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CAN SHAKESPEARE BE FILMED?

A Personal Impression of "Henry V"

(Written for "The Listener" by JAMES SHELLEY)

I MUST confess that when I was urged to go to the Technicolour version of Shakespeare's *Henry V.* some 18 months ago in London, I succumbed to the pressure with very serious misgivings. I had seen film attacks on Shakespeare before, and I had half made up my mind that his plays were by their very spirit foreign to the medium of the screen. I had come away even from Reinhardt's Hollywood version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* feeling that I had been present at an elaborate insult to English literature. However, I went to Olivier's production of *Henry V.* and came away—I frankly acknowledge—smitten to the heart with the beauty of it all. The screen foreign to Shakespeare! Why, here in this theatre in the Haymarket I had seen the realisation of the very dreams that stirred the poet's imagination when the cramped conditions of his own Globe Theatre had forced him to sigh.

*O! for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention;
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene.
..... But pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraised spirits that hath dar'd
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object; can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?*

What would Shakespeare have made of the film medium had he lived in our days? Let us not think that he would have scorned our modern scientific contraptions and confined his attention to weaving lovely tapestries of words. Not so. He was a working actor and knew all the tricks of the theatre, and in the making of his plays he took advantage of all the stage machinery available at the Globe to quicken the dramatic picture he wished to paint in the minds of his varied audience. What would Shakespeare have made of the film medium? I know no better answer than has been given by Laurence Olivier in his astounding production of *Henry V.*; and until I saw it I did not think that there could be an answer.

* * *

A COUPLE of years or so after Shakespeare arrived in London—a young impressionable man of 22—the pride of England was stirred to exuberant life by the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and the poet's expression of that pride in the long series of chronicle plays during the next ten years culminated in this most English of all English plays—*Henry V.* Again the pride of England, and of the whole British people, was stirred in our



"I shall never move thee in French, unless it be to laugh at me": the wooing of Princess Katharine (Renee Asherson) by King Henry (Laurence Olivier). Top right: Olivier as Henry before Agincourt.

own generation by the D-Day landing of our troops on the coast of France within a gunshot of the landing place of Henry V. And while that miraculous landing was taking place this very film must have been in the making. We marvel that such a production could have been contemplated during critical stages of the greatest war in history and carried through with such unhurried triumph. And yet, I wonder if the triumph would have been so complete had it not been infused with the spirit of D-Day and of the Commandos to whom the picture is dedicated.

During my short visit to England early last year, I saw John Gielgud in a charming stage presentation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and a not-so-charming presentation of *Hamlet*; I saw Olivier himself on the stage in *Richard III.*; but by far the greatest thrill the theatres of England afforded me was this film of *Henry V.* I could wish all New Zealand would share the thrill with me. If this production were seen by the youth of our schools and colleges it would do more for the appreciation of Shakespeare than a whole year's teaching by our most enlightened teachers.