

Drama Reviews, George Orwell

Drama Reviews

The Tempest by William Shakespeare, The Old Vic Theatre

If there is really such a thing as turning in one's grave, Shakespeare must get a lot of exercise. The production of The Tempest at the Old Vic has no doubt given him another nasty jolt, though one must admire the enterprise of the managers in putting it on at such a moment.

Why is it that Shakespeare is nearly always acted in a way that makes anyone who cares for him squirm? The real fault lies not with the actors but with the audiences. These plays have to be performed in front of people who for the most part have no acquaintance with Elizabethan English and are therefore incapable of following any but the simplest passages. The tragedies, which are better-known than the others and in any case are chock-full of murders, often succeed reasonably well, but the comedies and the best of the histories (Henry IV and Henry V), especially their prose interludes, are hopeless, because nine-tenths of the people watching don't know the text and can be counted on to miss the point of any joke that is not followed up by a kick on the buttocks. All that the actors can do is to gabble their lines at top speed and throw in as much horseplay as possible, well knowing that if the audience ever laughs it will be at a gag and not at anything that Shakespeare wrote. The Tempest at the Old Vic was no exception.

All the Stephano and Trinculo scenes were ruined by the usual clowning and roaring on the stage, not to mention the noise and fidgeting which seem to be a cherished tradition with Old Vic audiences. As for Ariel and Caliban, they looked like something that had escaped from a circus. Admittedly these are difficult parts to cast, but there was no need to make them quite so grotesque as was done on this occasion. Caliban was got up definitely as a monkey, complete with tail and, apparently, with some disgusting disease of the face. This would have ruined the effect of his lines even if he had spoken them more musically. Ariel, although for some reason he was painted bright blue, was horribly whimsical and indulged in exaggeratedly homosexual mannerisms, a sort of Peter Pansy.

John Gielgud, as a middle-aged rather than elderly Prospero, with the minimum of abracadabra, gave a performance that was a long way ahead of the rest of the company. Miss Jessica Tandy, as Miranda, spoke her lines well, but was wrongly cast for the part. No Miranda ought to have blue eyes and fair hair, any more than Cordelia ought to have dark hair. The best feature of the evening was the incidental music, which fitted the romantic setting of the play a great deal better than did the scenery. All in all, a well-intentioned performance, but demonstrating once again that Shakespeare, except for about half a dozen well-known plays, will remain unactable until the general public takes to reading him.

The Peaceful Inn by Denis Ogden; Duke of York's
An uncanny play possibly owing something to Outward Bound. Six travellers find themselves stranded by chance at a country inn which in fact does not exist, and a murder which happened there exactly a year earlier is re-enacted in front of them. As a result the various personal problems which brought them there are solved. The dialogue is convincing and the mysterious atmosphere is well worked up, but the play's weakness is that the problems of the six main personages are of such a nature that it is impossible to take them seriously.

The clergyman has lost his faith because his brother died of pneumonia, the young society beauty finds her life hollow, etc., etc. Although cast in 1940, the play makes no reference to the war, direct or indirect; bourgeois peacetime life, with all interest centring round financial success, motor-cars, divorce, etc., is apparently looked upon as something eternal. Miss Louise Hampton gave a very fine performance as Joanna Spring, successful journalist and editor of the Women's Page ("Write to Auntie Madge about it"), and the acting as a whole was worthy of better material.

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The End