

# Why Drag in Shakespeare?

(Written for "The Listener" by Professor F. SINCLAIRE)

THE announcement of a film production of Shakespeare's *King Henry V.* set my mind racing along a well-worn track of associations. I thought at once of that idol of my schooldays, George Rignold—some of my readers will, I hope, remember "handsome George"—of his regal stage presence, and the gusto with which he declaimed in his rich resonant voice, the fruity rhetorical lines in which the name part abounds. Thence, by an easy transition, my mind passed to Mistress Quickly, whose account of Sir John's death is surely worth all the windy rhetoric of the rest of the play—and thence again to Theobald, Pope's enemy and the hero of the *Dunciad*. "His nose was as sharp as a pen, and a table of green fields"—so Mistress Quickly was made to say in the earlier editions of the play. To Theobald we owe the amended version which has been adopted by all subsequent editions. "A babbling of green fields"—in that most famous and felicitous of all emendations, the editor has risen for a moment to the level of his author. If Shakespeare did not write that last phrase, then all we can say is that he ought to have written it, and that he will best show his good sense by adding one more to his list of verbal debts, and accepting gratefully the improvement he owes to his editor's flash of kindred genius.

Having completed this cycle of pleasant associations, I was back to my starting point. We were to have, not exactly Shakespeare's play, but an adaptation of the play to the capacities of a modern audience. Shakespeare, you see, was a poet, and poets are apt to make demands on the imagination. Shakespeare was a poet, and poets deal in verbal music, making demands upon the ear. Clearly, the producer of a Shakespearian play, in this age of atomic bombs, faces problems to challenge all his ingenuity. And that is just where the modern producer scores. Like Bully Bottom, he is always ready with a device to make all well. Challenge his ingenuity did I say? That is what he likes—nothing better. His motto is not "words, words, words," but gadgets, gadgets, gadgets. . . .

Perhaps, having accepted an invitation to a private view of this up-to-date version of the play, I ought not to be so ungracious as to offer any adverse criticism. But to say that, and to act upon it, is to be something worse than ungracious. It is to hint that the invitation proceeded from motives which were not strictly and highly altruistic. Well, as some wiseacre has observed, truth is truth. I confess that I accepted the invitation with some misgiving. In the last ten years I had already seen some three or even four films, so that

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I came to this with something of the feeling of a surfeited guest bidden to a feast. Besides, I did not see how Shakespeare and technicolour could be made to mix. It seemed like mixing champagne and cocoa. Still, as another wiseacre has told us, one must strive to overcome one's prejudices. And, after all, it was only *King Henry V.*, one of the plays in the canon which—always excepted Mistress Quickly—I can most easily do without. So I resolved to face it.

The admixture was at least—having regard to contemporary taste—judicious. That is to say, we had about ten parts gadgeting to one part Shakespeare. Against the major ingredient I have nothing to say. I accept the assurance that it was—like all the rest—superb, unsurpassed, and all that sort of thing. But why drag in Shakespeare?

And here, no doubt, someone will quote against me the lines of the Chorus in which the poet seems to apologise for the poverty of the stage effects he had at his disposal, and wishes he might have.

A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,  
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene.

But after all, if we are determined to be so stupid as to take these lines literally, I doubt if all the performers I saw were of princely blood, and I did not notice many monarchs in the audience. And, for all their ingenuity and resourcefulness, the producers could not give us a kingdom for a stage. That last feat remains, perhaps, for future accomplishment. Meanwhile, with all their devices, they cannot do what imagination can do, and what the poet in that same Chorus asks it to do, without them. The spectacle is well enough in its own way—that is, for children. But once again, why drag in Shakespeare?

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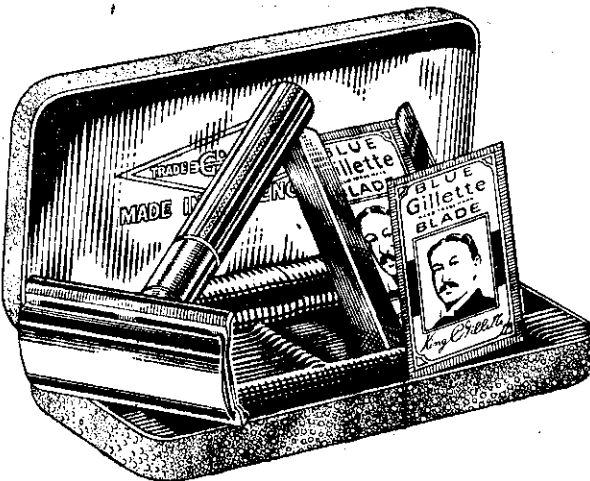
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