

The Shakespeare Newsletter

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"Knowing I lov'd my books, he furnished me..."

Spring/Summer 2007

Titus Andronicus in Washington, DC William Proctor Williams (University of Akron)

The Shakespeare Theatre Company's production of *Titus Andronicus* at the Lansburgh Theatre (3 April-20 May 2007) as part of the Shakespeare in Washington festival was, I suppose, a rather eccentric choice for a celebration in the nation's capital. But a play which has political conflict, serious family values, and alien forces taking over society, including the title character saying, "Ah, Rome! Well, well, I made thee miserable / What time I threw the people's suffrages / On him that thus doth tyrannize o'er me" (4.3.18; TLN 1884-86)¹, might be thought appropriate in a theater about equidistant between Capitol Hill and 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Titus entered on a ramp made up of the coffins of his twenty dead sons, and for all I know a political point was being made here (a war leader walks over the coffins of the war dead, including his own sons), just as there may have been one being made by the set of staring eyes projected on the back wall of the stage which greeted the audience as they entered the theater (the Patriot Act is watching you?), though we later discover that these are the eyes of the recently dead emperor.

This production, though it owes a good deal to Julie Taymor's two productions of *Titus*—more to the film than the stage version, I think (Gale Edwards, the director, does make a forceful reference to Taymor's film in the podcast which the Company provided on its web site [<http://www.shakespearetheatre.org>])—was a solid and in most respects an honest production. The sets by Peter England and the music by Martin Desjardins were absolutely wonderful. The former were not overly complex but they were incredibly useful, particularly on a standard proscenium arch stage such as the one at the Lansburgh Theater, and communicative, and that's all sets have to be in my view; the latter, though it might strike some as a bit lush, is still very good, particularly at the opening. The costuming, by Murell Horton, is of the typical mix of ancient and modern we have grown used to in the last decade or so. Titus is usually in antique military gear, as are his sons, though his dress becomes more ragged and miscellaneous as the play progresses; the other Romans are in business suits, though Saturninus's choice of outfits is sometimes startling; the Goths seem to prefer chain mail from the head to the waist and baggy trousers below that; Chiron and Demetrius dress in what I suppose we might call Punk; Lavinia is in straight long dresses of various colors; and Aaron is, eventually, in Moorish smart casual. It is Tamora who seems to demonstrate the flair of Gothic royalty. Her

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Michael Kahn Receives 2007 Gielgud John Andrews (President, Shakespeare Guild)

On May 21, 2007, during a reception that was graciously hosted by Sir David and Lady Manning at the British Embassy, the Shakespeare Guild and the English-Speaking Union joined patrons of the Shakespeare Theatre Company in a salute to Michael Kahn, that organization's Artistic Director,

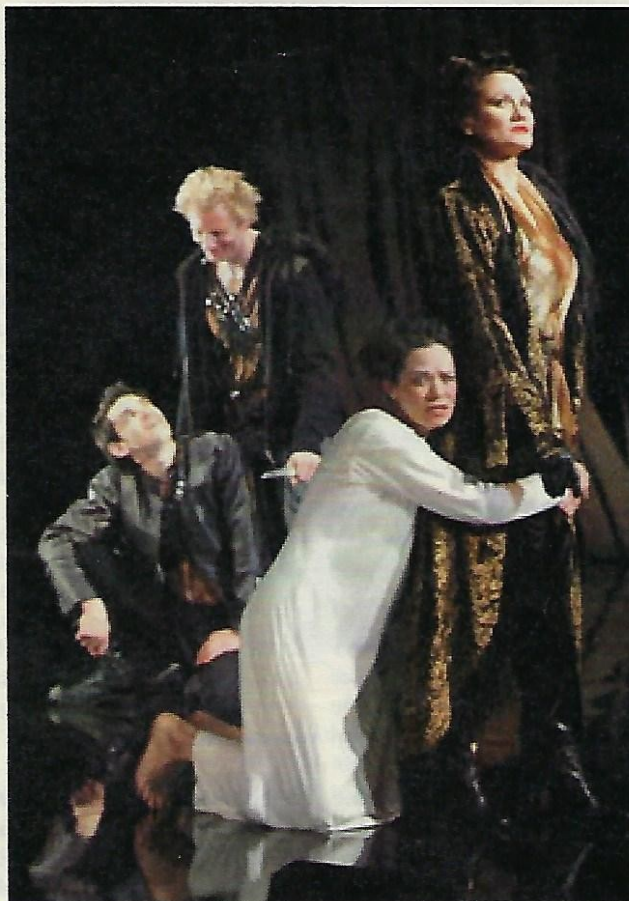
who received the 2007 Gielgud Award for Excellence in the Dramatic Arts. In a ceremony that featured Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg (who described the honoree as "a man of many dimensions"), STC Chairman Landon Butler (who read a laudatory proclamation from D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty), award-winning performers Helen Carey and Ted van Griethuysen (who talked about how privileged they always felt to be members of a Michael Kahn cast), and former BBC broadcaster Lord Watson of Richmond (who observed how fitting it was that an American producer of England's leading author was being lauded on the 400th anniversary of a brave New World venture that introduced the language of Shakespeare to the Western Hemisphere), Mr. Kahn became the first theatre artist who is not recognized primarily as an actor to enter a luminous circle of extraordinary thespians.

Justice Ginsburg praised the honoree as "maestro of Shakespeare in Washington," a six-month festival for which Mr. Kahn had "orchestrated the efforts of some forty arts organizations to honor the Bard through presentations of theatre, music, dance, art, and films." She noted that young Michael had been a "precocious child," having "made up his mind to be a stage director at the tender age of five." She singled out his achievements as a teacher and made special

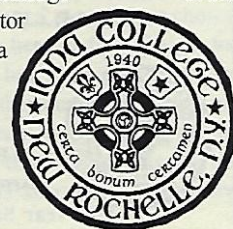
mention of the Academy for Classical Acting he'd created as a joint venture of the Shakespeare Theatre Company and George Washington University. She alluded to such "star students" as William Hurt, Kelly McGillis, Patti LuPone, and Christopher Reeve. And she illustrated the diversity of Mr. Kahn's talents by citing his many successes in the field of grand opera.

Both Stacy Keach and Zoe Caldwell (herself a 1998 Gielgud laureate) sent congratulatory remarks. But the most fervent message of the evening came from Keith Baxter, an actor and director who'd played Prince Hal in *Chimes at Midnight*, a 1966 Orson Welles film in which that legendary figure had taken the role of Falstaff and Sir John Gielgud, as King Henry IV, had inveighed against the fat Knight's influence on a youthful heir apparent. Mr. Baxter became a close friend of Sir

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Colleen Delany as Lavinia and Valerie Leonard as Tamora with David L. Townsend as Chiron and Ryan Farley as Demetrius in *Titus Andronicus*. Photo by Carol Rosegg.



Michael Kahn Receives 2007 Gielgud

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From left: Lady Manning and British Ambassador Sir David Manning, Michael Kahn, John F. Andrews, and Justice Ginsburg. Photo by Keith Harvey.

John, and in 1999 and 2000 he'd brought special greetings to Gielgud recipients from the legend in whose name they were being feted. For this gathering Mr. Baxter opened with a cheerful note from Dame Maggie Smith, who declared it "quite right" that Mr. Kahn was being saluted and proffered her "huge love." Mr. Baxter went on to say that there are many — perhaps too many — prizes in the performing arts these days:

The Gielgud is particular. It commemorates a man who was the greatest creative force in the English-speaking classical theatre of the 20th century, and it honors a recipient whose work reflects the high standards and disciplines that drove Gielgud's life. For over sixty years, from his first appearance in 1922, as a boy of eighteen walking on in *Peer Gynt*, to the last time I saw him, three weeks before he died in May of 2000, the theatre was Sir John's whole existence. Every actor, director, or designer who worked in the profession was somehow influenced by him — an unknown Richard Burton, a young Jessica Tandy or Paul Scofield. No one attempting one of the great roles could resist asking his advice, which was always practical as well as illuminating. We've all heard about his witty counsel to Alec Guinness, who was about to do his first *Lear*. "For God's sake, Alec, get a small Cordelia. You have to lug her around for hours, and you don't want to end up with a hernia." He was a pictorial director, and he revolutionized the whole concept of stage design. And, like you, he was a dazzling director of Shakespeare, rigorously protecting the rhythm and meter while at the same time allowing a fledgling Olivier to breathe new life into the playing of *Romeo*. He sought out previously unknown directors, employing Peter Hall and Peter Brook, for example, when they were barely in their twenties. Sir John's obsession with the theatre is what drives you, Michael, and that is what makes you so splendidly worthy of this award. You juggle pragmatism and idealism with a sure pair of hands. You enjoy persuading star actors and directors to come work at your glorious theatre, but you also have a good nose for newcomers — performers like Wallace Acton and Jeffrey Carlson, for instance, and directors like Ethan McSweeney and David Muse, both of whom started as your assistants. Let me close with a message from Dame Judi Dench: "Dear, dear Michael, I'm so pleased about this award. You really are a marvel. With dearest love, Jude."

At this point Mr. Kahn stepped forward to accept a framed portrait of the artist whose legacy he was doing so much to perpetuate, a charming caricature that London actor Clive Francis had devised as a limited-edition print in 1996 to commemorate Gielgud's elevation to Britain's august Order

of Merit. This special copy of *Sir John* bore an elegant signature by its subject, who'd inscribed it a few years before his death at the age of 96.

Mr. Kahn spoke warmly about the man whose ideals and lofty standards he'd sought to maintain and convey to future generations. He thanked those who'd taken part in the evening's proceedings. He talked about how his awe for Gielgud's favorite playwright had increased over the years. And he concluded with an observation about what several decades of experience had taught him — that, in a manner that may well be unique, this remarkable genius always seems to transcend our efforts to pluck out the heart of his mystery. The reason, Mr. Kahn had come to believe, is that, more perhaps than any other writer, Shakespeare doesn't tell us "what to think" so much as "what to think about."

As participants in this year's celebration of Shakespeare in Washington, nearly 250 attendees toasted a leader who'd helped position America's capital city as a prominent center for the interpretation of classical drama. They appreciated the program's reminders that Michael Kahn had garnered accolades on Broadway, and had overseen such enterprises as the American Shakespeare Theatre in Connecticut and McCarter Theatre in New Jersey before he arrived in 1986 to rescue a troupe that was on the verge of extinction. They were grateful that, drawing upon his experience not only as a director but as a gifted teacher, Mr. Kahn had transformed what started in 1969 as the Folger Theatre Group into a multifaceted institution that is now acclaimed as one of the foremost dramatic ensembles in the world. And as that organization moved forward with plans to occupy its magnificent new quarters at the Harman Center for the Arts, they were pleased to know that Mr. Kahn was putting his finishing touches on a challenging production of *Hamlet* and completing the unprecedented festival that he and Kennedy Center President Michael Kaiser had been coordinating from the outset.

Background on the Gielgud Award

On Sunday, April 24, 1994, one day after the 430th birthday of William Shakespeare, and ten days after the 90th birthday of a 20th-century interpreter of that poet's work who'd played a pivotal role in keeping his heritage vibrant, the Shakespeare Guild unveiled a John Safer sculpture that had been designed to capture an influential performer's "character" and preserve his legacy "with golden quill" (*Sonnet 85*). This presentation occurred at a reception to launch a new Gielgud Award for Excellence in the Dramatic Arts, and among the notables who came to the Folger Shakespeare Library to lend their support to the endeavor were film and television star Tony Randall, who recounted some endearing Gielgud anecdotes, and NPR correspondent Susan Stamberg, who read a touching letter that Sir John had sent to grace an auspicious occasion.

In comments that set the tone for the afternoon, PBS news anchor Robert MacNeil observed that "in our time no actor has spoken Shakespeare with a finer ear for the poetry, or a voice more perfectly tuned to the music, than John Gielgud. Shakespeare could not wish a more noble interpreter. So I believe the Shakespeare Guild does honor to itself by devising this way of honoring Gielgud, now and long into the future. And I am flattered to have a small part in bringing it about." Two years later, in May 1996, at the first of a trio of spring benefits for the Folger, Mr. MacNeil was back in the Nation's Capital to help bestow the Golden Quill upon its inaugural recipient, Sir Ian McKellen. That gala was followed, in April 1997 and again in April 1998, by Library-hosted salutes to Sir Derek Jacobi and Zoe Caldwell.

In May 1999 the Quill made its way to Manhattan for a sold-out evening at Broadway's Barrymore Theatre, where Zoe Caldwell led a cavalcade of theatrical celebrities in a Tribute to "Her Majesty the Queen," Dame Judi Dench. A few months later Dame Judi and another Gielgud honoree, Sir Derek Jacobi, were among the hosts for a January 2000 presentation to actor, director, and filmmaker Kenneth Branagh that took place at BAFTA's Princess Anne Theatre on Piccadilly and at the City of London's historic

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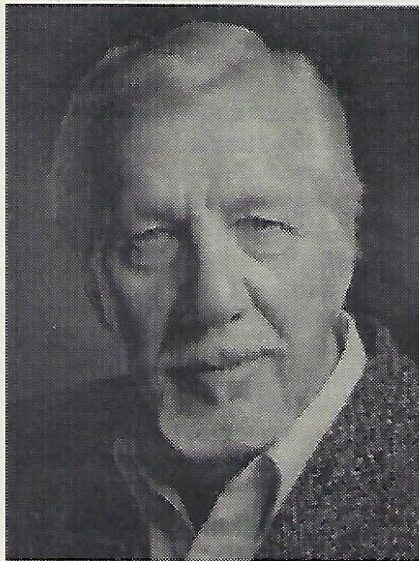
Michael Kahn Receives 2007 Gielgud

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Middle Temple Hall, the site of a 1602 production of *Twelfth Night* whose cast would almost certainly have included the playwright himself.

In June 2002 the trophy returned to New York for A Shakespearean Revel at Lincoln Center, where luminaries such as John Cleese, Bill Irwin, and Kitty Carlisle Hart toasted, and in some cases roasted, Kevin Kline. It proved to be a sparkling get-together, but like its predecessors, and like its sequel in April 2003 with Lynn Redgrave as Gielgud laureate and with her brother Corin and her sister Vanessa among the presenters at the National Arts Club, it was also substantive, with unforgettable reflections not only about the honoree's achievements but also about the exalted traditions that such achievements epitomize. On June 12, 2006, the Guild was back at the National Arts Club for a Manhattan toast to Christopher Plummer. The proceedings included a video greeting from Julie Andrews, as well as messages from Vanessa Redgrave and from two previous Gielgud laureates, Dame Judi Dench and Kevin Kline. Highlighting the program were Zoe Caldwell and Lynn Redgrave (themselves "Quillees," as the latter put it), soprano and four-time Tony Award recipient Audra McDonald, television journalist Robert MacNeil, and actor Clive Francis.

[Many of these awards ceremonies were featured in *The Shakespeare Newsletter*, which gave front-page coverage to the celebrations for Jacobi, Dench, Branagh, and Kline. According to the STC's website, "The Harman Center for the Arts is a 21st-century performing arts center and expanded stage for the Shakespeare Theatre Company and Washington's performing arts community. Opening in October 2007, the Harman Center will consist of the new 775-seat Sidney Harman Hall (Sixth and F Streets NW) and the existing 451-seat Lansburgh Theatre (Seventh and E Streets NW). These two superb mid-sized theatres will serve to transform the Shakespeare Theatre Company into a national destination theatre and provide ideal venues for many of Washington's distinguished performing arts companies. Located in the burgeoning Penn Quarter arts and entertainment district, the Harman Center will be a powerful magnet for tourism and an economic engine for the city of Washington." —Eds.]



R.I.P. William Hutt

One of the outstanding actors of the twentieth century, William Hutt, born in 1920 in Toronto, died of leukemia in June in Stratford, Ontario, where he had performed so often and so well in a wide range of roles, many of them Shakespearean. He had been part of the Stratford Festival since its first season in 1953, not only as an actor but also as a director and assistant director. His interpretation of James Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*

(1997), preserved on film, ranks as one of the best. I was privileged to see him over the years in Stratford, New York, and Washington performing as Feste in *Twelfth Night*, Leonato in *Much Ado*, King Lear, and the title character in Moliere's *The Miser*. He was famous for his impersonation of Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. I will remember him most vividly for his exquisite performance of Feste's closing song, as he evoked the rain that "raineth every day." [J.W.M.]

Murray Levith's *Shakespeare in China*

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After 1976, Shakespeare returned, with new translations and Chinese participation in global Shakespeare activity. Founded in 1983, *Shakespeare Studies* became the first mainland journal devoted to a non-Chinese writer. A series of bilingual, annotated, single-volume editions of each play began in 1984 and continues to publish new plays. The Shakespeare Society of China was founded in 1984, and there have been several Shakespeare Festivals over the years. After Derek Jacobi and the Old Vic offered nine performances of *Hamlet* in 1979, there were four Chinese productions of Shakespeare in 1980 (61), *Merchant* the most interesting, pitting the "feudal usurer" Shylock against the "rising capitalist" Antonio, and eliminating all suggestions of religious difference or conflict (63).

Murray Levith's discussion of various subsequent Chinese productions leads him to an important conclusion about Chinese Shakespeare: it is sometimes difficult to decide what is Shakespeare and what is Shakespeare-as-source-or-inspiration (68-9). The utilitarian, topical approach remains a significant factor. Thus, a 1982 production of *The Tempest* was used to reflect on the attitude of forgiveness adopted by the Chinese toward those who persecuted them during the Cultural Revolution (65). Caliban, predictably, "was not played as the monstrous creature he is usually imagined to be, but rather as a more sympathetic victim of Prospero's colonialism. At the end of the play he stands proudly on the very rock that the duke mounted at the start of the action" (66). A 1994 production of *Othello* for the Shanghai Shakespeare Festival makes Iago the central character whose point of view is regarded as reasonable. The action of the production began on Cyprus, with Act 2, eliminating Act 1 entirely. Some of these revisionist interpretations may reflect Deng Xiaoping's call for "Socialism with a Chinese face" (55), but sometimes their revisionist stance seems remarkably similar to productions in the West.

In his chapter on Shakespeare and Confucius, Professor Levith helps readers to understand the popularity of certain plays in China—they reflect Chinese values. Thus *Merchant* has always been popular because it offers a sort of comic-tragic mixed genre typical of Chinese drama, which is fond of characters like the cruel usurer and the "clever wench" (120). Although traditional Chinese drama ends in reunion and the hero always survives, *Hamlet* is nevertheless popular because of its focus on family ties and virtuous personal conduct, values "congruent with Confucian values" (118). *Lear* and *As You Like It* are popular for the same reason. Plays like *Romeo* and *Othello* attract audiences because they demonstrate that "socially or culturally inappropriate marriages [can] lead to tragedy and death" (122). Confucian ideals of rule would make the themes of both *Richard II* and *Henry IV* attractive, while Henry V is Shakespeare's idealized ruler, "akin to the greatest Chinese emperors of the past" (126).

In his closing reflections on "The Paradox of Shakespeare in the New China," Levith notes the ongoing love-hate relationship between the Chinese and Shakespeare, reflected in the contrast between the "safe" commentary of some and the daring work of other scholars. The same kind of contrast is found between translators of Shakespeare—as noted earlier, Liang Shiqui was suspect because of his humanist readings of the plays and, writes Levith, he was "reviled" until quite recently, and his edition was not available because of his politics (130); while another translator, Zhu Shenghao, is lionized for his contributions to the revolution. Levith concludes that "the Chinese have mostly adapted and appropriated the playwright for their own ideological and aesthetic purposes. . . . Perhaps more than any other nation, China has used a great artist to forward its own ideology rather than meet him on his own ground" (137). As Levith notes, some scholars have broken free of these ideological constraints: "Let's hope more will do so in the future." [J.W.M.]