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AN AUSTERE DANCE TO THE MUSIC OF LAST THINGS

A Review of Stratford's 1976 Tempest

Ship masts loom above the stage in darkness, their sails billowing ghostlike in the mist. On the stage dark figures pull at the ropes and sails in choreographed motion while others, standing apart from them, sway to and fro with the motion of the sea. There is a cry and a flash and the figures sweepingly change places, as if thrown in unison by the swaying of the boat. Other persons on stage, dimly seen, shout and argue and come and go. The stage itself seems to roll with the bodies and the sails until a general cry is heard and all exit save one, an old man who pauses to reflect on his imminent drowning. It is a shipwreck in a dream.

Thus opens what is perhaps among the most beautiful and least tempestuous of all Tempests. Most immediately striking in this scene is the highly stylized, rather than naturalistic, movement of the actors. Indeed, the mariners are as much dancers as actors, and the dance motif they establish will carry throughout the production.

The lights come up on Prospero and Miranda. Of the properties of the opening scene, the masts, the sails, the ropes, nothing of course remains, except for a large backdrop disk suggestive of the sun. But nothing has replaced them either. The stage is bare, without scenery or property, except for Prospero's wand, and so essentially it will remain, leaving the stage to the actors. But the actors do not solely hold sway hereafter, for as Prospero begins to speak, another element takes its place upon the stage, an element which will at times be setting, at times be backdrop, and at times be participant. It is a silent chorus of dancers, just one director Robin Phillips' stunning and sometimes radical innovations. Though not to be found in stage directions, the presence of this chorus is certainly justified by the
text itself, for the chorus represents the spirits of the isle, whose presence is always felt, either by deed or by reference, throughout the text.

More striking yet than this chorus is Ariel's entrance moments later, for Nicholas Pennell's embodiment of Ariel is at once the most radical element and the epitome of Phillips' Tempest. Rather than the lithe, darting, airlike apparition so familiar to admirers of The Tempest, Pennell's Ariel is a strong, mature, and above all restrained Ariel, suggesting always the prisoner that he is. He accomplishes his errands more quickly than the beating of the heart not through fleetness but the suspension of time, underscoring the basic paradox of the play, a tempest which is both orchestrated and composed, itself suspended in time.

Time is of great importance in the play. There is an urgency behind all else. But there is a serenity about the play also, existing simultaneously with the urgency. Prospero has much to do, old wrongs to resolve, old divisions to reconcile, new alliances to unite, and he must act while his moment is at its zenith. Yet at this moment time itself pauses for Prospero, allows him an interval in which to accomplish all he must. Thus, though the moment be important, the play itself exists in an interlude outside the realities of time, an interlude both reflected in and created by the very movements of Ariel.

Pennell's movements are the most stylized of the production, but they are not the only ones which suggest the romantic, illusory essence of the play. Ferdinand and Miranda, done magnificently by Jack Wetherall and Marti Maraden, move with a vitality, ardor, and trembling which captures all that young love can be, again in a choreographed manner that accomplishes quickly what a stricter naturalism could perhaps never convey. Their mating dance, culminating in a tumble together while attempting to hoist a log of wood, is done with such simultaneity and release that Prospero's later injunction concerning Miranda's "virgin knot" seems almost beside
This scene also reflects the economy and concentration of the production. There is only one property, a sole wooden log, and the two actors on the bare stage. The log is used very effectively, both to set off the contrast between Ferdinand and Caliban and to focus the interplay between Ferdinand and Miranda. What few other props are used throughout the play also do well by the absence of extraneous distracting and cluttering props. Prospero's staff, Trinculo's puppet, the leash between Caliban and Stephano, and the abstract figure of the sun, setting off the action and also reminding the audience, after the intermission, that time still hovers behind this interlude, these are all that Phillips needs to achieve his essential Tempest.

The Tempest is a play of great variety, even when done with great simplicity. Phillips' captures this variety not only in the dance (the stylized reserve of Ariel, the exuberance of the lovers, the low burlesque of Stephano and Trinculo, the bestial extravagance of Caliban, the abstraction of the spirits, etc.), but also in the costumes. The pageantry of the courtiers contrasts sharply with the simplicity of Miranda and Prospero, a fact brought home at the end when Prospera takes on the robes of Milan. Ariel, silvery and frozen, is set apart from all, while Caliban (played definitively by Richard Monette), dark and dirty, sets the bottom for the rest. And the spirits, in simple black, avoid being a distraction while reminding that they are not the impish fairies of, say, A Midsummer Night's Dream, but dark spirits who, far from being an extension of Prospero, rather "do hate him as rootedly" as Caliban.

As the play progresses much advantage is taken of these contrasts. The courtiers' encounter with the spirits, set off by the eerie simplicity of the illusory banquet, the low comic figures' episode with the spirits as clothesline, time and again the stage composes itself in contraries, emphasizing the disparities which Prospero has finally to bring together. It is a tribute to the magic of Phillips that he also has so brought all of these
elements together without confusion or clutter. Simplicity is always the key, an intelligent simplicity derived from confidence and strength, appropriate to this last and grandest trick of an old magician, the bequeathing of reconciliation and love to a world of usurpation and murder.

The combination of delicacy and strength can also be found in the music of the play. Ariel's song leading Ferdinand about the island, as well as the chimes which occasionally recall Prospero to his purpose, are indeed of the air and earth. They seem not to come "from" anywhere. Ariel's "Full fathom five..." echoed in both whisper and song, is a remarkable bit of theatrical imagination, as is the staging of Caliban's song, with the spirits and Caliban rising together in a crescendo of strength and power while Caliban is at the same time being leashed and subjected by the lowest of the intruders on their island.

The weaknesses of the production are anticipated by its strengths. The courtier scenes do not lend themselves at all to this atmosphere of music and dance, and in the absence of this atmosphere these scenes become mere plot advancement. They can only be handled naturalistically, yet not much can be done with them in this direction without upsetting the atmosphere of the production as a whole, so little is done with them at all.

The wedding manqué goes wrong for very different reasons, reasons for which there is less excuse. A stage which has been dominated by simplicity and economy suddenly is overwhelmed by spectacle as Phillips goes for the big special effect. Magic and illusion become stage artifice, of the "making an elephant disappear" variety, accomplished no longer by a wooden staff and books but by a film projector and screen. In an afternoon of restraint it is a moment of extravagance which nearly breaks the spell.

But the spell remains intact, as Prospero is presently reminded of his business and the play resumes its course. The disparate elements are finally brought
impliCity to this bequeating and can also be leading lines which are indeed from" in both same time anticipated. A stage suddenly artifice, accomplished film aint it is spell. This resumes brought together not to be transformed and mastered by Prospero, but to be forgiven and set free. Prospero's is the only true transformation, as a humanity finally supplants his calculating art and magic. William Hutt's handling of this transition, the making visible of inward change, is done with such gentleness and grace as to give the play, so marked by strong performances, finally to him, as it should be, for this Tempest has after all been his grand illusion.

What finally does it all amount to, the music and the dance and the simplicity? What interpretation has here been presented? What overall conceptions? What remains when the performance is over?

An observation by the critic Hallet Smith might here be helpful. He does not find the "charm and delight? of the play in this or that allegorical of philosophical interpretation, but rather in its "pervasive, enchanting beauty." Robin Phillips' conception is likewise one of enchantment and beauty, rather than of idea. The ideas are still in the play, of course, but they are left for the audience to discover and decide. Nothing is imposed on the audience in this consummate production, but everything is there. Those who believe Caliban and Ariel to be complimentary reverses, as did the director and designer themselves, will find support for their view in this production, but so will those who do not so believe, just as both interpretations exist in the text itself. It is a production respectful of its audience, one which shows but does not tell.

This is not to say that this Tempest is either a safe or a definitive Tempest. It is far from either, for the strong impression which Phillips makes with his choreography and his economy is unique, a bit of magic and enchantment which will not be duplicated again. It is an individual Tempest, rather than a universal Tempest, a dance of romance and illusion which renders marvelously ambiguous Prospero's self-observation "We are such stuff as dreams are made on..."