

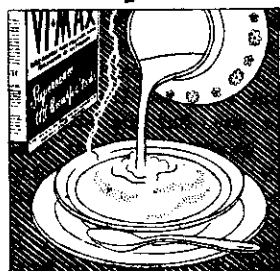
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"EXIT—PURSUED BY A BEAR"

A Reply To The Man Who Walked Out Of Shakespeare

A MAN walked out of a Shakespearean play. Well, he wasn't interested, so why should he stay? But then he held some conferences with himself and other people, and wrote an article over the pen-name of "The Pariah" for *The Listener*, trying to prove that Shakespeare in general and *Twelfth Night* in particular should not be produced on the stage to-day.

At the age of 34, it is suggested to him and he agrees, he belongs to a lost generation as far as Shakespearean performances are concerned. "Between 12 and 20 or thereabouts," he says, "is the proper age to enjoy the romanticism of Shakespeare. Then the improbabilities slide easily off the adolescent back. . . 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."

Now I disagree. (According to my age-group I'm in the "lost generation"). The "improbabilities" don't worry the people who like seeing Shakespeare acted any more than the pips worry people who like eating passion-fruit. They're part of the whole thing. "The Pariah" suggests that *Twelfth Night* is perhaps not a fair test of Shakespeare, and that *Macbeth* might be a better test; but on the grounds of "improbabilities," if he objects to Malvolio's presence on the stage with the loudly-speaking conspirators, what has he to say to the entrances of the bloody ghost of Banquo? Or are ghosts and witches all right in a "serious" play?

Like a Ham-Sandwich

I do not agree with the "lost generation" idea—that people "like Shakespeare, then don't like him, then like him again" in a sort of ham-sandwich; ham for not liking, bread on each side for liking. Some of the plays, of course, are more attractive to most of us when we are young than they will be when we grow old.

"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." It was a pity he used the phrase "I hope"; with the expression "small doses" it conveys a strong idea of obligation and duty. But that's not necessary. "The Pariah" and all his friends will still speak Shakespeare without quotation marks over lunch and on the street corners and while they bath their children; as long as they speak plain English, give a plain answer to a plain question, they will have Shakespeare unconsciously with them and so need not take him in undisguised doses.

Shakespeare Out of Uniform

He objects to the dressing-up and posturing. He could have made out a case there for Shakespeare out of uniform, and I'd agree. There are good reasons for wanting to see Shakespeare out of



"... The shape of men to-day doesn't go into an Elizabethan costume"

costume: for instance that the shape of women—and even men—to-day doesn't go into an Elizabethan costume as neatly as it goes into tennis shorts, and for instance that the way men and women move in 1943 hurrying to catch a tram with arms full of parcels, rushing through swing doors, standing feet apart to strap-hang in a crowded bus—a very different feet-apartness from the swordsman's stance—is a different way from the way they moved before they ever heard a steam whistle or saw a rubber tyre spin on bitumen. But I think these differences are not heart-deep; and I don't mind if our repertory theatre players put on costume and move their feet and bend and turn and laugh out of time—as long as they enjoy it.

Twins and Laughs

The objection to "the silly mix-up about the twins" cannot be sustained; there are examples of identical twins, if anyone wants to insist on fidelity to fact; and Shakespeare had perfectly good reasons for writing his young women's parts so that they could be played by men—women were not welcomed on the stage in his day in the way they are to-day, or even as they were in the naughty 'nineties.

And so it was a Walt Disney laugh that was the most successful thing (by laughter standards) in the play? Well, what did "The Pariah" expect? What was the most "successful" line in *Pygmalion*? ("Not bloody likely!"). And what was the most "successful" episode in *Mrs. Miniver*? (The kicking of the door shut by the giggling-weeping maid). Doesn't slapstick always get the "biggest response" from the audience? It is the nature of slapstick and humour to rouse visible and immediate emotion; the "big response" to other forms of art is a hidden response—neither "The Pariah" nor the actors would know much about it.

"The Pariah" walked out of *Twelfth Night*. Well, let him go, but he didn't convince me that he had good reasons against the production of Shakespeare on the stage to-day.

—"The Bear"