





were quite different from my own. Really—and I'm talking about the reality of human nature—is, for us today, a complicated business. We are post-Freud. We are living in an age in which nothing is as it seems to be. We are aware that a man's face is not necessarily connected to what's happening inside a man's heart or inside his mind. So that when I am being real on stage today I don't always present everything that I feel, because the audience, as in life, expects to have to guess, to have to look behind the words, behind the face, assuming that there is a whole mountain of material that the character himself doesn't fully understand. The amazing thing, I think, is that wherever you do Shakespeare, he can still be real. Whichever century he has been done in, whatever sort of theatre it happens in, whether it happens in front of a camera or a large audience, he still responds to changing notions, changing fashions of what is real. It is almost as if Shakespeare had written Freud before Freud was born.

*Would it interest you as an actor to try to recapture the reality of some of the earlier approaches to Shakespeare?*

I don't think it's ever possible to recreate the past by putting on a production in the way it was first produced. To begin with, you would have to decide what each theatre was like, and then you would have to suggest a style of acting that now seems woefully old-fashioned. And then the audience would have to make an imaginative leap that would be almost impossible, to understand what it was like to be living in sixteenth- or seventeenth-century London. We would all have to be historians, both in the audience and on the stage. And then at the end, I think we might say of the performance, "Well, that was very interesting, but so what?"

I think the challenge that is much more invigorating, much more rewarding, is for us to say, not "How can we imagine what these plays were like when they were first done," but "Can we imagine how they should be done today?" I don't think that theatre should ever be a museum piece. Like performances to belong to now, to be for this evening, this afternoon, today. And let the performance for tomorrow be something different, not just for the sake of being different, but because the actors must always be aware of the audience that they are speaking directly to, because once that audience has gone home the actors have gone home too. The strutting and fretting is finished.

No, I don't want to spend my time recreating what Shakespeare was like in the past. I always want to think that my duty, if I am going to serve him at all, is to bring Shakespeare into the present. I think that should only look at the past to see how it can enlighten the present. And when an actor steps onto a stage to speak Shakespeare, it's not to take the audience back in time but to bring Shakespeare forward.

*You mention in "Acting Shakespeare" that it is difficult to do Richard III in the shadow of Olivier's interpretation, which has been preserved on film. To what extent can an actor avoid the impact of a very recent and very resonant interpretation of a part when he is given the same role to play in front of the same critics and audiences?*

When I'm doing Shakespeare or any play I assume that the audience watching it has never seen the play before. I try to play *Hamlet* or *Richard II* or *Macbeth* with the same commitment and freshness as if those plays had been written only months before and the audience has no idea of what is going to happen. Even at Stratford-

upon-Avon, where some members of the audience come and see the play every year, know them backwards—know them, at times, better than the actors themselves—there will still be a larger percentage of people in the theatre who don't know the story of the play, and it is to them that I primarily play. I don't play to the critics who are coming to see their tenth *Hamlet* this season and who are likely to be interested in what I do that's different, something that may illuminate a corner of the play they haven't noticed before. No, my commitment is to the audience who don't know anything about *Hamlet* at all.

If we know too much about the play because we have seen it before, we are not likely to respond to the telling of the story in the way that Shakespeare wants us to. So in times of our productions of Shakespeare, even for an audience that hasn't seen the play before, we are likely to want to stress certain things so that everyone's eyes will be directed toward it. So in case people expect Lady Macbeth to come onto the stage at the dyed-in-the-wool villain, which I don't think she is at the beginning of the play, then the actress playing that part may slightly overstate the character's charm, her voice and costume implying that she is an ordinary, gentle person until she calls up the spirits of evil to change her.

I try to wipe from my own mind the strong impressions that great performances of the parts have given me in the past, whether on film or on television or in the theatre, and I try to go back to the words on the page. And with the encouragement of the director and the other actors and the designer, who may all have enormous experience with other productions of the play, I prefer that we say to ourselves, "This production of this play belongs to us and to the audience we are going to give it to. We are going to assume that they know nothing about the play and that anything that we want to tell them we must make them see through our words and our actions on stage. There must be no slily references, there must be no hidden assumptions, so that the story can come through clearly and strongly. Once the story has been told well, it's then that we can talk about the complications, the subtleties, and the difficulties we want to illuminate as well."

*Ever since John Russell Brown's call to "Free Shakespeare," there has been debate about the role of the director. How do you feel about the relationship between the director and the rest of the company?*

A play is very difficult to organize, and it's just as well that there's someone there in a position of authority, whether it's an actor-manager or a director. But if you can get a director who understands that everyone can contribute—and I firmly believe in that—that can be a good thing, and the result is a genuinely collective enterprise. In England, as distinguished from America, where the producer is god, the actor sometimes get together, if a play is going badly in rehearsal, and mutiny. A few years ago that actually happened to a young director who was doing his first production at Stratford; fortunately, he refused to leave until he had another production to direct, and he went on to become one of the most important directors the RSC has ever had. It is also not unusual in England for actors to form a company and themselves hire a director to work with them; that can often be a very satisfactory arrangement.

My main point is that normally an actor doesn't work on his own. He is almost always part of a team, and that team, those days, is likely to be led by a director. I am very happy to work within a group—and, of course, very happy to play the leading part. But I am aware that you cannot lead unless there are other people supporting you. When those two men climbed Everest, they were just at the tip of the iceberg. There was a huge production team behind them, and many supporters

to raise money and provide techniques and materials for those two men who eventually stood on the top of the mountain. In a good Shakespeare production, we collectively influence each other. So that the *Macbeth* that we presented, first on the stage at The Other Place in 1976 and then eventually on television, belonged not just to me and Judi Dench, but to a group of people who allowed us to do that way.

*Do you prefer working in small theatres such as The Other Place or the Warehouse?*

Well, yes and no. I like playing before a large audience. But you can do so much more, and more effectively, in a small house. I suppose that the optimum size is a theatre seating about 400 people—assuming that you're not in a commercial house where you need to earn enough money to pay for the thing. There's a sense of occasion, a social gathering, yet not so large a volume that the effects are diluted. I think that Shakespeare should, on the whole, be seen primarily rather than visual. If you don't get the language, then you've lost the heart of the matter. Doing Shakespeare in a setting like The Other Place is difficult. It's purist. It can be wonderful. But I certainly wouldn't want to see Shakespeare done only under those sorts of studio conditions. It would get very tiring.

*Most directors and actors are opposed to "museum Shakespeare"—and justifiably so. And yet, many of us have attended a production and found ourselves distressed by errors of a sort that might have been prevented if the director or his cast had done a bit more homework. We've left the theatre feeling that something that was good might have been even better if it had been better informed. Is it possible—indeed, is it desirable, in your opinion—to have more frequent interchange between theatre professionals and scholars?*

It's probably just an attitude, isn't it, which could perhaps be encouraged by someone who straddles both disciplines, like John Barton. I don't think it's much use trying to put on a play and have it taken academic in the corner during rehearsal. It might work, it would depend on people's willingness for it to work, I suppose. Some actors are just not interested in going beyond what they see in a play, and that's a pity. But it seems to me that in the last few decades, at least in England, there has been a concern to understand Shakespeare from his own point of view. I think that Shakespeare is getting a better deal at present than at many times in the past.

*People who saw your performances as *Romeo and Macbeth* in 1976 came away feeling that both productions were vibrant in twentieth-century terms, and yet that what you accomplished was a way of reading out of the lines what was in them, rather than imposing something from above. Is that a distinction that makes sense to you?*

Yes, I think that Trevor Nunn, who directed both productions, is absolutely remarkable, and his method is always to make the imagery come alive, saying to his actors that they must know exactly what the words mean in order to inform their emotions. Otherwise the play gets lost in a wash of language that doesn't mean anything. I remember Trevor saying to Francesca Annis, about the lines "It was the nightingale and not the lark / That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear," that that piece of beautiful poetry is actually concrete information for the actor and the actress. How do you know that an ear is hollow? How close do you need to

be to tell that? Very close indeed. Your eye has to be right against the ear. In other words, at the moment he leaves the lark, Romeo has to be right next to or on top of Juliet. They are in the middle of making love.

I'm persuaded that in order to act Shakespeare well, you have to understand the words, absorb the meaning in all your being, and then articulate the lines out the way John Gielgud does.

*Do you think that Shakespeare will last?*

It depends on the actors, doesn't it? If they give boring performances, then he won't. He'll just go on living in the Folger Library and in a few museums. Generations have been put off, first by being taught Shakespeare, then by seeing terrible performances. So when we go out there, we have a responsibility to make the plays as available and as exciting as possible. The trend in many places these days is to do full versions of the plays, as if the uncut script were sacrosanct. That's ridiculous. The plays were always cut. One should always be at the service of keeping the audience's attention—which is what Trevor Nunn did with *Macbeth*, a production that was severely cut, particularly in the second half. You need people—actors and directors—who are really dedicated to doing Shakespeare and are expert at it. Hence the importance of a company such as the RSC, which is continually doing the plays. There are lots of people in that organization who are real showbiz people, which is very good. John Barton, for example, is often thought of as the great academic director. He's not like that at all. If a play is having a bit of a problem, he shows some music in. I'm all for that.

But back to your question, I think that it is as likely that Shakespeare will stop interesting people as that flowers will stop interesting people. And even if all other plays become old-fashioned, even if the theatres are burnt down, there will still be people who are talking about, writing about, wanting to do Shakespeare. There are actors all over the world who earn a living out of doing Shakespeare, and there are still audiences who are willing to pay good money to see him. We can't all be wasting our time. We can't, over the four centuries since Shakespeare was born, have all been fooling ourselves.