

No More Masterpieces

by Robert Brustein

Perhaps one of the most controversial statements of the revolutionary French theatre theoretician, Antonin Artaud, was his call for "No More Masterpieces." For, taken literally, this position implies a complete break with all classical Western literature. It was Artaud's conviction that traditional theatre had reached a dead end, that the work of Molière and Racine had become less a living heritage than a source of rot and deterioration, and that the theatre would never be reborn in modern form until it had burrowed its way back past the written works of civilization to primitive, even pre-literary roots. Like all polemicists, Artaud was overstating his case. Actually, it was not the great French classical writers who disturbed him so much as the stodgy staging of their plays by such companies as the Comédie Française. And it was out of his desire to recapture some of the original vitality of the great ages of theatre—including the French Neo-Classical age of Molière and Racine—that he was compelled to make such a blanket repudiation of all beloved masterworks.

Artaud had become convinced that the greatest enemy of vital theatre was the contemporary middle-class notion of "art." In Artaud's mind, art was an excrescence, a limb of man rather than his vital center—it was something cut off from the inmost heart of the people. For the mildewed concept of *art*, Artaud wished to substitute his dynamic notion of *culture*, a word he used in a very special sense. Art was the expression of one man, culture the expression of all; art divided mankind, culture united it. For Artaud, culture was closely related to primitive religion, and would ideally take the form of ritual, ceremony, and sacrificial rites.

Connecting with the entire populace and not just the well-fed bourgeois, culture

was to produce a theatre that would shock and dismay, exteriorizing the dream life through theatrical images dredged from the deepest roots of man's psychic experience.

One does not have to accept Artaud whole, or join him in rejecting the whole corpus of Western dramatic literature, in order to understand his hostility to masterpieces. As a metaphor rather than a literal fact, Artaud's position makes a lot of sense, for it enjoins us to make the maximum demands on the theatrical event, to ask that everything performed on the stage—including classical plays—have the power and immediacy of living experiences, catching the audience up in an emotion of multitude. His is a cry against the institutionalization of dramatic art, against the piety reflected in the very word *masterpiece*. Artaud's battle cry, in short, asks us to free the energies of the great classical plays, asks us to liberate these works from libraries and museums, asks us to explore the hidden links that exist between every successful work of art and the deep sensual life of every spectator.

The questions raised by Artaud are of particular moment to us now that we are caught in a period of theatrical unrest, for until we can answer those questions properly we will never properly formulate an American theatre. If theatre, which so recently seemed close to extinction in this country, is now shaking itself into wakefulness like a long-sleeping animal, what form will this new awakening take for the production of the classics? If radical departures are now taking place in playwriting, acting, and staging, how will these affect the presentation of works from another time and country? Certainly, this seems like the proper time to be raising these questions. The decline of the

commercial system has resulted, at least temporarily, in a certain tolerance for experimentation; numerous arts councils are agonizing over the meaning of culture and the nation's responsibility to support it; and, although theatre boards and paying audiences are still demanding the more conventional forms of entertainment, artistic directors in various resident theatres around the country are searching for a new sense of theatrical identity. We are now in a crisis which will inevitably lead to change, and Artaud's questions must be raised again if we are ever to advance past the safe, the tired, and the predictable in the programming of plays. What is the proper relationship between the past and the present? Is history something to be memorialized or must it be renewed with each succeeding generation? How do we build a bridge to the past without turning into prisoners of culture centers and slaves to masterpieces?

The answers I am going to suggest may at first seem unacceptable since the literate community is traditionally opposed to any tampering with the past. But I do not see any way out of our present dilemma unless we are willing to approach classical works with complete freedom, even if this means adapting them into a modern idiom. I should add, by way of a preparatory footnote, that I advance this notion tentatively, and with a little astonishment at myself, since I have often been critical of the extensive liberties directors have taken with classical plays. As a teacher of dramatic literature, I have always felt that a classical play was relevant to the present by virtue of its concern with universal values and timeless traits of character, and as a critic of production, I have frequently cried out against the mutilation of the classics, either through updating, bowdlerizing, or adapting them to the musical stage.

I still have strong objections to certain of these approaches. But I have also had to concede lately that excessive familiarity with one's favorite plays, either in the study or in the theatre, can have the result of neutralizing their power. Certain works that used to have a lot of meaning for me—say, *Lysistrata*, or *Romeo and Juliet*—have by now lost a good deal of their charm. After seeing a dull but respectable enough production of *Measure for Measure*, performed by the Bristol Old Vic, I became curiously reluctant to read that play as well. And I am even growing gradually estranged from *Hamlet*, a work I thought would never lose its magnetism. To put it bluntly, I have sometimes found myself—during an evening at the theatre—half-inclined to shout, "No more Shakespeare!"; and this about an author of the greatest depth and brilliance, whom I have loved since childhood. I think we must conclude that the Shakespearean rag, as T. S. Eliot called it, is a rhythm that can begin to surfeit like any rhythm played too often, and that the famous parody of the history plays, performed by the Beyond the Fringe company, is a form of protest that becomes more meaningful with each successive conventional production of Shakespeare's plays.

Actually, we have reached the end of a cycle in the staging of the classics, and if we don't attempt some renewal in our thinking about these works, we run the risk of becoming as paralyzed in the theatre as captive husbands now are at Wagnerian opera. Ideally, such renewal should take place every ten or twenty years, and indeed *has* been taking place throughout history; in fact, it is only in recent times that literature has assumed the inviolability of scripture—perhaps because it has begun to take the place of scripture. But even scripture, in previous

times, was susceptible to interpretation and adaptation. Just as the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were adapted by medieval guilds in the Passion plays, so the Homeric myths—which constituted scripture for the Greeks—have been in a constant state of development and change. The Electra story, for example, was dramatized by Aeschylus, then by Sophocles, and then by Euripides, each treatment a brand-new departure which reflected each writer's own religious, social, and psychological obsessions. Roman drama is little more than a free revision of Greek comedies and tragedies, particularly those of Menander and Euripides, performed in Greek dress, but clearly Latin in tone and temperament. Racine adapted Euripides and Seneca to his own purposes, while Molière Frenchified Terence and Plautus. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, England, and Italy, almost every writer with literary pretensions revised or adapted the Greco-Roman drama; in the nineteenth century, the Germans joined the parade; and in our own day, the tradition of myth drama—which is to say, the updating of classical plays by contemporary hands—reached its peak.

Nobody, for example, dares to produce Greek originals more radically than Cocteau, Anouilh, Giraudoux, T. S. Eliot, and Eugene O'Neill dare to rewrite them. To turn Oedipus into a willful neurotic with a mother fixation, as Cocteau did in *La Machine Infernale*, or to make Agamemnon into a returning Civil War officer, as O'Neill did in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, or to bring the Alcestis story into the modern drawing room with Herakles transformed into a spiritual advisor and psychological counselor, as Eliot did in *The Cocktail Party*, is to wreak havoc on the original intentions of the original authors of these plays. But

despite the fact that the adaptation mania possessed the world of literature, art, music, and drama for the first half of our century, no professor of classics has ever been anywhere nearly as outraged by the reworking of Aeschylus as professors of literature, including myself, have been by the reworking of Shakespeare.

It could, of course, be argued that the Greeks themselves set a precedent for the elastic interpretation of their plots, and that, anyway, there is a world of difference between the plots of Shakespeare and the myths of the Greeks. But it could also be argued that Shakespeare himself borrowed his plots, and that the great stories of the Western tradition—the stories of Lear, Macbeth, Candide, and the Underground Man—are *our* myths, as deeply imbedded in our racial unconscious as the myths of Oedipus, Orestes, and Antigone were in the minds of the Athenians.

As a matter of fact, it is only recently that Shakespeare has become a sacred, inviolable text. In the Restoration period—the first age in which the Elizabethans were revived on anything approaching a significant scale—plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries were treated with about as much respect as the first story idea for a Hollywood movie. John Dryden, whose admiration for Shakespeare was second to none, had no compunction at all about translating his great predecessor's works into an idiom more acceptable to his formal and decorous age. He made a hash of *Troilus and Cressida*; he totally revised *The Tempest*, with the aid of William Davenant; and he rewrote *Antony and Cleopatra* so as to make it no longer a sprawling colossal epic but rather a well-organized and unglamorous moral lesson, during which

Antony's wife, accompanied by her children, arrives on stage to plead tearfully for the preservation of her marriage. Nor was Dryden unique in this; with the exception of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, which remained more or less untouched, every play of Shakespeare's suffered a sea change in this period. As Verdi was later to do with *Othello*, *Henry IV*, and *Macbeth*, Purcell adapted *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into operas. Colley Cibber revised *Richard III*, adding new characters and a famous line still mistakenly attributed to Shakespeare ("Off with his head! So much for Buckingham!"). And in a later version by Nahum Tate which held the stage for a century and a half, *King Lear* was given a happy ending which found Lear conquering the forces of Goneril and Regan, Cordelia marrying Edgar, and everyone but the villains living happily ever after.

A similar fate overtook Shakespeare for the next hundred years and yet he managed to survive; in fact, it was not until the romantic period, when the word masterpiece was invented, and a large middle-class public began seeking cultural improvement through books, plays, newspapers, and magazines, that Shakespeare became an object of jealous devotion. It was at this time—during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—that Shakespeare developed into "the immortal Bard," and thus sanctified, was approached in the most conventionalized manner. The famous roles became material for the declamatory acting of actor-managers; scenery became ponderous and extravagant and atmospheric; costumes were made up of velvets and brocades, flowing headpieces, and beautifully carved daggers and swords. It was the beginning of the "historical" Shakespeare, in which audiences were somehow persuaded they were seeking an authentic reenactment

of the play in its own period, even though Shakespeare's plays had originally been performed on a bare stage with a minimum of props, and with costumes that continually violated historicity (Shakespeare's original Cleopatra, for example, was known to have worn a hoop skirt).

This movement found its apotheosis in twentieth-century England in the institutionalized Shakespeare of the Old Vic Company and the Stratford Memorial Theatre. Both these institutions produced genuine achievements, particularly the Old Vic during the Olivier years in the late forties and early fifties when Ralph Richardson, Peggy Ashcroft, Joyce Redman, and Harry Andrews were members of the company, and the great productions of *Oedipus Rex*, *Henry IV*, and *Uncle Vanya* were being organized under the direction of Michel St. Denis and Glen Byam Shaw. But like the Comédie Française, which was also regenerated from time to time, these companies were more often dedicated to perpetuating the past than illuminating it, and, as a result, ended up looking more like museums than living organisms. The Stratford Memorial Theatre, until its recent transformation by Peter Hall (who took the word "memorial" out of the title and the atmosphere, renamed the group the Royal Shakespeare Company, leased a London Theatre, and introduced new plays into the repertory), was invariably overrun by tourists and schoolchildren who had already paid their fealty to the homes of Ann Hathaway and Mary Arden, and to Shakespeare's grave. As for the Old Vic, this company, once it had been abandoned by Olivier and his boisterous companions, degenerated into a collection of effeminate leading men and genteel leading ladies, who offered a Shakespeare calculated to rouse no one from

somnolence, and who were ultimately absorbed into the quasi-official National Theatre without the slightest protest from anyone.

The academic approach to the classics suggested by the productions of these two companies was more than a period or a costume problem: it was essentially a problem of attack. In the simplest terms, it amounted to a failure to probe and explore the classics in new and daring ways. This is not to say that institutional Shakespeare was impervious to novelty. Quite the contrary, it was at Stratford, and particularly at the Old Vic, that a practice known as “jollyng Shakespeare up” — a particularly noxious form of streamlining—first took hold. The “jollyng” techniques were especially adored by directors who were doing a Shakespeare play perhaps for the fourth time in as many years, and who therefore undertook to amuse themselves during a rather arduous chore not by trying to penetrate the play more deeply, but rather by changing its physical environment—not by determining a true modern equivalent for the action, but rather by re-designing its costumes, props, and settings. Tyrone Guthrie—responsible for many genuinely exciting productions of Shakespeare—was also largely responsible for the “jollyng” approach which has always seemed to me one of the emptiest and least concentrated ways to produce a classic.

It was, nevertheless, an approach that soon became immensely popular with many of the classical repertory companies in England and America—not only at the Old Vic and Stratford, but at the Bristol Old Vic, the Minneapolis Theatre, the Phoenix Theatre in New York—in fact, everywhere that Mr. Guthrie visited.

14 “Jollyng up” reached epidemic propor-

tions with the American Shakespeare Festival at Stratford, Connecticut, where the plays were almost invariably set during some time and in some geographical location totally foreign both to the spirit and the letter of the text: *Measure for Measure* in nineteenth-century Vienna, *Twelfth Night* in Brighton during the Napoleonic Wars, *Much Ado About Nothing* in Spanish Texas around the time of the Alamo. I myself had no purist objections to updating Shakespeare; rather I objected to updating Shakespeare for no discernible reason other than the desire for novelty. And when these techniques occasionally worked for comic or thematic emphasis—as did Franco Zeffirelli’s treatment of *Much Ado About Nothing* at the National Theatre, in which the characters became nineteenth-century Italian noblemen, peanut vendors, and carabinieri, or Guthrie’s own production of *Troilus and Cressida*, which analogized the corruption of the Trojans through images from turn-of-the-century Europe—then I felt that this was justification enough. But it was rare indeed when the “jollyng” approach illuminated the plot, theme, or characters in the slightest way.

While this was going on in the Anglo-Saxon world, another approach to the classics was being explored elsewhere, particularly by Bertolt Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble, which demonstrated that there was an alternative both to academic conventionality and to irresponsible “jollyng up.” For what Brecht proved through his own example was the possibility of refreshing the past by fortifying it with a new vision, the possibility of rejuvenating a classical idea by discovering for it a strong modern equivalent. Like T. S. Eliot, Brecht was a writer who used literary fragments to shore against his ruins: His own work is virtually a pastiche of plundered literature. Brecht, in fact, worked very

much the way Shakespeare did, striving not so much for originality of plot as for originality of conception, and just as, say, *Hamlet* is a reworking of an earlier play, probably by Kyd, so *The Threepenny Opera* is a modern version of Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, *Edward II* is a new look at Marlowe's play, *Trumpet and Drums* is a modern adaptation of Farquhar's *Recruiting Officer*, and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is an elaboration of the old Chinese play, *The Circle of Chalk*. Looting his way through the past, Brecht emerges as one of the great buccaneers of literature, for as he remarked when accused of plagiarizing a contemporary's work without acknowledgment: "In literature as in life, I do not recognize the concept of private property."

Given Brecht's manner of working, it was inevitable that he should turn his attention to Shakespeare himself, just as it was inevitable that the style of the Berliner Ensemble should be based on a distillation of epic Shakespearean production. In the *Little Organum for the Theatre*, Brecht speaks of the need of the theatre "to speak up decisively for the interests of its time," and goes on to give a reading of *Hamlet* in which the chief character's internal struggles take second place to the external struggle taking place between Fortinbras and the Polish forces, advising that cuts and interpolations be made to justify this reading. In his adaptation of *Coriolanus*—uncompleted at his death but, finished by another hand, now one of the chief glories of the Berliner Ensemble—Brecht shifts the emphasis of the play from considerations of human fallibility to considerations of economic problems caused by a rise in the price of corn, all played out against a background of battle in which Marcius and Aufidius stalk each other like two Kabuki warriors. As a Marxist, Brecht's motive for adapting Shakespeare was primarily

political—he wanted food and money to replace love and power as the prime dramatic concerns; and because of his ideology, he was anxious to bring Shakespeare's feudal sense of economics and primitive nationalism into some sort of conformity with the latest "scientific" findings on these subjects. Nevertheless, despite his narrow ideological views, Brecht brought fresh eyes to the staging of Shakespeare's plays, and gave artistic authority to a whole new method of producing the classics.

This authority was soon transferred to England, after a visit of the Berliner Ensemble in the fifties, and is now finding full expression in the work being done by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Under the direction of Peter Hall, and in association with such brilliant directors as Peter Brook, Clifford Williams, Trevor Nunn, and John Barton, this group has been creating a quiet revolution in the production of Shakespeare—a revolution which makes the more glamorous productions of the National Theatre look a little staid and old-fashioned. Like the Berliner Ensemble, the Royal Shakespeare Company is not a company of stars but rather of directors and actors producing out of workshop conditions; projects are initiated less in order to provide roles for lead actors than to establish the identity of the company as a whole. Settings are spare and abstract, using metal, wire, and aluminum; costumes are constructed out of burlap and leather; the acting is terse, ironic, cold, and contemporary; the style of the new plays (like *The Homecoming*) is almost indistinguishable from the style of the old (like Marlowe's *Edward II*).

And indeed the style of the new determines the style of the old. In Royal Shakespeare productions, Shakespeare and his contemporaries are seen through

the eyes of Beckett, Pinter, Genet, Brecht, and their contemporaries. A recent production of *Henry V*, for example, directed by John Barton and Trevor Nunn, divested the action of panoply and presented instead a play about the squalor of war and hollowness of military rhetoric. With Ian Holm in the lead (the same actor who played Lenny in *The Homecoming* with such cold grace), Henry was no longer a glorious warrior, achieving England's manifest destiny on French battlefields (Olivier's approach in the magnificent film version), but rather a frail, diminutive, sensitive youth who grows increasingly brutalized by senseless carnage. Holm's Henry is urged into battle by purely casuistical arguments, becomes an anguished participant in atrocities (personally cutting the throat of a French prisoner before the eyes of the audience), and suffers severely from shell shock and battle fatigue. When the battle of Agincourt is finally won, he is a shivering wreck, scarred inside and out, and crying like a baby. The concept obviously runs flat against Shakespeare's conscious intention, which was to glorify English heroism, but it adds an interesting dimension which may even have been put there by Shakespeare himself—how else do we explain the shaky morality of Henry's claim to France, his order to kill all French prisoners, his apparent indifference to the hanging of former comrades like Bardolph, and his personal stiffness and lack of scruples?

Peter Brook's celebrated production of *King Lear*—also a project of the Royal Shakespeare Company—was another modernized treatment of Shakespeare based on a serious new reading of the play. Brook, deeply influenced by Jan Kott's unconventional interpretations in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, offered *King Lear* in a barren primitive landscape where

no birds sang—visually realized by a single geometric sheet of corroded metal suspended near stretched canvas. All action was excised from the play and all empathy forbidden; compassionate speeches, including Edmund's repentance, were simply cut. The battle scenes became offstage cries, and the storm was realized by means of three shaking pieces of metal. Time stood still, activity became meaningless, life inchoate, and the most significant sounds to be heard were the souging and wheezing of an arthritic old man. It was *King Lear* as if written by Samuel Beckett—a Lear of stasis, ordeals, frustration—in which the repeated negatives of the play (no, never, nothing) became the token syllables of life upon a lonely, abandoned planet.

In America, we are just beginning to probe the possibilities of the modernized classic, though, to be fair, the Living Theatre was experimenting with new classical styles long before the English. Most of these experiments were dismal failures (I am still trying to forget a production of Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, translated by Ezra Pound into twenty-three-skidoo colloquialisms, which sent me running from the theatre), but when the principle was transferred to the production of a modern classic like Pirandello's *Tonight We Improvise*, it worked very well indeed (Pirandello's play was reset in New York, and Doctor Hinkfuss, the Reinhardtian director, became Julian Beck, a precious avant-garde aesthete). Similarly, the recent production of *MacBird* could be considered a radical reworking of Shakespeare, which uses *Macbeth* for its remorseless political purposes as freely as Brecht's *Arturo Ui* uses *Richard III*.

To speak from closer experience, a recent production of *Volpone* at Yale, directed by Clifford Williams of the Royal Shake-

spere Company, made an interesting (though incomplete) effort to find analogies for Jonson's play in the modern experience. Taking note of Jonson's emphasis on distortions and transformations of nature, Williams set the play in a fantasy Venice out of the imagination of Fellini and Antonioni—a Venice of aristocratic vice and corrupt daydreams. In this version, Volpone's dwarf, eunuch, and hermaphrodite became a monstrous pipe-smoking hunchback in a skirt, an outrageously campy queer, and a short-cropped lesbian in a leather suit who sang tuneless rock-and-roll; Mosca became a cunning Machiavellian pimp, obsessed with a loathed body and its excretions; Volpone turned into a vulgar middle-class charlatan with a bit of the pitchman in him; and the whole parade of suitors, judges, notaries, lawyers, and whores found their equivalents among the denizens of *la dolce vita*. Thus, Volpone's famous apostrophe to Celia before the attempted rape ("Come my Celia, let us prove") was sung and danced to the tune of a *bossa nova*, and Volpone came before the judges, impotent, in a hospital gown, being pumped with plasma, and drawn in a wheelchair by a male nurse.

In the Yale production of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, as adapted by Robert Lowell, the director, Jonathan Miller, chose to dispense entirely with the Greek setting, including the white-robed Greek chorus and the conventional notions of the Gods who hover over the action. "I want to escape from that deadening limbo of metaphysics," he told an interviewer. "It has less and less resonance for us, those huge, vague, sort of nimble figures, it's all rather sweet in an unsettling way. I want to go all the way along with Cal's conception. Not any of this Caucasus, rocks, and crags, and

all that operatic nonsense. We thought it would be far more exciting if we could set it in some institution that represents tyranny."

The setting he chose was a vague seventeenth-century background—probably Spain during the Inquisition. Michael Annals' design for the play was of an awesome hugeness, starkly geometric, with niches and platforms of tortured, aging brick ascending upward and downward to what looked like infinity. "It's supposed to suggest structure far larger than you can see," Miller said, "sort of a brick kiln, a Pharos or huge lighthouse on the Mediterranean going up thousands of feet and going down thousands of feet into the sea; no specific time, but some sort of decaying seventeenth-century culture that has gone bad. The characters are prisoners, they put on the play in this eternal imprisonment as entertainment."

The notion as stated is reminiscent of *Marat-Sade*, where prisoners or inmates also enact a play; in performance, it proved to be much more vague, blurry, and imprecise. What Miller had in mind was the memory theory of Frances Yates,* which assumes that each culture remembered the past by imagining a theatre and associating parts of speech with parts of the theatre. Using the seventeenth century as a kind of "booster message center," men could thereby argue their way back to antiquity. The *Prometheus* production cautiously avoided bringing any recognizable Gods on the stage—Ocean became a tired, self-serving and wheedling old man, Hermes like an S.S. trooper out of an old anti-Nazi movie, Hephaestus a

*Cf. her *The Art of Memory* (U. of Chicago Press, 1966).

crippled Negro who buzzed and hummed while he worked putting wedges into Prometheus' side—but the Greek gods were nevertheless continually present as cracked statuary in niches well above the heads of the actors.

Miller was anxious to let the action resonate in the minds of the auditors without allowing them to decide on any single interpretation. A lot of good rehearsal ideas, in fact, were thrown out because they were too precisely analogical. Originally, for example, Miller wanted to open the play with Prometheus adjusting a gag in his mouth, being tortured by Hephaestus to muffled screams, and then removing the gag as though nothing had happened. The torture itself was to be effectuated not through any actual physical contact but through analogy: Hephaestus broke some twigs at the feet of Prometheus as a metaphor for breaking his limbs and beat a leather pallet to signify the painful driving in of a wedge. But the device for Miller was too distinctly Oriental, and it was therefore discarded, rather to my own regret, with the torture scene finally being performed in relative darkness.

Other devices remained intact. In Lowell's text, the daughters of Ocean were changed to three Seabirds—Miller further enlarged their roles by turning them into recording angels who inscribe Prometheus' utterings and prompt the other actors, as well as fulfill their own function as questioners and observers. Io—raped by Zeus and pursued by flies—became the victim, in Miller's hands, of a kind of celestial malaria, in a frequent state of heat and delirium. And Prometheus himself was turned less into a demi-God, raging against his fate, than a bitter, self-hating but brilliantly intellectual young man, biting out his words in scorn, reluctant even to give the gods the benefit of his

indignation. The result of this was a thoroughly modernized version of the ancient play, with contemporary resonances in the echoes thrown out toward all forms of tyranny (including certain aspects of L.B.J.'s America), but a version which still maintained a certain historical distance.

The dangers of this line of attack are obvious: Everything depends upon the tact, taste, and talent of the director. If new values are not unearthed by a new approach, then the whole effort is worthless; and if these new values are merely eccentric or irresponsible, then it is careerism rather than art that has been served. Then again, romantic and light comedies do not lend themselves handily to such treatment, and neither do plays with very particularized environments. I do not look forward with any anticipation to the all-male production of *As You Like It* being produced at the National Theatre this season, and I do not look backward with any affection at the APA's translation of Chekhov's *Seagull* into Noel Coward's England.

But when something in the play itself stimulates the director to pursue a radical new line of inquiry, then even the most radical transformations can be justified. I think we might be more tolerant of these modernized interpretations if we stopped regarding each new production as definitive. Changing Shakespeare is not the same thing as painting a moustache on the Mona Lisa, for if an artwork has been desecrated by such behavior, a dramatic work still continues to exist purely, as a text. If we regard each new production of a classical play less as a total re-creation of that work than as a directorial essay upon it, then I think we will begin to regard mutilated masterpieces with more permissiveness and

relaxation. Peter Brook's production of *King Lear* is no more final than Jan Kott's chapter on the play: It is merely one more perspective on a profoundly complicated tragedy, a perspective that will undoubtedly inspire other productions in reply. And it is this continuing dialogue that keeps masterpieces alive on the stage, just as the dialogue among such Shakespearean critics as Coleridge, Bradley, T. S. Eliot, and F. R. Leavis has helped to keep the plays alive on the page.

What No More Masterpieces means for us, then, is no more piety, no more reverence, no more sanctimoniousness in the theatre. It means the freedom to approach the most sacred text as if it had just been written. It means trying to re-create not so much the original environment of a work as the original excitement with which spectators attended it, and that means establishing a link less with the spectator's educated life—the passages he memorized in school and college—than with his psychic life—the passages burned into his soul by the acid of experience. No More Masterpieces means treating the theatre as informally as a circus tent, a music hall, a prize ring—a place in which the spectator participates rather than worships, and offers the stage something more than the condescension of applause. No More Masterpieces means not a disrespect for the past, but rather an effort to rediscover some of its vitality. For masterpieces are the sedatives of a time half dead at the top, and only when they cease to lull us, will our time begin to come alive.