

Stratford, Ontario,  
Shakespeare Festival

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Measure for Measure  
July 13, 1954

How Measure for Measure could be given a better production than this is hard to see.

Certainly for this play, the Festival's apron stage, with its permanent structure of stairs, balcony, upper door, and window, and its trap door, well provided for every action. And the off-stage entrances and exits, through two corridors under the amphitheatre seating, and up and down the aisles not only made entrances and exits dramatic, but pulled the audience itself into the action. Movement throughout was skillfully planned and executed; and the use of a small but colorful number of supernumeraries (Viennese town folk, guards of the Duke in striking baroque costumes) kept the stage peopled when its peopling was appropriate. Lighting, largely in diagonal shafts down from the tent's ceiling, was flexible, and effective, and, notably, without the use of color, its only variation being in intensity. Finally, one's first and continuing impression, with everyone save in the narrow center section, facing someone else, the audience was a proper component of the piece.

A component in that it, by its costumes -- the low-toned variegation of men's and women's clothes and faces -- gave ~~human~~ context to the enactment, as did the stage and stage structure, stained a uniform dark brown. In this setting, and within the sharp focus created by the lighting, Tanya Moiseiwitch's handsome costumes held the stage. The integrity of their design becomes apparent only on reflection: there is, as one looks back on it, a color scheme for the whole, of a relatively narrow range, blacks, through grays and browns, to white and gold -- hardly a touch of red, and then in low intensity, as with the few touches of blues and greens. In short, in terms of costuming, the production gave much to think about.

In terms of acting, too, it takes high rank. Noteworthy, here, is the fact, that of the entire cast, only two are "imports," Mason, and the incomparable clown Douglas Campbell, the former now of Hollywood, the latter of the Old Vic. As the critics have noted, Campbell, in the role of the bawd, Pompey, has set a standard for all time in a performance that seems inimitable for speech, movement, and miming. Mason's performance as Angelo, while adequate as to acting, was hardly impressive in terms of speech. What voice he may command, he uses only within a narrow range. (It is said that his performance in this respect has greatly improved since the opening night, when he could be only imperfectly heard.)

The entire remainder of the cast, all Canadians, gives the country high promise for the classic theatre. Most notable in this production was Frances Hyland in the role of Isabella, and in this part exhibiting the best diction of the cast. Small, charming to look at, she was thoroughly in control as the novice in the convent, the suppliant to Angelo,

the outraged maiden, the perplexed conspirator, and finally the prospective Duchess -- a role by no means easy in its apparent inconsistency. Equally in control of his more consistent role was Donald Harron, as the fop Lucio. And the listing of the Canadian roster might well go on, for virtually every member deserved mention.

As noted, it is hard to see how the piece might have been given a better production, and it is, by general agreement, a hard piece to produce effectively. Cecil Clarke, the producer, in his program note: "Like all of Shakspeare, this play is full of people who behave shockingly badly, but none the less are disconcertingly and yet lovably like ourselves. These are people as seen and heard and understood and "felt" by a great genius. It is possible that instead of reflecting on how badly they behave, it might be wiser, as well as more becomingly humble, to wonder if we ourselves really behave any better."

*defines the  
artistic*

In short, Clarke played it straight, without cuts, and without any discernible interpretative emphasis. This is fair, in that it allows one to see in the play what he can see there. This was true for what, for this commentator, is the key role, that of the Duke. He is the context of the piece, its only begetter, despite the accepted notion that Angelo, here played by the star, is its protagonist. True, Clarke gave the Duke the prominence accorded him by the text; but the part lacked the weight it may deserve. Well and portentously acted by another Canadian, Lloyd Bochner, it could have had more and proper weight if it had been a bit more portentous, less hurried in its weightier lines.

Seeing Measure for Measure for a first time is a sufficient vindication of the Festival's choice of the piece. Repeated, careful reading almost inevitably leaves the impression that it is a poor, and as Coleridge said, a "painful" piece. To see it so admirably brought to life is to make one realize that Shakspeare's "poorest" work deserves revitalization. Seeing is again believing in his constant talent. If this is a piece which less readily submits to integral interpretation, it is all the more valuable that we have a chance to ponder it, as we can only if it is to be seen, and so believed. We may still be attracted by the virtuosity the "greater" works evoke in acting. But the test of a company, engaged in creating a coherent tradition in production, may well lie in the supposedly lesser works.

In this test of its competence, and potentialities, the Stratford Ontario company, passed with honors.

*Jim*