

## SHAKESPEARE, A PASSION WITH NO CURE By Paul M.S. Hopkins

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### **PAUL M.S. HOPKINS tells how he has pursued a lifelong love of Shakespeare from school halls to the Stratford Memorial Theatre**

AT the age of twelve, I was awarded 93 marks out of 100 for an exam paper on Julius Caesar. 'Given a few more minutes you would have got over 100,' my teacher calculated. Never again was I so convinced that I knew 'everything' about one of Shakespeare's plays. Indeed, as Julius Caesar came round again (and again) at my next two schools, I began to realise that there was more to this dramatisation of Roman history than any 12-year-old, with no knowledge of the author or any other of his works, could possibly have appreciated.

Unfortunately, the two schools seemed determined to narrow my expertise rather than broaden it. Each of them made me read Cinna the poet, a one-scene character noted for fatally misreading the situation he faces at that moment in the drama. It came as no surprise, when I next met Julius Caesar, on a drama summer school in Lincolnshire, that I was again cast as Cinna the poet. Farewell promotion to Mark Antony, or even to being killed as Caesar instead of as Cinna. But acting Shakespeare was still several years away.

My next experience of Shakespeare was a spectator. Sisters Esme and Vera Beringer, two London professionals taking refuge in Somerset 'for the duration', were invited to the hall of King's College to entertain and uplift hundreds of boys with their rendition of selected scenes from Macbeth. Esme made Lady Macbeth a frightening figure, while Vera battled with the problem of convincing the audience she was Macbeth.

In my form, no preparation was offered for this potted version, and the costumes – both wore similar long black robes – gave no help. I was puzzled – but excited – by the whole affair. Only much later, when the sisters gave Taunton their farewell recital, did I learn that Esme Beringer had been (in the opinion of Sir Hugh Walpole, at any rate) 'the finest Lady Macbeth of modern times'.

At the age of 16, I began work on the Somerset County Herald as a trainee reporter. I was entrusted with less important parts of the paper's content: end-of-the-war street parties, charity bazaars for the British-Soviet Friendship Society, the 100 years ago column – and reviewing amateur dramatics.

Play number two was a school Much Ado About Nothing, about which I knew nothing, except that as 'the critic' I ought to be given a free programme. The boy on the door saw no reason to give anyone the programmes he had been told to sell. I swallowed my pride and forked out threepence.

Daring all, I began my notice 'Elizabethan humour at its best' and argued that this sample contained 'all kinds of humour, from the wit of Beatrice and Benedict to the ignorance and clownish stupidity of Dogberry and his associates, drawn in the most decided outlines of burlesque'. I regretted that the first-night audience of mainly younger boys 'showed no great appreciation' of the lads who sought to put over Beatrice and Benedict's wit. I cheerfully nominated the Don Pedro as 'giving the best performance', noting that he 'had the advantage of being older than his companions, but this is not sufficient reason for explaining away the superiority of his performance'.

Much Ado About Nothing by the Bristol Old Vic Company found a more receptive audience for the wit of Beatrice and Benedict, while William Devlin, wearing a Civil Defence uniform and arriving on a bicycle, was greeted with gleeful recognition as a type of official known to the spectators, rather than as just a bit of Elizabethan burlesque. His entrance in this, the first professional production of Shakespeare I saw, remains one of the stage moments I remember best.

In mid-1947 I was called up for national service with the Royal Air Force. On the way there I climbed to the highest row of the gallery of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon to see Laurence Payne and Daphne Slater in Romeo and Juliet. It should have been a memorable experience. The director was the young Peter Brook, the action lively, the costumes gorgeous, but the atmosphere stifling. Those around me who stayed awake were probably startled when the play ended abruptly, immediately after the deaths of the two lovers. I was just startled from sleep by the applause.

It was almost 60 years before I learned about the drastic cutting of this production. Jill Levenson, lecturing at an RSC summer school, listed Brook's Romeo and Juliet among 'the half-dozen most significant stagings of the play in four centuries', because of its emphasis on the feud, in which the lovers had been 'lost in the maelstrom'.

I reached Norwich after square-bashing at Padgate, and training as a radio telephone operator at Cranwell, I was posted to RAF Watton. In April 1948 I made my stage debut at RAF Honington, dishing out cold-tea-whisky and cockney backchat to the officers in a Western Front dug-out in a tour of Journey's End with fellow airmen.

RAF Watton was 21 miles from Norwich, and I found my way to the Maddermarket, where Nugent Monck was producing Troilus and Cressida. It dawned on me that there might just be a possibility I could get involved in some way in this, but how could I get there regularly enough to be of real use? I approached the station education officer, who agreed that 'studying theatre' was an acceptable form of further education. A truck went into Norwich and back every weeknight taking other airmen to night schools. I could join them, he said. And so began eight months of 'study' under Nugent Monck.

After a silent entry in Quality Street I was promoted to play seven different roles in Richard II. Five were silent, but as a Serving Man in Act II I informed the Duke of York that 'My lord, your son was gone before I came' - my first words of Shakespeare spoken on a proper stage. The Serving Man had five lines in all and the Second Gardener in Act III had nine, including a whole eight-line speech putting forward an argument. In Act IV I handed Richard the mirror in which he could see '...what a face I have, Since it is bankrupt of its majesty'. And in Act V Richard killed me. Not a bad night's work. I appeared in five more

productions in succeeding months, including *The Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Demobbed and back in journalism, with the *Eastern Daily Press* and still in Norfolk, I was also hooked on acting, and particularly on acting Shakespeare. The two interests came together within a couple of months.

I was sent to the village school at North Elmham, four miles north of Dereham, to report on a performance of something called 'theatre in the round' by the Norfolk county drama adviser's demonstration team. It was all great fun, but a bit disconcerting at such close range. At the end of *The Taming of the Shrew*, Jack Mitchley, the drama adviser and producer of the show, invited me to 'look at the part of Biondello...' and so I became a Conesford Player, and an actor in the round, if still not a rounded actor.

The tour lasted all winter. Then it was *Hamlet* with the Conesford Players, in their Norwich base. *Hamlet* is the play I have most often returned to, as Guildenstern again, as Osric, Polonius, Corambis (the equivalent character in the First Quarto version), Claudius and *Hamlet* himself, first in the much-shortened First Quarto version, in the privacy of a living-room reading staged with friends, and then, reluctantly, in public in *Fratricide Punished*, a version concocted by actors touring Germany. It is also the play I have seen most often, in 33 productions. My other roles with the Conesford Players included Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing*, which I played in the Tybalt costume from Peter Brook's *Stratford Romeo and Juliet*

My double life did not stop me progressing in journalism and while at Sheringham I obtained my Proficiency Certificate from the newly-formed National Advisory Council for the Training and Education of Junior Journalists, coming in the top nine candidates. Armed with this, I resigned from the *Eastern Daily Press* and for one winter I earned my living in drama, running evening classes, before deciding to pick up some hints on how to teach by spending a term at the Preparatory Academy of RADA.

Though living in Norfolk and busy reporting and acting, I was still able, during the early fifties, to see a lot of theatre in London and elsewhere. It was a time when the stars shone in Shakespeare – I did not lack for good models. Diana Wynyard coming to life in the statue scene in *The Winter's Tale* joined my list of 'theatre moments never to forget', but John Gielgud and Wynyard in *Much Ado About Nothing* as a whole seemed perfection, unmatchable.

Not all Shakespeare was 'star' theatre, though. At the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, I saw Joan Littlewood's deliberately unglamorous *Richard II* with Harry H. Corbett. And for a year I was on the London stage myself, in the British premiere of Sartre's *Nekrassov* and other productions at Unity Theatre, before settling back into journalism in Harlow New Town, to which Jack Mitchley had also moved.

A town centre site had been labelled 'theatre' in Frederick Gibberd's 1947 Master Plan for Harlow. A theatre in the round for Harlow was one of three models which emerged from a working party which included Margaret Jones, who was also a Moot House Player. And in the churchyard at Stratford, on a Theatre Guild outing organised by me, marriage was first discussed. Shakespeare had taken a hand in my life yet again!

It was 15 years from setting up the working party to November 1 1971, when the 500-seat

Harlow Playhouse opened. Timothy West led the cast in King Lear and Love's Labour's Lost, followed by Journey's End, a production starring Peter Egan which went on to a long London run. This was, of course, the play in which I made my stage debut, and my old part of Mason the batman was played by an actor who had been the star of Land of the Living, the play running when I joined Unity.

As I sat in the stalls of the Playhouse of which I was now a director, writing a review for the Citizen of a play I had been in, helped on authenticity by Margaret's father, himself a veteran of WWI trench life, I felt that the bits of my life were coming together. Margaret and I stayed in Harlow for a further 13 years. There was still work to be done on the Playhouse management committee and as an officer of Harlow Arts Council, and artistic director of the Harlow Theatre Company.

In 1979 we found out about the summer school run by the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Shakespeare Institute. As a result, we have sat through over 400 academic lectures and discussions with theatre practitioners. Our weeks at the summer school have given us an annual 'fix' of Shakespeare – sometimes as many as nine plays in a fortnight. In 2006 we completed our 'Shakespeare in the theatre', with Henry VI Part One. Our ending was the RSC's new start, with HVI 1 the first play to be staged in the Courtyard Theatre, which replaces the main house for at least three years. In February 2007 we saw the last play in the 1932 theatre, a staging of Coriolanus.

But we will go on seeing the plays in the Courtyard, at the Globe and elsewhere, because once you are hooked on Shakespeare, there is no cure.

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