



Good Company

STRATFORD, CONN.

IN THIS, its ninth season, the American Shakespeare Festival appears finally to have relaxed and to have approached its productions with considerable common sense. What could be more sensible than selecting a strong, broad-based company? Instead of hiring actors whose high reputations have been acquired in motion pictures or in colorful Broadway characterizations, the festival has sought out actors whose work in Shakespearean productions has established them as assured performers with the skill and flexibility to master a variety of Shakespearean roles. And it has added to these a number of promising young unknowns.

Moreover, to insure the best possible amalgam of talents, the festival used a Ford Foundation grant to set up last fall a Dramatic Study Group that allowed the entire company to work together in advance and solve problems for which there is never sufficient time during the usual rehearsal period.

It is also good sense to have brought back Moris Carnovsky, whose previous Shylock still constitutes the single greatest performance in this organization's wayward history. And since both Lear and Shylock are betrayed by daughters, and are provoked into madness by society's harsh treatment of them, shouldn't Lear be a splendid role for Mr. Carnovsky to essay?

So it turns out, although it is not the *King Lear* one might have anticipated. For director Allen Fletcher seems deliberately to have avoided reshaping the play to make it say one paraphrased thing. Rather, he has let it unroll as a theatrically vivid chronicle of selfishly motivated events.

Mr. Carnovsky begins in a low key, a sick, tired old man relieving himself of the cares of a crown he has worn too long. He is so buried in his own declining state that he doesn't appear genuinely stung by Cordelia's refusal to express fulsome filial sentiment, but treats it as a minor hitch in the proceedings, an embarrassment not to be tolerated because it adds new items of business to his already heavy agenda. In the ensuing scenes Lear doesn't seem to understand the enormity of what he has done. Later, when Goneril and Regan humiliate him, he doesn't luxuriate in the rich invective that might push him to tragic separation. Rather, he pleads hopefully to keep as many of his knights as possible. And his most

moving moment comes when he appeals privately to the gods with "If you do love old men . . . if you yourselves are old, make it your cause. Send down, and take my part."

Because he is concerned so entirely with his personal fall from fortune's favor, Mr. Carnovsky's Lear is of human size. Just as Shylock put his trust in the letter of the law, so this Lear cannot believe that his daughters have seen fit for any reason whatsoever to abrogate the very specific agreement he made with them when he handed over his kingdom. But Mr. Carnovsky, rather than following one strictly logical course in his portrayal, snatches at passages sometimes in pride, sometimes in anger, as the spirit moves him. And when he goes mad on the heath, he displays the helpless confusion of derangement rather than the inspired eloquence of lunacy. Because Mr. Fletcher has chosen to end the first half of the play in mid-heath, and begin the second part of the evening with a continuation of this scene he succeeds in emphasizing Lear's pitiable sickness. We are thus more concerned about Lear's return to some sort of mental peace than about the restoration of political peace to his kingdom.

Indeed, the scenes in which Mr. Carnovsky surpasses all other Lears within memory are those in which Lear enjoys the release of comedy that goes with madness. He performs these with all the earthy effectiveness of a burlesque comic, completely avoiding sobriety, didacticism, and intellectual self-consciousness. "Give the password!" he shouts. "Sweet marjoram," improvises Edgar. "Pass," orders Lear, not because it is the right word, but because he likes the sound of it.

Given this interpretation, one cannot expect Lear's final scenes to be agonizingly tragic. A ripe, peaceful harmony is all that ensues, and Mr. Carnovsky melts into it. The death of Cordelia seems an almost necessary preparation for his own, and one suspects that in his personal heaven he will sing perpetually with her "like birds i' th' cage." And one wonders if Lear in death did not get the filial love that in life he had to share with her husband.

Most of the people around Lear also seem marvelously human. Philip Bosco's Kent is amusing when he has more fun than he ought with his invective, and touching when he laments that Lear must be awakened from a

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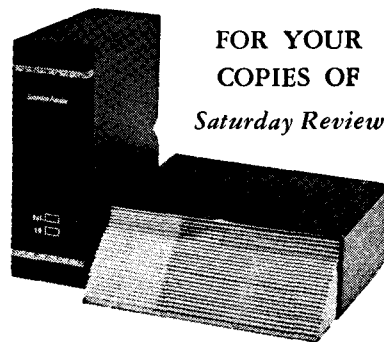
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sleep that might have cured his insanity. Lester Rawlins's deformed fool never capers or witticizes gratuitously but always seems to be putting thought and wisdom into his jokes.

As Edmund, Douglas Watson enjoys the challenges offered by a career of evildoing more than he does the promised material benefits he may derive from it. And Rosemary Murphy concentrates on Goneril's hysteria to make her a vulnerable and sympathetic character. James Ray's pensive Edgar and Carrie Nye's high-society Regan are also memorable. If one is slightly disappointed in Patrick Hines's weak Gloucester, and in Anne Draper's reticent Cordelia, these qualities are at least consonant with some aspects of their roles. As lesser characters, Frank Converse, Donald Gantry, and John Devlin give off sparks of power that suggest they are ready for bigger things.

Will Steven Armstrong's movable metallic settings pick up Tharon Musser's lighting to provide foreground areas of action into which the performers can emerge from the dark surrounding areas. This is one effective way to solve the problem presented by the ASFTA theatre's too, too vast stage.

Another solution is used in *The Comedy of Errors* where two stage houses close in the proscenium opening, and the space in between is filled with an inner frame from which commedia dell'arte performers can drop a filmy curtain or arrange themselves colorfully.

While this solution is both practical and charming, it seems to keep reminding us that the play doesn't matter. So does the device of having Douglas Watson play both Antipholi, and Rex Everhart both Dromios, for the fun of the play is that the people who should recognize the wrong twin don't. Thus, although the performances are impressive and the mood is gay, we seldom find ourselves very concerned about what seems a chain of highly artificial predicaments.

Douglas Seale's staging of *King Henry V* features James Ray as Harry. Mr. Ray, who was seen as Henry in Central Park a few summer ago, brings a boyish appearance and an always thoughtful delivery to the play. While there is a lack of explosiveness to his portrayal, he manages to give the complex proceedings a feeling of personal significance. And Mr. Seale has nicely employed his excellent supporting company to achieve a beautifully liquid presentation of the chronicle.

One may have reservations about any of the offerings here this season, but one can have nothing but admiration for the much improved quality of production and performance in all of them.

—HENRY HEWES.



## TV AND RADIO

### Biography's Backyard

**H**OW many living non-celebrities do you know personally who could be the subjects of interesting thirty-minute biographies or character sketches on television? I can think of a few who have never been mentioned in the press or who are known publicly only by limited groups. None of these is stylistically dramatic, yet because of their warmth and intelligence, and their activities, they could provide worthwhile viewing. *The Story of . . .*, a non-network, syndicated film series of thirty-eight programs, has essayed such a format this season. Produced by Mel Stuart for David L. Wolper Productions of Hollywood, the programs are being shown locally throughout the country in non-Class A time periods. I saw *The Story of an Artist*, one of the early productions, and recently I viewed *The Story of a Patroness*, which had been called to my attention by the producer.

I was disappointed in both programs and wondered why. Mr. Stuart said this series is the work of Hollywood documentarians exploring a new form in which real people are shown pursuing routine activities in loosely structured situations. The artist and the patroness who appeared in the two programs that I viewed evoked no sympathetic response. The artist is a neo-Dada sculptor who constructs his odd representations of human figures out of unrelated objects that he finds in junk yards. The patroness is a wealthy lover of the arts who was observed aiding an aspiring painter and a singer in their careers. It was disconcerting to see this woman of sixty-seven dressed in leotards in her bedroom in the morning, standing on her head and doing a yoga exercise, while her husband ("a second cousin of J. P. Morgan") discussed with her the money she had raised for a worthy cause. The artist fulfilled the stereotype of the rebel-in-our-culture, and the patroness came through as an overbusy esthete in the lap of luxury. Whether either of the two subjects was truly represented I do not know. Is eccentricity a selling point of the series, or are the two examples I viewed not representative of the other thirty-six?

Let's assume that the producers thought these two individuals had affirmative appeal. Were they mistaken or did their treatment fail to project the winning qualities for which the artist

and the patroness were presumably chosen? The problems of initial choice of subjects and their subsequent handling challenge all attempts at biography. When the subjects are well known, half the battle is won. The tougher job is in dealing with non-celebrities; and the law governing that task may be simply that the difficulties are in inverse ratio to the subject's degree of celebrity. The less known the subject, the more careful must be the choice and the more penetrating the treatment.

The producers seemed to lack a point of view regarding the artist and the patroness. They accepted their two subjects at their own evaluation, particularly in the case of the patroness. No human life is free from problems, yet the lady appeared all serenity and satisfaction—and not very believable. Perhaps the hazards of *The Story of . . .* are more administrative than creative. Mr. Stuart remarked that the series is produced within a comparatively low budget (syndicated series usually are). While four weeks are spent in editing each program in this series ("That's where the films are really made—in the editing room," he said), one week is given to preliminary research and another week to actual shooting.

The people who work this series are very good with film. Their cameras catch intimacy and spontaneity; their cutting moves right along; and their soundtracks, recorded wild and narrated by the subjects themselves as well as by an announcer, are put together with skill. But how can a subject be chosen wisely and sounded out in some complexity in one week without risking error in original judgment and inviting superficial treatment? Acres of diamonds may lie waiting for television in biography's backyard, but with low-budget syndication it costs too much to mine them.

The formula remains challenging. I think again of the people I know (and you know) who could qualify for such shows. Before the formula can pay off in quality, however, the front office will have to restructure the production schedule and put some interpretive spine into the portraits. Perception is everything—and time for perception will have to be made at the head of the assembly line as well as at the end.

—ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON.