

Richard Negri interviewed by Simon Trussler for Plays and Players in May 1964

For better or worse, I always have a refreshing feeling of freedom when I'm designing for a play by Shakespeare: so numerous and so varied have been the approaches to any play that there is never any one style that can be called definitive. There are, of course, fashions - and it can often clear the air to go ahead and do just the reverse of whatever is fashionable. That's rather what we did in *As You Like It* - which is usually presented too whimsically, too poetically. With some plays it's the reverse: the poetry needs putting back. In short, a new production must try and breathe back life into those areas of the play that have fallen into disuse.

Of course, the purpose of this kind of dialectic approach is to fuse all the levels of the play into a satisfying whole. Shakespeare was the most balanced dramatist who ever lived: but he was writing for an Elizabethan audience which could draw on the whole body of conventions and traditions he shared with them. For full enjoyment and satisfaction, later audiences need a production which adjusts the balance for their age, which is tuned to their sensibilities, and which fills out deficiencies in those sensibilities.

This is where design is important: a good set will create a world which enables the play to happen fully and convincingly on all levels, whilst good costume will clarify the strong individuality of the various characters. For example, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the designer should build and evoke a setting which can be inhabited convincingly by the courtiers, by the fairies and by the rude mechanicals. Whatever happens, he must not create three worlds, one for each of the groups: the levels must interact, and not be dissociated. I would very much like one day to design for *The Tempest*, which I think is the most completely integrated of all the plays. The interaction of all levels is complete, highly diversified and contained within the bounds of one small island. In *Othello* we used the confinement to one island in the reverse manner - to heighten and amplify the personal tensions.

The kind of stage one is using matters enormously. Some plays are not necessarily destroyed by the proscenium - *Richard II*, for example, is permeated with the atmosphere of medievalism, and can work well within the picture frame. The less formal works, those which are essentially of the Renaissance, need a much more opened-up staging, a space staging.

Always the scenic demands require a strongly disciplined approach, although paradoxically, it is a discipline which encourages the kind of freedom I mentioned earlier. It's a discipline which tends to be highly selective: too much fussiness will bog the play down. Usually sheer physical limitations check the designer's wilder flights in that direction. The restrictions, you see, though they are there, are essentially creative: they will tend to lead the designer along the right path, of creating a total set which will encourage a total response.