SHAKESPEARE
AT
HARROW

“For we began when he began”
SHAKESPEARE AT HARROW

An incendiary bomb which lodged in the roof of Speech Room one night in October, 1940, may be called the first cause of the present annual series of Shakespearean productions at Harrow. Fire and water, by destroying the mechanism for suspending a proscenium curtain and the wiring needed for floodlight and spotlight, confronted would-be Harrovian actors with something like the primitive conditions of the Elizabethan theatre.

In the summer of 1941 Twelfth Night was produced in these conditions. The actors played before a neutral curtain-background, with an occasional inset disclosed by parting the back-curtain. When they stood on the central steps or in the well, they had their audience all round them, in intimate contact. The stage was "unlocalised," taking its momentary geography from the characters who walked on it, or from the hints given—when he wanted to define—by the poet himself; a barrel of beer rolled on to the platform helped the imagination to descend into the cellar, boxtrees in the inset furnished forth Olivia's garden. The light was daylight throughout, with a candle to give verisimilitude to Sir Toby's contention that "not to be a-bed after midnight is to be up betimes." Music was used only where Shakespeare demands it, and for Shakespeare's explicit dramatic purpose. The women's parts were played by boys. In all this Granville-Barker pointed the way to the plain truth—that Shakespeare's method was likely to be the best.

There was but one deliberate departure from Shakespeare's instructions—an explanatory prologue which related both the dilemma and the remedy:

Gentles, perchance you wonder at this show—
So Shakespeare wrote hundreds of years ago.
Perhaps, though, you are wondering a bit
Not at the show, but at the lack of it.
Is this a theatre, do I hear you say?
This doesn't feel like going to a play.
No overture to talk through, while you wait!
No darkened hall! no chance to sneak in late!
No special seats reserved at fancy prices!
No programmes, no attendants, and no ices!
No curtain here in front, to close the act,
No scenery, no lights, nothing in fact.
Yes, yes, it's wartime and the saving season;
Good cause enough—yet there's another reason.
Remember, please, if tempted to pooh-pooh it,
This is the way that Shakespeare had to do it.
Take his advice—and if this wooden O
(Or rather D) in which we give our show
With its rude scaffold seem a little bare,
You help us spin our pictures from the air.
Work your imaginations to see visions
Of courts or gardens, cellars, sea-coasts, prisons
Before you in a twinkling—and in short,
Piece out our imperfections with your thought.

The last lines of this prologue have perhaps a special
interest as echoing some overtones of the mood of that time:

   All Speech Room, all this little world's our stage,
   And please all join us in our pilgrimage,
   And for our two-hour journey, grave and gay,
   Count yourselves part and parcel of the play.
   For this long summer night forget today;
   Come to Illyria miles and years away.
   Strike up, musicians! Gentles all, be still!
   Think of Twelfth Night, or think of What you Will.

   *   *   *   *   *

In 1942 the mood had changed and Shakespeare's English
Epic seemed in season. Henry the Fifth was moreover a
challenge to test still further the creed that the plays are best
performed in the kind of theatre they were written for. The
choice of this play was already implicit in the covert quota-
tions from its choruses in the *Twelfth Night* prologue. This time Shakespeare himself was brought upon the stage to speak his choruses and to expound his methods:

*But pardon, gentle all,*
The flat unraised spirits, that hath dared
*On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth*
So great an object. *Can this cock-pit hold*
The vasty fields of France? *Or may we cram*
*Within this wooden O the very casques*
That did affright the air at Agincourt?

and again—

*let us . . . *

*On your imaginary forces work.*
*Suppose within the girdle of these walls*
*Are now confined two mighty monarchies,*
*Whose high upreared and abutting fronts*
*The perilous narrow Ocean parts asunder.*
*Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts:*
*Into a thousand parts divide one man,*
*And make imaginary puissance;*
*Think when we talk of horses, that you see them*
*Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth;*
*For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our*
*Kings.*

Once again there was the neutral background, the un-localised stage and the steady daylight. It was uncanny to see Shakespeare himself people Speech Room with his mighty vision—to hear him rather, for it became clear as the play went on that it was the words, the poetry that was the medium through which Shakespeare worked on the imagination of his audience. The sheer force of poetry took them across the channel:

*Play with your fancies: and in them behold*
*Upon the hempen tackle ship-boys climbing;*
*Hear the shrill whistle, which doth order give*
*To sounds confused: behold the threaden sails,*
*Borne with the invisible and creeping wind,*
Draw the huge bottoms through the furrowed sea,
Breasting the lofty surge. O, do but think
You stand upon the rivage, and behold
A city on the inconstant billows dancing:
For so appears this fleet majestical,
Holding due course to Harfleur. Follow, follow!
Grapple your minds to sternage of this navy . . .

and poetry had them watching at Harfleur:

Work, work your thoughts, and therein see a siege:
Behold the ordnance on their carriages
With fatal mouths gaping on girded Harfleur . . .

and as the nimble gunner touched his devilish cannon, and
Shakespeare bade his hearers

still be kind,

And eke out our performance with your mind,

the heroic rush of a dozen stalwarts with scaling-ladders to
storm the battlements in the curtain-inset made pulses beat
even before King Harry called his men "once more unto
the breach."

There was much to learn about Shakespeare's stagecraft
from this production—not least his masterly manipulation of
the contrast of moods; how, for instance, with the King's cry

God for Harry, England, and Saint George!

still ringing through Speech Room—even in this heroic vein
he is not afraid to use his stock comedians, and he turns these
fustian figures to good dramatic purpose. Fluellen, on the
other hand, is not fustian but flesh and blood, and his noble
absurdities prove the perfect foil to the King's heroic stature.

Perhaps most exciting of all was the reconstruction of
the poet's picture of the night before Agincourt. The French-
men, who have filled the stage with their nervous, boastful
bickerings—"the Dolphin longs for morning"—retreat into
the far corner to polish their armour and play at dice. The
poet himself stands up in the centre of Speech Room to bid his audience entertain conjecture of a time
When creeping murmur and the poring dark Fills the wide vessel of the universe.

Then he proceeds with swift strokes to paint the scene:

From camp to camp through the foul womb of night The hum of either army stilly sounds, That the fixed sentinels almost receive The secret whispers of each other’s watch.

There are the sentinels prowling along the back-curtain: and at the same moment come three common soldiers—the same three who will afterwards discuss the ethics of war with their disguised king—down into the well with their tripod and cauldron to make a camp-fire:

Fire answers fire, and through their paly flames Each battle sees the other’s umbered face.

Other soldiers, no more than three or four, lie here and there upon the stage, taking their restless ease outside their tents in this fateful night. Old Sir Thomas Erpingham alone seems unmoved as he makes a pillow of his cloak and prepares for his habitual sleep.

With a glance at the Frenchmen, the poet points the contrast in the other camp:

The poor condemned English,
Like sacrifices, by their watchful fires Sit patiently and singly ruminate The morning’s danger; and their gesture sad, Investing lank-lean cheeks and war-worn coats, Presenteth them unto the gazing moon So many horrid ghosts.

Into this picture steps the familiar figure of the King:

O now, who will behold The royal captain of this ruined band Walking from watch to watch, from tent to tent, Let him cry, “Praise and glory on his head!”
He goes from group to group, bidding good morrow, and would put courage even into the shivering Pistol, who stands to warm himself by the fire his fellow-soldiers have made:

    That every wretch, pining and pale before,  
    Beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks . . .

    . . . Then mean and gentle all  
    Behold, as may unworthiness define,  
    A little touch of Harry in the night.

It seems now quite dark: every eye in Speech Room is peering through the shadows in fear of the Frenchmen, overwhelming in their numbers: the poet’s apology for the resources of his stage seems needless: his audience are in camp, at midnight before the day of battle, and feel genuine comfort when they hear the hushed voice of their commander:

    Gloucester, ’tis true that we are in great danger;  
    The greater therefore should our courage be.

There in the steady light, on the unlocalised stage of Speech Room the simple miracle was performed: Shakespeare’s positive delight in make-believe infected his hearers with a like pleasure: his medium was the spoken word, poetry: all through the play he had thrown down his explicit challenge to them to use their imagination: undistracted by pictorial realism, their imagination responded to his bidding—and lo! it was midnight between the rival camps. King Harry, speaking his soliloquy in the well—"Upon the King!"—showed those who had learnt to respect him as the young king determined to conquer, that here was a human being for whom they—and later Katharine—could feel affection.

There appeared moreover from this production something of the zest with which Shakespeare manipulated his

        four or five most vile and ragged foils,  
    Right ill-disposed, in brawl ridiculous.
Raised to some dozen or more, they seemed to take possession of Speech Room with their marching and counter-marching. Their storming of Harfleur was a tactical triumph: their subsequent appearance as the King's "poor soldiers" marching to Callicie, "with sickness much enfeebled... almost no better than so many French," had a touch of a more recent heroic retreat: the personalities among them came to life—Fluellen, Gower, Jamy, MacMorris, and in the ranks Williams, Bates and Court—and it was with a fellow-feeling as for old friends that they were heard whistling the Agincourt Song on the march, and then after victory filling Speech Room with the same old marching song and the thanksgiving of Non nobis, Domine.

Here too it was possible to admire the discretion with which the poet turns his back on the heat of the battle: after the long crescendo of suspense with which he prepares for the event, he leaves the battle to be fought out between Pistol and the one man in France who is a greater coward than himself!

It was Shakespeare's evening, and it seemed a rare and felicitous example of poetic justice when the audience was able to pay tribute to his visible presence at the end of the day.

Inevitably the third year of the series was to see a tragedy, and Macbeth, turning up in the arbitrary sequence of examination syllabus, offered at once the most formidable challenge and the most tantalising opportunity: by this test the Elizabethan method must stand or fall. Here was a story which must be imagined to take place not only for the most part in natural darkness, but ever and anon with supernatural horror hovering in the fog and filthy air. There was always the comforting assurance that Shakespeare himself had devised the play for the conditions of his own theatre: it remained but to infer or guess how he had solved each problem at his first performance.
Manifestly the poet himself began with no hesitation and no compromise: at three o'clock in the afternoon on his day-lit platform, with the aid of such skirls and groans and thunder and lightning as his property-men could manage, he defied his audience to be sceptical in face of the weird sisters. The experiment was repeated in Speech Room at eight o'clock of a July evening in 1943: the spell worked: the sisters were accepted, and on their second entry no one doubted their menacing power: Macbeth, as he set foot in their charmed circle, was a man bewitched. Analysing the spell, you would find the components partly in the doggerel of the sisters, partly in Macbeth's unconscious echo—"so foul and fair a day"—partly in Banquo's vivid characterisation—

What are these,
So withered, and so wild in their attire,
That look not like the inhabitants o' the earth,
And yet are on't? Live you, or are you aught
That man may question? You seem to understand me,
By each at once her choppy finger laying
Upon her skinny lips . . .

and again in the telling description of his partner—

That he seems rapt withal.

It is the poet's art to use words with such uncanny power. So early in the play, the audience were ready to enjoy the make-believe: they were themselves already bewitched. The sisters' departure with the aid of a trap-door was accepted without a smile: they had vanished

Into the air: and what seemed corporal melted,
As breath into the wind.

It became clear soon enough in the sequel, how right Shakespeare was to make this bold assault from the very start upon the imagination. There was now no strain upon belief when Macbeth stood alone in the centre of the platform—the actor with his audience all round him—and revealed his horrible imaginings in soliloquy: belief rested upon Banquo's observant comment:

Look how our partner's rapt.
Duncan's approach to Inverness revealed another stroke of the poet's stagecraft, simple yet sure. The ear still rings with Lady Macbeth's cry of triumph:

The raven himself is hoarse
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements . . .

and the consequent injunction to her husband is still in mind:

bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue: look like th' innocent flower,
But be the serpent under 't.

The hautboys play a reel, Speech Room gleams with torchlight, Duncan on the stage looks upward to the castle walls, Banquo below him in the well points out the flight of a martlet from buttress to buttress, and all the thanes and their servants follow with their eyes till they come to rest where the bird

Hath made her pendent bed and procreant cradle.

From the gateway beneath this nesting-place, in the delicate air of a summer twilight, comes "our honoured hostess" to greet the gentle King with the guile of a serpent. Time, place, mood, the very smell of the air is presented.

The noise of banqueting and the simple device of "a Sewer and divers Servants with dishes and service" crossing in the inset, are enough to indicate the next remove. A door slams: the revelry is hushed: out comes Macbeth, who has need to be alone with his struggling conscience. "Why have you left the chamber?" is his wife's indignant question, and when she has chastised all impediments with the valour of her tongue, it is to the banquet they return, to

mock the time with fairest show.

No sooner has the renewed sound of banqueting died away than Banquo appears with Fleance lighting him to bed. Time has passed: the moon is down—and she goes down at twelve. Shifting its ground, too, the story now moves in a courtyard open to the sky, but the night is pitch-dark—
there's husbandry in heaven;
Their candles are all out.

Banquo is nervous and jumps at the unexpected approach of Macbeth: he cannot sleep; he has been dreaming about the weird sisters: his host half hints at a bargain, then bids him goodnight with his meaning unexpressed. Macbeth is left alone in the dark, to await the signal from his wife which will tell him that the coast is clear.

This was in Speech Room, not yet nine o'clock of an evening in July: yet it seemed midnight under a starless sky in the courtyard of a Scottish castle. Imagination was spellbound already, but it had a much farther voyage to go in its adventure of make-believe. Next it was to see a hallucination of Macbeth's heat-oppressed brain—the air-drawn dagger marshalling him the way that he was going—and close on that a vision of the night itself wrapping the hemisphere, a vision compounded of witchcraft and murder, the wolf and "Tarquin's ravishing strides," to be recalled from this frenzied digression by the bell that summons Duncan to Heaven or to Hell.

Thereafter, for all the immediate local atmospherics—the hooting owl, the creaking door, Macbeth's stifled cry in the distance—attention is carried by the force of the poetry away from the supposed courtyard, away even from the visible stage and the visible figures of Macbeth and his Lady; and is transported to the bedchamber in which Duncan lies—how many touches are given . . .

The surfeited grooms
Do mock their charge with snores—
Had he not resembled

My father as he slept—
There's one did laugh in 's steep, and one cried
Murder—
One cried God bless us, and Amen the other—
Listening their fear, I could not say Amen—
Here lay Duncan,
His silver skin laced with his golden blood . . .
and beyond this into the imaginary world of a guilty despair, in which echoes that terrible voice crying

_Sleep no more!_

*Macbeth doth murder Sleep, the innocent Sleep, Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care, The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath, Balm of hurt minds.*

When Shakespeare's mind gallops with such unbridled freedom, and his audience follows breathless in his tracks, what purpose is served by a visible picture of Gothic pillars and gloomy flights of steps? What else can scenery and lighting effects do than distract from the verbal painting and confine the imagination within cramping bounds? Indeed in such a scene as this Shakespeare's stage seems to have no fixed locality, but to follow the shifting of his invention: as you look back upon the play in retrospect, it seems almost as hard to believe that you have not seen Duncan in his bed as to realise that the stage has never been darkened from start to finish. And he that would really hear that voice cry "Sleep no more," must listen without the distraction of a preoccupied eye.

Granville-Barker has made a sober statement of the obvious truth: "After all, there was once Shakespeare's method. We cannot reproduce this exactly . . . because too much that was topical would always be lacking; nor, therefore, should we try to. But his stagecraft had its essentials, and until the producer has mastered these his own inspired way is neither here nor there. Much of Shakespeare's stagecraft—and the best of it, no doubt—is fundamental to all drama. Show it on what sort of stage you will, it cannot fail of its effect. But more than we have thought is framed to the stage for which he wrote it (why we never thought it would be a mystery!-) and, lacking the belongings of this—the essential, not the incidental and accidental belongings—it will fail of its full effect, and often of any. No one will deny, at least, that if we crush it without more consideration
into the conditions of the modern theatre we stifle the life out of it."

It would seem impossible to outdo the horrors of Duncan’s last night. But there is in Macbeth a night more terrible still, the night of Banquo’s death. For the creation of this terror, no more was needed than to give just emphasis to the poet’s cumulative suggestion. Banquo is to

become a borrower of the night
For a dark hour or twain.

Macbeth’s insidious curiosity strikes the first sinister note: “Ride you this afternoon? Is’t far you ride? Goes Fleance with you?” It is sounded again when, giving his commission to the cut-throats, he says that Fleance too

must embrace the fate
Of that dark hour.

The bat with “his cloistered flight,” and the “shard-borne beetle, with his drowsy hums” bring dusk before the sight: but it is no natural darkness that Macbeth presently invites:

Come, seeling Night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day . . .

. . . Light thickens, and the crow
Makes wing to the rooky wood:
Good things of Day begin to droop and drowse,
Whiles Night’s black agents to their prey’s do rouse.

There is no need to turn down lights: all Speech Room, all this little world is charged by the actor’s words with black evil: peering through this darkness the cut-throats lurk for their victim:

The west yet glimmers with some streaks of day.
Now spurs the tardy traveller apace,
To gain the timely inn . . .

it is the poet’s comment more than the murderer’s. You hear just such a traveller’s horses; then his voice; he dismounts
and approaches on foot, he and his son Fleance with a lantern. The murderers pounce, the light is struck out, Fleance runs for his life; and the audience, still peering in darkness, catch sight of Banquo's mangled body carried away for summary disposal.

Hautboys break in to celebrate the Royal Banquet: immediately the eye is dazzled with the sudden change to brilliant light; in fact, a couple of torches mark the difference—and the splendid company of thanes and henchmen. The "best of the cut-throats," standing aloof by the door, gives news that Banquo bides safe in a ditch

*With twenty trenched gashes on his head.*

Then without more ado Banquo himself, dressed as in life but with a gaping wound on his pale brow, walks up to the table and takes a seat in Macbeth’s place. His second appearance, as Macbeth with frenzied bravado drinks to

> our dear friend Banquo, whom we miss . . .

is even more thrilling than his first.

Throughout this scene, as throughout the play, Speech Room was, to the camera’s view, lit with prosaic daylight. Yet all eyes were content to see the ghost of a man newly murdered. That audience, like Shakespeare’s own audience trained to see witches and darkness and murders done out of sight, and to hear the voice of desperate conscience, trained a year ago to follow the progress of a mighty war enacted in the little space of Speech Room, that audience could take a ghost in its stride. It made one long to see upon the same stage that other and more eloquent apparition, that “in complete steel Revisitzst thus the glimpses of the moon.”

After this it was easy to show in visible presence through the steaming trapdoor-cauldron the prophetic phantoms of the witches' cave. It was easy too with a single candle to sketch the stifling confinement of Lady Macbeth’s nightmare: here too it was well proven that Shakespeare, writing for boy-actors, did not demand more than the boy-actor could
give: this pregnant summary of an over-burdened conscience wrung the heart with every item of confession. And it was easy, in the light of last year's experience, to give life and shape to the battle sequence of the play's ending, for which the Art School, always generously equal to every demand, provided its *chef-d'oeuvre* in Macbeth's gory head.

But perhaps the most interesting moment of all was the famous soliloquy with which Macbeth greets the news of his wife's death. The "unlocalised" Elizabethan stage became then for a little space most truly itself—in fact, a stage. Almost dropping his part for the time, and coming forward to the edge of the platform, the actor stopped the play—letting his audience see that he was an actor, that the whole miraculous evening was make-believe—to give Shakespeare's own comment:

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,*  
*That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,*  
*And then is heard no more.*

* * *

Much that has been here written became first clear in the stress of rehearsal and performance. Let Granville-Barker again be cited (from the preface to his second series of *Prefaces to Shakespeare*): "All that I have set out to do is to re-discover as much as I can of this lost stagecraft. One must, I think, make the attempt play by play. Shakespeare's stage changed a little, perhaps more than a little, during his working lifetime, and he himself enlarged its artistic resources to the limits of recognition . . . These books have quite a practical aim. I want to see Shakespeare made fully effective on the English stage."

That too has been the ambition prompting this series of productions in Speech Room: and it is hoped to continue to make the attempt play by play.
TWELFTH NIGHT

Twelfth Night was produced in Speech Room in the evening of Wednesday and Thursday, July 9 and 10, 1941, with the following cast:

ANTONIO - J. L. A. Elgood, Bradbys.
A SEA CAPTAIN - M. G. Moss, Bradbys.
VALENTINE - M. G. Moss, Bradbys.
CURIO - I. H. S. Silver, Bradbys.
SIR TOBY BELCH - B. R. M. Austin.
SIR ANDREW - The Head Master's.
MALVOLIO - J. V. Caesar, Druries.
FABIAN - P. Bowen-Davies, The Knoll.
FESTE - J. P. G. Wathen, Druries.
OLIVIA - A. G. Wilson, The Head Master's.
LORDS, LADIES, SAILORS, ETC. - D. L. Henry, The Head Master's.
PRIEST - M. L. Henry, The Head Master's.
OFFICERS - M. Royde-Smith, The Park.
MUSICIANS - M. G. Moss, Bradbys.
TRUMPETER - I. H. S. Silver, Bradbys.

Stage Management: J. L. A. Elgood, Bradbys.
The prologue was spoken by M. G. Moss, Bradbys.
The music, taken mainly from Elizabethan sources, was arranged by Henry Havergal and W. N. Campbell.
The play was produced by Ronald Watkins.
KING HENRY THE FIFTH

The Life of King Henry the Fifth was produced in Speech Room in the evening of Wednesday and Thursday, July 8 and 9, 1942, with the following cast:—

KING HENRY THE FIFTH C. Campbell, The Park.
DUKE OF GLOUCESTER C. A. Carlisle, Elmfield.
DUKE OF EXETER D. C. Allen, The Knoll.
EARL OF WESTMORELAND W. H. J. Summerskill, Bradbys.
EARL OF SALISBURY H. R. La T. Corrie, Bradbys.
LORD SCROOP M. G. Eiloart, Bradbys.
SIR THOMAS GREY A. S. McLean, Druries.
SIR THOMAS R. A. Bagley, Moretons.
CAPTAIN GOWER L. J. Verney, The Head Master's.
CAPTAIN JAMY C. S. S. Furlong, The Park.
CAPTAIN MACMORRIS D. M. Ramsay, The Head Master's.
WILLIAMS M. G. Eiloart, Bradbys.
COURT H. R. Bridgeman, Druries.
PISTOL R. B. Stuart, The Park.
NYM C. Hollingsworth, The Knoll.
BARDOLOPH M. Essayan, Moretons.
ENGLISH HERALD N. C. Parsons, The Knoll, C. J. B.
ENGLISH SOLDIERS Wood, The Head Master's, P. W.
W. Ingram, The Knoll, A. S.
McLean, Druries, E. C. A. Bott,
The Grove, A. J. S. Griffin, The
Park, R. R. Joicey, Druries, J. C.
Stebbings, The Grove, D. E.
Townsend-Rose, Moretons.
DUKE OF ORLEANS - W. R. Bazley, The Head Master's.
MONTJOY - P. J. F. Green, The Grove.

PRINCESS KATHERINE - P. B. Blackwell, Bradbys.
MISTRESS QUICKLY - J. D. Money, The Park.

Stage Management: C. Q. Henriques, Bradbys, J. B. Hollingsworth, The Knoll.


The play was produced by Ronald Watkins.
MACBETH

MACBETH was produced in Speech Room in the evening of Friday and Saturday, July 2 and 3, 1943, with the following cast:

DONALBAIN - J. E. St. G. Mirehouse, Druries.
MACDUFF - C. Hollingsworth, The Knoll.
BANQUO - G. M. D. Thomas, Elmfield.
CAITHNESS - R. T. A. Cooper, Moretons.
FLEANCE - N. Hollway, Moretons.
SIWARD - C. Hollingsworth, The Knoll.
YOUNG SIWARD - P. B. Blackwell, Moretons.
A DOCTOR - P. Dodd, The Head Master’s.
A PORTER - J. A. Clark, The Head Master’s.
THREE MURDERERS - J. A. Clark, The Head Master’s.
LADY MACBETH - I. M. Pease, The Grove.
LADY MACDUFF - J. Anderson, Druries.
SOLDIERS AND ATTENDANTS


The play was produced by Ronald Watkins.