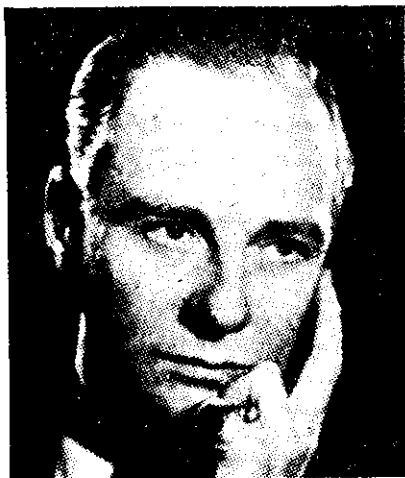




World Theatre Next Week

IF Cleopatra's nose had been shorter, said Pascal, the whole face of the earth might have been different. The heroine of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, the first in the new series of *World Theatre* productions to be broadcast next week, was not, by all accounts, surpassingly beautiful. There are no authentic portraits of her, but the evidence suggests that she was small, slender, and gipsy-like, with a nose just too long for perfection. She was not as attractive, for instance, as the chaste and beautiful Octavia whom Antony so shamelessly neglected for her sake, but she lived a life dedicated to love, and like many far plainer women she had weapons stronger and more dangerous than beauty. She had intelligence, erudition, and a personal magnetism that was irresistible. If it was Helen's face that launched a thousand ships and burnt the topless towers of Ilium, it was Cleopatra's personality that shook the kings of the earth and changed the destiny of nations.

Antony and Cleopatra will be heard first from 4YA at 7.30 p.m. on Monday, January 16. The production lasts for two and a-half hours and the strong cast is headed by Fay Compton as Cleopatra and Clifford Evans as Antony. The part of Enobarbus, the trusted lieutenant who deserted Antony at the eleventh hour, is played by Bernard Miles, and Val Gielgud is the producer.

The play comes towards the end of the Shakespeare canon, and was probably written about 1606-7, marking the close, with *Coriolanus* and *Timon of Athens*, of the great tragic period which produced *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear*. It was first printed in the folio of 1623, and the story closely follows that of North's *Plutarch*. Stylistically it is one of the most spacious of his plays, written in the full assurance and ease of his maturity and with less of the horror and tension of the earlier tragedies. The twin themes of imperialism and infatuated love are skilfully intertwined by a dramatist at the top of his powers, and he does it moreover with passages of remarkable poetry, in which the passion of the two lovers, who have "kissed away kingdoms and provinces," is made to transcend human limits.

The play opens at Alexandria about 30 B.C., where Mark Antony, the Roman

Empire's first soldier and noble prince, brave, generous, and impetuous, worshipped alike by men and women and claiming descent from Hercules, sits enthralled by the Egyptian queen, a woman as vain and wilful as she is intelligent, capricious, extravagant, and an insatiable sensualist, created to make men mad and "set a bud betwixt the lips of death." Antony is recalled to Rome by the death of his wife Fulvia and political developments, and terminates his estrangement with Caesar by marrying his sister Octavia, an event which provokes Cleopatra's intense jealousy. But the reconciliation is short-lived, and Antony returns to Egypt and his lover. At the battle of Actium he is defeated by Caesar after the Egyptian squadron, led by Cleopatra, flees from the engagement, and on the false report of Cleopatra's death he falls on his sword. He is borne to the monument where Cleopatra has taken refuge and dies in her arms. Cleopatra, fallen into Caesar's power, but determined not to grace his triumph, takes her own life with the bite of an asp.

With her death ended the dynasty of the Ptolemies, and Egypt became a Roman province. "This was another kind of love," Stephen Williams wrote recently in the *Radio Times*, "from the rose-scented morning that dawned for Romeo and Juliet. It was the love of a man in his fifties for a woman in her thirties, both scarred by life and experience; a jealous, remorseless, all-devouring love, as cruel as the grave; a love that would 'let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch of the ranged empire fall' that drove Cleopatra to turn back her ships in battle and Antony to post after her 'like a doting mallard.' And never was this kind of love caught and mirrored with such overpowering insight."

The Tragedy of Coriolanus is Shakespeare's last complete tragedy. It is a difficult play, one more respected than loved, more honoured in the breach than

the observance, and one that demands abnormal physical attributes in the leading player. A. C. Bradley, in about the best book on the subject ever written, laid it down that in Shakesperian tragedy the hero must be a man of high estate. "His fate affects the welfare of a whole nation or empire," he says, "and

when he falls suddenly from the height of earthly greatness to the dust, his fall produces a sense of contrast, of the powerlessness of man, and of the omnipotence — perhaps the caprice — of Fortune or Fate, which no tale of private life can possibly rival."

So with *Coriolanus*, whose pride is so great that he "disdains the shadow which he treads on at noon," and calls the rabble curs and dissentious rogues that "rubbing the poor itch of your opinion make yourselves scabs." Yet because of the difficulty of depicting this towering pride of his, the play makes hard demands on both actors and audience. For this reason it should be most effective in the more intimate medium of radio, which will allow listeners to concentrate more closely on its

ROTA OF THE PLAYS

The complete rota of the first four plays in the new "World Theatre" series is as follows: "Antony and Cleopatra," 4YA, January 16; 2YA, January 26; 3YA, February 1; 1YA, February 10. "The Tragedy of Coriolanus," 3YA, January 18; 1YA, January 27; 4YA, January 30; 2YA, February 9. "She Stoops to Conquer," 2YA, January 19; 4YA, January 23; 1YA, February 3; 3YA, February 8. "The Family Reunion," 1YA, January 20; 3YA, January 25; 2YA, February 2; 4YA, February 6.



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