



# The Shakespeare Productions Of Max Reinhardt (Studies in Theatre Arts)

*Frederick Tollini*

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This study's intellectual center of gravity is Reinhardt's experimental early work in Wilhelm and Berlin, culminating in the 1913/14 Deutsches Theater Shakespeare Cycle, but touching as well on large-scale postwar productions at the Grosses Schauspielhaus. More than a half-century after his death, Max Reinhardt (1873-1943) and the once vibrant theater associated with his name remain only a vague and distant memory. In America he is remembered chiefly for large-scale spectacular productions, for *Everyman* because of its continued association with the Salzburg Festival, and for the memorable 1935 *Midsummer Night's Dream* film, one of Hollywood's costliest productions up to that time. Other significant aspects of Reinhardt's distinguished career, such as his fascination and lifelong experimentation with all manner of theatrical styles, emerging stage technologies, acting techniques, and theatrical venues have by now mostly been forgotten. In Europe, where memory runs deeper, Reinhardt's genius and achievements are still periodically celebrated. Generally speaking, however, the work of this trend-setting director has largely been relegated to a footnote of theater history. This is due, in no small measure, to the fact that his once novel conceptions have been assimilated into standard theatrical practice or superseded by more contemporary ideas and techniques. Moreover, not being a theorist in the formal sense that Appia, Craig and Stanislavsky were, Reinhardt's conceptions were not enshrined in paper pronouncements - we have only select promptbooks, occasional working notes, and a limited correspondence - as much as forged in the laboratory of actual performance, whose once numerous practitioners are now practically all deceased. It is therefore fortuitous, for American audiences especially, that Frederick Tollini has produced this exemplary work on Reinhardt's Shakespeare productions, bounded roughly by the epochal 1905 *Midsummer Night's Dream* production that won the young actor the directorship of Berlin's Deutsches Theater and the similarly memorable 1935 Warner Brothers' *Midsummer Night's Dream* film. As actor, playwright, scene designer, impresario all in one, Shakespeare epitomized Reinhardt's broadly humanistic conception of theater (all the world's a stage) and served as a lifelong role model. Indeed, in the period 1905-1930, Reinhardt's Berlin theaters alone produced well over 2,500 performances of 22 Shakespeare plays - *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Hamlet* being the most popular and often performed (in that order), down to *Coriolanus*, with a "mere" nine performances - a frequency more than double that of the nearest contender (George Bernard Shaw, surprisingly). What Tollini has been able to accomplish so admirably is to reconstitute some of the original vitality of these Shakespeare productions by drawing variously on Reinhardt's own promptbook conceptions, scene design descriptions as integral to the production, commentaries and recollections by actors and close associates (e.g., Ernst Stern, Arthur Kahane, and Heinz Herald), and the best contemporaneous critical literature, with particularly reference to Siegfried Jacobsohn, that barometer of the prewar Berlin theater scene. The author allows his discussion to proceed integrally from the inside out, blending the craftsman-like assurance of the practitioner (Tollini is himself an actor) with the considered reflection of the scholar and teacher. By successfully integrating the diverse components and subtleties that make up a Reinhardt staging into a coherent whole - for example, reconciling Reinhardt's promptbook sketch with Karl Walser's design drawing for the opening scene of the 1907 *Romeo and Juliet* - Tollini's reading takes on considerable conviction and explanatory force. The organizing metaphor for this study, clearly given in the title, refers to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Reinhardt's favorite play and one he staged repeatedly in many guises throughout his lifetime. But in a more fundamental sense, Reinhardt's entire theatrical corpus occupies the borderland between dream and reality. Shakespeare's plays in particular are viewed as seminal texts for understanding both the substance and development of Reinhardt's dramaturgy

as well as throwing light on his encompassing humanism. In an introductory section the author indicates how Reinhardt's ongoing dramatic experiments progressively dissolved existing stage limitations in favour of a dynamic three-dimensional realism that conflated word and action, stage and image, actor and audience into a new theater of participation. Nor does Professor Tollini neglect the technological aspects of Reinhardt's theatrical revolution, which perceptively utilized many new potentialities for staging and scene design, even prefigured later cinematic techniques (despite Reinhardt's general aversion to this eaned medium). This study's intellectual center of gravity is Reinhardt's experimental early work in Wilhelmian Berlin, culminating in the 1913/14 Deutsches Theater Shakespeare Cycle, but touching as well on large-scale postwar productions at the Grosses Schauspielhaus. Flirting briefly with Expressionism toward the end of the war, Reinhardt soon eschewed its subjective and stylized vision as too inherently untheatrical. After an unsuccessful attempt to promote mass theater from a bourgeois (rather than proletarian) perspective, he disavowed the political and social uncertainties that accompanied the birth of the Weimar Republic and sought refuge instead in the perennial "baroque" folk traditions of his native Austria. This Austrian return forms the shorter second section of the book, shorter in part because Shakespeare was no longer as central to Reinhardt's theatrical vision in rural Salzburg or nostalgic postwar Vienna as it had been earlier in liberal-progressive Berlin. Despite periodic triumphant returns to the German capital prior to the Nazi takeover, Reinhardt during the 1930s became increasingly peripatetic, guest directing prestigious productions in Italy, England and America (to which he immigrated before the Anschluss) but increasingly without the sure instincts, clear focus, or experimental vision of earlier times. Said differently, he progressively lost his patrons, audience, and purpose. The opposition between dream and reality, beyond providing a better understanding of Reinhardt's Shakespeare productions, serves as a useful starting point for situating Reinhardt in a larger cultural-historical context. To begin with, while his early theatrical experimentation and reputation as a director were made in Wilhelmian Berlin, his most deep-seated formative influences derived from Habsburg Vienna. As more than one observer has noted, Vienna was not merely the Austro-Hungarian capital but a "state of mind" dedicated to cultural aestheticism and largely indifferent to political and social concerns. In a milieu that encouraged the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake, sociability and play-acting had long been cultivated as fine arts. The interconnectedness between artist and audience was best exemplified by the Vienna Burgtheater, a centuries-old institution now in decline, but whose playwrights and actors were still lionized and universally admired. Vienna's art-absorbed public, moreover, could be extremely arrogant and self-satisfied, prompting the well known love-hate relationship for Vienna that was analyzed so perceptively by native writers like Hermann Bahr. Although the term "Viennese Impressionism" is no longer current, it was once widely used to characterize the writers of Young Vienna (notably Bahr, Schnitzler, and Peter Altenberg) and by extension turn-of-the-century Viennese society and culture as a whole. The historian William Johnston recently reassessed the validity and usefulness of this concept, and my discussion is indebted to his formulations. Johnston underscores the affinity between impressionism and positivism, in that both concepts acknowledge the primacy of verifiable sense perception, except that impressionism scrutinizes these data with greater finesse and intensity. Like Monet in painting or Debussy in music, the Viennese Impressionist (more likely a writer) reassembles fleeting components of reality into an architectonic whole, a process that excites admiration through the sheer virtuosity of being able to combine minute detail with broad vision, analysis with synthesis. The ability to create a compelling vision out of previously unconsidered or ignored aspects of reality is the defining characteristic of the impressionist. Turn-of-the-century Vienna functioned as a magnet for impressionistic endeavors in scholarship, science, culture, and the arts. Several of Reinhardt's closest associates and supporters - Bahr, Schnitzler, Hofmannsthal, Egon Friedell among them - typified the stylistic and philosophical postures of Viennese Impressionism. (Not surprisingly Reinhardt's harshest critic, Karl Kraus - for whom the "play" got lost in all the "show" - was decidedly not in this camp.) Bahr himself was the quintessential impressionist, always receptive to new impulses, continually revising previous opinions, striving to be in the vanguard of the latest developments. Hofmannsthal, too, was fascinated by the impressionist mentality, which characterized his early life and work, but which he later repudiated. While Impressionism is most often associated with Paris, it also flourished elsewhere - in Munich

and Dresden, less so in Berlin, where Naturalism (and later Expressionism) held sway - and seems to have had a particular resonance in fin-de-siecle Vienna. Impressionism certainly attracted Vienna's many young Jewish intellectuals, who could view its eclectic pluralism as reflective and supportive of their own divided allegiances on the road to assimilation. Moreover, the multilingual and multiethnic nature of the Habsburg Empire offered an ideal setting for an impressionist worldview in that, given the many possible points of view on any issue, each having its own validity, impressionism could accept the right of all to somehow coexist. Impressionism implies the dissolution of the self into a succession of discrete impressions only loosely connected by a unifying ego, a splintering into countless selves, which perhaps accounts for the preoccupation among Viennese writers with themes of impermanence and transitoriness (as in Schnitzler's *Reigen*). And yet, this fascination with change and novelty could also engender creative new responses to insoluble old problems. Impressionism may be said to have "internalized" Naturalism by shifting the focus from external environment to the interior psychic life, while continuing to treat these elusive psychic data scientifically. Freudian psychoanalysis certainly shares in this development. It may also explain the great affinity between realism and symbolism in Reinhardt's theater aesthetic. This consummate "magician" of the theater both psychologized external reality (the text) and externalized the psychic stream of consciousness underlying the text through seamless scene changes, novel lighting devices, sound effects and musical underpinning of the action, and so on. A true empiricist in elucidating the inner life of the plays (particularly Shakespeare plays) he directed, Reinhardt continually generated kaleidoscopic, heretofore unimagined new interpretive strategies and presented these "objectively," as if they had always been there just awaiting discovery. With only a minimal formal education, Reinhardt schooled himself in the arts and surrounded himself with talented actors, designers and dramaturgs so as to be able to execute these novel interpretations with verve and style. In larger historical context, William Johnston has drawn attention to the excessive importance attached to old age in modern Austrian culture, which - from Schubert and Grillparzer to Hofmannsthal and Otto Weininger - produced, as he has it, many prematurely old youths but few youthful intellectuals. In the course of the nineteenth century, too, the Habsburg bureaucracy increasingly became the refuge of old men, and the young soon learned that advancement and recognition were most easily obtained by aping the concerns of old age. Perhaps, then, it isn't so surprising after all to learn that Reinhardt got his start as a young character actor playing old men's roles, and that as an actor he succeeded best and always felt most comfortable behind the masks and trappings of age. Viennese Impressionism has been ascribed to the failure of Austrian liberalism, which imbued a politically frustrated upper bourgeoisie with aristocratic attitudes of dilettantism and aesthetic escapism. Reinhardt's lower middle class background, however, tended to preclude dandyism, inculcating instead the entrepreneurial virtues of the self-made man. An impressionist mentality can also be attributed to that "intensification of nervous stimulation" so characteristic of the noisy, fast-paced lifestyle of the modern metropolis, a phenomenon perceptively analyzed by the sociologist Georg Simmel. In this regard one can speculate that newly industrialized, wealthy, progressive Berlin offered a greater stimulus for releasing Reinhardt's tremendous energies than nostalgic, backward-looking Vienna would have, had he chosen to remain there. The energetic tempo and daring of the young German capital, Hermann Bahr once noted, were a good match for Reinhardt's own "consuming impatience" to create. Berlin had long attracted Austrian actors, but an Austrian theater director to mould its emerging national theater was a new development. Yet Berlin and Reinhardt seemed imminently well suited to one another. And when he articulated a post-Naturalist style suited to the classics as well as avant-garde theater, in venues as radically different as chamber hall and circus, his reputation among Berliners was assured. In creative stages, wonderfully described in Professor Tollini's book for the Shakespeare plays, Reinhardt ended the sway of the literary play and again pressed all the arts into the service of the theater. Soon it seemed there was no dream, however improbable, that "the Professor" could not readily convert into a reality on stage. Reinhardt had left Austria barely out of adolescence, attaining his creative maturity in the modernist atmosphere of the German capital. His genius (had it been allowed to develop at home) would likely also have been recognized in Vienna, but somewhat later, after resistance to entrenched interests was first overcome. In Vienna Reinhardt would have found it exceedingly difficult to make his way to the top in ten short years, as he did

rather effortlessly in the capital of the recently unified German nation, where this Viennese-Jewish immigrant came to play a leading role in prewar Berlin's cultural Renaissance. If Vienna had a long-standing theater tradition, Berlin had hardly any before Otto Brahm championed Naturalists like Gerhart Hauptmann and Henrik Ibsen during the 1890s. And it was one of Reinhardt's great achievements to have helped create an authentic theater audience out of Berlin's bourgeois nouveau riches, one that supported his privately financed theatrical efforts for almost two decades, until the social and political upheaval resulting from a lost war created the need for new theaters and audiences. Reinhardt left Berlin in the early 1920s for pragmatic reasons, among them his failure to generate mass theater audiences at both the Volksbuehne and the Grosses Schauspielhaus, an inflationary situation that precluded new large-scale undertakings, and the hostility of the critics, who now championed the theater of Jessner and Piscator. Reinhardt's return to Vienna and Salzburg reconnected him with Austria's neobaroque cultural traditions, which strove to reconstitute the less than glorious postwar realities in the image of Austria's golden eighteenth-century past. Culturally dominant (though not without modernist opposition) until the breakup of the Habsburg Empire in 1918, this neobaroque tradition survived the debacle as the ideology of an energetic conservative minority. Its most enduring legacy during the interwar years was the Salzburg Festival, which promulgated a cultural program both conservative and nationalist, but in a cosmopolitan sense that was compatible with Austria's new pluralistic republicanism. Here Shakespeare, too, had a place at the table, but took a back seat to the classical panoply of leading German literary figures. It has been said that only in Salzburg could Faust, Don Giovanni, and Everyman be revered as a trinity of Catholic morality plays. In the final analysis, to go to Salzburg was to make a pilgrimage to rediscover an authentic sense of community and, in the process, to be absolved from the contaminating influence of modernity. The irony is not lost that Hofmannsthal (of distant Jewish lineage) and Reinhardt (an assimilated but unconverted Jew) together were at the center of this dramaturgic attempt to reconstitute a baroque Catholic cultural tradition in postwar Austria, and to attempt this restoration in the backward, antisemitic Salzburg of the early 1920s, where the local popular press routinely derided Hofmannsthal, Reinhardt, and festival audiences as unwelcome "Jewish summer vacationers" from Vienna. As a Berlin Jew and outsider, Reinhardt was mistrusted locally; his supportive clientele was mainly the international set. But the harsh local opposition to the Catholic Hofmannsthal was more disturbing, since he was deeply committed to the Salzburg Festival as a shrine for cultural regeneration, whereas for Reinhardt the opportunities for theatrical representation were the overriding concern. At issue here is what Michael Steinberg in his comprehensive study of Salzburg Festival ideology has called the "Catholic Culture of the Austrian Jews," and that culture's claim to authenticity in representing pan-Austrian cultural interests, a claim increasingly being denied in cosmopolitan Vienna, let alone in this reservoir of folkish ideology just across the mountain from Berchtesgaden. Max Reinhardt's theatrical career had in a sense come full circle. Having originally exported Impressionist styles and Burgtheater conceptions of theatricality, representation, and the aesthetic validity of the dream world to Berlin, where these conceptions underwent amalgamation with avant-garde modernist trends, Reinhardt now reverted to the reconstituted baroque aestheticism that informed the Salzburg Festival. In 1930s Vienna he tastefully restored the dilapidated Theater in der Josefstadt to baroque splendor and made it a model for ensemble acting, but with an antimodernist, pre-war repertoire for an elitist audience. Shakespeare was increasingly performed not at home but in guest productions abroad, at the Boboli Gardens in Florence, in Venice's Campo di San Trovaso, at Headington Heath near Oxford, in the Hollywood Bowl and Berkeley's Greek Theater - all incidentally outdoor venues - before being transformed into film. Shakespeare seems to have survived these many twists and turns in tact, thus amply validating Frederick Tollini's choice in making Reinhardt's Shakespeare productions the centerpiece for this engaging study of Reinhardt's theatrical universe.

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