

In Memoriam
Paul Scofield

and

In Commemoration of Peter Brook

The death of Paul Scofield is reported, the best English actor any of us have ever seen. This is pretty much the same as saying: the best Hamlet, the best King Lear. He was more than an amazingly skilled performer, though he certainly was that. The significance Scofield managed to get into not very extraordinary dialogue in *A Man for All Seasons*! But to show his greatest powers he needed Shakespeare. His art necessarily included a good critical grasp of the lines he was speaking. A production of *Lear* can be very effective criticism. Scofield was the best actor of Shakespeare by way of understanding and showing the depths of Shakespeare.

Most of his work was on the stage, and he left regrettably few films. In the Peter Brook *King Lear* he is, as claimed, the best Lear any of us have ever seen, and is ably supported by first-rate performances from Irene Worth as Goneril and the best Fool anyone has ever seen, Jack McGowran.

The film is a disaster, and on film Scofield's Lear is ruined, entirely predictably, because simultaneously with a great generation of actors we suffered from an abominably bad generation of directors, of whom Peter Brook was about the worst.

Brook gave us an early example of deconstruction by taking the Shakespeare play to bits and expecting us to prefer some of the bits.

The things wrong with his film are extremely simple and elementary. Brook cuts entirely the opening conversation between Kent, Gloucester and the Bastard, so that anyone coming to the play for the first time wonders who they all are when they turn up later, beginning with Kent's intervention and banishment. The audience is about as unlikely as the King to identify Kent in disguise. France suddenly intervenes to marry Cordelia without any comment from Burgundy or Lear. Some of Edmund's lines are given to Edgar, so as to make it hard to see what difference there is supposed to be between them. A pub brawl is inserted just before Lear asserts that his train are men of choice, so as to make the claim ridiculous and justify Goneril. Lear's raving is, surprisingly, expurgated much in the manner of Dr Bowdler. The effect is rather Pinteresque (Pinter, whose individual lines often sound very good on stage but who gives no way of joining them together). Some of the best-known lines in the last scene have been used long before, and most of the rest are cut, so the duel between Edgar and Edmund, the hanging of Cordelia, becomes a sort of Punch & Judy.

The whole thing was realised to be so confusing that Brook has to resort to the old silent-film device of a notice on screen telling us where the scene is and what is happening! Unless you know Shakespeare's play pretty well you won't find a way through Brook's, but if you do know Shakespeare, Brook will be intolerable.

This film results from a compound of incompetence and the egregious self-importance of a director who knows better than Shakespeare.

PETER STEPHEN PAUL BROOK

Commander of the Order of the British Empire, 1965
 Honorary D. Litt., University of Birmingham, 1990
 Honorary Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, 1991
 Honorary D. Litt., University of Strathclyde, 1990
 Honorary D. Litt., University of Oxford, 1994
 Légion d'honneur, 1995
 Companion of Honour, 1998

Edgeways Order of Stupidity, First Class, 2008

Scofield must surely have underestimated his own importance. Was he not in a strong enough position to be able to tell Brook that he would act Shakespeare but not Brook? Alas! he didn't. It is a sad thought that Scofield left a film with wonderful, wonderful moments, a Lear every inch a king, but no *King Lear*.

Note: Commination = a threat of divine vengeance
Ronald Gray's essay "Shakespeare Upstaged", in *Human World* 9, is not out of date.

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