

Shakespeare and the Festivals

Alice Griffin

This year, the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, promises to set a worldwide record for Shakespeare festivals. Hundreds of schoolchildren in Westchester are piping the Bard's blank verse for a mammoth celebration; more than a hundred amateur productions are scheduled in England; schoolboys in the Philippines are rehearsing the roles of Shakespearean heroines, and the replica Elizabethan stage at Waseda University in Tokyo will ring to Shakespeare in Japanese translation.

Why should there be so much activity in the summer when, to the best of this writer's recollection, there has been no independent Broadway production of the Bard between the Olivia de Havilland *Romeo and Juliet* and the Burton *Hamlet* this spring? One reason, of course, is financial. The large cast of Shakespeare and the large number of stagehands required make for the high cost of production.

Summer offers an opportunity for production by non-professional groups in the universities, which have come up with such annual celebrations as those at Ashland, Oregon and Boulder, Colorado.

And then, there are the tourists, looking for somewhere to go and something to do in the summer. Stratford-on-Avon offers plays at the Memorial Theatre as an "added attraction" for tourists. Stratford, Canada and Stratford, Connecticut also offer plays to attract tourists.

Whatever the reason, Shakespeare lovers will again flock to the festive umbrella-roofed building in Ontario, to the staid octagonal building beside the Housatonic River in Connecticut, to the red-brick edifice beside the Avon in England.

Initiated by David Garrick's Shakespeare Jubilee, celebrating the 200th anniversary in 1764, the idea of offering the plays at Stratford-on-Avon continued through the years. After the last war, the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in England reached a high standard of excellence, under such directors as Anthony Quayle and Glen Byam Shaw. The productions were reduced to five in number and leading British actors created a memorable gallery of Shakespeare's great roles. Who that has been fortunate enough to see them can forget Gielgud's Lear, Burton's Hal, Redgrave's Richard II, Peggy Ashcroft's Beatrice, and Laurence Olivier's Mac-

beth? In more recent years, under a number of new directors like Peter Hall, young companies have enacted the comedies creditably. Attempts by English directors to give individuality to their productions have been both praised and deplored.

The Canadian Shakespeare Festival was founded ten years ago, with Tyrone Guthrie, a veteran of the Stratford-on-Avon festival, as its artistic director. Alec Guinness and Irene Worth were the stars in the first season, but the real star, then and ever since, has been the stage, generating excitement to the production and bringing the actor into close rapport with the audience, who surrounds him on three sides, as he stands on a bare platform. Such features of the Elizabethan stage as the inner and upper stages are reproduced in a graceful, columned structure at the back. Designed by Guthrie and Tanya Moiseiwitsch, this stage has been greatly influential, as can be seen in the design of the Delacorte Theatre in Central Park and the new ANTA Washington Square Theatre of the Lincoln Center Repertory.



A scene from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at Stratford, Connecticut Shakespeare Playhouse

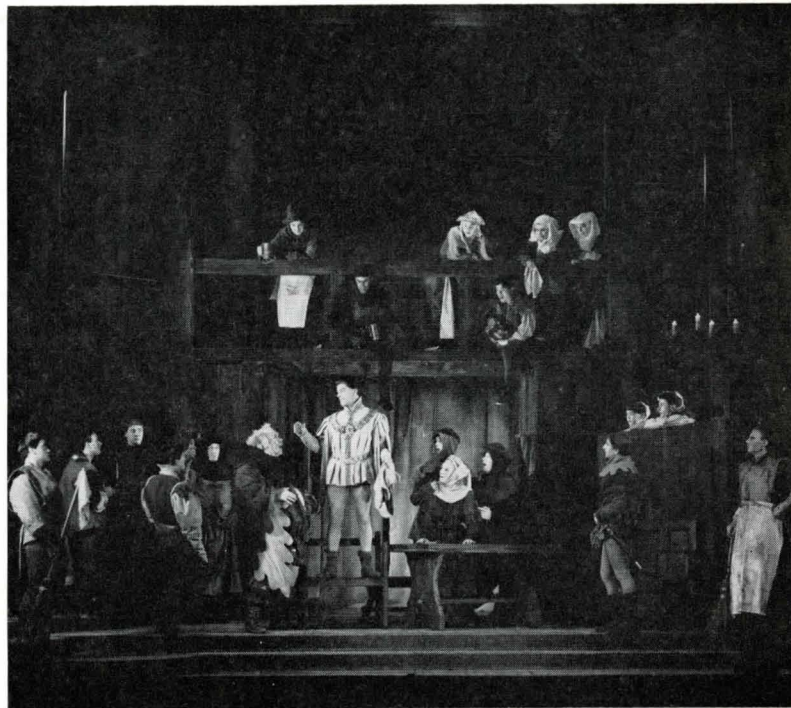
This type of stage for Shakespeare had had its genesis at another festival, years before, at Elsinore, when Guthrie was directing Laurence Olivier as Hamlet for a performance outdoors at Kronborg Castle. When it rained on opening night, an arena-stage production was improvised indoors, and the result convinced Guthrie that this was the most effective way of staging Shakespeare.

The Canadian opening in 1954 was electric: Guinness as an intellectual, non-heroic Richard III and as the aging King of France in *All's Well*; Irene Worth as Helena in one of the most appealing interpretations of that character; the company sweeping down the aisles and across the stage in the scenes of history and spectacle, or choreographed like a ballet in the comedy, all wonderfully disciplined both for mass effect and minor detail. Playgoers found to their astonishment that Shakespeare *was* exciting theatre, and that his poetry could be both beautiful and meaningful.

The brilliance of the opening season was equalled later in individual productions, but never again throughout an entire season. One recalls not only with satisfaction but with affection the outrageously amusing non-period production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, with Petruchio a bumbling Harold Lloyd type at the beginning and a dashing Rudolph Valentino at the end; the dignified, possessive Shylock of Frederic Valk; Christopher Plummer as a heroic Henry V; Douglas Rain sadly touching as Malvolio, realizing the hoax that has been perpetrated on him. Yet Canadian productions that were less than brilliant were still exciting, because of the very proximity of actors and audience, and also because the speech and most of the acting always have been at a high level.

The American Shakespeare Festival Theatre at Stratford, Connecticut, opened the year following the Canadian inauguration. Henry Irving would have felt at home in the theatre — a huge auditorium stretching back into space, a steeply graded balcony, an old-fashioned proscenium stage.

Reflecting on the Connecticut Festival's first nine years, one remembers a few good performances, and a great many miscastings, misinterpretations and novelties: John Emery seeming downright uncomfortable as King John, and Katherine Hepburn playing Portia as a combination of Alice Adams and Jo March. One recalls, sadly, all the "tricking up" of Shakespeare in the belief, no doubt, that this is necessary to make the audience accept him: *Twelfth Night* set in a Regency seaside resort, with half the cast in natty sailor suits, looking as if they were about to break into a chorus from *H.M.S. Pinafore*; *Troilus and Cressida* in an American Civil War setting; *Much Ado About Nothing* set in the American-Spanish Southwest, with Benedick's



A scene from "Henry IV, Part I" at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Stratford-on-Avon, England



Banquet scene from the Stratford, Ontario, Festival production of "The Taming of the Shrew"

first entrance marked by cowboys parading in, whooping it up with lassoes and pistols. More fondly, one remembers the stars who gave star performances — Morris Carnovsky as Lear and as Shylock, and Alfred Drake as Iago.

The Connecticut Stratford Festival began with a building, and it has been looking for a company ever since. In 1963 the Festival received a Ford Foundation grant to train one, so all may end well.

The New York Shakespeare Festival, founded and guided by Joseph Papp, started with the plays, and the audience demand for them became so great that in 1962 the company was given a theatre in Central Park. Designed by Eldon Elder, the stage of the outdoor theatre follows the general principles of the Canadian: a large, curtainless platform with suggestions of Eliza-

bethan features, the audiences seated in amphitheatre-fashion.

The Central Park Shakespeare theatre opened with George C. Scott giving a stunning portrayal of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, but it has not reached that height again. It has never had another actor of Mr. Scott's talents. Yet even workmanlike productions in the Park seem more immediate than they would elsewhere, again because of the proximity of actor and audience.

And so the summer draws nigh and off we go to the Shakespeare festivals. Perhaps we will disagree with the Oedipus complex of Hamlet, or *The Tempest* as an allegory of modern science, of *Twelfth Night* as an operetta — but how better may one spend a summer evening?

HELEN GRAY CONE '76

1859-1934



President, Alumni Association 1886-1888

Helen Gray Cone taught at Hunter for thirty-seven years. She was first appointed to the teaching staff in 1889. From 1899 until her retirement in 1926 she was Chairman of the Department of English.

English majors in her courses in Shakespeare and Romantic poetry carried away a life-long impression of her devotion to literature, her dedication to all the best that has been thought and said.

She was herself a poet in the Romantic tradition, a writer of verses "grave and gay" reflecting a love of nature, a love of country, "a vision of the brotherhood of man." In 1931 she published *Harvest Home*, a selection of poems from five volumes of her verse which had appeared earlier: *Oberon and Puck*, 1885; *The Ride to the Lady*, 1891; *Soldiers of the Light*, 1911; *A Chant of Love for England*, 1915; *The Coat Without a Seam*, 1919.

In 1920, in the course of the celebration of Hunter's fiftieth anniversary, an honorary doctorate of literature was bestowed on her by the College. She was also elected to the newly established chapter of Phi Beta Kappa at Hunter in that year. She had earlier been awarded a Master of Humane Letters degree by New York University.

After her retirement, graduates of the College and members of the Faculty, as well as other friends, established the Helen Gray Cone Fellowship in the English Department. No graduate of the College, no member of the teaching staff was perhaps more widely admired and revered, in the first decades of this century.