

Orson Welles' 1937 Production of Julius Caesar

The changing role of the director

The director – a history

Theatres have been producing Shakespeare in different styles and funded by different means since Shakespeare was writing. There has always been a creative impulse to bring actors together under the visionary leadership of an actor-manager or artistic director, to develop the performance of Shakespeare and generate new audiences for his plays through new interpretations and through the availability of performance, whether by touring or programming. The term 'ensemble' might suggest a democratic and egalitarian creative process, but Orson Welles was in the tradition of the great actor-managers in that collaboration with a group of talented and sympathetic actors was the means to an end – the successful achievement of an interpretation of Shakespeare that was entirely his own.

Until the late nineteenth century, the director was not an important figure in the theatre. Plays were not interpreted or investigated in the way that we now expect and acting styles were very different. We can only imagine what the acting styles of the nineteenth century were like, although photographs and early recordings from the end of the century convey some of what created a 'great' performance. Before that, there is only the written testimony of audience members. The poet Coleridge famously described the actor Edmund Kean (1787-1833):

'To see him act is like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning.'

- and the essayist William Hazlitt (1778-1830) said that 'the general fault' in Kean's acting was

'...that it is always energetic or nothing. He is always on full stretch – never relaxed.'

He also said of Kean's performance as Richard III:

'He fought like one drunk with wounds: and the attitude in which he stands with his hands stretched out, after his sword is taken from him, had a preternatural and terrific grandeur, as if his will could not be disarmed, and the very phantoms of his despair had a withering power.'

Theatres were very large and lighting was not sophisticated enough to help the actor in subtle effects. We know that David Garrick used a special wig in his performances as 'Hamlet' so that his hair would lift and 'stand on end' when he saw the ghost of his father – a famous and very popular effect. There were undoubtedly actors of great skill and brilliance who did 'interpret' the character (though we would find their style of acting impossible to relate to now) but plays were 'spectacles' and today, we would find them unsubtle and lacking in interpretive depth. The director (often the actor-manager in charge of the company) would choose the plays to be

performed, and stage the play, making decisions about settings and costumes (based on what was in the store – there was no tradition of design informing the meaning of the play) and then choreographing the movement of people on the stage.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century a huge shift began towards the development of the director's role as the unifying force in the creation of an artistically coherent production in which sets, costumes, settings and context, and acting styles would together create a 'view' of the play which would be unique to that production. The most significant figure in this development in Europe is Constantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938), the actor-manager and first artistic director of the Moscow Arts Theatre, which he founded in 1897. His work there revolutionised theatre and its influence dominates to this day. The Stanislavskian theory and philosophy of acting and production, which investigated emotional and psychological impulses in characters rather than demonstrating their effects, allowed much deeper examination of the motives and relationships within the play and as this impacted on acting styles, the emphasis on production values shifted from visually elaborate settings and multiple set changes to a more integrated and supportive staging in which these new discoveries could be best explored.

Stanislavsky's work with the actors of the Moscow Arts Theatre is the template for the 'ensemble' theatre companies that flourished in the early years of the twentieth century in Britain, Europe and the United States. Under his artistic directorship, the Moscow Arts Theatre became the pre-eminent 'naturalistic' theatre and Stanislavski worked with, taught and directed a company of actors, many of whom remained with the company for decades. Under the Soviet regime when the theatre was heavily subsidised, rehearsal periods would last for months, creating a depth of interpretation reflected in the equally careful and thoughtful design. The company premiered the plays of Anton Chekhov and Maxim Gorky and toured Europe and the United States in the early 1920s where they had a profound impact on theatre practice.

In Britain, Shakespeare's plays were re-examined in the light of these new and exciting developments in theatre practice. The Royal Shakespeare Company and the Old Vic in London produced seasons of Shakespeare's plays with an ensemble of actors who would be in two or three of the plays in the repertoire. Young actors would be expected to play small parts, graduating to larger roles as their craft developed. Directors like Tyrone Guthrie (1900-1971), who was heavily influenced by Stanislavsky, directed radical interpretations of Shakespeare's tragedies. Guthrie directed a production of 'Othello' at the Old Vic in 1937 (starring a mis-cast Ralph Richardson and Laurence Olivier) in which he explored a Freudian interpretation of the relationship between Othello and his nemesis, Iago. Productions like these enabled a fresh look at aspects of Shakespeare as a dramatist that had previously been overshadowed by the poetic and declamatory style of performance popular in the nineteenth century.

Theatre companies in the United States

In the United States, where theatre had emulated that of Europe, there was an established tradition of Shakespearean performance, and the development of the railways enabled companies to tour to the new centres of population. However, there were few 'serious' writers for the stage. Theatres were dominated by melodramas and musical shows that were the beginnings of the musical theatre that would eventually become the great Broadway musical.

Theatrical dynasties flourished on the East Coast – the Barrymores being one of the most famous – and steam ships across the Atlantic brought visiting companies such as the Moscow Arts Theatre. During the great depression of the 1930s President Franklin D Roosevelt set up the Federal Theatre Project as part of the New Deal to give employment to thousands of unemployed actors, writers and directors. Although this scheme was cancelled in 1939, it was a unique moment in American theatre history, with large subsidies from the government allowing the opportunity for experimentation and risk-taking and the production of radical and political work. It was also the meeting point of many of the actors, directors and writers who would go on to build the serious American theatre of the mid-twentieth century, among them Arthur Miller (1915–2005), Elia Kazan (1909–2003) and Orson Welles (1915–1985). In this atmosphere of creative possibility and collaboration, Welles made his first ventures into 'ensemble' theatre, directing a production of 'The Cradle will Rock' (1937), a musical heavily influenced by the work of Bertolt Brecht in Germany, which was cancelled when the FTP withdrew funding. A now legendary performance of the piece took place in another theatre, with no orchestra, set or costumes and members of the cast playing their roles from the auditorium as Union rules forbade them being on stage. It was as a result of this experience that Welles formed the Mercury Theatre Company in 1937.