fossilized. But I think that it is silly to suppose that all artifacts from the past, Shakespeare's plays included, are of interest only insofar as they can be used as vehicles or devices for expressing or conveying something that is of current interest.

There are two extremes, both ludicrous, which

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should be avoided at all cost. One is the notion that one should use the plays to say something about an urgent political issue or social concern. That, to my mind, is fatuous—a consequence, as T.S. Eliot would have said, of overvaluing our own time. The other extreme is to assume that there is, in fact, a readily identifiable author's intention that can be excavated intact from Shakespeare's own time. I realize that there are intentionists in this business who claim that a controlling authorial design is what has to be identified before you can really satisfactorily do any work, either critical or productive, on a play. This extreme is not as ludicrous as the first alternative, but it has certain absurdities built into it because, as one well knows, authors may not be fully aware of what they intend. They may be in a position to exclude certain things that they certainly don't intend, I suppose—but since Shakespeare is dead, he is not in a position to do even that. No, I think that the most an intelligent reading can do to recapture an author's intention is to identify a cluster of probabilities and work with those.

But this prompts another question. Is it possible to realize all these identifiable Shakespearean probabilities in settings and in contexts that are different from the ones in which he would have seen his own plays staged? There is a widespread and, to my mind, curious belief that the best way to present Shakespeare in order to realize his intentions is in the format, in the costumes, or in the settings that he would have used. You can, of

course, construct an argument in support of the view that using Elizabethan staging conventions is the best way to re-create the conditions of the original rehearsals at which Shakespeare was present and therefore in a position to say what he did not want, even if we grant that he was not in a position to say everything that he did want. Perhaps. But I think that even if we were capable of reinstating the prototype, it would be of no interest at all for modern audiences. They wouldn't understand the gestures; they wouldn't understand the rhetorical mode. And even those familiar with all the codes of that dramatic style would probably find that it doesn't work the same way now. So the modern director has the job of trying to realize something approximating Shakespeare's original intentions with idioms and modes of dramatic presentation that may be completely at odds with the ones that Shakespeare was familiar with.

Short of going back and attempting to re-create the staging conventions of the 1590s and early 1600s—which, as I say, is fraught with difficulty—what you have to do, if you're interested in recapturing some of the sensibility of the playwright as it was manifested visually and aurally on the stage in Shakespeare's own time, is to look for other resources from which it may be possible to retrieve energies consonant with the past. Thus, although it may not be altogether precise to look for Shakespearean parallels in the Italian painting of the Renaissance, attempting to do so is one of the ways in which you can try to recover something of the feel of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theater. There's a spontaneity and exoticism in *Antony and Cleopatra*, for example, with the extraordinary baroque richness of its language, that seems to me to be remarkably compatible with the atmosphere in the paintings of Paolo Veronese. And in any event, whatever else it does, using Veronese as the visual basis for a television setting of the play (as with my BBC production of *Antony and Cleopatra*) enables you to escape the simple-minded literalism of reproducing archaeologically orthodox images of the historical period represented in Plutarch's narratives and, by derivation, in Shakespeare's tragedies. It keeps you aware that when a character mentions an object or a place from classical antiquity, it doesn't necessarily mean that what the character (or the playwright who created him) has in mind is what we would recognize as an archaeologically accurate image today.

Unlike ours, the sixteenth-century view of the

past was extremely odd and syncretic. It drew from a diversity of sources, most of them fragmentary and few if any of them properly distinguished from the others, to create an image of classical Greece and Rome that is to ours as a crude sixteenth-century map of the world by Claudius Ptolemaeus is to a twentieth-century atlas based on the kinds of surveys now made possible by satellite reconnaissance photography and computer technology. We have the capacity to reinstate the past with a great deal of fidelity to detail because our archaeology is much more sophisticated than Shakespeare's. But paradoxically—and precisely because of this disparity between our technology and Shakespeare's—the better our archaeology becomes, the more anachronistic an application of it becomes as a means of re-creating the visual images of Shakespeare's theater. Shakespeare himself had no access to our archaeologically restored images of the ancient past. He was simply writing verse and drama for the Renaissance English theater, drawing much of his material from narratives of classical antiquity. So if we were to place Shakespeare's verse and drama in front of the actual Roman and Alexandrian settings to which he nominally referred, we would find ourselves confronted by a jarring incongruity. A more recent parallel may be found in Verdi's opera *Rigoletto*, where the composer seems to be referring to sixteenth-century Mantua but actually gives us the oompa-oompa of a nineteenth-century town band as the curtain goes up. The dissonance between these two historical frames of reference is more apparent to us today than it would have been to audiences in Verdi's time. The nineteenth-century character of Verdi's music would not have been noticeable as such to a nineteenth-century audience, but it is immediately obvious to a twentieth-century audience. By the same token, the sixteenth-century character of Shakespeare's spoken text is audible as such to us in a way in which it couldn't have been audible to Shakespeare's audience. As a general rule, the discrepancy between a given text and its earlier "historical" setting becomes more pronounced the more distant the audience gets from the time at which the author wrote.

But does it follow that a modern director's task is to strive for as little discrepancy, as little dissonance, as possible? Not necessarily. I think that as long as you are explicit and deliberate about the dissonance, you are free to exploit it for whatever artistic purposes you consider legitimate. The awful

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thing is when you simple-mindedly happen upon dissonance because you haven't thought it out. It's all very well to have dissonance in the Brechtian sense, because then you are deliberately creating an effect that is calculated to move the audience in a certain preconceived way. But if you happen upon a dissonance merely because you literal-mindedly reproduce the setting to which Shakespeare nominally refers, you are faced with a dissonance that is unlikely to work to your advantage. It is simply dissonance *de facto*, by default. If you deliberately undertake a dissonance for the purpose of creating a sense of dramatic distance, a sense of staging the thing as an object to be looked at, that can be artistically exciting. You have to be aware of the ontological status of every single act that you commit on stage. If you are not, then you run the risk of making a fool of yourself.

I hate to have to resort to the fashionable terms of semiotics, but what I'm saying is that when you produce a play, what you present on stage is a cluster of signs, and the status of those signs has to be very clearly understood by the person who is making them. Otherwise the object is giving off not your signals but impressions that are incorrectly interpreted as your signals. Anything that is giving off impressions, giving off sensory evidence, may be taken by the audience as contributing to a sign system. If it is not intended as such, then it may produce a very confusing effect on the audience. Ideally, what you do with a production is control every impression that comes off the stage so that it brings about one effect by contrast with something else. It's the same as the way in which language is structured. Language is a system of morphemes, the purpose of any one of which in a particular instance is to be seen or heard in contrast with all of the other morphemes that might have occupied a given position in a statement but do not.

But, of course, just as an author will sometimes generate unanticipated effects, so will a director. There may be certain things that he can clearly indicate and articulate as being his intentions, but he is usually surprised to find, by hindsight if not at the time, that things that quite clearly by their coherence would have to be labeled as intentions are not necessarily the intentions with which he started—or at least intentions of which he was fully aware at the time he was designing his production. Some things come about by accident, but they can become incorporated into the director's intentional system by his deciding to keep them. What starts

out as an incidental feature becomes a deliberate one once you decide to keep it rather than exclude it. An accident that is kept in by accident is obviously a mistake; but an accident that is kept in by design becomes an intention.

I strongly prefer to work in an atmosphere that encourages spontaneity. Because anyone who supposes that he has such control over the future that every single one of the contingencies of the real world are manageable in advance is deluding himself. What you do is to begin with a broad design, a series of things that you feel to be preferable, and then you start working on the physical, concrete material, which is the setting and the people who are playing the parts. And because you do not in fact have control over the future, you are constantly being surprised by it. Every now and then something comes up which is quite clearly valuable and interesting. So what you do is keep it. I like that: keep it. That's part and parcel of the job of being a director. There are, as we all know, obsessive directors who feel that their conscious creativity is in some way jeopardized if they include things that are contributed by someone or something other than their own private imagination. But that, I think, is a completely unrealistic view of the function of the imagination. First of all, you are constantly being surprised by your imagination, which contains things that you don't know. And secondly, the world is always coming up with things that you don't know, because it is actually much more complicated than you could ever know. Which is what makes it interesting. And which is why, to me, directing is interesting.

Until fairly recently, of course, directors were relatively unimportant. During much of the nineteenth century, for example, producing plays was much more simple-minded than it is now. Directors in the modern sense weren't really needed. Shakespeare's plays were sentimentalized and turned out in a succession of easily identified virtues and vices, so that going to the theater was rather like looking at row after row of Shakespeare Toby Jugs. Because audiences were comfortable with these stereotypes, each Toby Jug cloned to look exactly the same as the ones that people had long been used to seeing, theater producers had little incentive to offer up anything new. To be sure, there were a few gifted people in the early years of the twentieth century—Harley Granville-Barker and Tyrone Guthrie, for example—who shook things up a bit. But the modern era of the director really began, I think, in

the 1950s, when the theater began attracting directors and actors who had studied English at Oxford and Cambridge and who had been taught to subject the plays to close literary analysis. All of a sudden it became possible to see something more than Toby Jugs in Shakespeare's plays: it was permissible to get away from the didactic, oversimplified stereotypes of the past and bring some subtlety to the process of interpreting the script.

Predictably, this disturbed a lot of people, including academic critics like Helen Gardner, and many of them still look back on the 1950s as the time when Shakespearean production began to deteriorate. They yearn for the good old days when you went to the theater for the actors and never even heard the names of the directors. They deplore the threat to Toby-Jug Shakespeare that they see in directors like Peter Hall, Peter Brook, and John Barton—not to mention Jonathan Miller—and they clamor for an end to directors' Shakespeare. And, of course, many of them write for the popular press and do their best to make life miserable for people who try to give them something other than the stereotyped images of Shakespeare that they bring with them to the theater or the television screen. I find it debilitating to worry about offending these kinds of audiences and critics. So, like most other modern directors, I strive to please a constituency of intelligent and curious people who are not afraid to see things made over new again. Although I think that, in the sense I've already described, Shakespeare meant what he meant, I also think that there are different ways of discovering what he meant. So I direct for the kind of audience that Hamlet identified as the "judicious." Not necessarily the scholars who can pick up esoteric references to Renaissance iconography. No, I'm referring to ordinary people whose intuitions are disciplined and informed and open to new experiences. If you're a director, it's from their souls that you recognize what you are doing and how well you are doing it, because their souls are well furnished and responsive to what you give them in the theater.

In some ways, I suppose, I don't really think of audiences as such—I think of people in the audience, one by one. I know that there will always be some who will be querulous, who will complain about not getting what they liked before, or who will object that I have departed from some canonical version of the play that they have just seen. But there will also be those people who are so delighted

that it is as if they have just seen the play for the first time, people who instantly understand what I'm getting at; and not necessarily, as I say, because they're deeply informed. Often it's merely that they have good antennae and they've received something that you've been trying to transmit through the production. These are the people I aim for.

But the only way I can reach them is through the actors with whom I work. On the whole, I prefer to have actors who are unexpected—what the professional people think of as dangerous—actors from whom I never quite know what I'm going to get next. Unpredictable but not corny, not hams, not mandarins, certainly not sentimental. People who are prepared to be hard and peculiar and often quite disturbing. Above all, I look for actors who can always be funny, even in the most serious plays—perhaps particularly in the most serious plays—actors who can suddenly startle me and everyone else on the set with something absolutely absurd. Because I think it's a terrible mistake to be too solemn with Shakespeare. There are certain critics of my work who are so frivolous that they can only be grave. I'd much prefer to be in the company of people who are sufficiently serious to know that they can also be frivolous. So I look for a sense of playfulness in the actors and designers I surround myself with, and I occasionally enjoy planting a little joke in a production—like the picture of Cranch's Eve that I pinned up on the pole in Ajax's tent in the BBC *Troilus and Cressida*, for example, or the easel I put in the background of the Greek council scene with preliminary specifications for the Trojan Horse. But getting back to the actors, it's nice if they do some reading and thinking of their own about the play we're working on, but it's by no means necessary because I can supply that. And they, in turn, will supply something that I can't. What I ask them to bring with them into the rehearsal room is the totality of their experience. Some of it may have to do with reading, some with what they've seen in the street, or with very accurately recalled images of friends or relatives. What I look for, mostly, is accurate and unselfish recall, both of reading and of immediate experience.

I've normally sketched out at least a theoretical construct of the production before I assemble the actors. I've already met with the designer and the costumeur and developed an overall "look" for the production. So with me there is a creative relation-

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ship with the actors that precedes any actual encounter simply by virtue of my having chosen one group of actors rather than another for the various parts. I've already developed a rough idea of who it is that might have meant these lines or those, and that idea has informed my selection of this actor rather than that actor. But even though I will have already pre-empted a certain amount of the decision-making that goes into a production, I tend to be much more intuitive and haphazard and spontaneous in my rehearsals with my actors than my explicit commitment to theory might lead you to expect.

My rehearsals, I think, are felt by the profession to be rather easygoing, and I try not to drum actors into interpretations that they find alien. I never begin with a read-through because it's a humiliating ordeal; some actors are very good sight readers, others are not, and I see no reason to make anyone feel uncomfortable on the first day of rehearsal. So what I do is spend the first morning explaining roughly what my ideas for the play are. I show the actors the set and costumes, and then we sit around, drink coffee, and chat. I find that I'm less talkative in the early stages now than I once was. My first day on the set used to be rather like a university tutorial. Now I feel more comfortable just getting people on their feet and letting the scenes develop as we fudge our way toward what seems to be a coherent expression of the play. The actors will contribute things I didn't expect, and as the production grows the combination of ideas that I had at the beginning becomes more and more complicated. Unforeseen contingencies enrich the mixture of ingredients, and gradually the finished product begins to emerge. I don't block it. I don't force it. I simply try to let it take the final shape that seems most natural under the conditions and in the context in which my actors and I find ourselves working.

I've been asked whether I find Shakespeare's plays archaic, and if so whether I attempt to enter them by means of Renaissance iconography, say, or Renaissance psychology. I find that kind of question intriguing, but in fact I've seldom found it possible to bring much historical knowledge into a production in such a way as to make it intelligible to a modern audience. I may find it illuminating to read a book like Erwin Panofsky's *Studies in Iconology*, or even to go back to such Renaissance sources as Cesare Ripa's *Iconografia* or Timothy Bright's *Treatise of Melancholy*. It may help me to get

a feel for Shakespeare's staging of certain scenes if I understand something about the way Shakespeare's audience read emblem books. And it may be valuable for my approach to some of Shakespeare's characters to have a general notion of the way a playwright like Ben Jonson caricatured people by his systematic application of humor psychology. But I can't honestly say that I do historical reading in order to understand the plays more fully. It's just that I read that stuff all the time anyway. In a way, I suppose, I put the cart before the horse. To me, Shakespeare's works offer good practical experiments in that they allow me to play with the ideas I get from my historical reading. So when I say that I don't do historical reading in order to understand the plays, what I really mean is that I do the plays in order to get a clearer view of what the history means.

In some of my television productions for the BBC, I tried to relate the work of modern historians such as Lawrence Stone to the relationships between the sexes in *The Taming of the Shrew*, or to the emergence of a contractual society from one rigidly structured in terms of status as illustrated by Shakespeare's portrayals of villains such as Iago and Edmund. But the closest I've come to using the visual sign systems embedded in Renaissance iconography is in my use of, say, Wylie Sypher's *Four Stages of Renaissance Style* to help identify stylistic parallels, such as those relating a mannerist painter like Tintoretto to a mannerist play like *Hamlet*. I like Sypher's notion—which, of course, he derived from Heinrich Wölfflin—that there may be some kind of elective affinity between the pictures of a period and the plays of a period. The notion of the sister arts is important, something I take note of, and it's one of the means by which I've tried to achieve artistic coherence in my television productions for the BBC.

But as much as I strive for coherence in a production, I am also intent on allowing the text's latent ambiguities to emerge. Once I've decided what will be fundamental, I will emphasize that. But I also want to give the audience an experience of the complexities that accompany that primary emphasis. It's like plucking a string. A fundamental is what you are most conscious of hearing; but in order to get an interesting timbre, you encourage overtones related to that fundamental so as to enrich it and make it somewhat ambiguous. William Empson talks about this sort of thing in *The Structure of Complex Words*. By definition, complex words have

many connotations. You develop one as the key, and then you try to control the others in such a way as to achieve harmonics as one connotation plays off against all the others.

Sometimes in directing you can do this by transposing a play from the time in which Shakespeare set the action to another historical period that will set off slightly different resonances. The trick is to choose a historical setting whose resonances will help to reinforce the dominant tonality of the original text. When I first directed *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, I set it in the 1880s in order to get the effect of idle young men of that period as they lounged around places like Trieste. I was struck by certain similarities between the Bassanio-Antonio relationship and the relationship of Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas. Wilde was a rather tigerish young masher who enjoyed parasitizing his patron while giving him little or nothing in return; Douglas, for his part, must have agonized with jealous love. I recognized when I decided to build on this kind of parallel that I would have to sacrifice certain aspects of the original text, but I felt that the gains were worth the price. It was a deliberately playful way of dealing with Shakespeare; it wasn't in any respect frivolous or arbitrary, however, nor was it in any way an attempt to make Shakespeare "relevant." Rather, it was part of an effort to bring out some of the resonances latent in the original play by setting off one idea against several levels of allusion. There were allusions to Verdi, for example, and I used the music in the production to suggest parallels between the treatment of Rigoletto and the mocking and rejection of Shylock. The effect of the production as a whole was to illustrate the potency of that wonderful line in *All's Well That Ends Well* where we are told, "The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together" (IV. iii. 66-67).

Nothing is ever simple in Shakespeare. His plays continually remind us that our vices and our virtues are all mixed up in a ball with one another. We do the right things for the wrong reasons, and the wrong things for the right reasons. The virtuous are often vindictive, and the vengeful are often virtuous and affectionate. Although it was Jack Gold rather than I who directed the BBC television version of *The Merchant of Venice*, I worked with him as producer for that rendition of the play, and I thoroughly approved of the searing moment at the conclusion of the trial scene when Shylock's "conversion" to Christianity was sealed by the plac-

ing of a crucifix around his neck. Here what was ostensibly an act of mercy came across as something that also had a strong element of malice in it. Shakespeare was too complicated a human being to wish Shylock to be a mere pantomime villain: witness the "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech (III. i.). And Shakespeare was too much aware of the "mingled yarn" principle in human life to present the Christians in the play as exponents of pure compassion and unquestionable virtue.

The more I've thought about *The Merchant of Venice*, the more I've found myself meditating on its many plays on words connoting affinity—words like *kind*, *kindness*, *kin*, *kindred*, *gentle*, *gentile*. These words all have to do with being kind to people of your own kind, gentle to people of your own "gentility." One of my favorite speeches in the play is "Hie thee, gentle Jew. / The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind" (I. iii. 173-174). Since *kin* and *gen* derive from the same root, meaning *generation*, Shakespeare reminds us here and elsewhere that kinship and gentleness are related to one another. We are obliged to be kind to those to whom we are in some way kin. But what the play illustrates, in fact, is that there are people of the same race who are utterly unlike one another, and even people of the same family (Shylock and his daughter Jessica, for example) who share few if any character traits. On the other hand, there are people of different races or family groupings who are very similar to one another. At the end of the trial scene in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is dogged off the stage by a character whose name, ironically, is Gratiano. Character Gratiano is nominally a Christian, he is in some ways the most vengeful character in the play; his spitefulness is the very antithesis of the spirit of grace implied by his name. As a consequence of Gratiano's scornful interjections as the moneylender's defeat becomes unavoidable, Shylock's forced conversion, which Christians in Shakespeare's original audience were evidently expected to respond to as a bestowal of unmerited mercy, is difficult to distinguish from the "justice" that Shylock had been insisting upon prior to his discomfiture by "the learned judge."

In Gratiano we hear the first faint rumblings of the virulent anti-Semitism that was to produce such unutterable horrors in our own century. In saying this, however, I am by no means suggesting that *The Merchant of Venice* is anti-Semitic in a modern sense. I see the play as susceptible of having our more recent kinds of anti-Semitism poured into it

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(as sometimes happens when it is performed today before audiences prone to racial bigotry); but in fact the "anti-Semitism" of *The Merchant of Venice* is the theological anti-Semitism of the Middle Ages. It is the view of human history that is depicted on the front of Strasbourg Cathedral, for example, where there are two effigies, one blindfolded and representing the Old Law and the Synagogue, and one with eyes raised to heaven and representing the New Law and the Ecclesia, the congregation of the redeemed. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock's sin, such as it is, can be removed by baptism because it is the sin of Judaism, the outgrowth of a spiritual blindness rather than a genetic defect; if the Jew's fault stems from his failure to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, he can be forgiven that fault by consenting to become a Christian. The proper expression of this kind of "anti-Semitism," in other words, is to bring the Jew to the font—against his will, if necessary—in Christian compassion.

This may not be very palatable to a twentieth-century society that places a high premium on tolerance and cultural pluralism, but it is nevertheless a far cry from the very different kind of secular anti-Semitism that Nazi Germany based upon a racial theory. According to that theory, you would only exacerbate the problem by bringing the Jew to the baptismal font. For if the Jew's fault was defined as genetic, the only way to eradicate it was by extinguishing its carrier. Once racial anti-Semitism supplanted theological anti-Semitism, it was no longer thinkable to address the spiritual fault in the Jew by showing him the light; the only imaginable solution was to bring him to the gas chamber instead. Because of what happened under Hitler, it is difficult for a modern audience, and particularly a Jewish one, to sit through a performance of *The Merchant of Venice*. But I would not favor removing the play from the repertory, in part because it is an interesting piece of archaeological literature that helps us understand something of what the Renaissance inherited from the Middle Ages, in part because as such it gives us a valuable perspective on today's anti-Semitism, and in part because, like all of Shakespeare's plays, it reminds us that human beings are so complex, so confusing a mixture of good and bad elements, that "final solutions" are never going to work as ways of bringing about improvements in society.

What I've been referring to as the "mingled yarn" principle has also guided my approach to the

directing of other Shakespeare plays. Thus I find it impossible to view Iago in Coleridge's terms as a pure embodiment of evil, a manifestation of " motiveless malignity." So when I selected Bob Hoskins to play the part in the BBC television production of *Othello*, I set out to portray Iago as a credible social type: a dwarf petty officer whose Cockney accent immediately set him off as a man of lower-class origins and thus of limited opportunities for military advancement. As I directed the play, it was clear that Iago's envy of upper-class twits was what motivated him to punish the Moor: Othello would come to see that it was bad judgment to hold Cassio's "bookish theoretic" in higher regard than the experience of a pragmatic soldier like Iago. I wanted to depict Iago as a profoundly diseased person, afflicted by both class prejudice and racial prejudice; I did not want the audience to come away thinking of him as a morality-play devil who takes pleasure in villainy simply because he is by definition evil.

If Iago is a character with some grounds for a grudge, however, if he has a personality that makes him something more complicated than a simple embodiment of evil, I would insist by the same token that many of Shakespeare's more attractive characters are something other than the paragons of virtue they are often considered to be. Take Brutus, for example. I find him spinsterishly Victorian and lacking in generosity. In the quarrel scene with Cassius, he seems somehow to take pleasure in the collapse of his fellow conspirator, so intent is he on maintaining his own dignity as "the noblest Roman of them all." And Hamlet. I've directed *Hamlet* three times, and I've come increasingly to find a pinched mean-mindedness in the Prince. Hamlet is not a magnanimous person: he finds fault where there is none, and he brings about a great deal of unnecessary grief and suffering. I've grown more and more impatient with his infantilism—his refusal to believe that his uncle can have any positive qualities (notwithstanding the play's clear indications that Claudius is in many ways an effective ruler and an affectionate husband to Gertrude), his obsession with his mother's "lechery" (and his inability to see that she might be attracted to Claudius in a perfectly normal way), his monstrous behavior toward Ophelia (which drives this delicate girl to schizophrenia and death), his cruelty toward Polonius (both before and after the moment of rashness when Hamlet stabs the "foolish, prating" old counselor through the arras), and finally his

cavalier dismissal of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In my last production of the play, at London's Donmar Warehouse in 1982, I had Horatio withdraw somewhat as Hamlet boasted of his plot to have his former schoolmates "put to sudden death, not shirving time allowed" (V. ii. 46-47). And at the very end of the play, as Claudius reached out for Gertrude in death, the Hamlet in this production angrily rushed to pull their hands apart. It wasn't that I was trying to deny Hamlet any sympathy from the audience. It was rather that I was interested in developing aspects of his personality that hadn't emerged in previous productions. And, of course, I found in doing so that I was also compelled to take a fresh look at the other characters, most of whom (Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, for example) came off more attractively than they had in my previous interpretations of the play.

Over the years I've learned that you must be careful never to take what one character says about another as being what Shakespeare necessarily meant us to think about that other character. Shakespeare's characters are frequently unreliable in what they say about others; and just as frequently they are unreliable as guidelines about themselves. Quite often, in fact, the most revealing indications they provide occur in the remarks that spill out by accident—when you know that they are not intending to convey something but when they nevertheless do so incidentally and inadvertently. It's in the slips of the tongue that someone really tells you what they're like. So as you read the text, if you're a director, you treat it in much the same way that a psychoanalyst treats the discourse of his patient. You try to overhear statements that lie beneath the surface of what is actually being said. Like Polonius, you try by indirections to find directions out. And in doing so you recognize that Shakespeare was writing for an audience that was capable of picking up a great deal of information from the subtlest of hints.

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I sometimes wonder what kind of Shakespeare we'll be producing fifty years from now. Life is changing so fast now, and we are getting more and more remote from many of the works of the past that we think of as classics. The Bible is totally unknown to many people today. I was watching people at the Art Institute in Chicago recently, and it suddenly occurred to me that many of them were confronting pictures about subjects that they knew nothing about. As I watched them looking at medieval and Renaissance religious triptychs, it seemed to me that they were desperately trying to make them generate some kind of beauty that didn't depend on the pictures' subject matter. It was as if they believed that beauty was a substance that could be held in a container, rather like some kind of aerosol spray, and that you could get at it if you only applied the right kind of scrutiny to the container. But, of course, medieval and Renaissance pictures do have the quality of being about something, and their beauty is involved in and partly constituted by what they are about. And if you don't know what they are about, then you are not actually in a position to understand or appreciate them at all.

The farther we get from the assumptions and beliefs of a Christian Europe, the harder it will be to be moved by its art. This is certainly true of the paintings that were familiar to Shakespeare and his contemporaries. And it is no less true for the dramatic works of Shakespeare himself. The job of the modern director is to do what he can to keep renewing Shakespeare, to persevere in the effort to maintain Shakespeare's plays in the repertory as long as there are audiences capable of understanding and responding to him. But if our society fails to do its part to perpetuate the idea of a classic and to sustain the kinds of cultural literacy upon which the apprehension of a classic depends, there isn't much the director can do to keep Shakespeare alive by himself.