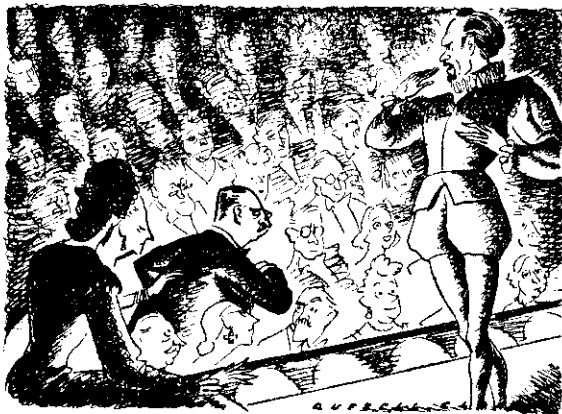


# The Man Who Walked Out Of Shakespeare

THE other evening I did a dreadful thing, a thing so shocking that my conscience has been tying itself in knots ever since. So now I am writing this confession. I walked out of a Shakespearean performance by a local repertory company. I was not suddenly attacked by appendicitis; I had not just been told that my house was on fire. I simply walked out as the last act of *Twelfth Night* was about to begin. And I was glad to go.



There were, perhaps, some extenuating circumstances. My wife was tired and restless and worried about catching the last bus home. But it would be as cowardly as Adam was to blame the woman. When I suggested that she might like to leave, it was a relief to find that she was agreeable, though at that moment I wasn't honest enough to admit the fact even to myself. As we slunk up the aisle and past the reproachful eyes of the doorkeeper, I felt like the victim in a Bateman cartoon. I hadn't felt like that since my form-master caught me cribbing. But once outside it was different: instead of guilt and shame there was elation. I had had the moral courage to do something that simply isn't done. I mean, one doesn't walk out of Shakespeare, does one?

WELL, if I'm guilty of heresy, blasphemy, lèse-majesté, or just plain ignorance, I don't care. I've come to the conclusion that, at the age of 34, I'm too old (or not old enough) to appreciate Shakespeare on the stage—though not too old, I hope, to enjoy reading him. As was tolerantly suggested by a friend to whom, in an excess of masochism, I confessed my shame, I belong to the "lost generation" so far as Shakespearean performances are concerned. I think he's right: between 13 and 20 or thereabouts is the proper age to enjoy the romanticism of Shakespeare. Then the improbabilities slide easily off the adolescent back, and from my own happy recollections of Allan Wilkie, I'd agree that it does help to see theatrical form given to the plays that have been stuffed into you in the classroom. But from that age on you can manage without all the dressing-up and posturing, and still enjoy the philosophy and poetry in small doses from an edition by your fireside. After that again the age of nostalgia may set in, and you may pretend to yourself that Shakespeare has got all these moderns licked when it comes to an evening at the theatre.

DON'T imagine I'm criticising the acting or production of the repertory show I saw. So far as I could judge both were very good. The question is not so much whether they did it well as whether it was worth doing. Perhaps *Twelfth Night* isn't a fair test of Shakespeare.

One might walk out of that play, and sit through *Macbeth*, say, or one of the other tragedies. I say, one might: I don't say one would. But the story of *Twelfth Night* does suffer to excess from ridiculous improbabilities—all that silly mix-up about the twins; that scene where Malvolio finds the letter and comments on it and the conspirators behind the hedge five yards away carry on a conversation loud enough to be heard by the audience, but not by Malvolio. And so on. And all the interminable punning and embroidery of words by everybody, and particularly by the clown. Can you deny it's a strain to follow? It's even a strain to read.

GO on, call me a Philistine and an ignoramus. I've gone so far I don't care. Hold up your hands in horror, and echoing some of our dear magistrates, tell me that the talkies are to blame for my near-criminal tendencies. Perhaps they are (I'd been to a five o'clock screening before I went to *Twelfth Night*). My answer is that the films are produced for my day and age, and Shakespeare's plays were written to be produced for his day and age. They'll still be read, I hope, in my great-great-grandchildren's day; but I doubt if they'll still be produced except as an academic curiosity.

BUT I've been on the defensive too long. Here's one for you tradition-soaked snobs who pretend you enjoy every minute of Shakespeare, and you others who are wishing in your innermost hearts that you had the moral courage to follow me down the aisle. What scenes got the biggest response from the audience the other evening? I'll tell you—the low comedy; the slapstick by the drunks with the candlesticks, and so on. Is that in the Book?

And I haven't finished with you yet! What single feature of that performance produced an immediate reaction, and, judging by the laughter, was the most successful thing in the play? It was the silly laugh adopted by the player who portrayed Sir Andrew Aguecheek. And where did he borrow that laugh from? Straight from a Walt Disney character! Ho, ho! Laugh that one off.

This started as a confession. It ends as defiance. Up dogs, and bite 'em!

—The Pariah



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