Tradition, Style, and the Shakespearean Actor Today

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Tradition, according to the dictionary, is "the handing down of customs, opinion, or doctrines from ancestors to posterity, from the past to the present, by oral communication; an opinion, custom, or doctrine thus handed down; principles or accumulated experiences of earlier generations handed on to others."

It is often said that the English stage has none of the great tradition of acting that has given dignity and substance to the theaters of France, Germany, and Russia in their finest days. Today the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Barbican are hoping to create a similar tradition in England, a permanent company for acting classic plays with style.

Style (I read again in my dictionary) is "the general formal characteristics of any fine art." A broad generalization, surely, and not a particularly illuminating definition. What exactly is style in acting and stage production? Does it mean the correct wearing of costume, appropriate deportment, and the nice conduct of a clouded cane? Does it mean correct interpretation of the text without extravagance or eccentricity, an elegant sense of period, and beautiful (but unselfconscious) speaking, by a balanced and versatile company of actors, used to working together, flexible instruments under the hand of an inspired director? Such were the theaters of Konstantin Stanislavsky in Russia, of Jacques Copeau and, afterward, the Compagnie des Quinze in France, and, during certain years of his supremacy, of Max Reinhardt in Germany.

An individual actor can have style. A production can achieve a general style. A company can be said to play with style. And this word *style* can apply equally to a modern play or to a costume piece, to comedy and tragedy alike.

It is a doubtful question whether tradition and style can be studied and learned in a dramatic school or acquired by watching fine actors, still less by reading accounts of the performances of the great players of the past. Every year students flock to England from many parts of the world (and especially from the United States) to learn the way to act Shakespeare and to interpret his texts. It would be interesting to know what conclusions they carry away with them. For the glamor and the past traditions of the theater merge so imperceptibly into the theater of today that it is hard to know which influence is the stronger. Both actors and audiences know the familiar plays of Shakespeare far too well and the unfamiliar ones far too little. It is a sad disappointment to find the recent production of *Alls Well That Ends Well,* after being acknowledged as a superb and original production of the Royal Shakespeare Company both by the British public and by the London and New York critics, failing on Broadway owing to swiftly decreasing audiences.

Some actors and directors try to escape altogether from the web of tradition, especially in the best-known Shakespearean plays and parts. Too often in the last fifty years they have achieved sensational modern innovations and freakish quirks of originality at the expense of the plays themselves.

The actors who are asked to play Shakespeare dressed in clothes of some other period—Macbeth in Byronic costume, Rosalind as a Watteau lady—have a double task, for they have to play in the manner of a much later period as regards deportment and behavior while interpreting characters conceived in the Renaissance. Shakespeare has already tended to confuse the issue with his anachronisms, but too much ingenuity in decorating his plays will only add to the confusion. Harley Granville-Barker has suggested that some of the Roman plays should be staged with Renaissance-classical costumes, in the manner of Veronese and Tintoretto, and this legitimate experiment has been tried with varying success—most happily in the obvious case of *Antony and Cleopatra,* to which it is particularly suited.

But style in acting does not consist solely of the external elegances. Sergei Diaghilev introduced painters into the theater, and a designer of fine taste can help the pictorial side of a production by insisting upon correct detail, not only in scenery, costume, and properties, but also with wigs and makeup (though he cannot teach the actor how to wear them). But this is only the beginning. Each actor has his own qualities and methods of approach, and it is the subtle task of the director to study his players before trying to weld them into a particular unity of manner, pace, grouping, and variety of attack. He is apt to be influenced considerably by his designer, and by the limitations as well as the outstanding qualities of his leading players. (He should, of course, influence and collaborate with the designer in planning the production, and together they will have considered the physical limitations of the theater in which the play is to be given, as well as those of each player in the cast.)

In the process of invention and interpretation many strange complications may ensue. A designer of genius, as Claude Lovat Fraser was, may invent an original version of the period he is to convey. In his famous designs for *The Beggar's Opera* (1920), Fraser stripped the costumes of all trimmings and superfluous detail (preserving the line and using plain but brilliant colors) and simplified his backgrounds to the barest suggestion. Sir Nigel Playfair, the director, invented a presentational style for the actors and singers that also simplified and stylized the eighteenth-century atmosphere, and, in complete harmony with his designer, a new and delightful effect was achieved. This was a rare example in the theater of a marriage of true minds, but subsequent developments of the same kind and treatment (even by Playfair himself) seemed comparatively inferior, imitative, and sometimes quite indifferent.

True originality comes from within—an instinctive feeling on the part of some person connected with a production who is strong enough to control and influence everybody concerned. But if this originality, however brilliant, runs counter to the intrinsic quality of the author and his text, the result will not be a happy one.

It is seldom customary nowadays for the author to read his new play to the company at the first rehearsal, though this was often done in the past by men like Sir Arthur Wing Pinero, himself a masterly director, and by George Bernard Shaw, who always read with a rare vivacity and sense of character. Sir Henry Irving, too, always read a play to his company, whether by Shakespeare or anyone else. But readings are apt to be unsatisfactory occasions, since the interest of each actor in his own part is apt to make him inattentive to everybody else's. Also, if the director attempts to give too many theoretical hints of what he hopes to achieve at such an early stage, he may only succeed in confusing his actors before they get down to work. He will have some main essentials worked out for himself through his preliminary talks with the designer and with the author, in the case of a contemporary play, but he will often find it best to wait to elaborate his views until he has seen, from the first few rehearsals, how the cast he has to work with fits into the imaginary pattern he has in mind. As regards a classical play, however, several readings will be found needful (though not necessarily at the first rehearsal) for elucidating meanings, discussing rhythm and phrasing, and offering a broad suggestion of character-drawing, interplay, and the manner in which the director hopes to proceed.

Most actors like to set their movements and business at an early stage, and they find it very exasperating when the director changes his mind continually on these matters up to the very last minute—as, I regret to say, I have so often done myself when I have directed Shakespeare. Some extremely skilled directors (Granville-Barker, Michel St. Denis, Theodore Komisarjevsky) who had their plans worked out in great detail in advance could bring an almost perfect scheme, prepared in every detail, to the early rehearsals, and the movement of

the play could then be rehearsed and set in the first weeks, leaving two weeks or more for the development of detail, pace, character, and the finishing touches. This is certainly the ideal method of production—but few directors are sufficiently clear-headed, or certain enough of the abilities of their company, to achieve it. There is also a danger that, if the director provides too much set detail, the actors will become lazy and cease to contribute their share in the creative work they have to do. They begin to move to order like puppets. It is important that they should feel they are bringing something of their own to add to the effect that the director is trying to contrive. Naturally, he must remain the guiding influence, since he sees them as a first audience, from the front, and he must be the final judge of their efforts, for they may easily, amongst themselves, create a somewhat different result from what he had imagined, and he must remain alive to the possibility of exciting developments throughout the rehearsals that he never envisaged from his own conception in his preparations. A modern author, too, must be prepared to be similarly influenced in the matter of cuts and rewriting.

The actor, then, should be receptive but not dumbly submissive, obedient but not slavishly imitative, and the director, if he is also an actor, must not try to force his own personality upon the members of his cast who seem to him lacking in personalities of their own. It is better for him to indicate subtleties of mood and character than to go up onto the stage and illustrate what he requires by showing off his own superior technical skill or caricaturing faults—a cruel discouragement to self-conscious or inexperienced actors. Only if he finds a player negligent and deliberately uncooperative is he justified in making an example of him before his fellows.

Since the 1950s, the supremacy of the director has lessened the tradition of the importance of the so-called star, and the public is far better informed as to the director's contribution, through newspapers and television interviews, than ever before—though actors and actresses, of course, in my own early years, were familiar with directors' names and reputations. Granville-Barker unhappily was no longer working in the 1920s, but Dion Boucicault was still a skilled director (especially of Sir James M. Barrie's plays) as was Basil Dean (a feared and respected martinet). Sir Charles Hawtry and Sir Gerald du Maurier, both better known to the public as actors, were acknowledged masters of direction, too, helping many aspiring authors and players to success.

I myself began to direct plays in 1932 and found it fascinating to work with a number of established players, whose willing obedience to my untutored efforts surprised and delighted me; and for many years before and during World War II, I directed twenty or thirty plays with increasing enthusiasm. I never found difficulty in blending the talents I was fortunate enough to find among older players with the less experienced skills of my own generation, so many of whom were destined to achieve subsequent supremacy in their art. I learned much of my increasing efficiency as a director from Komisarjevsky, St. Denis, and Playfair, with all of whom I had worked as an actor, and from whom I had gained some sense of grouping, pace, decor, music, and lighting. But I never felt that I had sufficient originality to put a greatly individual stamp on my productions—especially when I was lucky enough, in 1950, to work for the first time under Peter Brook, who, still a very young man, made a brilliant success at Stratford-upon-Avon with his *Measure for Measure,* in which I played the part of Angelo. His later successes, in which I was also fortunate enough to participate, were *The Winter's Tale* in London in 1951, and a Stratford *Tempest* a few years later. Since then, Brook's productions of *Titus Andronicus* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* among many others, were perhaps two of his most acknowledged triumphs.

Meanwhile, Sir Peter Hall, John Barton, Trevor Nunn, Terry Hands, and Jonathan Miller have all contributed an important succession of achievements, aided by a brilliant number of talented players such as Judi Dench, Ian McKellen, Albert Finney, and Alan Howard, as well as established stars of an older school, such as Dame Peggy Ashcroft and Paul Scofield—all of whom have readily adapted themselves to innovations of every kind, especially to the problem of becoming accustomed to open stages and uncut texts. They have demonstrated exemplary discipline in teamwork and a resolute determination to avoid the old-fashioned dangers of ranting.

What are the most important qualities in an actor? Imagination, sensibility, and power. Relaxation, repose, and the art of listening. To speak well and to move gracefully are elementary feats that

can be mastered with hard work and practice, though some great actors, Irving in particular, seem to have succeeded without them. At first the young actor is bound to be greatly influenced by the acting he admires, and a love of tradition combined with a natural respect for experience may lead him to admire the less subtle excellences of the actors he watches at work. His own taste may not be good. But as he grows older, he will be increasingly influenced by the pictures he sees, the books he reads, the music he hears, rather than by the acting of other players. He will come to trust more to his own instinct and to his increasing knowledge of character and emotion, as well as to his experience of acting in many different kinds of plays. A fine actor of modern parts who plays for the first time in a costume play may sometimes bring a far truer sense of style to his performance than an actor who is steeped in tradition and can boast of a long career in Shakespeare.

As he grows in experience and power, the actor discovers more and more how the make-believe side of acting has to be strangely combined with a naked admission of self-revelation. At first he enjoys pretending, living in another character. But he has at the same time to imagine himself, say, into the character of Macbeth, a warrior capable of committing a murder for the sake of ambition, and also to discover his own personal reactions to the speeches and situations with individual truth and sympathy. However well he may simulate the externals of the part—the age, deportment, and physical aspects of his impersonation—he can only execute the promptings of his imagination within the limits of his own technical instrument and range of personality. And it is here that Shakespeare provides so wonderfully for the actor. In his great characters there is such a wide sweep of creation, such subtle variety of temperament, that a dozen actors may choose a dozen ways of playing them, and—if only they succeed within their own personal expression to the full—the result will be a fine performance. Lord Laurence Olivier, especially in his performances of *Titus Andronicus, Macbeth,* and his controversial but strikingly powerful and original *Othello,* is an outstanding example of this.

The director has his most subtle task in conducting the rehearsals so that the actors may feel confident that he is stretching them to the extreme limit of their potentialities, yet not demanding the impossible. Only with this object in view is he justified in any liberties he may take in adjusting the balance of a scene, for the total effect of the play will be greatly influenced by the qualities of the leading performers, and they need all the assistance possible to enable them to dominate the action, though only when it is justifiably required by the text.

Some directors believe in preliminary discussions and many days of readings. Others work without trying to explain their views to the actors. Others, again, look to the leading players to set the pace and style. They try to teach, parrot-fashion, the actors of the smaller parts or seek to cover their deficiencies with a mass of movement, comic invention, and pretty groupings. But how seldom is the intrinsic atmosphere of a period achieved (especially when the play is written in prose or verse of complicated pattern and full of archaic references and jokes), and how often is a false effect superimposed as a result.

I have said that relaxation is all-important in acting. For myself, I have always found it the most difficult quality to attain. Relaxation is best learned, perhaps, in acting the plays of Anton Chekhov. I believe any actor who has appeared in one of his plays will agree with me. There is a lack of urgency, an inner truth of domestic substance in his characters, that comforts the actor. Though the Chekhov men and women are frustrated, unhappy, nervous, yearning, they are very natural. It is curious that it seems easier for our actors to interpret the humors and tragedies of these Russians than to give convincing performances of the simple English rustics of Shakespeare, Richard Sheridan, and Oliver Goldsmith. It may be that the mixture of comedy and tragedy in the Chekhov plays makes the burden easier to sustain. The mood is continually flexible and changing, and the director may exercise his talents to the full in controlling these varieties of mood and atmosphere, leaving the actors to concentrate on details of characterization. Besides, the parts are very evenly divided, no single character dominates the action, and the period style is comparatively unimportant and not so very far from our own day.

It is very difficult to sustain the tragic plane in a tragedy like *Macbeth* or *Othello,* where the principal characters are of such heroic size and there is little comic relief. But it is equally difficult to sustain the changing moods of Shakespeare's comedies, with their alternating scenes of verse and prose, romance and knockabout, or the brilliant heartlessness of William Congreve and Oscar Wilde, without wearying the audience, especially today, when

the restlessness of modern life and the familiar hectic rattle and whisper of the microphone makes it harder for an audience to concentrate attentively during a long performance in the theater. Pace, in classical playing, is essential, but it is equally important for the actors to play closely with one another, picking up cues, welding scenes together in contrasts of varying speeds and intensities, than for the producer to achieve a general effect of violent hurry and restless vivacity. Unless the leisure of an earlier generation is achieved upon the stage, the brilliant talk seems wearisome and over-elaborate, the characters jerky puppets, grimacing and posing in a wealth of improbable affectation.

Tradition can only be handed down, a delightful but ephemeral mixture of legend, history, and hearsay. But style evolves afresh in the finest players and directors of each succeeding generation, and influences, in its own particular era, the quality of acting and production. The theater needs both, thrives on both, for both are the result of discipline, of endless experiment, trial and error, of individual brilliance and devotion. And genius may always be relied on to appear suddenly from nowhere, breaking all rules and confounding all theory by sheer magnetism and originality.

William Poel and Harley Granville-Barker worked continually to clear away the melodramatic gestures, slow delivery, and old-fashioned declamatory manner of the Victorian and Edwardian theaters. Thanks to their influence, Shakespeare's plays began to be acted, for the first time, in the right order of scenes and with a minimum of cuts. Business was allowed only if it seemed to arise naturally from the text and was not spun out or elaborated into effective tableaux or used as a means for working up applause. All this was greatly to the good. But the director, however forceful in personality, has to withdraw once the curtain goes up. The actors have the final word. Then, after six weeks of consecutive performances, the pace has dragged, new business has been introduced. Even the most conscientious players tend to flag when the audience is unresponsive, and they begin to find their parts monotonous and devoid of spontaneity. Rehearsal is the only remedy, and English actors do not relish rehearsing a play in which they are already acting eight times a week. So it is obviously an advantage from the actors' point of view to be playing several plays in a changing repertoire. But such a program confuses the public, costs a fortune in scenery changes and lighting rehearsals, and risks the dangers of miscasting, since the same actors must somehow be fitted to several parts at once.

We have never till now achieved a permanent classical company in England, though in the period 1937–1938 and again in 1944 and 1953 I myself ventured on three repertory seasons using a group of the same actors with some success. Granville-Barker achieved one or two brilliant beginnings and foundered with World War I. Nigel Playfair and J. B. Fagan benefited by his example and (to a limited extent) created theaters of integrity and style. They used a nucleus of actors and actresses whose early training, under the actor-manager stars (Sir Herbert Beerbohm-Tree, Sir Frank Benson, Sir George Alexander), had developed their talents to a point where they were admirably fitted to become members of a company in which the policy was bent toward interpreting good plays without sacrificing their balance.

English character actors are surely as fine as any in the world; and, as the body of every repertory company, they are essential. They are versatile and loyal. But, curiously enough, they seem to do their best work under an autocrat—whether he be actor, director, or a combination of both. For it is the leader of a company who creates his own tradition of style and ensemble playing. But soon the more brilliant among the younger members of such a company begin to find themselves cramped. They break away from the nursery and, as they become increasingly successful, begin a new tradition of their own. So it happened with Mrs.—afterward Dame—Madge Kendall, Dame Ellen Terry, Irving, Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson, Beerbohm-Tree, Alexander, Granville-Barker, and in our own day with Dame Sybil Thorndike, Dame Edith Evans, Sir Ralph Richardson, Olivier, Sir Alec Guinness, Sir Michael Redgrave, and myself.

The struggle is always the same: between the actor's personal magnetism, the public's preference for outstanding personalities, and the author's dependence on actors to interpret the leading roles that they write. It is evident that the star must always exist. But is he to sacrifice his choice of parts and the development of his personal career to the establishment of a theater of which he is the head? If so, he must stand down in certain productions, and either play a small part, or direct, or not appear at all. In that case he must have in his company one or two actors at least of equal talent and drawing-power as himself—a very difficult achievement,

since star actors are always greatly in demand. In addition, he must guarantee his company long-term engagements—but not so long that they will become exhausted and dissatisfied. Also, his actors must agree not to accept film and radio work, since they will be required to rehearse continually. And sufficiently attractive parts must be provided for each player—at least one good part in a season, say, of four plays.

Experimental plays must be alternated with some of the well-known classics (which are most certain to attract the public), and modern authors must accept a ready-made cast (which may imperil the chances of their work, since in a repertory company a certain amount of less-than-perfect casting is inevitable) as well as a limited run. It is essential that a classical company should sometimes work on an original script, even though a Shakespearean team is seldom well suited to act a modern play, in which the women's parts are so often predominant and in which there are seldom enough parts to accommodate the whole company. If actors are laid off for a certain play (which may be an admirable respite for them), they must be paid or they will go elsewhere. Economically, as well as artistically, the prospect is a bleak one; and it seems to me remarkable that, with the interruption of the two wars, the advent of films, radio, and television, and the enormous rise in expenses in every department of the theater—all these crises following one another in rapid succession—the experiments in classic repertory and semipermanent companies made in England during the last sixty years have succeeded as well as they have.

Patrons such as Lord Howard de Walden, Lord Lathom, Sir Barry Jackson, and Anmer Hall cheerfully risked and lost fortunes in the English theater, but distinguished work was still achieved through their enthusiasm and altruism. Lilian Baylis used to boast that the Old Vic was really the National Theatre and there is no doubt that her extraordinary career succeeded, despite endless struggles with inadequate means, in proving an inspiration. After her death her example bore fruit in shaming the endless prevarications and postponements of the government into the long-promised creation of the National Theatre and the Barbican. But even in her lifetime she had accomplished the remarkable feat of rebuilding (and establishing after several difficult years) the Sadler's Wells Theatre. She also enabled Dame Ninette de Valois to triumph in the founding of her ballet company, while she continued to provide opera in English at cheap prices for her ever-enthusiastic audiences, even though her knowledge of the arts was utterly naive (style and tradition meant nothing to her). But Miss Baylis combined shrewdness and unfaltering determination with her faith in God and her conviction that with his help she would accomplish the work he had given her to do. She must be remembered as something of a saint, with all the doubts, fears, eccentricities, and frequent disagreeableness that must ever be associated with sainthood.

The Old Vic and Stratford were, until the creation of the two subsidized theaters, the only two houses for many years to pursue an uninterrupted policy of presenting Shakespeare. Both underwent periods of unequal criticism and popularity. At the Vic, Robert Atkins, Harcourt Williams, Michael Benthall, and Tyrone Guthrie were important influences, while at Stratford, Walter Bridges-Adams, Barry Jackson, Anthony Quayle, Glen Byam Shaw, and Peter Hall contributed a number of memorable seasons and productions. The much-criticized Arts Council did a great deal of work—invaluable especially during and soon after World War II—in helping and encouraging experimental and classical ventures throughout the country. Both at the Vic and at Stratford the star actors who appeared over the years—Sybil Thorndike, Edith Evans, Laurence Olivier, Paul Scofield, Peggy Ashcroft, Maurice Evans, Charles Laughton, Godfrey Tearle, Paul Robeson, Ralph Richardson, Alec Guinness, Ruth Gordon, Michael Redgrave, and myself, as well as many others, all distinguished players—were content to appear, shorn of West End salaries and star billing, to the great and valuable development of their talents. And, at both these theaters, from 1920 to 1970, the work reflected their devotion to their craft and to the interpretation of Shakespeare and the classics.

The repertory system, with the establishment of the two subsidized theaters, has now at last been achieved, and the public, which for so many years was supposed to be unable to support a series of productions given on alternate nights, now appear to take the scheme for granted, and take the trouble to make certain that they are booking seats for the production that they wish to see. This is an enormous step forward and was considered quite out of the question as recently as the early 1960s. But it is sadly ironic that this state of things should have been achieved only in a time of inflation, when production costs, industrial disputes, salaries, and

cutbacks have endangered the entire theatrical profession and forced the staggering increase in transport and the price of theater seats.

It is sad that when at long last a really fine production has materialized, it cannot be kept in the repertoire of a theater, to be revived at intervals over several years and shown in the United States and the great capitals of Europe, too. But that is the glory of the theater as well as its fallibility. Talented players develop quickly and cannot be kept in a subordinate position for long. The best ensemble will deteriorate after a hundred performances of the same play. Actors cannot work together happily for too many years at a time. Directors become stale. Style changes. Stars become too old to wish to continue playing the great parts in which they made their reputation a few years ago. (This was not always so, and surely it is a sign of grace.)

The repertory theater and the classical theater must always be nurseries. They will attract talented young people who wish to learn their business. A few of the best stars and character actors will always be glad to work in them—but only for a limited period, for the work is intensely concentrated and demanding, and the rewards financially inferior. In addition there are the purely material considerations to deter an actor who is no longer young—continuous rehearsals and learning of new parts, sharing of dressing-rooms, unfeatured billing, and the binding terms of a long contract.

Practical men of vision are rare in the theater. It is seldom that one man can combine the talents of impresario, financial manager, director, and actor. He may have a smattering of all these qualifications, but if so he is best fitted to work in a theater building that belongs to him and to devise his own policy for running it. He will certainly not work so well under a committee or board of governors. But if he makes wrong decisions or becomes tired or ill after a concentrated period of hard work, he will collapse as Irving did. It was obviously a bitter disappointment to Olivier that, after so many years of brilliant work and endless managerial troubles, he was not after all well enough to remain director of the National Theatre when at last it opened.

Under present-day conditions there is little possibility that an actor can back his own ventures, so that he is bound to be financially responsible to a patron or a syndicate, or else he must work, under someone else's management, in whatever theater that management is able to provide for him and, to some degree, under supervision. The conditions cannot be ideal, however one looks at them. The demand is always far greater than the supply as far as talent is concerned—and the temperament of theater people is notoriously incalculable. Actors are inclined to be loyal in adversity and difficult when things are going well.

But there is a great new public for the theater since World War II. The little clique of middle-class theater-lovers of the Victorian and Edwardian days has disappeared. Regular and critical playgoers, but conventionally minded, following the favorite authors and actors of their day, they were, on the whole, fearful of experiment and suspicious of innovation. They loved Shakespeare chiefly as a stamping ground for stars and spectacle and reveled in the melodramas that the cinema has usurped today. Books are more widely read; films, radio, and television have increased the public demand for entertainment; and an appetite for literature, acting, spectacle, and the spoken word has spread to millions of potential playgoers who would never have dreamed of entering a live theater fifty years ago. Plays are read, listened to, and discussed as well as seen. There is a much wider interest in the production of intelligent work. Criticism is more general, if often less well-informed and expert. And though one may venture to resent pipes and open shirts in the stalls of a theater, they represent a far more widely representative audience than the snobbish, socially-divided house of former days.

For myself, I am in two minds as to some of the most drastic practical changes that have come to the theater in these last years. I cannot like the open stage or theater in the round, both of which demand a completely different method of projection from actors trained to appear on a proscenium stage. In an otherwise brilliant production of *The Duchess of Malfi* that I saw recently at the Roundhouse the continuous turning and changing of positions made it impossible for me to watch the facial play of the cast and forced me to miss hearing a large proportion of the intricate text—though this fact, I must admit, did not seem to trouble the audience or the majority of the critics.

Lighting has become far more brilliantly and imaginatively used, and experts in this department now have highly respected and invaluable posts in all the best theaters, as well as being successfully provided with booths at the backs of auditoriums so that they can direct their work satisfactorily.

Scenic design has veered in a number of directions, both realistic and abstract, and the curtain has

been largely abolished (destroying anticipation, complicating the ends of scenes, and necessitating laborious curtain calls). For several years steeply raked floors became the fashion—very effective from the stalls, less popular with the actors, whose balance was apt to be seriously threatened by them. Overhead lighting is now almost always in view, but this does not seem to trouble audiences (many of them used to open ceiling lights in their own homes), though personally I cannot help resenting their somewhat freakish intrusion on the pictorial effect of a scene.

The subsidized theaters have enabled directors to rehearse far longer than the three or four weeks customary in London for so many years. This is undoubtedly a great advantage, though I cannot say that I believe long discussions, exercises, and improvisations are always necessary. I myself rehearsed with Peter Brook for ten agonizing weeks on the *Oedipus* of Seneca in 1968, and the result, though controversially received, was undoubtedly for me a rigorous and intimidating experience.

Peter Hall rehearsed his production of the *Oresteia* for almost a year, almost rivaling the historic precedents of Stanislavsky and Felsenstein. But the stage director must possess almost the equivalent staying power of a film director to keep the trust of a company for so long. And quite a different discipline must then be demanded of the actors as well as the already taxing task of acting eight times a week before an audience. It is for a younger generation than mine to learn how to stay the course. The labors of applying their skills to the new media in which they do additional work—broadcasting, films, and television, as well as the persistent interviews and other forms of promotion and publicity on television and radio talk shows—make their lives increasingly exhausting and deprive them of any sort of private life.

Audiences are still traditionally minded. They still applaud (as a rule) and hiss (a good deal less frequently than of old). They still stand in queues, arrive late, drop tea trays, and demand speeches and autographs from their favorites.

Behind the curtain, too, tradition remains, as much an inevitable part of the theater magic as the plush curtain, the jumbled property room, the narrow, bleak passages and staircases where the actors pass, now in costume, now in their street clothes, and the dressing rooms with their pinned-up yellowing telegrams, strangely assorted mascots, and reminders scribbled in greasepaint across the mirrors. An age-old tradition, even in a young company playing in a theater that has been newly built (though how much happier most actors feel when playing in an old one—the Haymarket or the Theatre Royal in Bath or Bristol). But Tradition is not a God to be worshiped in the theater, for that encourages sentimentality and looking backward. We may best use it as a warning as well as an example, a danger as well as an ideal.

To play with style—the style that expresses the actor's individual personality, serves his author intelligently, and is flexible enough to give and take for the benefit of his fellow actors, either in classical or in modern plays—this is a worthy and constructive aspiration for a talented young actor to pursue. He may achieve it, perhaps, when he comes to his maturity, in a different, yet equally brilliant, way from his predecessors. But the theater muddles on. I believe it will muddle forward and muddle through.