

On a Recent Staging of *Richard III*

by John W. James*

The staging of a Shakespearean production, today, can be effectively accomplished in several styles. However, there are few arguments against the choice based upon a sound understanding of the author, the play, and the house. Many of us believe that, usually, the best choice for a standard proscenium theater is the unit set. We feel that it affords the most flexibility both to actor and script in its interesting and varied series of acting areas and levels. Naturally, the design of any set for a Shakespearean play should be fundamental and inconspicuous. That is, any interest and beauty apparent in the design must not detract from the language of the play; rather, design should supplement the play. It is Shakespeare's language, of course, that has survived, while the physical theater of the Elizabethan period could not withstand the London fire or the wrath of Oliver Cromwell.

We are indebted to J. Cranford Adams for a conjectural reconstruction of the Globe playhouse, effectively used from Stratford to Ashland to San Diego in this country. The Adams idea, while working well in a theater totally constructed upon its principle, often leaves much to be desired when utilized in connection with a proscenium stage. The sterile pastel plasters of our contemporary theater often clash loudly and clearly with seventeenth century architecture. Since the vast majority of theaters connected with academic institutions are of the proscenium type, one assumes that the unit set is the safer choice for success at this production level. In 1920, Robert Edmund Jones gave Hopkins a unit type set for *Richard III*, which has become an alternative model for the Adams set. Jones's design initiated a movement in this country which many of us must adopt as a basis for the design of a Shakespearean production. When Bel Geddes' unit appeared for *Hamlet* in 1931, the total flexibility of many steps, levels, ramps, and varied acting areas was upon us.

Consequently, the set illustrated in the accompanying photographs was designed with these two and many other unit sets in mind. It met most of the requirements demanded by the stage and theater for which it was intended. Only time and expense modified the director's initial ideas. The total lack of architectural motif (except for a vague Gothic sense) allowed equal facility in the playing of interior and exterior scenes. Only the changing of minor set pieces, drapes, and hand props was needed to shift from the throne room to the plain near Tamworth, which is standard procedure in connection with the unit set. The unsymmetrical yet balanced step units rising on either side of the stage made dramatic focus a much simpler matter. Extremely vital to this method of staging is the lighting. From the strained visibility of a dungeon to the grandeur and color of a coronation scene, lighting had to help tell us when, where, and perhaps why. Realism, as we know it, was left to costume.

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- I. *“Now is the winter of our discontent” (I.i.1)*
- II. *“Go, tread the path that thou shalt ne’er return. . . .”
(I.i.117)*
- III. *“O, let me make a period to my curse!” (I.iii.238)*





