Problem Plays

Steve Vineberg

All's Well That Ends Well,
directed by Peter Hall,
Royal Shakespeare Company,
Stratford-upon-Avon, 1992.

The Winter's Tale,
directed by Adrian Noble,
Royal Shakespeare Company,
Stratford-upon-Avon, 1992.

Measure for Measure,
directed by Adrian Noble,
Royal Shakespeare Company,
Stratford-upon-Avon, 1984.

King Lear,
directed by Adrian Hall,
American Repertory Theatre,
Cambridge, 1991.

WHEN I WAS studying theater in grad school, a professor I knew mounted a production of *King Lear* with six student directors in the cast, each one participating in the directing process. "You see," he confided to me on opening night, "it took seven directors to *solve* this son-of-a-bitch!" It may seem ungrateful to speak of a great play by Shakespeare—for many of us, his greatest—as if it were a thick, stubborn knot that needed to be untied. Yes, we know *Lear* is a sublime piece of writing, that a brilliant actor in the role—Olivier on video, Redgrave on recordings—can tear your heart out, that Lear's reunion with Cordelia is so emotionally overwhelming that even a dismal production can't completely wreck it. But what we look for in a new *Lear* is a director and a cast who arrive at interesting, workable ways to meet the play's challenges: how to stage the opening scene so that we comprehend Lear's folly without losing sympathy for him, how to explain Cordelia's position without making her seem icy and uncaring, how to make emotional sense of Edgar, whose devoutness and devotion appear exquisite on the page but in production tend to come across as humorless and exasperatingly naive. *King Lear* used to be referred to as the great Shakespeare play that never works on stage (peculiarly, that seems more nearly true of *Macbeth*, which is less complex and more succinct and flamboyantly theatrical), because it's loaded with problems that a production needs to solve. At least as many, I'd say, as *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well*, the two dark comedies that scholars long ago dubbed the "problem plays," or Shakespeare's most mysteriously beautiful work, his fairy-tale romance, *The Winter's Tale*.

The problem in *All's Well That Ends Well* is Bertram, the son of the Countess of Rossillion, whom Helena, her ward, chooses as a husband—her reward for treating the sick King of France and curing him. Helena is one of Shakespeare's quicksilver heroines, charming and astonishingly plucky: carrying her dead father's bag of medicines to court, she offers her services even though she knows she will die if she fails. It's easy to love Helena the emotional adventuress, who chances everything out of love for Bertram, too high above her in station to consider her an appropriate wife under normal circumstances. And it's easy to hate Bertram, who, when the King hands him over to Helena, is so appalled that he runs away to the wars without consummating the marriage, vowing never to share her bed until she can gain possession of his ring (a gift from the King) and get pregnant by him, a man who despises her and crosses half the world to escape her. It's a fairy-tale set-up (like the premises of both *Lear*—the love contest—and *Winter's Tale*), damnably hard to make dramatic sense of on a stage. However sympathetic you might be to a young man's rebellion against his monarch's telling him whom to love, Helena is such a treasure (as he ought to know, since they've lived in the same house) that you quickly lose patience with any man who can't appreciate her value. And you may feel like murdering a man who humiliates her as Bertram does. She's far too good for him; when she wins him by devising a bed-trick to ensnare him and journeying across the continent to put it into effect, you can't help thinking he isn't worth it.

The *All's Well* I saw last summer in Stratford, England, by the Royal Shakespeare Company, was staged by Sir Peter Hall, whose direction I've never much cared for. His 1968 film of *Midsummer Night's Dream* had almost every gifted young British performer in the cast (it was a hippie *Midsummer*, and pretty famous in its time), but I found it unwatchable, and the work I've seen by him since in New York left me cold—a stately, Edwardian-style *Merchant of Venice* rescued by Dustin Hoffman's Shylock; a grotesquely overwrought *Orpheus Descending* starring Vanessa Redgrave; and last season's *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun*, a bad John Guare play made still worse by Hall's inept handling of the actors. However, seeing his *All's Well* finally made sense, for me, of his august reputation. He does have a taste for old-fashioned tableau staging, but this was a remarkable *All's Well* that cut straight through the play's notorious "problem" and made complete sense of the text.

Hall doesn't achieve this by sacrificing Helena, by making any less of her than Shakespeare seems to indicate (a chintzy "solution," I think). Sophie Thompson, with her munchkin face and shrunken-apple voice, somehow dry and soft at the same time, is as delightful a Helena as you could wish for. (At moments, she suggests a tiny, courtly version of Amanda Plummer.) When she invokes the spirits to aid her in treating the King (Richard Johnson, in an effortlessly commanding performance and some of the most splendiferous costumes—designed by John Gunter—I've ever seen in a theater), she makes you aware of how much she's risking, and how untried her healing arts are. Boldly proclaiming she'll answer for those skills with her life if need be, she falls to her knees; she's rushing headlong, her heart in advance of her practical side (and past her fear of failing). And having hazarded so much, she goes the whole hog and asks for a husband of her own choosing if she triumphs. Thompson's resolute little sprite Helena, delicate in manners but heart-exposed, is a true Shakespearean heroine; you feel her shame acutely when Bertram (Toby Stephens), seconds after they've wed, declares he's off to war with his friend Parolles (Michael Siberry), denying her even the goodbye kiss she summons up her courage to ask for. And you weep for her when he writes that he has no intention of bedding her, ever.

What Hall does to bring off an emotionally satisfying finale is to dramatize the transformation of Bertram. Sophie Thompson's Helena is the injured good angel of this *All's Well*, but Bertram is its protagonist. Toby Stephens, a superb actor, plays him as the most callow of youths in the first act, so restless and self-involved (his first action on stage is to check himself out in a mirror) that of course he can't appreciate Helena—he doesn't even *see* her. He's a true *puer* type: eager and boyish and completely irresponsible. But when we catch up to him again at the beginning of the second act, war has aged him a little, and he's experienced so much in such a short time—he's learned that his wife is dead (a false report put out by Helena herself), and he's losing his first bout with sexual passion (a longing for Diana, played by the witty young actress Rebecca Saire)—that he looks baffled by it all. He doesn't seem to know what to feel, but it's clear he's feeling *something* deeply, for the first time in his life. And, though you laugh when Diana mocks his extravagant lovemaking (she knows it's empty, even if he doesn't), you see that he's growing up—at least he's capable of looking beyond himself to another human being, even if he's still too young to distinguish between lust and love.

Hall uses Parolles, the handsome braggart who turns out to be a coward of the first order, to move Bertram to the next phase in the maturation process. Michael Siberry cuts a magnificent figure on the stage of the Swan, and his vocal attack, though a little like Alan Rickman's on the surface, really evokes the tempestuous declaimers of the nineteenth century. That's a fine choice, since Parolles is a grandstander, all show and no substance. Bertram, still a kid, is taken in by him the way David Copperfield is taken in by Steerforth; and, like David, he has to see his hero fall before he can grope his way to manhood. That's why (though it's never been clear to me before) Shakespeare makes sure that Bertram is in attendance when the other members of his regiment, capturing Parolles, blindfolding him, and pretending to be enemy soldiers interrogating him, expose his willingness to betray even his closest friend because he's so terrified of dying.

Stephens reappears in the final reconciliation scene at the court of France with a little hair on his chin and cheeks (a nice touch). Here he must answer for all his youthful follies before he (and we) can be rewarded with a happy ending—all must be truly well before the play can end well. In most productions of this play, Bertram's lies about Diana (who he thinks slept with him; we know that Helena substituted for her in bed), when she confronts him with his lechery before the King, just exacerbate our dislike of him. In Hall's production, they're desperate lies, not contemptuous ones; he's working feverishly to dig a grave for the sins of his recently dead youth. When Parolles enters, Bertram realizes that what he's attempting is futile, because Parolles is the very picture of those sins, returned to haunt him. (Hall places the two companions downstage, in opposite corners, to underline this point.) So Bertram makes a free confession of his past, earning the right to Helena's hand when, apparently restored to life and pregnant as well, she makes a glorious—really magical—final entrance to bring the play to a close. Hall's solution to the Bertram problem is ingenious—better than that, it comes out of such a fully worked out vision of the play that it reaches backwards, out of the production, to the text itself, and alters the way you read it. You don't feel he's grafted anything onto the play to make it work, the way directors of *The Merchant of Venice* (like Jonathan Miller in the famous National Theatre production with Olivier in the early Seventies) always have to change things around in order to get rid of the anti-Semitism; you feel, rather, that he's simply read the play more deeply and more intelligently than previous directors. But his reading wouldn't work without Toby Stephens, who digs firmly into the emotional turmoil of what is essentially Bertram's trial scene, and makes us believe in his remorse and in the maturity of judgment that permits him to see Helena for what she is at last.

IN HIS BOOK *Shakespearean Romance*, Howard Felperin defines the romances as comedies that transpire in a post-comic world—that is, a world that's been touched by tragedy. In his romances, Shakespeare often recycles bits of narrative from earlier comedies, like the suitors' test in *Pericles* (which originally appeared in *The Merchant of Venice*), or the usurped kingdom in *The Tempest* (out of *As You Like It*), or the wronged queen in *The Winter's Tale* who fakes her death until her husband has done penance for slandering her (a plot idea that first shows up in *Much Ado About Nothing*). The difference is in the amount of suffering the characters must endure before they win through to a happy ending. To achieve the balance of tragedy and comedy in a production of one of the romances is a tall order. To make *The Winter's Tale* work, a director has to bring equal conviction to the tragic first half and the comic second—for the play divides exactly down the middle, shifting from tragedy to comedy after the kind old servant Antigonus, who has brought the Sicilian baby princess scorned by her father to the wilds of Bohemia, is eaten by a bear. (The change is signaled by the tone with which the young Bohemian shepherd, who rescues the princess, describes the slaughter of Antigonus.) *The Winter's Tale* is as

melancholy and emotionally complex as a fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen; to stage it well demands delicacy as well as imagination.

Sometimes a production manages both. In 1978, Robin Phillips mounted the play at the Stratford (Ontario) Shakespeare festival with Brian Bedford as the madly jealous King Leontes (who accuses his innocent wife of adultery with his best friend and condemns her innocent child as a bastard) and Martha Henry as Paulina, Queen Hermione's waiting woman and confidante, who drags Leontes through a long and willing sixteen years' penance until he's earned the right to have Hermione restored to him. It was a magical show; I took a group of high schoolers to see it, and they were so dazed by it that they sat in their seats, paralyzed with wonder, until long after the rest of the audience had limped out (most of them, if my memory is to be trusted, in silence). I still remember the penultimate scene, where the courtiers exchanged descriptions of the multiple reunions that had just occurred (Leontes with his friend Polixenes, with his faithful old minister Camillo, and with his long-lost daughter, Perdita): Phillips placed it in a kind of royal lounge, an antechamber, perhaps, to the throne room, and as the lords spoke, the smoke from their cigars drifted up and up like the threads of the ancient tale that was drawing to its close. And most of all I remember the final scene, where Martha Henry's Paulina lit surely a hundred candles on an altar, center stage, before conjuring Hermione's statue to life.

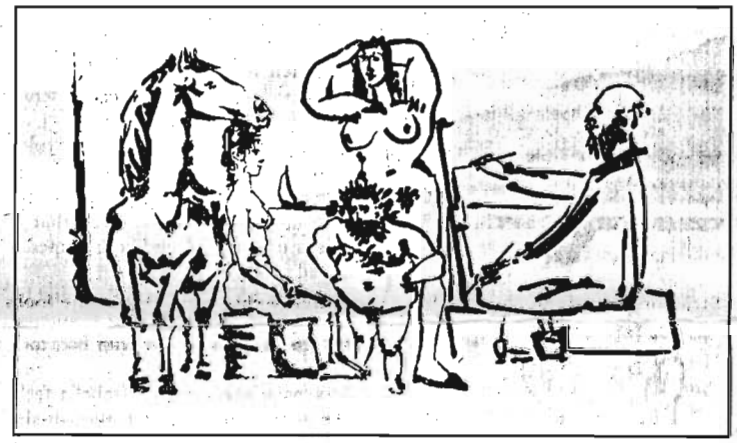
The key to understanding *The Winter's Tale* is grasping the tragedy that can't be swept away in the happy (i.e., comic) ending. Felperin calls his chapter on this play "Our Carver's Excellence," quoting the line in which Paulina explains to Leontes why it is that his wife's statue looks sixteen years older than she was when she (supposedly) died: the sculptor, Paulina explains, is so gifted that he could estimate the effect of those years on her face had she lived. Hermione is returned to Leontes in the peerless last minutes of the play, but the sixteen years during which he grieved her loss (and missed seeing his daughter grow up) can never be regained; neither can their son, Mamillius, who perished of fever—a punishment from the gods—when Leontes pronounced Hermione guilty despite the oracle that told him she was innocent.

Adrian Noble's production for the Royal Shakespeare Company, which opened the day after Peter Hall's *All's Well*, starts with Mamillius. It's his birthday party, and he sits downstage, turning a snow globe in his hand, while the image of a magic world preserved under glass is echoed upstage, where the adults at the party, amid dozens of brightly colored balloons, are contained, in tableau, within a cage of scrim. Time stands still; for one glittering moment we see, suspended in all its beauty, the happy world of Mamillius's childhood, preserved by marital love and familial love and friendship—before it all breaks apart in the wake of Leontes' jealousy.

This *Winter's Tale* begins so well—so much on the mark—that you're willing to forgive John Nettles' overplaying Leontes (the aside in which he reveals his suspicions about Hermione and Polixenes ought to be a sudden sliver of evil, not a moustache twirler) and the erratic staging of the first half. Samantha Bond is a first-class Hermione, losing neither her wit nor her love for Leontes when he abuses her, and it's a good thought to have her trial in the rain, under umbrellas, like the cemetery scene in *Our Town*. (Noble's opening image also links up with *Our Town*—with Wilder's notion of time racing past while we're too preoccupied to look at one another.)

But the second act is a disaster, for the most part, and it's hard to forgive Noble for what he puts you through. The Sicilian scenes are set early in the twentieth century; sixteen years pass, and we're in the Twenties, at an English country fair (it's a sheep-shearing festival in the text). Designers don't generally tie the distance between the two halves of the play to the gap between two such distinct eras (Anthony Ward designed this *Winter's Tale*), and it's a clever idea. But Noble pads the act with country-fair entertainments, and the singing and dancing are execrable. Richard McCabe, playing Autolycus, a crafty clown figure, does several numbers, and he's no singer; he's also not a dialect comedian, so his routines are instantly wearying. I resented the self-indulgence of the Bohemia section in this production—the assumption that an audience would be only too happy to put up with amateurishness if it had a haze of English music-hall nostalgia hanging over it. Neither of the young actors cast as the lovers (Perdita and Florizel, Polixenes' son), Phyllida Hancock and Alan Cox, is up to the demands of the roles, though at one point Cox's extreme youth (he looks about seventeen, but more likely he's in his early twenties) gives the drama an extra punch: when Polixenes, attending the fair in disguise, catches his son wooing a maid he takes for a poor shepherdess and shoves him across the stage so hard that the boy crashes into a table.

Noble obviously isn't comfortable with the comic elements in Shakespeare's play. Once he returns to the Leontes-Hermione story, he's back on safe ground: he delivers the resurrection ending with all the enchantment and feeling it cries out for. I don't know when I've seen a production so schizoid.



CURIOUS ABOUT Adrian Noble's other Shakespeare productions, I checked out a videotape of his 1983-84 *Measure for Measure*, which starred Juliet Stevenson as Isabella and Daniel Massey as the Duke. *Measure for Measure*, like *All's Well That Ends Well*, contains major characters who can be read as unsympathetic (and often are, in these deconstructive days). *All's Well* has its Bertram; *Measure* has Isabella and the Duke of Vienna. The Duke proclaims his intention to go on a journey and leave the run of the city to his deputy, Angelo, until his return; then he takes on the disguise of a benevolent friar and watches carefully to see how his deputy copes with his new power. Angelo immediately begins to enforce an old law against fornication, and the first offender he imprisons and sentences to death is Claudio, whose "guilt" is highly visible in his pregnant fiancée. Isabella is Claudio's sister, a novice nun who leaves the convent to beg Angelo for mercy in her brother's case. He tells her he'll grant it—but only if she sacrifices her own purity to his lust. Isabella refuses; her chastity, she insists, is of more value to her than even her brother's life. But the Duke, in the person of the Friar, devises a scheme to rescue both brother and sister and entrap the deputy in his own machinations, exposing his hypocrisy. He takes what seems like an unconscionably long time to set things right, however, and meanwhile poor Isabella, who believes her brother has been hanged, is on the rack. The long final scene can strike an audience as sadistic—towards Isabella and Mariana, the woman Angelo was betrothed to and spurned, whom the Duke employs to effect the bed-trick that will let Isabella off the hook and bind Mariana to Angelo. And when, at the end of it, the Duke proposes marriage to Isabella, after all he's put her through, you may wonder what Shakespeare could have been thinking of. Moreover, Isabella's choice to take the moral higher ground at her brother's expense can come across as a very chilly kind of virtuousness.

Not surprisingly, this text has aroused considerable interest among feminist scholars who see Shakespeare's Vienna as a patriarchal society that places Isabella, a celibate woman, at a considerable disadvantage. And though my instincts tell me that's not what *Measure for Measure* is about, I did see one production with this slant (at U.C. Berkeley, directed by David McCandless) that made sense of that reading without sacrificing any of the characters to it. McCandless presented an Angelo who was agonizingly enslaved to his own sexual impulses (and his inability to comprehend them, let alone bring them in line with his puritanical policies) and dramatized the moment when the Duke falls in love with Isabella—a moment that Shakespeare doesn't specifically provide. And he left the play open-ended. Shakespeare doesn't give Isabella a reply to the Duke's proposal. When Martha Henry played the part, in Robin Phillips' Stratford, Ontario production in 1975, she remained on stage, alone, after the Duke had led the court off, and slowly, very slowly, she turned and removed her wimple. The student actress in McCandless' production stood undeclared—mystified, it seemed to me—while the Duke knelt to her and stretched out his hands.

Adrian Noble's production has a formal, highly conceptual opening: the Duke stands before a full-length gilded mirror while his valet removes his robe and replaces it with another (his official court robe). The mirror stays upstage of the actors throughout the play. It's a very clever idea—too clever by half, I thought for the first twenty minutes or so, when I was reminded of other self-conscious uses of mirrors, like the scene in Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* where Garrett, having shot down his old friend Billy, turns his gun on his own image in the mirror and shoots into it. After a while, though, you stop focusing on the mirror itself in Noble's production and start to notice how much of Shakespeare's play is reflected in it: how many lines there are about appearances and seeing, how many of the characters are playing roles or concealing secrets. The mirror opens the play up to us. When Isabella stands before it in her first scene, next to one of the other, confirmed nuns (who is dressed differently), we see the woman Isabella longs to be. Imploring Angelo on behalf of her brother, Isabella reminds him of what he is:

> ...man, proud man,
> Dressed in a little brief authority,
> Most ignorant of what he's most assured—
> His glassy essence—like an angry ape
> Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
> As makes the angels weep...

When Angelo, after hearing Isabella's plea, soliloquizes on the feelings she's stirred in him, we see the part of him he's suppressed under the cold justice he dispenses; then the Friar passes, on his way to prison to visit Claudio, and we see, of course, the Duke behind the Friar's costume. Angelo, trying to work his sexual blackmail on Isabella, assures her he's serious: "Believe me, on mine honor, / My words express my purpose." And she replies, "Hah! little honor to be much believed, / And most pernicious purpose. Seeming, seeming!" Mariana "unmasks" (her word) before the mirror, showing Angelo which woman he really slept with when he thought he was making love to Isabella; moments later, the Friar does the same, revealing himself as the Duke and shaming the deputy with the infamy he's committed under cover of the office the Duke has loaned him.

Noble solves the sympathy problem largely through his casting. Juliet Stevenson, the star of the marvelous

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DRAWING BY PETER DE SEVE (TQ #56)

British film *Truly Madly Deeply*, and a stunningly modernist Nora in the fine BBC production of *A Doll's House* that ran on PBS last January, must be one of the most gifted actresses working right now. She gives off a heady blend of emotional and intellectual energy in her performances that isn't remotely like anything you see from anyone else. Her Isabella is more warm-blooded and life-affirming than either of the other two women I've loved in the role (Martha Henry, and Kate Nelligan on television) chose to play her. She's capable of both hot flashes of anger—not the indignation, the outraged purity, that Nelligan (the best of the conventional Isabellas) presented, but a much more personal and secular kind of fury—and genuine intimacy. When she first appears to Angelo (David Schofield, in a supremely intelligent performance), she begs him, "[G]o to your bosom, / Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know / That's like my brother's fault..." The staging emphasizes Isabella's audacity here. She and Angelo are seated opposite each other, each at a desk, in an area that looks like a courtroom: she is making a formal suit to the city's administrator of the laws. But when she speaks these lines, she crosses the area between the desks and reaches into his private space to touch his heart—and she does. Noble and Schofield make perfect sense of Angelo's horrifying treatment of Isabella: she gets beyond the cool ruler to the part he's concealed beneath his role, and he's so ill-equipped to deal with his own buried sexuality that it comes out twisted and he becomes a sexual tyrant.

Isabella asks the Friar to help, and he responds to her passion, her emotional fullness; he falls in love with her, too, but his love isn't tyrannical, and Stevenson suggests that Isabella feels the impulse to answer it, though she checks it. (Their scenes together are played with a touch of the what-am-I-feeling-now farce that bubbles up out of Shakespeare's cross-dressing romantic comedies, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*.) Daniel Massey, with his fragile, multi-colored, Gielgudish line readings, supplies the beating heart of this production; he's the most movingly human Duke I've seen. He's slow to act on Angelo's corruption, not because he's a sadist or because he enjoys playing God, but because he's slow to believe it: Angelo is a man he's trusted, a minister he's had faith in, a friend.

The last scene takes so long to wrap up because the Duke, to be just to Angelo, has to see exactly how this deputy comports himself when Isabella and Mariana accuse him publicly, and because there's one thing about Isabella the Duke has yet to learn before he can ask her to be his wife. He's seen her love for her brother, her sense of justice, her self-righteous anger, but he hasn't any evidence that she's capable of generosity—of moving beyond her own injuries to act on another's behalf. That's why, having commanded Angelo to wed Mariana, he then sentences the deputy to death and ignores Mariana's plea to spare him ("O, my most gracious lord, / I hope you will not mock me with a husband"): he wants to see what Isabella will do when Mariana, inevitably, asks her friend to add her voice to the call for mercy.

Stevenson plays this moment for all it's worth. Her Isabella has to grapple with her baser emotions; how could she feel anything but satisfaction at the doom the Duke has pronounced on her tormentor? But finally she approaches the Duke and kneels quietly to him. The mirror reflects her best self, as well as the intimacy of her petition, which recalls the yet unspoken link between Isabella and the Duke. Interviewed in Carol Rutter's book *Clamorous Voices: Shakespeare's Women Today*, Stevenson (who'd played the role once before) says:

> But you know, there isn't a fixed end to a play. The *script* ends. The words run out. But the *ending*—that's something that has to be renegotiated every performance.

The performance recorded by the Royal Shakespeare Company archivists ends with the Duke stooping to ask for Isabella's hand, and her rising to his "dear Isabel," touching his face, tenderly, and receiving his kiss.

THE CHALLENGES of these plays can bring out the worst ideas and impulses of directors and actors; we've all see *those* productions. They can also bring out the best, and actors embarked on one can sometimes surprise themselves. The American Repertory Theatre, in my neighborhood (in Cambridge, Mass.), mounted a *Twelfth Night* a couple of years back, under Andrei Serban's direction, that was so monstrous—and so cruel to the performers—that I swore I'd never watch another Shakespeare there. But a friend persuaded me that their *King Lear*, directed by Adrian Hall (chief, for years, of Providence's Trinity Rep), was worth a look, so I swallowed my oath and bought a ticket. She was right: the show was splendid, and the role of Lear revealed sides to the actor F. Murray Abraham that his movies certainly never do. There was a frail bloom to the interplay between him and Alvin Epstein's Gloucester during Lear's mad scene; when Abraham's Lear reached over the wall of his lunacy to acknowledge the kinship between himself and the blind Gloucester, you could feel, as you seldom do in a theatre, the audience's collective heart cracking. Hall came up with readings that were like fine little annotations on the text—like a strong bullying Cornwall, who gets a charge out of taking on Abraham's diminutive Lear and who, having stocked Kent and left him out in the night air, pulls off his shoes and socks and throws them away, just to be extra mean. After Cornwall has blinded Gloucester, the pitiful, gulled old man is led out of the gate by kind servants, and as he stumbles upstage toward Dover, snow begins to fall softly, as if to soothe his pain—a touch of grace. The night I saw this *Lear*, there was a feeling of barely restrained triumph on the stage. (An understudy had taken on the role of Edgar at the last minute, and during the curtain call he received the warm applause of the rest of the company.) The actors seemed dazzled by what they were able to bring off; there was a charm at work, and they knew it.□