BURBAGE TO BRANAGH

Great Shakespeare Actors

STANLEY WELLS

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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To all the great Shakespeare actors not included in this book

Preface and Acknowledgements

This book draws on a lifelong interest in the history of theatre and of Shakespeare's place in it, as well as on close on seventy years of play-going. An early stimulus to write it came from an invitation from Alistair Smith, editor of *The Stage*, to contribute to a feature about great Shakespeare actors.

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The order in which the actors are discussed is roughly chronological by date of birth, but in a few cases I have departed from this principle in the interests of continuity.

Stanley Wells

January 2015

Contents

List of Illustrations xi

Introduction 1
Prelude: William Shakespeare 13
1. Richard Burbage 17
2. Will Kemp 21
3. Robert Armin 26
4. Thomas Betterton 29
5. Charles Macklin 34
6. David Garrick 41
Who Was the First Great Shakespeare Actress? 49
7. Sarah Siddons 53
8. George Frederick Cooke 61
9. John Philip Kemble 67
10. Dora Jordan 73
11. Edmund Kean 77
12. William Charles Macready 84
13. Helen Faucit 91
Who Was the First Great American Shakespeare Actor? 97
14. Ira Aldridge 99
15. Charlotte Cushman 104
16. Edwin Booth 108
17. Henry Irving 114
18. Ellen Terry 121
19. Tommaso Salvini 127
Times of Change 133

20. Edith Evans 138
21. Sybil Thorndike 144
22. Charles Laughton 151
23. Donald Wolfit 159
24. Ralph Richardson 166
25. John Gielgud 171
26. Laurence Olivier 179
27. Peggy Ashcroft 189
28. Michael Redgrave 197
29. Paul Scofield 204
30. Donald Sinden 211
31. Richard Pasco 215
32. Ian Richardson 220
33. Judi Dench 225
34. Derek Jacobi 231
35. Ian McKellen 236
36. Janet Suzman 242
37. Antony Sher 247
38. Simon Russell Beale 252
39. Kenneth Branagh 257

Endnotes 263
Select Bibliography and Further Reading 287
Index 293

List of Illustrations

0.1 Putative oil painting of Shakespeare by an anonymous artist, 1610. akg-images 12

1.1 Anonymous oil painting traditionally regarded as a self-portrait of Richard Burbage. By permission of the Trustees of Dulwich Picture Gallery, London 17

2.1 Woodcut of Will Kemp dancing his way from London to Norwich, accompanied by his drummer, Thomas Sly. Image Asset Management Ltd./Alamy 21

3.1 Robert Armin: a woodcut from the title-page of his play *The Two Maids of More-clacke*, 1609. Mary Evans Picture Library/Alamy 26

4.1 An engraving of Thomas Betterton (left) as Hamlet in the 'closet scene'; from Nicholas Rowe's edition of *The Works of Mr William Shakespear*, volume, 1709. Reproduced by permission of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust 29

5.1 Charles Macklin as Shylock: an oil painting by Johann Zoffany. © Holburne Museum (Somerset Maugham Collection) 34

5.2 A caricature of James Quin, wearing the plumed helmet and carrying the truncheon often associated with tragic heroes, as Coriolanus hearing the pleas of his mother, Volumnia, on behalf of Rome. Private Collection/Bridgeman Images 35

6.1 An early copy of Nathaniel Dance's painting of David Garrick as Richard III. Stratford-upon-Avon Town Council 40

6.2 An engraving of David Garrick as Hamlet seeing the ghost of his father, Drury Lane Theatre, London, 1756. Reproduced by permission of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust 45

6.3 An engraving of Spranger Barry and Maria Isabella Nossiter as Romeo and Juliet, Covent Garden, London, 1753. Reproduced by permission of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust 46

6.4 Henry Fuseli's impressionistic oil painting of David Garrick and Hannah Pritchard in the sleep-walking scene from *Macbeth*. The Art Archive/DeA Picture Library 47

6.5 Johann Zoffany's more naturalistic painting of David Garrick and Hannah Pritchard in the sleep-walking scene from *Macbeth*. The Art Archive/Garrick Club 48

7.1 Sarah Siddons as The Tragic Muse: oil painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1784. Huntington Library/SuperStock 52
8.1 George Frederick Cooke as Richard III; an anonymous oil painting of about 1805. From the Somerset Maugham Collection, courtesy of Theatre Royal, Bath 60
9.1 John Philip Kemble as Coriolanus; copy of an oil painting by Sir Thomas Lawrence. The City of London, Guildhall Art Gallery 66
10.1 Dorothy Jordan (left) as the Comic Muse, oil painting by John Hoppner. © National Portrait Gallery, London 72
11.1 Edmund Kean as Sir Giles Overreach in *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, by Philip Massinger: oil painting by George Clint. The Art Archive/Victoria and Albert Museum, London/Sally Chappell 77
12.1 W. C. Macready as Macbeth: oil painting by George Clint, 1821. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London 84
13.1 Helen Faucit: undated studio photograph. © National Portrait Gallery, London 90
14.1 'Head of a Negro in the Character of Othello': oil painting, 1825, by James Northcote believed to represent Ira Aldridge. Manchester Art Gallery, UK/Bridgeman Images 99
15.1 Charlotte Cushman: daguerreotype, c. 1855. © Everett Collection Historical/Alamy 104
16.1 Edwin Booth as Hamlet, Princess's Theatre, London, 1880. Reproduced by permission of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust 108
17.1 Henry Irving off duty: unfinished oil painting, 1880, by Jules Bastien Lepage. © National Portrait Gallery, London 114
18.1 Ellen Terry as Beatrice, in *Much Ado About Nothing*: photograph, Lyceum Theatre, London, 1882. Reproduced by permission of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust 120
18.2 Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth: John Singer Sargent, oil painting made for her Jubilee programme in 1906, based on an earlier sketch. © National Portrait Gallery, London 122
19.1 Tomasso Salvini as Othello, Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, 1875. Reproduced by permission of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust 127
20.1 Edith Evans as the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1961; photograph by Angus McBean. Angus McBean © Royal Shakespeare Company 138
21.1 Sybil Thorndike as Volumnia, with Laurence Olivier as Coriolanus, Old Vic, London, 1938. culture-images/Lebrecht 144
22.1 Charles Laughton as Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1959; photograph by Angus McBean. Angus McBean © Royal Shakespeare Company 151

23.1 Donald Wolfit as Hamlet; Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1936–7. © Lebrecht Authors 158
24.1 Ralph Richardson as Falstaff in *Henry IV, Part One*: Old Vic Theatre, London, 1944. University of Bristol/ArenaPAL 166
25.1 John Gielgud as Hamlet, Theatre Royal, Haymarket, London, 1944. Gwen Watford Collection/Lebrecht Music & Arts 171
26.1 Laurence Olivier as Coriolanus, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1959: photograph by Angus McBean. Angus McBean © Royal Shakespeare Company 179
27.1 Peggy Ashcroft as Queen Margaret in *The Wars of the Roses*, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1963: photograph by Tom Holte. Tom Holte Theatre Photographic Collection © Shakespeare Birthplace Trust 188
28.1 Michael Redgrave as Richard II, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1951: photograph by Angus McBean. Angus McBean © Royal Shakespeare Company 196
29.1 Paul Scofield as King Lear, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1962: photograph by Angus McBean. Angus McBean © Royal Shakespeare Company 204
30.1 Donald Sinden as Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1962: photograph by Joe Cocks. Joe Cocks Studio Collection © Shakespeare Birthplace Trust 210
31.1 Richard Pasco as Jacques in *As You Like It*, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 1973: photograph by Zoë Dominic. © Dominic Photography 215
32.1 Ian Richardson as Richard II with Richard Pasco as Bolingbroke, Royal Shakespeare Company, 1973: photograph by Joe Cocks. Joe Cocks Studio Collection © Shakespeare Birthplace Trust 220
33.1 Judi Dench as Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 1962: photograph by Tom Holte. Tom Holte Theatre Photographic Collection © Shakespeare Birthplace Trust 225
34.1 Derek Jacobi as Prospero in *The Tempest*, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 1982: photograph by Tom Holte. Thos. F. and Mig Holte Theatre Collection © Shakespeare Birthplace Trust 231
35.1 Ian McKellen as Macbeth, with Judi Dench as Lady Macbeth, The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1976: photograph by Joe Cocks. Joe Cocks Studio Collection © Shakespeare Birthplace Trust 236
36.1 Janet Suzman as Cleopatra, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1972: photograph by Reg Wilson. Reg Wilson © Royal Shakespeare Company 242
37.1 Antony Sher as Richard III, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1984: photograph by Joe Cocks. Joe Cocks Studio Collection © Shakespeare Birthplace Trust 247

38.1 Simon Russell Beale as Thersites in *Troilus and Cressida*, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1990: photograph by Joe Cocks. Joe Cocks Studio Collection © Shakespeare Birthplace Trust 252
39.1 Kenneth Branagh as Henry V, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1984: photograph by Joe Cocks. Joe Cocks Studio Collection © Shakespeare Birthplace Trust 257

Introduction

In this book I offer a series of short essays on my personal selection of the greatest Shakespeare actors from his time to ours. In making my choices I have looked for that degree of special illumination, originality, and communicative power that distinguishes the great from the good, or even from the excellent. I have chosen actors primarily for their greatness as performers rather than for qualities such as entrepreneurship or the ability to run theatres. For all the actors since Edith Evans onwards I have been able to draw upon my own theatregoing experience.

The process of selection has not been easy and I am conscious that many great names of both past and present are not represented here. All but one of the actors I write about are from the English-speaking world. The exception is Tommaso Salvini (Chapter 19), who performed extensively in England and America, interacting with English-speaking colleagues and audiences while speaking in his native Italian. I have limited myself to writing about stage performance rather than film, where the actor has less autonomy, though some actors of recent times have shone equally in both media. Laurence Olivier, great as both stage and film actor, nevertheless wrote, 'film is the director's medium, television the writer's, but the theatre is the actor's'.[1] No one acting in a Shakespeare play performs in a vacuum, but my focus is on individuals rather than on the productions in which they appear or the directors who contribute, often to a great but (to audiences) unidentifiable extent, to their performances.

Actors who appeared in the earliest performances of Shakespeare's plays, such as Richard Burbage, Will Kemp, and Robert Armin,

achieved star status, as contemporary accounts show, and ever since then his plays have been valued partly because of the wide range of opportunities and challenges that they offer to leading players. For young men—or men able to impersonate youth, because actors need not be of the same age as the characters they play—Berowne in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Richard II, Romeo, Prince Hal (sometimes leading directly to his portrayal as Henry V), and above all Hamlet are, as Max Beerbohm wrote of the last named, hoops 'through which every very eminent actor must, sooner or later, jump'.[2] For male actors more mature in years—or able to impersonate men older than themselves—there are opportunities for greatness in such diverse roles as Richard III, Oberon, Shylock, Iago, Othello, Macbeth, Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*, Coriolanus, Prospero in *The Tempest*, and—the final summit of ambition—King Lear. Actors with a special gift for comedy can revel in Lance in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Bottom, Benedick or (very differently) Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Malvolio, three different Falstaffs in three separate plays, and (if they can sing) Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*.

Great opportunities for young women are provided by Juliet, Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, both Viola and Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, Helen in *All's Well That Ends Well*, Cressida, and Imogen in *Cymbeline*.

Because originally women were played by boys, roles for older women are fewer but they include Queen Margaret in the early history plays, the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, Mistress Quickly in the Falstaff plays, Lady Macbeth, the Countess in *All's Well That Ends Well*, Volumnia in *Coriolanus*, and—another summit—Cleopatra. And, as with men, the actual age of the actor need not be identical with the presumed age of the character: apparently youthful women such as Beatrice in *Much About Nothing*, Katherine the shrew, and Titania have been successfully played by actresses of mature years, such as Helen Faucit, Peggy Ashcroft, and Judi Dench, and Ashcroft played Margaret from young beauty to old crone in an adaptation of the early history plays (see Chapter 27).

In modern times a revival (with variations) of the cross-gender casting of Shakespeare's time, when it was confined to female roles, has increased opportunities for women. As early as the late eighteenth century, Sarah Siddons became the first of many women to play Hamlet. Half a century later the American Charlotte Cushman was

an acclaimed Romeo and played other male roles. All-female Shakespeare companies, both amateur and professional, have come into being from time to time. Grown men have played female roles, as in so-called 'original practices' productions at Shakespeare's Globe (inauthentic in that they do not cast boys in women's roles), and in the work of Edward Hall's Propeller Company. And the introduction of colour-blind casting has broadened the palette of roles available to both male and female actors of colour. The fact that reversals of conventional expectation such as these are far more common in Shakespeare than in plays by other dramatists, both classic and modern, is perhaps a reflection of the heightened style and tone associated with poetic drama (as with opera): putting it simply, if audiences can accept the unreality of people on stage talking in verse, they may also be able to accept men as women, women as men, black actors as kings of England, and other apparent anomalies.

The great roles are there for the asking, and they invite greatness of performance. How can we define this? What makes a great, as distinct from a good or a merely competent, actor? Some basic qualities are essential, whatever the role. To put it simplistically, actors manipulate their bodies—their limbs, hands and feet, their facial muscles, their eyes, their voices—in order to manipulate the reactions of people who come to see them. This necessary reliance on the body means that there is inevitably at least a subliminal sexual relationship between actors and those who watch them—what Michael Billington, in a chapter of his book *The Modern Actor* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1973) headed 'Sex and Acting', calls 'the androgynous, bisexual quality that invariably underpins great acting'. Some actors exploit this quality to the full, flirting covertly or even blatantly with their audiences, drawing on their sexual appeal to involve those who watch them with the inner natures of the characters they are playing.

At the most basic level, actors need to be able to inhabit a theatrical space with confidence, to move easily and to stand still in the presence of an audience. Shakespeare knew that stillness, the ability to listen and to react in silence, can command attention and convey emotion as effectively as loud speech or violent action. The direction '*Holds her by the hand silent*' as Coriolanus undergoes the inner struggle that will result in his death, can, as Olivier showed (Chapter 26), enable the actor to hold the audience in silent, awed suspense. 'Silence is the perfectest herald of joy', says Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing*

at the moment of his betrothal (2.1.287).[3] And in the final scene of *The Winter's Tale* Hermione is required to sustain a pose of motionless silence for several minutes.

An actor's physical presence may be modified or enhanced by various means. Some roles clearly call for physical transformation. An obvious example is Richard III, whose deformity is made much of in the text. Olivier is conspicuous for his delight in seeking to find a visual correlative for his characters' inner natures, ageing himself by forty or so years when, at the age of 37, he played Justice Shallow. Of his Macbeth he wrote, 'I had a huge false face on: a nose that went down straight from the forehead, a false chin and a putty forehead with vast eyebrows. The idea was to make something real through a highly poetic and unreal approach.'[4] Vivien Leigh said acerbically, 'Larry's make-up comes on, then Banquo comes on, then Larry comes on.'[5] Costume can assist characterization, helping to indicate social class, for instance, or occupation, or moral attitudes: a Doll Tearsheet will dress very differently from an Isabella, a Dogberry from an Orsino, a Shylock from an Angelo. Most actors need to bulk themselves out to play Falstaff (though it helps if they are fat to start with), and Donald Sinden has described how as Malvolio he felt a need to wear 'black, only relieved by very narrow plain, white collar and cuffs', complemented by 'a period hat like a black flower pot', and gold chain of office (see Chapter 30).

Props may play their part. Antony Sher supplemented Richard III's back deformity with a pair of elbow-crutches which he wielded to devastating effect (see Chapter 37). Attitudes to facial make-up have varied greatly over the centuries, influenced in part by the size of theatres and the nature of the stage lighting—whether natural daylight, gaslight, or electric light.

Actors may be required to interact physically with colleagues, to dance or to fight or to appear to make love on stage. Illustrative or emphatic gesture may be a valuable tool. The Restoration actor Thomas Betterton and his wife, Mary Saunderson, used to practise their movements in front of a mirror (see Chapter 4). But, as Hamlet advises the players, gesture can be overused: 'do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and as I may say the whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness' (3.2.48). In my essay on Macready (Chapter 12) I describe how, following

advice from Mrs Siddons, he disciplined himself to beget such 'temperance'. He

> would lie down on the floor, or stand straight against a wall, or get my arms within a bandage, and, so pinioned, or confined, repeat the most violent passages of Othello, Lear, Hamlet, Macbeth, or whatever would require most energy and emotion. I would speak the most passionate bursts of rage under the supposed constraints of whispering them in the ear of him or her to whom they were addressed, thus keeping both voice and gesture in subjection to the real impulse of feeling.

Like Betterton, he would use looking glasses, too, to help him to 'keep the features, perhaps I should say the muscles of the face, undisturbed, whilst intense passion would speak from the eye alone'.[6] It is almost as if he were foreseeing the advent of film and television: but Macready played in some of the biggest theatres London has known.

Memory, and confidence in it, play an essential role: Shakespeare writes in Sonnet 23 of an 'imperfect actor'—that is, one whose memory and self-confidence fail him—'who with his fear is put besides his part'. Stage fright has afflicted great actors, such as Laurence Olivier and Ian Holm, for long periods of time, even driving them off the stage. Though actors need to identify with the emotions that their characters feel, they need also to maintain an emotional distance from their roles. Needing at once to be in control of themselves and their audience, they may exist in a schizophrenic state, actor and character held in perfect equipoise, as Donald Sinden wrote of his performance of Malvolio (see Chapter 30). Excessive identification with the fictional situation may result in memory loss: Coriolanus, overwhelmed by emotion as his mother, wife, and child come to plead with him on behalf both of themselves and of Rome, loses self-control like a poor actor who identifies too closely with the role he is playing:

> Like a dull actor now
> I have forgot my part, and I am out
> Even to a full disgrace. (*Coriolanus*, 5.3.40–2)

Vocal prowess is no less important. At the most basic level, actors must make themselves heard, sometimes in large spaces with difficult acoustics. They may be required to shout, to sing, to speak in dialect or in chorus. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Shakespeare shows Bottom's awareness that an actor may need sometimes to speak in 'a monstrous

little voice' and at others to 'roar' in such a way that it 'will do any man's heart good to hear' him (1.2.48, 66–7). Voice can be manipulated in various ways. Actors may adopt regional, national, or class-related accents to aid characterization, most obviously for a Shylock or a Hotspur (who is said to 'speak thick'—Olivier famously gave him a stammer on the letter 'w' and died trying to say 'worms'), or the Welsh Fluellen, or Portia's Moorish suitor. Olivier is said to have spent six months lowering his voice by an octave for Othello (see Chapter 26). Many actors, from Betterton onwards and including Helen Faucit, John Gielgud, and Kenneth Branagh, have won praise for vocal beauty; others, such as George Frederick Cooke and Henry Irving, have triumphed in spite of serious vocal limitations.

Facial expression plays an important part. 'Your face, my thane, is as a book where men | May read strange matters' says Lady Macbeth to her tempted husband. And she advises him to 'look like the innocent flower, | But be the serpent under't' (*Macbeth*, 1.5.61–2, 64–5). Actors must be able to control their facial muscles so that they can register changes of expression, sometimes in large spaces, conveying through physical means a sense of what is going on in the character's mind. Writing of Charles Laughton in Chapter 22, I quote John Mason Brown's observation that his face was 'one of the most expressive masks that I have ever seen in the theatre. . . . He does not say the lines, he thinks them. They can be seen gathering like clouds in the eyes. He can be cross with peppery violence, carnal with a grossness that is repellent, merry with the expansiveness of Falstaff, cruel with a hideousness that is sickening and afraid with a whimpering terror that is almost unendurable'. In my essay on David Garrick (Chapter 6), I quote Diderot's astonished observation that the actor could 'put his head between two folding doors, and in the course of five or six seconds his expression will change successively from wild delight to temperate pleasure, from this to tranquillity, from tranquillity to surprise, from surprise to blank astonishment, from that to sorrow, from sorrow to the air of one overwhelmed, from that to fright, from fright to horror, from horror to despair, and thence he will go up again to the point from which he started'. And we read of Macready as Benedick that 'In the celebrated soliloquy in the second act, after he has overheard in the arbour that Beatrice loves him, the complex expression of his face as he advanced drew roars from the house before he uttered a word. One might read there the sense of amazement, of gratification,

and of perplexity as to the way of reconciling his newly-revealed passion for Beatrice with his late raillery at her and all women' (see Chapter 12).

Eyes can be variously expressive. Again Shakespeare shows awareness of this weapon in the actor's armoury. 'Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes', says Hero of Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* (3.1.51), and in *Love's Labour's Lost* Boyet knows that 'the heart's still rhetoric' may be 'disclosèd with eyes'. In *Hamlet* Polonius expresses astonishment that the First Player 'has turned his colour, and has tears in's eyes' (2.2.521–2). G. F. Cooke's eyes were described as 'fiery, dark, and at times terribly expressive, with prominent lids and flexible brows'.[7] Actors may need to call up tears at will, whether through imaginative identification with their characters' suffering, or by a willed control over their tear ducts, or by a combination of the two. John Gielgud, along with other members of the Terry dynasty, was famously tearful.

Playing in Shakespeare may call upon skills beyond those that form a routine part of the training of actors to perform in modern plays. Ability to respond to the varying demands of Shakespeare's verse is basic. Long verse paragraphs such as Juliet's or Berowne's soliloquies call for the kind of breath control for which Ellen Terry and Ian Richardson, among others, were famous. The great director John Barton lays emphasis on the importance of drawing attention by vocal shading to the antitheses that characterize much of Shakespeare's writing in both verse and prose. Judi Dench (Chapter 33) stresses the need for legato in speaking lyrical verse. The wide range of styles that Shakespeare deploys makes diverse demands on the actor, and few can achieve greatness in all of them. Some actors, like Edwin Booth or John Gielgud, or Ellen Terry or Judi Dench, may excel at the lyricism of a Romeo or a Richard II, a Juliet or a Viola. Others, like Donald Wolfit or Laurence Olivier, or Charlotte Cushman or Sybil Thorndike, may more easily summon up the resonance and vocal power called for by more heroic or passionate roles such as Henry V or Coriolanus, or Constance (in *King John*) or Volumnia. Other actors, such as Henry Irving or Antony Sher, or Sarah Siddons or Peggy Ashcroft, may excel in roles of psychological complexity, such as Hamlet or Macbeth, Isabella or Cleopatra. Some, such as Ian McKellen or Olivier again, have an ability to signal irony or emotional detachment or cruelty which makes them particularly good as villains such as Richard III or

Iago. And others, like Garrick, Ellen Terry, Donald Sinden, and Ian Richardson have special talents for comedy—irony is important here too, and charm, and the ability to time a comic quip with delicate precision.

In both tragedy and comedy Shakespeare's prose is often no less self-consciously constructed and artistically patterned than his verse, and most of the great roles demand fine prose speaking, with no less attention to rhythm and verbal patterning than in verse. Hamlet and Lear, Cleopatra and Rosalind express themselves no less eloquently in both. And the prose spoken by predominantly but diversely comic characters such as Lance (in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*), Dogberry (in *Much Ado About Nothing*), Malvolio (in *Twelfth Night*), and Autolycus (in *The Winter's Tale*) has its own diverse challenges.

Technical acting skills can be acquired through training and the application of intelligence, but there is an extra dimension to great acting which transcends and can even defy technique. It calls for an exercise of imagination, an ability to see beneath the surface of Shakespeare's language, to encompass and weld together the diverse elements of a role—what the character says, what other people say about it, how it behaves, how it interacts with others, how it changes or develops during the course of the play—and it calls for the ability to project this understanding in performance after performance and often in a wide variety of physical circumstances. It calls in short for genius, a quality that we may recognize more easily than we may define.

Genius may reveal itself in handling of language, as Herbert Farjeon recognized when he wrote of Edith Evans that she 'quickens every syllable, recognizes in a choice epithet something as three-dimensional as a living being, reveals new wonders unsuspected and never to be forgotten' (see Chapter 20). It may illuminate individual moments of a play's action: it was there when, for, instance, Judi Dench, playing Viola, spoke 'I am all the daughters of my father's house—, and all the brothers too' with an inflection of the word 'brothers' that took us movingly from the fictional situation of Viola speaking equivocally to conceal her own disguise to the reality of the situation in which she genuinely believed she had lost her own brother. It can reveal itself in stage business, as when Edmund Kean as Hamlet, at the end of the nunnery scene, came back from the side of the stage 'from a pang of parting tenderness to press his lips to Ophelia's hand' with, wrote William Hazlitt, 'an electrical effect on the house' (see Chapter 11). It

can be there in moments of silence, as it was, T. C. Worsley wrote, when Peggy Ashcroft, playing Cordelia to Michael Redgrave's Lear in 1950, showed her 'power of touching us simply by her posture and the atmosphere she distils' (see Chapter 27). It is there when an actor achieves not just physical but imaginative transformation such as was described by a young student watching Edith Evans from the wings as she prepared to go on stage as Rosalind:

> I used to watch her waiting for her cue, night after night, dressed in her shirt and knee-breeches, transforming herself in a matter of seconds into a sparkling, adorable young creature. Her chin would go up, her eyes begin to shine, her body became spring-like and resilient, and full of confidence in her beauty and gaiety, she would sweep on to the stage to meet her dear love with such lightness that I used sometimes to wonder if her feet actually touched the stage at all.[8]

Genius is there when an actor appears to be possessed by the character, as Mrs Siddons was when, as Volumnia, she 'towered above all around, and rolled, and almost reeled across the stage; her very soul, as it were, dilating, and rioting in its exultation; until her action lost all grace, and, yet, became so true to nature, so picturesque, and so descriptive, that pit and gallery sprang to their feet electrified by the transcendent execution of an original conception' (see Chapter 7). And genius can break rules. Henry Irving was notorious for the eccentricity of his vocal delivery (Chapter 17), Charles Laughton's pronunciation offended some listeners (Chapter 22), and John Gielgud never ceased being embarrassed by his legs, especially if he had to wear tights (Chapter 25).

Performances are inevitably affected by the physical conditions under which they are given. In every period and every country actors have had to adjust the scale and style of their acting to a wide range of playing spaces and to varying expectations from audiences. This was true of Shakespeare's time, when the public playhouses of London, open to the elements, made different demands from private playhouses such as the Blackfriars, in which the King's Men operated from 1609, and from the inn yards, the great halls of aristocratic houses, the town halls, and even the churches in which companies performed when on tour. In later ages too the size and design of theatres has fluctuated, encompassing proscenium arch theatres, playhouses with thrust stages, theatre in the round, studio theatres, and open-air spaces. In London from the Restoration onwards theatres gradually increased in capacity

because of the demands of a growing population until in the Romantic period plays could legally be given only in the large Theatres Royal at Covent Garden and Drury Lane, with the Theatre Royal in the Haymarket in use as a summer playhouse from 1766. This severely stretched the demands made on the powers of those who played in them to project their voices and to make visual effects that would register in the furthest reaches of the auditoria (Chapter 7). In more recent times, too, actors have had to scale up or down according to the spaces in which they are playing. It is a far cry from the vast spaces of Drury Lane and Covent Garden to the village halls in Welsh mining villages in which Sybil Thorndike and Lewis Casson played during the Second World War (see Chapter 21), and in recent years the National Theatre has played Shakespeare both in the large spaces of the Olivier auditorium and in the much smaller Cottesloe, just as the Royal Shakespeare Company's spaces have ranged from their main house through the Swan to The Other Place. Transfers from one to the other don't always work. Trevor Nunn's production of *Macbeth* with Ian McKellen and Judi Dench was immensely successful in the small space of The Other Place in Stratford-upon-Avon, for which it was created, but fell notoriously flat when it moved to the main auditorium of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. I vividly remember the atmosphere of depression backstage at the end of its first performance there.

In writing this book I have come increasingly to feel that acting is a creative art. The playwright provides performers with their raw material, which may well have its own kind of greatness. But these scripts have unwritten dimensions which come to reality only when they are performed, and which achieve a different kind of reality in each performance. There is, we might say, no such thing as a play: there are only scripts which come to life in different ways each time they are performed. The creative power of the actor was well described by James Agate reviewing Edith Evans's performance of Margery Eyre in Thomas Dekker's comedy *The Shoemaker's Holiday*. 'Miss Evans', he wrote, 'has this characteristic of all good acting—that is she takes hold of her dramatist's conception, absorbs it, and then gives it out again re-created in terms of her own personality and delighted imagination, so that you get the two-fold joy of one fine talent superimposed upon another'.[9] It is because of this necessary interaction between actor and

role that we can go on seeing *Hamlet* or *King Lear*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Twelfth Night* with pleasure in innumerable productions. Each of them is and is not the same play, a text made flesh by the actors who perform it, a catalyst that can release the creative powers of great actors such as those I write about in the pages that follow.

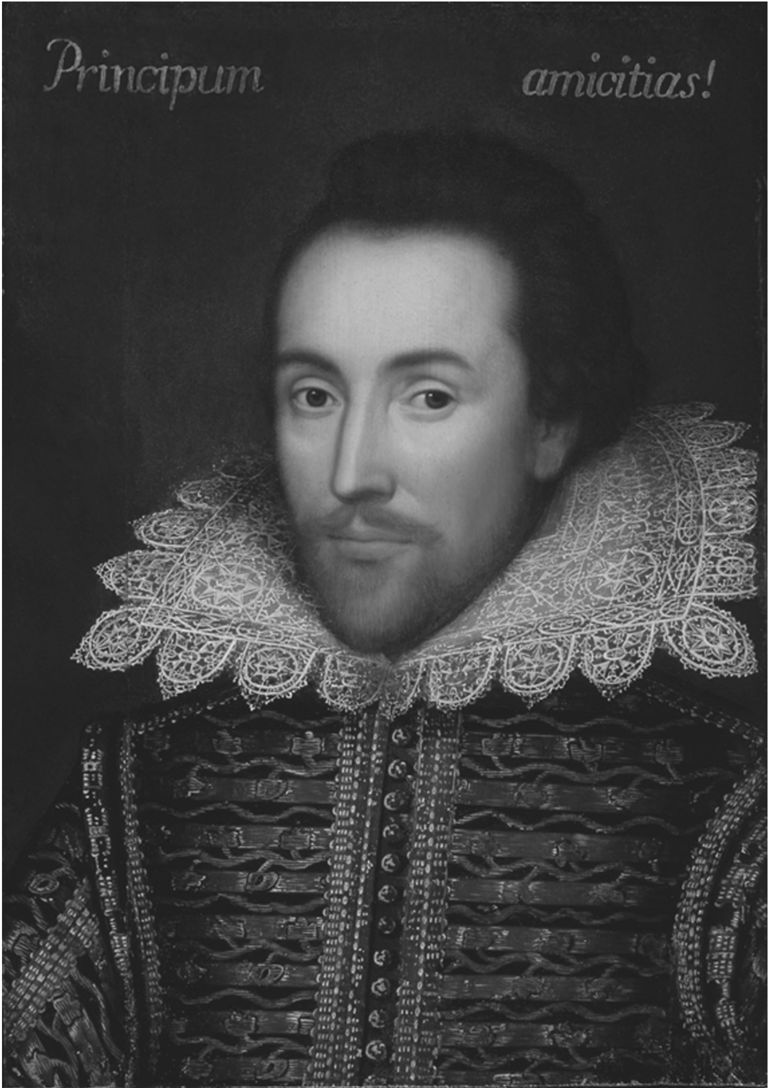

Figure 1. Putative oil painting of Shakespeare by an anonymous artist, 1610.

PRELUDE
William Shakespeare

Born in Stratford-upon-Avon, 23(?) April 1564, died 23 April 1616. Founder member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, 1594; from 1603 this company became the King's Men. *Shakespeare roles*: none certainly identified.

Who was the first great Shakespeare actor? Could it have been Shakespeare himself? The First Folio edition of his plays, printed in 1623, seven years after he died, includes a list of 'the names of the principal actors in all these plays'. Shakespeare's name comes first; it has been suggested that this may 'imply that he had been a leading performer in every single play included in the Folio'.[1] It is a bold claim. The heading to the list does not necessarily imply that all the actors named in it had appeared in all the Folio's thirty-six plays. Indeed that is impossible. One of the actors named is Nathan Field, who was not born until 1587, and so would have been an infant when Shakespeare started writing. And another actor in the list, Laurence Fletcher, didn't join the company until 1603.

Still, there is no doubt that Shakespeare was an actor. He, along with Richard Burbage and the great comedian William Kemp, received payments for plays performed before the Queen in December 1594. This shows that he belonged to an acting company, and almost certainly that acting was part of his duty. He is named unequivocally as an actor in the printed list of 'The principal comedians' for Ben Jonson's comedy *Every Man in his Humour* (acted in 1598) and of 'the principal tragedians' in Jonson's tragedy *Sejanus* (which bombed heavily when it was acted in 1603). I think 'comedians' and 'tragedians' in these lists simply mean that the actors named were playing in a comedy and a tragedy, not that they were specially known for one kind of acting

rather than another. Also, in a document (known as 'the York Herald's Complaint') of 1602 a sketch of his family's arms is annotated 'Shakespeare the player'. This is usually taken to be a slur, implying that no mere actor could be worthy of bearing arms, but it could be a straightforward statement of fact. A poem by John Davies of Hereford published in 1610 begins 'Some say, good Will, which I in sport do sing, | Hadst thou not played some kingly parts in sport | Thou hadst been a companion to a king . . . '. This clearly refers to his acting, but it is headed 'To Our English Terence Mr Will. Shakespeare', where the reference to the Latin dramatist no less clearly relates to him as a playwright. So there is documentary evidence that he acted, at least from time to time, from 1594 until the performance of *Sejanus* in 1603. Davies's poem shows that he was still thought of as an actor in 1610 though not necessarily that he went on acting till then.

There are also some early anecdotes. In 1699, long after he had died, a fictional character said he 'was a much better poet than player'.[2] On the other hand the gossipy John Aubrey, writing in the mid-seventeenth century, says that Shakespeare, 'inclined naturally to poetry and acting, came to London, I guess, about 18: and was an actor at one of the play-houses, and did act exceedingly well'.[3] A bit later, in the first attempt at a biography of Shakespeare, published in 1709, Nicholas Rowe said that after he 'was received' into an acting company 'his admirable wit, and the natural turn of it to the stage, soon distinguished him, if not as an extraordinary actor, yet as an excellent writer'.[4] So the balance of evidence suggests that he was a decent but not outstanding actor.

What parts did he play? There is no hard evidence, just a few late rumours. Rowe said, 'I could never meet with any further account of him this way than that the top of his performance was the ghost in his own *Hamlet*.'[5] (Bernard Shaw suggested that he might have played the part because it is 'one of the wonders of the play' and he would trust no one else with it.[6]) Somewhat later the antiquary William Oldys (1696–1761) claimed to have heard that 'one of Shakespeare's younger brothers, who lived to a good old age' said that he had seen Shakespeare play a role which is clearly that of Adam in *As You Like It*.[7] This anecdote is highly suspect because none of Shakespeare's brothers lived to an old age.

Since *As You Like It* and *Hamlet* had been written by the date of *Sejanus*, the anecdotal evidence does nothing to extend Shakespeare's likely acting career beyond 1603, and Jonathan Bate, in his book *Soul of the Age*, deduces from that that he 'stopped acting around the time of the 1603–4 plague outbreak'.[8] He supports this by citing some inconclusive annotations to an early copy of the First Folio and, more significantly, with the fact that 'a recently discovered list of "Players of interludes" in the records of the royal household', dated 1607, lists Burbage and other members of the King's Men but not Shakespeare. 'If he was still acting,' says Bate, 'he would unquestionably have acted at court.'[9]

That is only negative evidence. Another writer, Katherine Duncan-Jones, more positively, cites a late annotation in a 1590 edition of William Camden's *Britannia* which refers (in Latin) to 'William Shakespeare, manifestly our Roscius'.[10] The annotator was born about 1596. Roscius was the great actor of ancient Rome, so it does look here as if Shakespeare were being recalled primarily as an actor and that it could refer to late in his career. More significantly, Duncan-Jones draws attention to the first line of the elegy by William Basse on the death of Shakespeare which is 'Sleep, rare tragedian Shakespeare, sleep alone.' The word 'tragedian' could mean a tragic playwright, but as Duncan-Jones says there is ample evidence that it could also mean an actor—not necessarily even a tragic actor.[11] Shakespeare himself uses it in this sense in *Hamlet* ('the tragedians of the city', 2.2.330) and elsewhere.

To my mind then there is good presumptive evidence that Shakespeare was still thought of as an actor at the time of his death, and therefore that he continued to act after 1603, probably till close to the end of his career. But did he regularly take major roles in his plays or in those of other men? In other words, was he a star actor? The two greatest luminaries of the tragic stage in his time were Edward Alleyn, who worked for the rival company, the Lord Admiral's Men, and is not known to have acted in any Shakespeare plays, and Richard Burbage. We know quite a bit about them. In the case of Alleyn, this is mainly because of the survival of the papers of the theatre manager Philip Henslowe. We know a number of the roles that Burbage played, partly because of an epitaph which names many. We have no such evidence for Shakespeare. Admittedly whether evidence survives is a matter

of chance. But we cannot with certainty name a single role that Shakespeare played, and my guess is that he continued to act through most of his career but that he was not a star actor and did not necessarily take roles even in all of his own plays. So Burbage remains on his throne.

Richard Burbage

Figure 1.1. Anonymous oil painting traditionally regarded as a self-portrait of Richard Burbage. By permission of the Trustees of Dulwich Picture Gallery, London

1568–1619. Member of the Lord Chamberlain's, later King's, Men from 1594 to his death. *Shakespeare roles*: Richard III, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Pericles, and many others not certainly identified.

If Shakespeare himself was not the first great Shakespeare actor, who was? The answer must be Richard Burbage.

We know all too little about the actors of Shakespeare's company, but Burbage was among the founder members of the Lord Chamberlain's Men in 1594 and stayed with the company through its transition into the King's Men and right to the end of his career, with his death in 1619, three years after Shakespeare himself had died.

Born in 1568, four years after Shakespeare, Burbage came from a theatrical family. His father James was both an actor and a joiner who built the first major English theatre, called simply that—The Theatre—in 1576. This is likely to be the London playhouse where Shakespeare's early plays were given. Remains of it were uncovered in 2012. The family's lease on it expired in April 1597, and by the end of that year the Theatre, now unfrequented, stood empty. A young Cambridge-educated poet, Everard Guilpin, wrote:

But see yonder,
One like the unfrequented Theatre
Walks in dark silence and vast solitude.[1]

Though the Burbages tried hard to renew the lease, the landlord, Giles Allen, decided to pull the building down and 'to use the timbers for a better purpose'.[2] But the original lease had specified that under certain conditions Burbage could 'take down and carry away' the structure, and this his heirs—he himself died early in 1597—proceeded to do. Around Christmas 1598 they, along with around a dozen supporters and workmen, began to dismantle it with the intention of rebuilding it elsewhere.

Shakespeare probably wrote many of his greatest roles with Burbage in mind; indeed their long collaboration makes it likely that Burbage starred in all Shakespeare's plays, and the fact that he belonged for so long to a single company means that he would have gone on playing roles long after they were first created. An anecdote written down by a law student—John Manningham—of the Middle Temple in 1602 shows clearly that Burbage played Richard III some years after the play was written, and may throw light on both his and Shakespeare's private life:

Upon a time, when Burbage played Richard III, there was a citizen grew so far in liking with him that before she went from the play she appointed him to come that night unto her by the name of Richard the Third. Shakespeare, overhearing their conclusion, went before, was entertained, and at his game ere Burbage came. Then, message being brought that Richard the Third was at the door, Shakespeare caused return to be made that William the Conqueror was before Richard the Third.[3]

Burbage's versatility is illustrated by the roles mentioned in obituary verses that circulated after he died:

He's gone, and with him what a world are dead,
Which he revived, to be revivèd so
No more. Young Hamlet, old Hieronimo,
Kind Lear, the grievèd Moor, and more beside,
That lived in him have now for ever died.[4]

(An even pithier, though apocryphal, epitaph was 'Exit Burbage'.)

The contrast between 'young' Hamlet and 'old' Hieronimo—in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, written around 1588—emphasizes the actor's ability to portray characters of widely differing ages; and he was still under 40 when he first played the octogenarian Lear. By and large we have to deduce his characteristics as an actor from the demands