

Della Couling

«All the world's a stage»

Born in England, Della Couling has travelled widely, working freelance as translator of books, plays and articles from German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish and French, and as theatre and opera critic for the *Independent*, *Financial Times*, *The Times*, *Opera Now* and others. She was elected a member of the Critics Circle of Great Britain in 1990. Her definitive biography of Ferruccio Busoni (*Ferruccio Busoni. A musical Ishmael*) was published in 2005. The great poet and playwright Ben Jonson, colleague and contemporary of William Shakespeare, declared in his long eulogy written two years after Shakespeare's death, 'He was not of an age, but for all time'. In the four hundred years since that death, Jonson has been proved right, and not only 'for all time', but also for all the world.

For almost forty years, as a theatre and opera critic, I spent a large proportion of my time travelling in Britain, Europe, and occasionally even further afield, seeing plays and operas for British and other European newspapers and journals. I gave up most of that travelling only a few years ago, when the thought of yet another early flight, another hotel, another performance that was often not really worth the effort, began to lose its allure!

In all that time, Shakespeare was a frequent presence, in so many languages, in so many interpretations. The revelation of Shakespeare's popularity beyond the British Isles was at first astonishing to me, and led me, with some colleagues in the International Association of Theatre Critics, to organize a weekend conference in 1987 at the Young Vic Theatre in London entitled 'Is Shakespeare Still Our Contemporary' – an allusion to the book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964) by the famous Polish journalist and academic Jan Kott. The book had meanwhile become a classic in the theatre world and, almost 25 years after its first appearance, it seemed appropriate to re-examine Kott's theories. We were lucky enough to gather an astonishingly starry list of guests, beginning with Jan Kott himself, and the great director Peter Brook, who had written the Preface to the English edition of Kott's book; the German poet Erich Fried, who translated 34 of Shakespeare's plays, and many others. Over two days, and in many sessions, a huge audience listened and learned, and one fact, other than the conviction that Shakespeare was indeed still our contemporary, seemed to impress them almost equally, and that was that Shakespeare is just as important in so many other different countries and cultures as he is to the British.

In fact, some of the most impressive performances of Shakespeare I myself have been privileged to see were not in the English language. The most memorable? A production by the great German playwright and director Heiner Müller of *Hamlet* at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin in early 1990. When rehearsals began, in late 1989, the Wall fell, and in a subtle and highly intelligent way, Müller incorporated this momentous historical fact into his production, but without banal theatrical tricks. The DDR was Hamlet, the man who made up his mind too late, and paid the price. With the great actor Ulrich Mühe (later famous internationally in the film *The Life of Others*) in the title role, Müller's production relentlessly

drove home the parallels, over five hours (Müller included his own *Hamletmaschine* in the middle of the Shakespeare play) in a way that was cruel in its unmerciful revelation of the appropriateness of Shakespeare's message. Unlike other eastern bloc countries, who had made brave attempts to shake off Soviet tyranny, the DDR had only acted when it became inevitable. When Fortinbras appears in the play's final moments, Müller makes clear, through subtle visual hints and some very harsh and metallic music, that Fortinbras is the Deutsche Bank, the new ruler. It was a most memorable evening and, as so often, I thought, 'How did Shakespeare know what it was like, to live through such a dilemma?'

How did Shakespeare know what it was like for Othello to live and operate in an alien environment, and how did it scar him? How could he present the opposing sides of Shylock and his enemies, and leave the audience free to decide? The tragedy of feuding, in *Romeo and Juliet*, the machinations of evil, as in *Macbeth*, the naked conflict of power, as in *Julius Caesar*. I have seen these and many other of Shakespeare's plays in so many languages, but Shakespeare's message, not only in his words, but also in his skill in constructing a drama, was always clear.

But what no other culture can so fully appreciate as we Anglophones can is the beauty of Shakespeare's English. Ordinary English people use Shakespearean phrases, view the characters as perennial examples of human society, every day, mostly without realizing it. As any translation of Dante gives only a poor idea of the poetry, so with Shakespeare, the greater part is lost. In English schools the detailed study of at least one Shakespeare play is obligatory – with very varied results, as can be imagined. But some remains in the mind. The play selected at the time at my school (many years ago) was *Julius Caesar*, and although since then I have become very familiar with the majority of Shakespeare's plays, none other is etched so deeply in my memory. Three years ago I saw the film *Cesare deve morire* by the Taviani brothers and found it intensely moving to hear those familiar phrases spoken in Italian by the inmates of the Rebibbia prison in Rome – moving because the play miraculously touched the hearts of these tragic people, and it was astonishing to see and hear one of them reciting Cassius' prediction: 'How many ages hence/ Shall this our lofty scene be acted o'er, / In states unborn and accents yet unknown!' [Act 2, Scene 1, lines 110-113] An intriguing phenomenon in that the 'states unborn' are Britain at the time of Cassius, when it was certainly still 'unborn', and 'accents yet unknown' is the English language, which did not exist at that time either. In other words, Cassius is predicting the play in which he himself figures!