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SHAKESPEARE

LE MONDE VERT : RITES ET RENOUVEAU

Société Française Shakespeare

Actes du Congrès 1994

sous la direction

de

M.T. JONES-DAVIES

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Rencontre avec Michael Attenborough, executive producer of the R. S.C.

Président de séance : Dominique Goy-Blanquet

D.G-B : Just yesterday, we had the announcement that the R.S.C. received the largest ever sponsorship of the arts' organization which should keep the company out of worries for several years.

M. Attenborough had an exciting period when he was the Director of the Hampstead Theatre, where he performed interesting new plays and more classical ones. Some of you probably saw his production of *The Changeling*.

M. Attenborough has agreed to answer a few questions on *The Winter's Tale* staged by Adrian Noble which some of you saw at Bobigny last term. Perhaps he will tell us about Adrian Noble's choice of showing the Pastoral in a setting which was more on a working-class urban basis.

Before we go on with this discussion, M. Attenborough will give his own views on the green world.

M.A : I am going to touch on four plays in this brief contribution to your title : *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* which are currently on our repertoire, *As You Like It*, which is just finished, and *Midsummer Night's Dream*, which we are doing next year. I am slightly expanding the title : to me the key word "green" means "nature", which is certainly the most frequently used word in the whole of Shakespeare. It is certainly the most complex, and one of the most ambiguous and contradictory. John Donne said ; "the term 'the law of nature' is so unconstantly delivered that I confess I read it a hundred times before I understand it once". For me the two embodiments of the word would be the "natural world" and the "world of human nature". It raises questions to do with what is "natural", "what is man's true nature ?", and "How is it revealed in the green world, in the natural world itself ?" Dr Johnson said that "Shakespeare was above all writers — at least above all modern writers —, the poet of nature exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless combination and

expressing the course of the world in which the loss of the one is the gain of the other, in which at the same time the reveller is tasting his wine and the mourner is burying his friend, in which the malignity of one is sometimes defeated by the frolic of another and many mischiefs and many benefits are done and hindered without design." The picture that we get of nature, both in terms of the natural world and in terms of human nature, is a series of contradictions, of antitheses, which is of course one of the major structural pillars of Shakespeare's work. The two brothers in *King Lear* being a perfect example of this antithesis — Edmund refers himself to nature : "Thou nature art my goddess". And then right at the end of the play, having devoted himself to what he feels is his true nature, wild, unbridled, as opposed to the natural bonds of family, he says : "Some good I mean to do despite of mine own nature".

An idealized view of the natural world is an oversimplification of what Shakespeare was writing about. The forest of Arden, the forest in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the Pastoral world of *The Winter's Tale* and Prospero's island in *the Tempest*, the green world, the non-urban, non-human society, are riddled with contradictions. In *As You Like It*, the Duke acquires authority because he is respected outside the Court, he has "natural authority". Orlando who is victimized within the Court finds his own goodness. "They say he is already in the forest of Arden, and many merry men with him ; and there they live like the old Robin Hood of England. They say many young gentlemen flock to him every day and fleet the time carelessly as they did in the golden world."

Also you find the essential of human life, cultural life reflected in the natural world :

... "And this our life exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones and good in everything."

Corin answers Touchstone :

"Sir, I am a true labourer : I earn that I eat,
And get that I wear, owe no man hate,
Envy no man's happiness, glad of other men's Good,
Content with my harm ; and the greatness of my pride
Is to see my ewes graze and my lambs suck."

Into this somewhat idealized image of the golden age, they begin to be revealed in their true state in the less ordered world of

the forest of Arden. The journey of the play is resolved by a woman, by the forces, the environment in which Rosalind operates. We reach revelation through confusion and concealment, it results in sexual ambiguity. So reconciliation is achieved through, albeit humorously delicately woven, a degree of pain, a degree of contradiction, and one man still does not want to conform to the happy image.

Midsummer Night's Dream opens with a human society of strife and discord, and the same kind of journey takes the characters to the green world. But it is not a simple pastoral idyl, it is quite cruel and humiliating. But finally the resolution is achieved because it is a comedy after all.

In the last two plays, the antithesis is more starkly painted and the journey arguably more complex : either side of the fifteen-year gap are two extreme poles of the unnatural, discordant, pained, distorted image of human relationships in Sicilia. But the third person we meet in Bohemia is a pickpocket. Of course, as we are in a light, comic mode, villainy is enjoyable, but it is not a simple, idyllic world. The destiny behind Florizel and Perdita's life is always going to take them back into the Court, where the circle is completed. The lessons of the natural world is brought back to a form of reality.

Lastly in the *Tempest*, again the removal from human society is there right at the beginning. Shakespeare chooses not to dramatize the scene. He inflicts upon the poor actor who plays Prospero the long exposition in order to devote the rest of the play to the process of healing, forgiveness, growth and self-knowledge. Again we see all the more clearly people's true human nature in the natural surroundings of the island because they are out of their context : the ugly villainy of Sebastian and Antonio, the misguided values of Stephano and Trinculo in the sub-plot, and indeed it becomes a painful journey for a number of the shipwrecked. Finally Prospero has to resign himself to that certain things are beyond his so potent art. He cannot change who Sebastian and Antonio are ; although he resolves to reform himself, Prospero acknowledges Caliban as part of himself.

And again the effects of the pastoral life is by no means idealized and involves a degree of acceptance of contradiction. The resolution of both these two plays is a resolution of the intellectual wrestling match that was going on through Shakespeare's life between art and nature. Nature is constantly referred to as a

good, wise goddess, but in *The Winter's Tale*, art makes the statue of Hermione almost natural : it was created by "that rare Italian master Julio Romano ; who had he himself eternity and could put breath into his work, would beguile Nature of her custom, so perfectly he is her ape."

Someone working in the theatre is constantly faced with the way a character has to come to terms with the contradictions of human society, the contradictions within their own personalities. The second problem is that you have to identify the journey of the play, in order to make an evening in the theatre work.

D.G-B : What you say of the last plays applies to earlier ones like *As You Like It*. There are conflicting aspects of one great creating nature rather than two completely distinct views of nature, one being rather realistic, and one literally an artificial one.

M.A : Curiously I think the more Shakespeare wrote, the more his view of nature both simplified and got more complex.

D.G-B : I quite agree about the idea of inclusiveness.

My next question would concern the representation of nature on the stage. How are the next productions going to be done ?

M.A : *The Tempest* is now playing in Stratford. I suspect that Sam Mendes would say that in his production, the realization of the natural world could not be separated from his view of the world of the play as a whole. He made a specific choice how to depict Prospero's world, i.e. much more to do with magic than it is to do with greenness or naturalness. One of the recurring images is of performing conjuring tricks : people emerge from boxes, disappearing in one place and reappearing in another. It is a very un-naturalistic, stylized production : when Prospero is watching, he just perches on top of an enormous ladder. The element of performance is mirrored by Trinculo who is portrayed as a sort of faded northern music hall ventriloquist, so a number of his lines are in fact given to his doll. As a result, Trinculo is constantly having dialogues with himself within his own lines. The image of nature is very unliteral, certainly very un-green.

D.G-B : Obviously Adrian Noble's was also very un-green. Incidentally Richard McCabe, who was a brilliant Auto-

lycus in that production was earlier on a Puck in a *Midsummer Night's Dream* in which there was not any greenness either. Do you think the R.S.C. has no time for the green world, or that there are other ways of broaching the subject ?

M.A : The R.S.C. has no set view. The most crucial issue the R.S.C. has a view of is the approach to Shakespeare's text and language. Each director and designer is left absolutely and entirely free to take the view of the plays that they do, even if I disagree. I did not know what Sam's production of *The Tempest* was going to be like until I saw the first preview. If the image of nature in John Caird's production of *Midsummer Night's Dream* and Adrian Noble's *The Winter's Tale* is ungreen, I suppose it is only coincidental.

D.G-B : That is the interesting point : obviously there was no signed agreement about not showing any greenness, but for some reason, both directors seemed to agree on the fact that you cannot perhaps put it on stage. Is it because it is irrelevant to us today ?

Midsummer Night's Dream was set as to represent the backyard of a junk-shop.

M.A : And there were a lot of punk fairies.

I do not think Adrian Noble intended the world of Bohemia to be urban. It was an English country village largely influenced by the paintings of Stanley Spencer (the music, the country fête) rather than a Bohemian environment. But it was not green.

D.G-B : They seem to refer to a working-class culture rather than a country culture.

What are the coming plans of the R.S.C. for the next season ?

M.A : In the "Main House" in Stratford we are doing *Henry V*, *Measure for Measure*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, which Adrian Noble is directing and *Twelfth Night*. In the "Swan", we are doing a *Coriolanus* and two lesser known Jacobean pieces : John Ford's *The Broken Heart* and Southern's *The Wife's Excuse*. I am directing two plays in "the Other Place", both of them new : one by David Edgar, an associate writer of the R.S.C.

D.G-B : He wrote *Mayday* and *Destiny*.

M.A : This new play is called *Pentecost*. The other play is by a female Irish playwright called Anne Devlin : *After Easter*. Do not imagine there is any connection between the two titles, but there may be one accidental thematic connection : a fascination with the nature of nationhood and nationalism, and the effect on people's lives, particularly on language and the way communication goes, although expressed very differently in either plays.

QU : In the case of the Irish play, is it a reference to 1916?

M.A : Obliquely, yes. It refers to the approach of language, which is central to our policy. I have only been with the R.S.C. for four years, so, to a degree, it is a new area for me. It is a problem we encounter all the time with young actors emerging from drama school. By and large they are in ignorance of the structure of Shakespeare's verse. In the first rehearsal period of the season, we apologize to the ones who know, but we organize a session to take them through Shakespeare's verse in some workshops. It is to awaken the cast to the craft of Shakespeare, but also to demystify it. It is not that we wish to define an R.S.C. form of verse speaking. We simply wish that the lines should be well delivered and honoured. The actor should have in his equipment all the possibilities that arise out of Shakespeare's text. If finally that actor chooses to go against the rules, at least he can make it a conscious choice. Last year I sat in on Peter Hall's rehearsal of *All's Well That Ends Well*, which as you know, is an absolute totter when it comes to the verse. Even during a late run-through, he spent as much time checking the delivery as he was watching the actors. Terry Hands violently disagrees with this attitude, not because he believes actors should be ignorant, but because he thinks it should not be followed that slavishly.

The central challenge facing any actor picking up Shakespeare is reconciling the two traditions of text and psychology, of Shakespeare and Stanislavski, language and motivation.

In the auditions I was holding yesterday for actors joining the company, nine times out of ten, the language was undervalued, under-explored, so you came away with a sense of the colour but not with the full richness, diversity and complexity of the text that this emotion was meant to be illuminating. It is our duty as directors to achieve a synthesis between those two so that the

audience are not aware of any gap. Our voice department — now extended — is there to make sure the actors can be heard at the back, but it is principally there to help the actors meet that central challenge of performing Shakespeare with that balance between language and emotions.

QU : As there seems to be a realistic approach to the cast, could the same be said about the costumes ? There have been some strange, unexpected representations as if it was anachronistic to use the costumes and the language of the same time, unlike the cinema.

M.A : There is certainly a difference between the two media. I directed a new production of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* at the R.S.C. last year. The only adverse comment was that some people who had seen it in the cinema complained we did not use all those pretty costumes. Bob Crowley's design in the theatre was deliberately not naturalistic. Had those people never seen it in the cinema, they would never have made that remark, they would accept the theatrical world.

We have no general policy about the costumes at the R.S.C. There is currently a highly successtul production of the *Merchant of Venice* which takes place now. It certainly is shocking for five minutes : actors sitting at meals, being served by waiters, smoking cigars, Bassano and Graciano playing at computers on the sittee ... Even the most traditional, conservative of critics have praised the production. It was a gamble, but in David Thacker's staging the issue could not be dodged : you were looking at a man in a post-holocaust context.

QU : You are playing on a myth, the costumes have a meaning.

M.A : The language and the costume serve different functions. The costume is a context. In that sense, to a degree it is cosmetic, but the approach to the language is absolutely central.

QU : Has the R.S.C. had a policy about the edition of the text to be used ?

M.A : There is a vast choice of editions in Stratford, we can argue and choose one or the other, with justifications of course.

QU : Has there been a policy about the videos of the plays ?

M.A : By and large, our policy is not to do the plays on video, with some exceptions like Trevor Nunn's *Macbeth*. The theatre plays look maladjusted on tape, and the video cannot take the place of a live performance. A TV angle is a close-up, the theatre view is by definition a wide shot. The small selected frame of the TV does not serve the play well. And a play stuck in between the national news and the weather forecast has little to do with the act of imagination which is asked for in an audience in the theatre.

But we take a video recording of every single production for our own archives, but there is a signed agreement with all the unions with whom we work that they will never ever be used for any commercial purpose.

D.G-B : Thank you very much for your visit and we wish good luck to the R.S.C. for the coming years.

Texte transcrit par Mme Isabelle Schwartz-Gastine