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Bringing Bard Down to Earth On West Side

By SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN

They came, a thousand thespians, to learn to speak Shakespeare trippingly on the tongue. And when they stumbled — sawed the air too much, tore a passion to tatters and, all in all, out-Heroded Herod — some of the finer English classical actors tried to help.

"Do that speech while running around the room," Christopher Ravenscroft commanded a young actress, Chris Vecchione. "Aye," she cried, beginning both a speech by Viola from "Twelfth Night" and three laps around a church basement on West 66th Street. When she puffed to a close in her soliloquy, Mr. Ravenscroft pronounced himself pleased.

Hamlet never asked his players to jog, but that was one of dozens of ploys that five members of the Royal Shakespeare Company used in New York last week in five days of workshops and performances with American actors.

'There Should Be No Mystique'

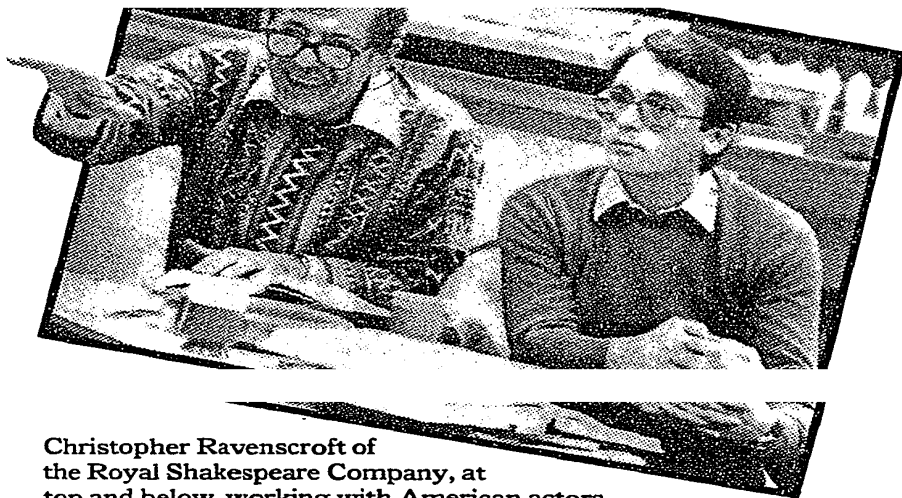
These Britons, these Brutuses and Lady Macbeths, had the Americans shouting their speeches or whispering them, speaking them while tossing a sack or lacing up shoes, anything to loosen lines that had been memorized. The English actors also gave seminars, worked with a local company rehearsing "The Tempest" and prepared performances of their own. All the activity sought to show Americans how to act Shakespeare naturally and without fear or mystery.

"There should be no mystique," said Edwin Richfield, whose roles with the Royal Shakespeare Company have included Friar Lawrence in "Romeo and Juliet."

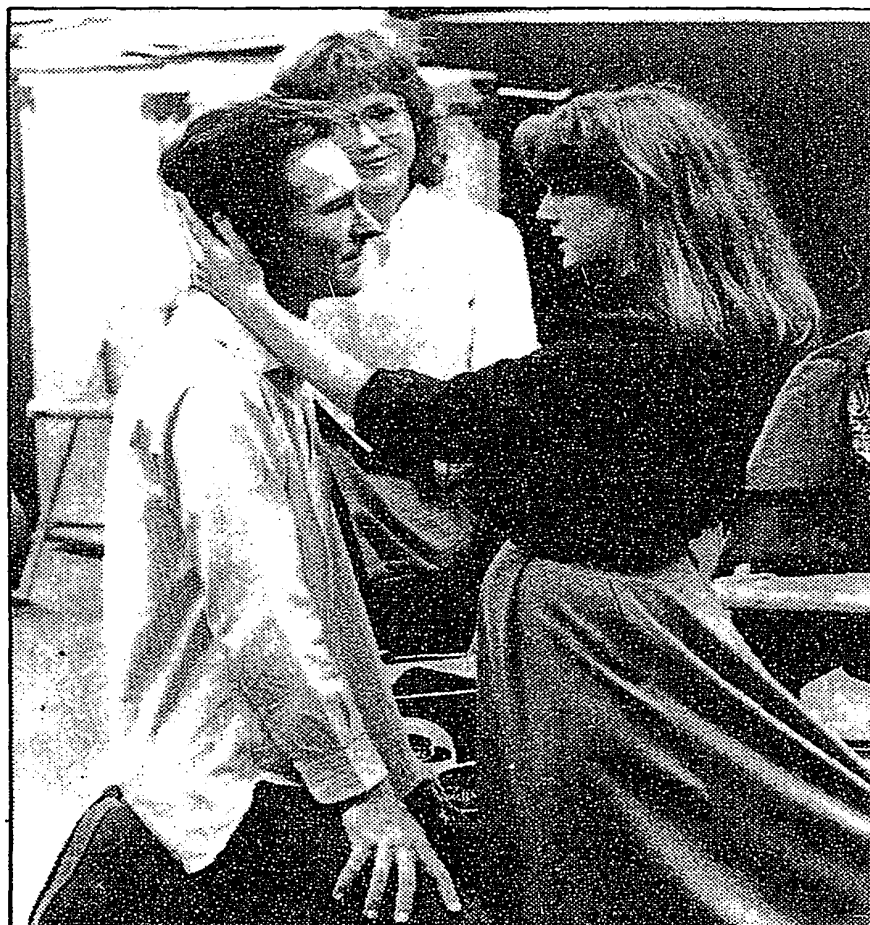
"I keep saying — I say it so often in class — Shakespeare is just a very good playwright," he went on. "In his lifetime, he never published a play. He just wrote them and did them. He never thought the plays had a future for professors to write books saying, 'The reason there's a third murderer is...'"

"It's good to remove the reverence," said Heather Canning, an English actress who appeared in "Marat/Sade" on Broadway, "because Shakespeare is very frightening to Americans. I heard that when they did 'Othello' on Broadway, they put Christopher Plummer's name up on the marquee, and James Earl Jones's name — every-

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Christopher Ravenscroft of the Royal Shakespeare Company, at top and below, working with American actors. Above: Edwin Richfield, left, also with the Royal, and John Clingerman, a Riverside Shakespeare Company instructor.



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one but Shakespeare's. It was as if he might scare people away."

The British actors came to New York, at a cost of \$13,000, under the sponsorship of two American groups passionate about staging Shakespeare in the United States. One is the Riverside Shakespeare Company, an Off Broadway organization with a special interest in education, which acted as host to the English. The other is the Alliance for Creative Theater Education and Research, a joint American-English group that since 1975 has sent Shakespearean actors into American colleges to train actors in performing Shakespeare.

Profound Reactions

"Most teachers teach and most students study Shakespeare as if it was literature, as if he'd written a series of novels," said Homer Swander, the director of the alliance, based in Santa Barbara, Calif. "Our purpose is to put into classes the actors for whom the words were written."

Mr. Swander has seen profound reactions. At a small college in Texas, he recalled, one young woman said, "This is the greatest thing that's happened to me since I was saved."

A young man at a different college said of his work with the classical actors, "It was like being tubed, man, utterly tubed." The college, Mr. Swander added, was in California, and the fellow meant the experience had been quite nice.

Until last week, Mr. Swander and the Royal Shakespeare Company's actors had never conducted their workshops in New York City and had never opened them to actors in addition to students. About 1,000 — from the age of 15 to 87, from amateurs to professionals to struggling journeymen waiting on tables between audi-

tions — signed up for the 22 sessions. They paid \$30 for workshops and \$5 for seminars.

"All the tips in New York restaurants," said Jane Badgers, a public-relations person for the Riverside Shakespeare Company, "are probably paying for these workshops."

Katie Cohen, a 17-year-old from Nyack, N.Y., said she saved her summer baby-sitting money to pay for a workshop Tuesday on Shakespearean verse. "Ever since I saw 'Nicholas Nickleby,'" she said, "I loved the Royal Shakespeare Company and I really wanted to act. This is like being with my heroes. Besides, if I was in high school I'd be in math now."

Miss Cohen delivered one of Juliet's speeches in the class and then heard the praise of one of her heroes. "What a lovely sense of youth," Mr. Richfield said. "I'd forgotten what it's like, darling."

Practice or Heritage?

Tom Parkesian, 24, who has worked lately in soap operas, said he attended to remind himself why he had wanted to become an actor.

"I've been the whole sit-com route," he said, "and people lose the spirit of the writing. It's good to be able to make money, but it's important to get back in touch with the classics. George Bernard Shaw once said that Shakespeare is like music, and I came here to learn how to play the music in harmony."

If there was one lesson the British actors tried to impart, it was simplicity, returning always to the words.

"If the verse is spoken properly, then the character is always right," said John Kane, who is best known for his performance as Puck in Peter Brook's production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

"The text holds all the clues for Shakespeare," Mr. Kane said. "We hear that you Americans do a lot of delving into the character and doing improvisations on the character until you know the character so well you wonder why you've got all these words in the script to convey an emotion you already know."

But the actors bridled at the notion that, being British, they had some innate, almost genetic, advantage in playing Shakespeare. During one workshop, John Clingerman, an instructor with the Riverside Shakespeare Company, alluded to "a certain British temperament."

"No, no, no," Mr. Richfield shouted. "You're wrong."

"We just have more practice doing it," said Mr. Ravenscroft, whose roles have included one of the Cheeryble brothers in "Nicholas Nickleby." "That's all. You could do it just as well or better. We have no advantage being British."

"We do your plays in England," Mr. Richfield added. "Iceman," "Once in a Lifetime." The National just did "Guys and Dolls." You have expertise. You can teach us things, about O'Neill and Miller, about musicals. The richness of the theater is something we can share."

Techniques and Coffee

Still, the curiosity ran mostly east across the Atlantic during the workshops. How much do you research a script? some asked. Do you act differently in film? Do you ever have discussions in the Royal Shakespeare Company?

"Yes," Mr. Richfield said. "Like, 'God, the coffee's awful.'"

"Do you ever direct yourselves?" someone asked. Mr. Richfield and Mr. Ravenscroft howled.

"So there are separate actors and directors?" the questioner persisted.

"And they get better food," Mr. Richfield said of the directors.

For all the jocular moments, it was a week of work for the English actors, with only a bit of time for leisure. Jennie Stoller saw the Manet show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, while Mr. Kane marched his family up to the crown of the Statue of Liberty. And Miss Canning, investigating American television, discovered "Soap."