



## A Good Block

IN ACT IV, SCENE 6 of *King Lear*, the mad Lear utters an obscure line: “This [is] a good block.” Richard Monette remembers directing William Hutt in the role in 1996. When Hutt came to the line in rehearsal, he stamped his foot on the stage, rather than touching his head as many actors do. For Monette, the gesture was right for Lear and also captured an essential truth about the Festival’s unique thrust stage. “It worked,” says Monette. “It was a brilliant theatrical moment.”

For actors, the thrust stage that Hutt honoured with his gesture is both enormously demanding and intensely exciting. “What we consider good acting at Stratford is different from many other companies,” says Antoni Cimolino, Festival actor turned general director. “Acting here has been driven by the architecture. You don’t have to hurl what you are doing across the void to the audience, so everything seems more natural and easy.”

With minimal sets, the actors and the story they are telling become the centre of the audience experience. Seen by audience members in three dimensions whenever they are on stage, actors must perform with extraordinary concentration and skill. “An actor cannot lie on that stage,” says Hutt, the great Canadian classical actor who appeared in the first season and in most of the intervening seasons until present day.

LEFT The thrust stage in 1997

“On a proscenium stage, he has the protection of scenery at his back. Here, if he is to be successful, he must be able to respond intuitively to the size and shape of the space which surrounds him.” The late Mervyn Blake, who played forty-two seasons with the Festival, agreed. “It’s a frightening but very exciting stage,” he wrote. “I’d be terribly nervous because I felt I couldn’t move without being noticed. But the best thing to do, unless you’re in the middle of a scene, is to stand still and involve yourself in the scene.”

The stage gives actors the opportunity to connect with their audience with a depth and intensity not possible on a proscenium stage. Artistic Director Richard Monette remembers Paul Gross, an actor more familiar with the demands of television, adjusting to the stage while rehearsing for *Hamlet*. “For the first two weeks of rehearsal he kept asking, ‘Where’s the camera?’ but eventually he realized that the camera is all around. He came to love working on the stage. Once you’ve got the knack of it, it is a great friend not only to the verse, but also to the actor.”

The interaction among actors is different too. On a proscenium stage, they play to the audience and only pretend to play to one another. On the thrust, as Michael Langham put it, “their bond of relationship is direct, true, and complete, and serves to pull the audience deeply into the experience of the play.”

For many fine actors, acting on the thrust stage represents the highest level of artistic expression. “There is nothing quite like standing at the centre of that stage with Shakespeare’s words and nothing else,” says Colm Feore, a Stratford star who has gone on to international renown in films and on Broadway. “It is an enormously dangerous place to be, and it requires enormous technical facility. But once you digest all that, the acting can be simpler, more real, and more revealing. It is three-dimensional acting, and you take the memory of that experience to everything else you do.”

Blake, Feore, Gross, and Hutt are just a few of the great actors who have delivered electrifying performances on the Festival stage. Among others: Alan Bates, Brian Bedford, Zoe Caldwell, John Colicos, Bruno Gerussi, Lorne Greene, Martha Henry, William Needles, Stephen Ouimette, Christopher Plummer, Douglas Rain, Paul Scofield, William Shatner, Maggie Smith, and Christopher Walken. Many Stratford actors

have become skilled teachers, sharing the expertise they developed in the demanding Stratford environment; Nicholas Pennell, for example, taught at the universities of Michigan, Eastern Michigan and Northern Michigan, Northwestern University, McMaster University, and the University of Windsor.

### **“Meritorious fair design”** (*The Rape of Lucrece*)

FOR DIRECTORS, TOO, the challenges of the thrust stage are significant. Arranging actors on a stage with no vanishing point or pictorial perspective can be difficult, requiring directors to think in terms of diagonal movement, rather than what Monette calls the “windshield wiper” movement of the proscenium stage. Michael Langham, who assumed the role of artistic director in 1956, later admitted that he found the stage difficult to work with. “I fought it for years,” he said. “I resisted it. It took me quite a few years before I began to realize that I had to accept it and go with it and sort of marry it.” John Hirsch, who took over as artistic director in 1981, was reported to have said that the only directors to whom a thrust stage was “natural” were those with “a choreographic sense, twenty years of repertory experience, and nine *Shrews* and five *Hamlets* behind them.” Yet as Langham discovered, once the stage is embraced, it becomes a dynamic and exciting space with great flexibility and intimacy.

Design is also challenging on the Festival stage. On a proscenium stage, much of the atmosphere and sense of spectacle is created through elaborate sets. On a thrust stage, sets must be relatively simple, although as the scale models in this exhibition demonstrate, they can be remarkably creative and evocative. The nature of the stage makes costumes and props enormously important. Because the audience is so close, everything must be “real.” Costumes must stand up to scrutiny from inches away, but also to the exigencies of an eight-month season. Rich fabrics, wonderful colours, and exquisite detailing help create the imaginary world of each play. The Festival has a corps of highly skilled artisans—experts in wig making, millinery, shoemaking and leatherwork, bijoux (jewellery and gems), cutting and sewing, and costume decorating and painting—who bring to life the vision of the designers. Masks and props of all kinds are also made in-house to demanding

standards, and virtually all swords and daggers used on stage are real weapons made in the Festival's armoury. This exhibition includes five spectacular costumes worn by Stratford's leading ladies through the years, serving as testament to the exceptional skills of Festival artisans.

These costumes and other items included in this exhibition are part of the Stratford Festival Archives. With more than two thousand costumes, hundreds of props, and 250,000 photographs and videos, as well as extensive artistic, production, and administrative files, it is the largest archive devoted to a single theatre in the world, and a unique and invaluable resource for scholars, students, actors, directors, broadcasters, journalists, and others.

**“If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction” (*Twelfth Night*, Act III, scene 4)**

THERE IS LITTLE QUESTION that the thrust stage has influenced and continues to influence acting, directing, and design—indeed every aspect of the Stratford Festival. But where did this remarkable performance space spring from and how did it come to be built in the unlikely setting of a small Ontario town?

Like a Shakespearean plot, the story is familiar yet always engaging. Tom Patterson, a Stratford journalist, was looking for a way to revive the sagging fortunes of his formerly railway-driven hometown and decided in 1951 that the answer was a Shakespearean festival.

The timing was right. That same year, the influential *Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters & Sciences*, better known as the *Massey Report*, was published, leading to the establishment of the Canada Council for the Arts in 1957. Robertson Davies, who wrote the theatre portion of the *Report*, argued that while Canada had its share of theatrical talent, it was utterly lacking in facilities, training, and professional opportunity.

Interestingly, the *Report* made direct reference to the idea of a Shakespearean festival along the lines of the famous one in England. “If the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, we were told, could be transplanted bodily from Stratford-on-Avon to Ottawa-on-the-Rideau, with all its equipment, we would still be without a National Theatre; but if we can develop even one company, acting in a tent or in school halls,

which can move Canadians to tears and laughter with the great plays of the past, and with great plays of the present, we have the heart of a National Theatre.”

Patterson probably had no idea he would be doing exactly that when he began to develop his bold idea for Stratford. He soon connected with the doyenne of Canadian theatre, Dora Mavor Moore. She suggested that the best person to advise the new festival was celebrated British director Tyrone Guthrie. Patterson called Guthrie at his home in Ireland and arranged for him to visit the town in July 1952.

It was more than Patterson’s persistence and salesmanship that brought the internationally renowned impresario to little Stratford, Ontario. Guthrie had long been fascinated by the idea of creating a unique space, modelled on the Elizabethan stage, for the performance of Shakespeare. He wanted to break the mould of the proscenium arch theatre, with its conventions and clichés, and create a dynamic and fluid environment that fostered an intimate connection between audience and actors.

In June 1937, he had directed a production of *Hamlet* starring Laurence Olivier at Elsinore in Denmark. The play was intended to be produced outdoors with the castle as a backdrop, but torrential rain drove the performers inside to a hotel ballroom. The audience surrounded the hastily constructed platform on three sides. “I should never have suggested staging this rather important occasion as we did if I had not already had a strong hunch that it would work,” Guthrie later wrote. “At its best moments that performance in the ballroom related the audience to a Shakespeare play in a different and, I thought, more logical, satisfactory, and effective way than can ever be achieved in a theatre of what is still regarded as orthodox design.” In 1948, Guthrie directed a sixteenth-century Scottish play, *Ane Satire of the Thrie Estaites*, in the Assembly Hall of the Church of Scotland for the Edinburgh Festival. In this unique setting, he created his first thrust stage: a large open platform accessible from three sides, with a gallery across the back. The production was so successful that it was revived in 1949 and 1959, and the Assembly Hall became an important performance space for the Edinburgh Festival.

When first approached informally by Mrs. Mavor Moore, Guthrie saw the potential to realize his dream of doing Shakespeare on a similar stage. “I am intensely interested,” he wrote to her, “to produce

Shakespeare on a stage that might reproduce the actor-audience relation for which he wrote ... I assume that at Stratford, Ontario ... the stage and auditorium are still to be made. And if I could influence their design, I would be very happy to do so." Later he wrote to Patterson, "It would be wise to avoid the usual course of entrusting the eventually functional design of a theatre to the local Borough Surveyor, or a landscape gardener, or worst of all—to a committee."

Guthrie's dream was Patterson's opportunity. At Guthrie's suggestion, Patterson secured the services of Tanya Moiseiwitsch, a gifted English designer who had worked with the famous director on a highly successful production of *Henry VIII* at the Old Vic. "It's now known as my stage, but that's not strictly true," wrote Moiseiwitsch later. "Guthrie knew exactly what he wanted: he drew it on the back of an envelope. ... I had to turn it into a half-inch-to-the-foot scale model." In a January 1953 press release, Guthrie was quoted as saying flatly, "There will be no drastic improvement in staging Shakespeare until we return to certain basic conditions of the Shakespearean stage."

## **Leaving the Clichés Behind**

THE STAGE GUTHRIE ENVISIONED and Moiseiwitsch created was influenced both by the Elizabethan stage and the amphitheatres of ancient Greece and Rome. It was a curtainless hexagonal platform with a gutter separating it from the amphitheatre-style seating. A stage balcony was set on the diagonal against the back wall, supported by nine slender pillars. For the first four seasons, this extraordinary performance space was located under a huge blue-grey and rust canvas tent. When the permanent theatre was built in 1957, the stage remained in place, and architect Robert Fairfield created the permanent building around it. The balcony, with its central pillar marking the geographic centre of the structure, held the engineer's tripod used for making all radial measurements.

For those who have grown up with this stage, it is difficult to appreciate how revolutionary it was and how wide its impact. Alec Guinness, the big-name British star who performed in the Festival's first season, pronounced that "picture-frame Shakespeare is finished." Guthrie himself wrote in 1953 that while the stage might undergo modification over time, "of the general plan I have no doubts whatever. With



practice we shall all—directors, designers, and actors—learn to use it more skillfully, forgetting many of the clichés of the proscenium stage.” Robertson Davies wrote that the new stage lent a strong sense of ritual to the productions of the first Festival season. “It was the effect of a temple: [the audience was] as necessary to the completeness of what was being done as were the actors and those who stood behind them. We were not spectators; we were part of a great ceremony of evocation and celebration.”

Cecil Clarke and Tanya Moiseiwitsch with a model of the thrust stage

## An Evolving Space

AS GUTHRIE PREDICTED, the stage has undergone small changes but his concept has remained intact. When the permanent theatre was built in 1956–1957, an underground chamber was created beneath the stage, and a trapdoor entrance was added to the main apron stage. The number of upstage entrances was increased, and an orchestra chamber was created twenty-two feet above and immediately behind the main stage.



The thrust stage in 1982 (top)  
and in 1997 (bottom)

The audience arc, with its new balcony, was reduced to 220° from 260°, and the seating, which was increased from 1500 to 2192, was designed so that no member of the audience was more than seventy feet from the stage. In 1962, major changes were made to the stage under the direction of Tanya Moiseiwitsch and designer Brian Jackson. The upstage area was widened and opened up, two small balconies were eliminated, two large panelled entrances were added, and the number of pillars was reduced from nine to five. In a Festival media release, Artistic Director Michael Langham noted that the gender of the stage “has changed from feminine to masculine—more in keeping with the robust nature of most of Shakespeare’s works.” The contrast between the original and the 1962 stage is brought to life in this exhibition by a full-scale model that shows the two stage balconies side by side.

The next changes came in the mid-seventies, under the artistic directorship of Robin Phillips. The riser under the balcony was eliminated by the addition of a wrap-around level running from the upstage right steps to the upstage left steps, the bottom step was enlarged, and a canopy was added to the second level of the balcony. In 1976, the balcony was made removable to provide more flexibility and to open up possibilities for opera, operetta, and musical comedy. Phillips explained, “While it does enhance more robust works of Shakespeare, the balcony has an inherent aggressiveness inimical to the staging of other works.” Further alterations were made to the balcony in 1987–1988, making its prow, oak facings, and oak column covers removable, providing even more flexibility. In 1997, under the leadership of Artistic Director Richard Monette, a further renewal took place. The audience arc was changed to 175°, reducing the total

number of seats—from 2276 to 1832—and some of the demands on actors; sightlines and acoustics were improved. The exhibition traces this evolution from 1953 to the present through a series of photographs.

## **Building a National Theatre**

TYRONE GUTHRIE's revolutionary stage design shaped every aspect of the Stratford Festival, helping to give it a place in world theatre. Just as the stage made Stratford, so Stratford has contributed to the development of a vigorous regional theatre industry across Canada.

When the Festival was first proposed, there were those who argued that it would have a negative effect on Canadian theatre, siphoning off the best talent from across the country to play in European classics. Guthrie quickly defended the concept, pointing out that before Stratford, talented young Canadians had to leave their homeland to have viable careers in the theatre.

Almost from the beginning, the Stratford Festival was a force beyond its home in southwestern Ontario. The Canadian Players company was launched after the first season to employ Festival actors during the fall and winter. Tony van Bridge, a long-time member of both companies, notes: "The Canadian Players took theatre to the whole country, to the whole continent, and throughout North America built Canada's reputation for fine classical acting." In the late 1970s, Festival stalwarts Marti Maraden and Nicholas Pennell toured Canada doing two-handed plays and acting workshops. In Vancouver, a reviewer wrote of their made-in-Stratford "Phillips" style as "uncluttered and spare yet rich and eloquent."

By its third season, the Festival had also developed a structured theatre training program and had thirty young actors studying voice and movement. Training continued in various forms, including the famous Young Company established by Robin Phillips in 1975 and revived in various forms by subsequent artistic directors. In 1998, Artistic Director Richard Monette established what is now the Birmingham Conservatory for Classical Theatre Training, which offers learning opportunities to actors and directors.

As one of the first major theatres built in North America in the twentieth century, the Festival theatre marked the beginning of a Canadian construction boom. As Tom Patterson later put it: "For the following two decades, hardly a year went by without another theatre being initi-

ated. During the 1960s and 1970s, every few months another sponsor, architect, or civic official would arrive in Stratford to check out ‘How To Do It.’” Between 1957 and 1970, the National Theatre School, the Shaw Festival, the Manitoba Theatre Centre, Neptune Theatre, the Vancouver Playhouse, the Charlottetown Festival, the Citadel, the Globe Theatre, Theatre Calgary, the Centaur, Theatre New Brunswick, and the National Arts Centre were established.

Here are just a few examples of how Stratford has shared its theatrical treasures:

- Tom Patterson, Leon Major (an assistant director at Stratford), and playwright John Gray were commissioned to produce a report on Canadian theatre for the Canada Council in 1961. During their visit to Halifax, Patterson gave a rousing speech about the benefits of a professional theatre for community development. That seed sprouted into the Neptune Theatre.
- After his time at Stratford, Michael Langham went on to work with the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis and the Drama Division of the Julliard School of the Arts, and then returned to Canada to help found the Atlantic Theatre Festival in Wolfville, New Brunswick.
- In 1968, young Stratford actor Christopher Newton was recruited to start up a professional theatre in Calgary. Somewhat hesitant, he was encouraged by promises of support from his Festival colleagues. Newton put Theatre Calgary on a firm footing and moved on to new challenges, eventually serving as artistic director of the Shaw Festival for more than twenty years.
- More recently, twelve outstanding Canadian actors came together to create Toronto’s Soulpepper Theatre Company. Of the twelve, six had been in Robin Phillips’s Young Company, three had been in other young companies, and two more had other Stratford experience.

**“The world’s my oyster”** (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act II, scene 2)

THE THRUST STAGE itself has been copied and adapted in many theatres around the world, including Minneapolis, Dallas, Los Angeles, New York,

Atlanta, Washington, London (Globe Theatre and National Theatre), Chichester, Nottingham, Manchester, Sheffield, and even Moscow. The Rockefeller Foundation sent a delegation to Stratford to take measurements and study seat angles in preparation for designing the Beaumont Theatre at the Lincoln Centre in New York City.

Recently the Royal Shakespeare Company announced that it is re-making its theatre. Representatives visited the Stratford Festival, borrowing blueprints and photos of its famous stage. In June 2006, Artistic Director Michael Boyd explained the changes. "We want to move away from the nineteenth-century proscenium 'picture frame' to a theatre that embraces interaction," he said. "Our commitment to bring an immediacy and clarity to Shakespeare means we need to bring the audience to a more engaged relationship with our actors. The best way we can achieve this is in a bold thrust stage, a modern take on the theatres of Shakespeare's day." It could almost be Guthrie talking to Stratford City Council more than fifty years ago.

Tom Patterson and Tyrone Guthrie came together at an auspicious moment in Canadian theatre history, and the result was the Stratford Festival of Canada. Would it be what it is today without Guthrie's revolutionary vision and Moiseiwitsch's design for a bold thrust stage? Would its impact have been felt across Canada and around the world? Antoni Cimolino, the Festival's general director, puts it simply: "That stage was the whole reason we happened."

**Pat Morden attended the University of Western Ontario and then completed a Masters in history at the University of Sussex as a Commonwealth Scholar. After several years as a freelance magazine writer, she was hired as editor of the *Western Alumni Gazette* and manager of alumni communications at Western. In 1994, she and her partner Max started Morden Communications. Since then, the company has received more than twenty local, national, and international awards for their work, including an International Association of Business Communicators Gold Quill award.**