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"Knowing I lov'd my books, he furnished me. . ."

Spring 1997

Springtime in Washington: Celebrating the Bard

A Derek Jacobi Fest

The last Saturday in April was a picture-perfect day on the east coast of the United States. After an early start from home in Stamford, CT, I flew to Washington on a "Dash" prop-jet from Westchester County airport, in order to meet Sir Derek Jacobi during the festivities celebrating his reception of the Sir John Gielgud Award for Excellence in the Dramatic Arts, "The Golden Quill." Like many others, I have seen and admired Sir Derek's television performances and have enjoyed several live performances, most notably his Benedick with a touring RSC production in Paris in the spring of 1984.

Since there were only eight passengers in a cabin designed for thirty-six, I could move from one side of the plane to the other to enjoy spectacular views. The plane flew at 12,000 feet literally over Manhattan Island, so it was easy to observe the Bronx and Queens, the east side of Manhattan and the various East River bridges, and there were good views of my hometown, Brooklyn, along with the Statue of Liberty, Staten Island, and the early-morning quiet of Newark Airport's runways. The landscape was still brown, awaiting the first leaves of spring. As the plane moved down the coast, along the Delmarva peninsula, green began to appear and was in full bloom as we approached Baltimore. Again, at the relatively low altitude it was easy to see Camden Yards and the Inner Harbor and then, moments later, Washington came into view; viewed from the eastern side of the District the great monuments gleamed in the morning sun as the plane swooped down over Bolling Air Force Base and the Potomac to land from the southeast at National Airport.

After such a spectacular show, I was properly prepared to experience parts of a weekend designed by the Shakespeare Guild and the Folger Library to celebrate the superb showmanship of Derek Jacobi. The President of the Shakespeare Guild, John Andrews, had invited *The Shakespeare Newsletter* to spend Saturday morning and evening with Sir Derek, at events preceding the gala celebration of Monday evening, when Jacobi was awarded the 1997 Gielgud Award (he is the second recipient of the award, which went to Ian McKellen last year; background on "The Golden Quill" appears in *SNL XLIV:1*, Spring 1994, 17).

When John Andrews suggested that I join him with Jacobi and a small group for a private tour of Ford's Theatre on Saturday morning, I jumped at the opportunity for access, and I asked John if my sister Jane, like John a Lincoln buff, and my brother-in-law Tom, a Civil War buff, who live in Silver Spring, MD, might join the tour. Jane and Tom picked me up at the airport and we drove downtown as I read an article on Derek Jacobi in *The Washington Times* (April 25, 1997, pp. C12-C13), which Jane had already found and brought along. It provided the best coverage of the Jacobi weekend, including the information that Sir Derek "admits to being 'very

(continued on page 6)

IN THIS ISSUE:
A SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING OF
SUMMER SHAKESPEARE FESTIVALS.
SEE PAGE 13.

Presidential Address, SAA, 28 March 1997

Barbara A. Mowat

While I've always thought of this luncheon at our annual meeting as a festive occasion, and no time for contention or for partisan exhortation, I'm very aware that these days the most banal, benign, or cliché-ridden statement about Shakespeare could easily be a red flag to someone in this room. The fact that we live in a world where every Shakespearean verity is being challenged makes for lively seminars, provocative scholarly papers, and exciting classrooms, but complicates the task of addressing the gathered members of our association without dividing the ranks. To make matters worse, I'm only too aware of the fact that there is little I can say to you on the topic of our shared interest - that is, Shakespeare - that you don't already know. Fortunately, the Folger Shakespeare Library, where I work, is not short of arcana.

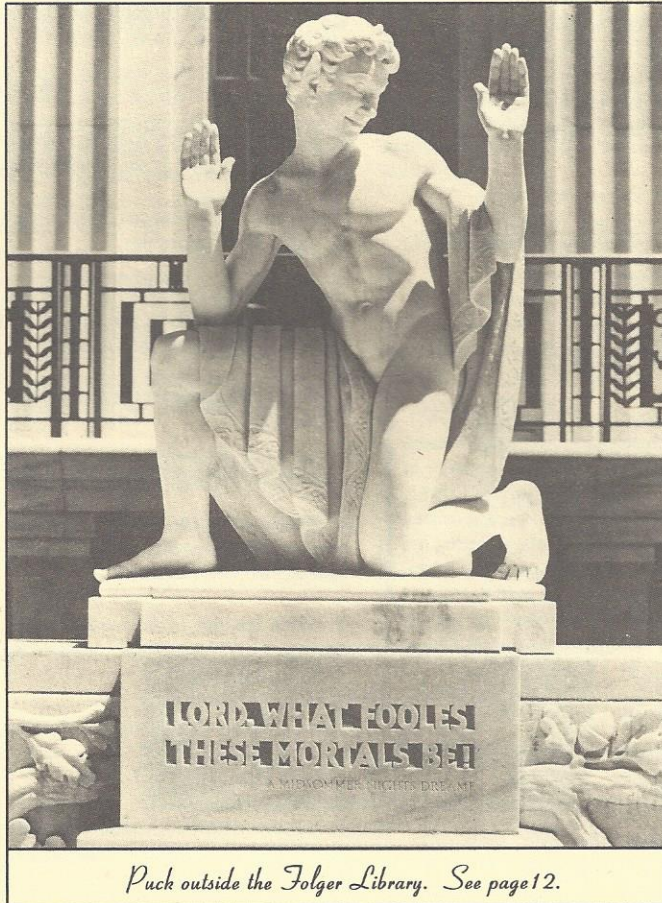
For example: In March of 1952, a wealthy American sold his magnificent collection of folios and quartos to Dr. Martin Bodmer of Geneva, Switzerland. The event caused quite a stir. It was recounted in articles in both *Shakespeare Quarterly* and *Shakespeare Survey*, and written up in the March 12 *New York Times* both on the front page under a banner headline and in a separate op-ed piece. It's the tone of the *New York Times*' coverage that catches my interest. After opening with the sentence "The A.S.W. Rosenbach collection of Shakespeare folios and quartos, famous around the globe, has been sold for considerably more than \$1,000,000," the front page article continues with the statement: "A history-making event in the book world, the transaction was the first to take from these shores a collection of books long recognized as being without peer in

rarity and quality." The writer's seemingly blissful ignorance that these volumes had a point of origin on quite other shores is matched in the conclusion of the newspaper's op-ed piece, which congratulates America on sharing its cultural treasures with the benighted Swiss:

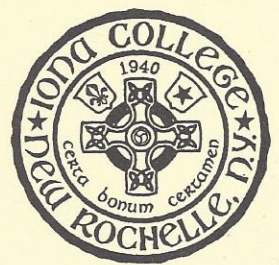
Shakespeare belongs to the ages and to the world. If some of Shakespeare's quartos and First Folios are in Switzerland instead of here, we need not feel badly.

The little story of the Rosenbach-Bodmer sale offers a glimpse into a phenomenon that has in many ways already been well explored - that is, the phenomenon of Shakespeare in America - but it strikes me that this is a topic worth our returning to today. After all, here we are in Washington, D.C., surrounded by national monuments and other reminders of things American (if our friends from Canada and Mexico will allow me, for this occasion, to equate America with the United States). And surely no focus could be more apt for a meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America - nor is there, surely, anyone with a more complicated, more interested, view of it than a Shakespearean resident at the Folger Shakespeare Library. Actually, the Folger Library itself, encapsulating as it does a bit of the Shakespeare in America phenomenon, provides a rather obvious place to start. Much of its story you've read in Mike Bristol's *Shakespeare's America/America's*

(continued on page 8)



Puck outside the Folger Library. See page 12.



A Derek Jacobi Fest

(continued from page 6)

old order: could this detail have inspired Branagh's over-the-top portrayal of Fortinbras's takeover in his film version? By the same token, Branagh obviously remembered that, in the Jacobi production, Hamlet addresses his most famous "soliloquy" to Ophelia (played by Sophie Thompson, Emma's younger sister).

In his Foreword to the Everyman edition of the play, Jacobi writes:

Over the years since I first began playing Hamlet, I have become more and more convinced that "To be or not to be" is to be treated not as a soliloquy, but as a dramatic speech to Ophelia. . . . the irony is that the speech is about the very things that happen to Ophelia - madness and suicide. She goes mad and commits suicide, virtually. Hamlet talks about both but experiences neither. In effect, though, hearing this speech plants the seed in Ophelia's mind.

Earlier in the same Foreword, Jacobi observes that "Hamlet goes on a voyage of self-discovery. I don't believe he's ever truly mad. There are three occasions in the play, maybe four, when he drives himself to the edge of madness, but he never actually topples over that edge. He is in control of his own destiny for a great deal of the play."

Saturday Evening at the Folger

Later on Saturday, again as a guest of John Andrews and The Shakespeare Guild, I attended "An Evening With Sir Derek Jacobi" in the Elizabethan Theatre at the Folger Library. Sitting on stage with John Andrews and Mark Olshaker (the author and filmmaker who created *Discovering "Hamlet,"* a documentary account of the 1988 Birmingham production directed by Sir Derek), Jacobi commented on six brief clips from his work. The first, his reading of "To be or not to be" in the BBC television production of 1979, prompted him to remember that Richard Burton saw him perform as Laertes in his first role at the Old Vic. When Jacobi himself later played Hamlet at the Old Vic, Kenneth Branagh interviewed him about the role.

The second clip was from *Discovering "Hamlet."* When he saw the third excerpt, from his starring role in the BBC *Richard II*, he recalled that John Gielgud, who played Gaunt in the same production, gave him a signed copy of his script, inscribed "To a worthy successor in a wonderful part." Jacobi recalled a similar experience in another role: impressed by Michael Redgrave's performance as Hamlet, Forbes-Robertson gave his younger colleague an edition of *Hamlet* that he had used; Redgrave gave the edition to Peter O'Toole, who came up on stage after one of Sir Derek's performances to present it to him. Jacobi has now given the edition to Kenneth Branagh.

After watching clips from his performances as Cyrano, Hitler, and the Roman Emperor Claudius, Jacobi observed that Hitler was an actor whose rages were often staged. Indeed, Sir Derek noted that politicians, teachers, priests - anyone with an audience - had better be good actors. Taking questions from the audience at the Folger, Jacobi volunteered his opinion about Kenneth Branagh's boldness in directing himself in his own performances by noting that Branagh is a master at seeing himself and making objective judgments about himself, an ability Jacobi readily admitted he lacks. He said that he envies Branagh his youth and his abundant talent, and that he regards Branagh as a "beacon" to other actors.

The Weekend Continues

Later during his long weekend in Washington, Sir Derek returned to the Folger for the award ceremony, when he was lauded by many colleagues, including Kenneth Branagh, who praised Jacobi's "wit, originality, and honesty: quite frankly he makes us proud to be in the same profession." Branagh also noted "an ongoing sweetness of character that makes him the most popular of actors' actors." Dame Diana Rigg presented the award. In accepting the Golden Quill, Sir Derek began to reminisce about his portrayal of Richard II for the BBC and then, in the words of *The Washington Post*, "suddenly he was reciting - in character - a succession of the king's speeches from Act 4, when he loses the crown. For a full 10 minutes, Jacobi riveted the startled crowd, his performance a slow, heart-rending tour de force of magisterial anger, humiliation and failure; a standing ovation followed immediately." When my sister met Jacobi at Ford's Theatre, she recalled the delight of seeing him at the Kennedy Center as Benedict and Cyrano, and he commented that this visit to Washington seemed strange since no performances were part of the experience. What an unscheduled treat the crowd at the Folger had!

Later still, there was a White House reception and a luncheon at the National Press Club, televised on C-Span.

Reflecting on Sir Derek Jacobi's contribution to our understanding of Shakespeare, I am struck by the range of his talent and by the sheer hard work he evidently employs to succeed in a variety of roles. He seems to possess an intuitive grasp of the "key"

(concluded on page 12)

Presidential Address, SAA, 28 March 1997

(continued from page 1)

Shakespeare, but let me remind you of its general outline, adding a bit and giving it a Folgerian twist. The story is classic "America meets the Bard."

It begins in the late-nineteenth century, when a less-than-wealthy American kid named Henry Clay Folger makes it to Amherst College, hears one of the last lectures ever given by America's own Ralph Waldo Emerson, is inspired to read Emerson's works, finds a published version of an address Emerson had given in Boston to celebrate Shakespeare's 300th birthday, is once again inspired, buys a cheap edition of the plays, becomes enamored of Shakespeare, marries a girl as obsessed by Shakespeare as he, makes a lot of money, and starts buying everything by and about Shakespeare that he can find.

I'd like to pause at this point to note a couple of moments in the story that, if you are in favor of Shakespeare in America, are strangely fortunate. The first is the anomalousness of Emerson's effect on the young Henry Folger. Emerson had never been popular at Amherst; this particular lecture was pitifully underattended; and Emerson, 76 at the time, had grown so feeble and inattentive that Susan Dickinson (Emily's sister-in-law), who was very fond of Emerson, wrote, after hearing the lecture, "We could have wept." But Henry Folger attended and was impressed. The second oddly fortunate fact is that Henry, in seeking out Emerson's published writings, did not stumble on Emerson's rather ponderous essay on Shakespeare in *Representative Men*, with its occasional attacks on Shakespeare's unfortunate bawdy and tendency to play to the crowds, but found instead a brief, rather charming appreciation that Emerson had composed for Boston's Saturday Club's Tercentennial Celebration. It's easy to see how this little address could have spoken directly to an imaginative young man. I especially like the whimsy with which Emerson ends the address, crediting the late date of the First Folio's publication with allowing the founding of America:

The pilgrims came to Plymouth in 1620. The plays of Shakespeare were not published until three years later. Had they been published earlier, our forefathers, or the most poetical among them, might have stayed at home to read them.

If we move forward to 1928, the next big moment in the Folger Library story, we observe America and Shakespeare once again coming together in unexpected ways. The moment involves the then Librarian of Congress; it involves Mr. Folger - who has by 1928 bought massive numbers of Shakespeare folios, quartos, editions, and translations - along with rooms full of materials about Shakespeare: playbills, chests made from the Shakespeare oak, paintings of characters in the plays, curios, critical and interpretive works - as well as an entire city block of Washington property quite close to the Capitol, where he secretly plans to build a home for his collection; and it involves the Congress, where a bill has been introduced that would, if passed, allow the Architect of the Capitol to pluck down all the houses standing on that very property if at any time in the future the Library of Congress should express a need for the space. The Folger Library's box of 1928 correspondence - letters, telegrams, copies of the Congressional Record and of bills before the House of Representatives - tells a wonderful story of catastrophe averted - wonderful, that is, if you're in favor of Shakespeare in America. Mr. Folger happened to see a notice of the Congressional bill in *The Washington Post*, wrote to the Librarian of Congress, Herbert Putnam, just in time to have debate on the bill delayed, and persuaded Putnam and through him the Congressmen promoting the bill to amend it to spare the property where the Folger Library now stands. Mike Bristol quotes part of Mr. Folger's initial letter to Putnam, where Folger explains his desire to build a Shakespeare Library in Washington, noting that he has been under pressure to house his collection in Stratford-upon-Avon, but that he prefers not to do this, since his ambition is to "help make the United States a center for literary study and progress." The letter goes on (and this part is not included in Mike's book):

Two universities in the United States have approached me to locate the collection with them, making flattering offers providing quarters and supervision for it. But I have always preferred to consider Washington as its permanent home, being satisfied that it is of sufficient value and importance to add to the dignity of your city. Until I saw this newspaper mention of the Library [of Congress] expansion, it had never occurred to me that the site I had selected might be considered within the zone of possible government territory.

The picture of Shakespeare and Congress fighting over a little, if valuable, patch of ground which, though owned by Henry Clay Folger, had suddenly become "possible government territory," along with Mr. Folger's nod in the direction of the dignity of Washington, are matters that we might well pause over. But of more interest, I think, is the central matter of Mr. Folger's decision - not Stratford, not a university (even one promising "quarters and supervision"), but Washington. He underlines the significance of this decision in a letter a few days later, in which he

(continued on page 12)

A Derek Jacobi Fest

(continued from page 8)

to different characters, no doubt the result of long and careful study of the roles. Before he played Claudius in Branagh's film, Jacobi took the part in a radio production and wrote about the experience:

For all the times I've worked on *Hamlet* as actor or director, I have never seen myself as a Claudius. Whereas on stage I would use other means to convince myself and an audience that I am Claudius, in a recording there is only the voice and I'm not sure if I possess the right Claudian voice. It all depends on the picture you have of him. He's often played as a physically large, almost Falstaffian figure but I prefer to see him as a suave diplomat, even something of a playboy, who genuinely loves Gertrude and who wants everybody to have a good time.

Surely this picture anticipates his own performance in Branagh's film and helps to explain why he has said that, of all the Claudiuses he has experienced, Patrick Stewart (who played the king opposite Jacobi in the BBC production) was the most satisfying.

One hopes that Derek Jacobi will find the time to write at greater length about his many experiences with *Hamlet*, which he describes as "probably the clearest and most accessible of all of Shakespeare's plays, largely because it's such a wonderful story, with wonderful dramatic sweep rhythmically throughout the evening." Michael Pennington's *A User's Guide to "Hamlet"* certainly leads the way. Meanwhile, we quote with approval J.C. Trewin's appraisal in his *Five and Eighty Hamlets* (London: Hutchinson, 1987):

The period's most regarded Hamlet (1977), on tour and at the old Vic, was Derek Jacobi. . . . Logical, graceful, possibly the most touching Hamlet since John Neville, but fortified always by his fiery spirit, he re-charged my faith in the courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword. To listen to him was like reading the play in a fresh format: no emphases were follow-my-leader. (164-65)

Despite my admiration for many other Hamlets, including Stacy Keach, Richard Burton, and Kenneth Branagh, I remain an ardent fan of Jacobi's BBC performance. I share Sir Derek's wish that he could essay the role again, and this time in an uncut version. [J.W.M.]

Our Cover

Twice in her presidential address, Barbara Mowat refers to the Puck statue outside the Folger Library. It was sculpted in 1932 by Brenda Putnam, with the inscription "Lord, what foolies these mortals be" on the base. One guidebook notes that "Puck's raised left thumb has been so inviting to vandals over the years that the library has had to keep a supply of replacements on hand." Another guide comments: "Perhaps it is no accident that Puck seems to be turning away from the Capitol."

Henry Clay Folger apparently intended the architect, Paul P. Cret, to design a building in the English Renaissance style, but the mood of 1930 dictated that the exterior reflect its Neoclassical surroundings; hence, the interesting contrast between the exterior, in Art Deco style, and the interior, based on Elizabethan models. John Gregory designed the bas-relief panels depicting scenes from nine of the plays; according to one guidebook, Mr. Folger was so excited over the King Lear panel when he saw it in the sculptor's studio that he was unable to get to sleep. The cornerstone was laid in 1930, in the presence of President Hoover. Folger died two weeks later and never saw the completed building, which was dedicated on 23 April 1932.

Presidential Address, SAA, 28 March 1997

(continued from page 8)

says to Putnam that, if the property can't be guaranteed free from future government annexation,

the best plan will be to arrange for a location at one of the universities, where a warm welcome is promised. But the ideal location is Washington, and the best site in Washington is the one now secured, providing there is an assurance of permanency.

Bristol sees in this decision and what followed from it a monumentalizing and an institutionalizing of Shakespeare, but my own sense of it - sitting, as I normally do, at a desk from which I can observe the Congress and the city at work and the thousands of tourists who walk past the Folger on their way to or from the Capitol or the Supreme Court, often stopping to pose in front of the statue of Puck - is that the Library, sitting as it does just by the Capitol and the Court, fully Elizabethan on the inside, fully marbled on the outside, emblemizes the complex and mutually determined ways that Shakespeare and his works are embedded in American government and public and private life.

Of course, this symbiotic relationship may exist only in the eyes of a Washington, D.C., resident. I acknowledge a particularly strong connection between Shakespeare and this city, one that the city's residents are more than usually aware of these days with Michael Kahn's productions at the Shakespeare Theatre often speaking directly to concerns that are, of course, national, but that have a particular resonance within the Beltway. The rapt and uneasy silence with which Washington audiences experienced Kahn's production of *Measure for Measure*, which played here in close proximity (in both time and space) to the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings, comes first to mind. But I also think of how his production of *Troilus and Cressida* managed to surface the generational questions that inform the politics of sending young men to war, and the consequent discomfort and sense of dark shared memories one felt in the audience of that play. I think as well of the city's overwhelming reaction to Kahn's sequence of productions of Shakespeare's English history plays, with - most recently - standing room audiences for his *Henry VI* and anticipation already building for its sequel in *Richard III*. With the subtle control of silences and emphases, Kahn throws into relief the raw ambition, violence, and betrayal that are the stuff of both Shakespeare's history plays and of the political struggles reported daily in *The Washington Post* and so familiar to Washington residents. We Washingtonians are aware of the special frisson that comes from sitting in the theater alongside the nation's senators and supreme court justices while - through Kahn's productions or through, for example, Joe Banno's recent *Merchant of Venice* and *Cymbeline* - Shakespeare anatomizes our current national scene. (The jolt to the spectator's psyche is even more potent, and more ambiguous, when such governmental decision-makers take small parts in the productions, which they on occasion do.) Even travelling productions, like the RSC's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, assume a special local color when performed at the Kennedy Center in the presence of, say, the First Family and the British Ambassador.

And it seems to have been thus from the beginning in this city. Where else could you find 16 distinguished Senators and Representatives drafting and publishing a letter in the local paper that begs Miss Charlotte Cushman to prolong her engagement in the city in order to appear "in her sublime rendition as Hamlet"? This was in 1861. Or where else - on a more somber note - would a Shakespearean like John Wilkes Booth - in 1863 the lessee and manager of the Washington Theatre, and, as he advertised himself, "the People's Favorite Tragedian" in his starring role in *Othello* - be able less than two years later to walk into the President's box at Ford's Theatre and with one shot permanently alter American history?

Granted, then, that Washington and Shakespeare are interlinked in a special way. But it's hard for me to believe - though this may be inside-the-Beltway hubris - that something which significantly affects Washington will lose all force as it reaches the city limits. Just as the laws passed on the Hill and the decisions handed down at the Supreme Court have an effect on the most distant farm in North Dakota or fishery on the Willamette, so, I believe, influences on the Capitol, on the Court, and on the President and his staff have far-reaching effects. I think Mr. Folger knew this. I think that's why he wrote to Putnam: "the ideal location is Washington, and the best site in Washington is the one now secured" - i.e., one that sits cheek-by-jowl with the Capitol and the Court, a constant reminder of a richer world - at the very least a linguistically richer world - than anything our country's present moment can afford us.

It's humbling to think about the position of the United States right now - so very powerful, so very young, and with so much still to learn. I find it somehow heartening that Shakespeare's words and characters and stories have so infiltrated our collective psyche that we can scarcely escape them. I hate the ubiquitous linking of Hillary Clinton with Lady Macbeth - largely because I find it so inapt - but I'm pleased that the nation has an image of female power that, even if evil, transcends

(concluded on page 14)