VI

LIGHT AND SHADOW IN THE THEATRE

Put out the light and then—put out the light!
—SHAKESPEARE

The artist . . . will give us the gloom of gloom and the sunshine of sunshine.
—EMERSON

PROFESSOR MAX REINHARDT once said, "I am told, that the art of lighting a stage consists of putting light where you want it and taking it away where you don't want it." I have often had occasion to think of this remark—so often, in fact, that with the passage of time it has taken on for me something of the quality of an old proverb. Put light where you want it and take it away where you don't want it. What could be more simple?

But our real problem in the theatre is to know where to put the light and where to take it away. And this, as Professor Reinhardt very well knows,

is not so simple. On the contrary, it demands the knowledge and the application of a lifetime.

Future historians will speak of this period in theatrical history as the spotlight era. Spotlights have become a part of the language of the theatre. Indeed, it is hardly too much to say that they have created our contemporary theatre idiom. Once upon a time our stages were lighted by gas-jets and before that by kerosene lamps, and before that by tapers and torches. And in the days to come we may see some kind of ultra-violet radiation in our theatres, some new fluorescence. But today our productions are characterized—conditioned, one might almost say—by conical shafts of colored electric light which beat down upon them from lamps placed in the flies and along the balconies of the theatre. Lighting a play today is a matter of arranging and rearranging these lamps in an infinite variety of combinations. This is an exercise involving great technical skill and ingenuity. The craft of lighting has been developed to a high degree and it is kept to a high standard by rigorous training in schools and colleges. It has become both exacting and incredibly exact. The beam of light strikes with the precision of a *mot*

juste. It bites like an etcher's needle or cuts deep like a surgeon's scalpel. Every tendency moves strongly toward creating an efficient engine behind the proscenium arch. Almost without our knowing it this wonderful invention has become a part of the general *expertise* of Broadway show-business. We handle our spotlights and gelatines and dimmers in the theatre with the same delight and the same sense of mastery with which we drive a high-powered automobile or pilot an aeroplane.

But at rare moments, in the long quiet hours of light-rehearsals, a strange thing happens. We are overcome by a realization of the *livingness* of light. As we gradually bring a scene out of the shadows, sending long rays slanting across a column, touching an outline with color, animating the scene moment by moment until it seems to breathe, our work becomes an incantation. We feel the presence of elemental energies.

There is hardly a stage designer who has not experienced at one time or another this overwhelming sense of the livingness of light. I hold these moments to be among the most precious of all experiences the theatre can give us. The true life of the theatre is in them. At such mo-

ments our eyes are opened. We catch disturbing glimpses of a theatre not yet created. Our imaginations leap forward.

It is the memory of these rare moments that inspires us and guides us in our work. While we are studying to perfect ourselves in the use of the intricate mechanism of stage lighting we are learning to transcend it. Slowly, slowly, we begin to see lighting in the theatre, not only as an exciting craft but as an art, at once visionary and exact, subtle, powerful, infinitely difficult to learn. We begin to see that a drama is not an engine, running at full speed from the overture to the final curtain, but a living organism. And we see light as a part of that livingness.

Our first duty in the theatre is always to the actors. It is they who interpret the drama. The stage belongs to them and they must dominate it. Surprising as it may seem, actors are sometimes most effective when they are not seen at all. Do you remember the impact of Orson Welles' broadcast of a threatened Martian invasion? A voice out of darkness. . . . But this, of course, is an exception. In nine cases out of ten our problem

is simply that of making the actors and their environment clearly and fully visible.

Visible, yes. But in a very special way. The life we see on the stage is not the everyday life we know. It is—how shall I express it?—*more so.* The world of the theatre is a world of sharper, clearer, swifter impressions than the world we live in. That is why we go to the theatre, to dwell for an hour in this unusual world and draw new life from it. The actors who reveal the heightened life of the theatre should move in a light that is altogether uncommon. It is not enough for us to make them beautiful, charming, splendid. Our purpose must be to give by means of light an impression of something out of the ordinary, away from the mediocre, to make the performance exist in an ideal world of wisdom and understanding. Emerson speaks of a divine aura that breathes through forms. The true actor-light—the true performance-light—is a radiance, a nimbus, a subtle elixir, wherein the characters of the drama may manifest themselves to their audience in their inmost reality.

Perhaps the word *lucid* best describes this light. A lucid light. I think of the exquisite clarity in the prints of Hiroshige. A light of "god-like in-

tellection" pervades these scenes. They are held in a shadowless tranquillity that cannot change. The peace of the first snowfall is in them. Everything is perceived here; everything is understood; everything is known.

Or I might use the word *penetrating*. If we look at a portrait by one of our fashionable portrait-painters and then at a portrait by Rembrandt, we see that the one is concerned mainly with the recording of immediate surface impressions. His approach is that of a journalist who assembles a number of interesting and arresting facts for his leading article. The other penetrates beneath the surface into the inner life of his subject. In the portrait by Rembrandt we see not only the features but the character of the sitter; not only the character, but the soul. We see a life that is not of this moment but of all moments. We sense "the ultimate in the immediate." The portrait of an old man becomes a portrait of old age.

Or I might use the word *aware*. When we see a good play well performed we are brought to the quivering raw edge of experience. We are caught up into the very quick of living. Our senses are dilated and intent. We become preternaturally

aware of each instant of time as it passes. In this awareness we see the actors more clearly, more simply, than we have ever seen human beings before. They seem, in some strange way, more *unified*. We no longer appraise them or criticize them or form opinions about them. We forget all that we have ever heard or read about them. We gaze at them as we gaze at long-lost loved ones or at those we look upon for the last time. *Forever and forever, farewell, Cassius.* . . . And we see them in a different light. It is this *different* light that should be given in the theatre.

But more than all these necessary qualities, the lighting of a play should contain an element of surprise, a sense of discovery. It holds the promise of a new and unforgettable experience. I will give you an illustration. We are all familiar with the lines from Keats' sonnet, *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*—

Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific—and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise—

Let us put out of our minds for a moment the accustomed music of these lines and allow the poet to take us with him on his high adventure.

Imagine this little band of explorers, lost in wonder, on the shore of an unknown ocean. See their faces as the vision of a new world bursts upon them. A scene on the stage should give us the same sense of incredulity and wonder and delight. As we enter the theatre we too are on the threshold of a new experience. The curtain rises. The vision of a new world bursts upon us as it burst upon these voyagers of an earlier day. A new powerful life pervades the theatre. Our hearts beat with a wild hope. Is this what we have waited for? we ask. Shall we see at last? Shall we know?

Lighting a scene consists not only in throwing light upon objects but in throwing light upon a subject. We have our choice of lighting a drama from the outside, as a spectator, or from the inside, as a part of the drama's experience. The objects to be lighted are the forms which go to make up the physical body of the drama—the actors, the setting, the furnishings and so forth. But the subject which is to be lighted is the drama itself. We light the actors and the setting, it is true, but we illuminate the drama. We reveal the drama. We use light as we use words, to elucidate ideas

and emotions. Light becomes a tool, an instrument of expression, like a paint-brush, or a sculptor's chisel, or a phrase of music. We turn inward and at once we are in the company of the great ones of the theatre. We learn from them to bathe our productions in the light that never was on sea or land.

One afternoon many years ago I was taken into the inner room of a little picture gallery and there I saw, hanging on the wall opposite me, Albert Pinkham Ryder's painting of *Macbeth and the Witches*. I knew then in a sudden flash of perception that the light that never was on sea or land was a reality and not an empty phrase. My life changed from that moment. Since then I try with all the energy of which I am capable to bring this other light into the theatre. For I know it is the light of the masters.

I find this light of other days in the paintings of Ryder and Redon and Utrillo, in the etchings of Gordon Craig, in Adolphe Appia's drawing of the Elysian Fields from the third act of the *Orpheus* of Gluck. Here it is for everyone to see, achieved once and for all, so clearly stated that no one can escape it. I find it implicit in certain

scenes from Shakespeare. It casts its spell upon the lovers, Miranda and Ferdinand, as they meet for the first time on Prospero's magic island. Miranda speaks—

> *What, is't a spirit?*
> *Lord, how it looks about: Believe me, sir,*
> *It carries a brave form. But 'tis a spirit . . .*
> *I might call him*
> *A thing divine, for nothing natural*
> *I ever saw so noble. . . .*

And Ferdinand—

> *Most sure the goddess*
> *On whom these airs attend . . . my prime request,*
> *Which I do first pronounce, is, O you wonder,*
> *If you be maid or no? . . .*

And again, when Prospero by his art calls down the very gods and goddesses from Olympus to celebrate their marriage, Ceres, and great Juno, and Iris with her rainbow—

> *—and thy broom-groves,*
> *Whose shadows the dismissèd bachelor loves,*
> *Being lass-lorn: thy pole-clipt vineyard,*
> *And thy sea-marge, sterile and rocky-hard,*

> *Where thou thyself dost air, the Queen o' the sky,*
> *Whose watery arch and messenger am I. . . .*

A rare light of the imagination is poured over the scene, fresh and disturbing and strangely tender. A new theatre draws near, bathed in "the nameless glow that colors mental vision."

Lucidity, penetration, awareness, discovery, inwardness, wonder. . . . These are the qualities we should try to achieve in our lighting. And there are other qualities too. There is a quality of luster, a shine and a gleam that befits the exceptional occasion. (It would be hard perhaps to make the water-front saloon setting of *Anna Christie* lustrous, but I am not so sure. It is the occasion and not the setting which should be lustrous.) There is a quality which I can only describe as racy, a hidalgo quality, proud, self-contained. And last of all, there is a quality of security, a bold firm stroke, an authority that puts an audience at its ease, an assurance that nothing in the performance could ever go wrong, a strength, a serenity, flowing down from some inexhaustible shining spring. Here, in a little circle of clear

radiance, the life of the theatre is going on, a life we can see, and know, and learn to love.

But creating an ideal, exalted atmosphere, an "intenser day" in the theatre is only a part of our task, so small a part that at times it seems hardly to matter at all. However, beautiful or expressive this light may be, it is still not a dramatic light. Rather, it is a lyric light, more suited to feeling than to action. There is no conflict in it: there is only radiance. Great drama is given to us in terms of action, and in illuminating dramatic action we must concern ourselves not only with light, but with shadow.

How shall I convey to you the meaning of shadow in the theatre—the primitive dread, the sense of brooding, of waiting, of fatality, the shrinking, the blackness, the descent into endless night? *The valley of the Shadow. . . . Ye who read are still among the living, but I who write shall have long since gone my way into the region of shadows. . . . Finish, bright lady, the long day is done, and we are for the dark. . . .* It is morning, the sun shines, the dew is on the grass, and God's in His Heaven. We have just risen from sleep. We are young, the sap runs strong in

us, and we stretch ourselves and laugh. Then the sun rises higher, and it is high noon, and the light is clear, and colors are bright, and life shines out in a splendid fullness. Jack has his Jill, and Benedick his Beatrice, and Millamant her Mirabell. But then the sun sinks down, the day draws to its close, the shadows gather, and darkness comes, and voices fall lower, and we hear the whisper, and the stealthy footfall, and we see the light in the cranny of the door, and the low star reflected in the stagnant tarn. A nameless fear descends upon us. Ancient apparitions stir in the shadows. We listen spellbound to the messengers from another world, the unnatural horrors that visit us in the night.

I shall leave the doctors of psychology to explain the connection between this ancient terror and the dread of the unknown darkness in our minds which they have begun to call the subconscious. It is enough for us to know that the connection exists, and that it is the cause of the curious hold which light and shadow can exercise over the imagination of an audience. At heart we are all children afraid of the dark, and our fear goes back to remote beginnings of the human race. See the mood of an audience change, hear them chat-

ter or fall silent, as the lights in the theatre are raised or lowered. See them rush to the nearest exit at the sudden rumor, "The lights have gone out!" See their instant reassurance as the broken circuit is repaired and the great chandelier blazes once more. It is such instinctive responses that give light its dynamic power in the theatre.

Our greatest dramatists have woven light and shadow into their creations. Dramatic literature is filled with examples. We see Lavinia Mannon as she closes the shutters of the Mannon house, banishing herself forever from the light of day. We see the moon shining fitfully through scudding storm-clouds over the ramparts of Elsinore, where the unquiet ghost of Hamlet's father wanders, wrapped in his black cloak, "for to go invisibell." We hear the tortured cry of Claudius, "Give me some light! Away!" The dim shadows of Pelléas and Mélisande embrace one another far away at the end of the garden;—*Comme nos ombres sont grandes ce soir! . . . Oh! quelles s'embrassent loin de nous! . . .* We watch the two women in the anteroom of Lucio Settala's studio as they gaze at one another across the shaft of light that falls along the floor between them. We wander with Lear through a storm that is like a convul-

sion of Nature, "a tyranny of the open night," an "extremity of the skies."

Here is the most wonderful example of all, the great classic example of dramatic insight:

Lo, you, here she comes! This is her very guise, and, upon my life, fast asleep. Observe her: stand close.
How came she by that light?
Why, it stood by her. She has light by her continually, 'Tis her command.
You see, her eyes are open.
Ay, but their sense is shut.
What is it she does now?

Shakespeare animates the scene with his own intense mood. The candle flame lives in the theatre. It becomes a symbol of Lady Macbeth's own life —flickering, burning low, vanishing down into darkness. *Out, Out, brief candle! . . .* Where the layman might see nothing more than an actual candle, made of wax, bought for so much, at such and such a place, the dramatist has seen a great revealing image. He has seen deep into the meaning of this terrible moment, and the taper is a part of it. *Animula, vagula, blandula,* little flame, little breath, little soul, moving before us

for the last time. . . . And the shadow on the wall behind "that broken lady" becomes an omen, a portent, a presage of her "sad and solemn slumbers," a dark companion following her, silent and implacable, as she passes from this to that other world. *She should have died hereafter. Life's but a walking shadow. . . .* When we think of this scene we remember, not only the dreadful words and the distraught figure, all in white like a shroud; we see vast spaces and enveloping darkness and a tiny trembling light and a great malevolent shadow. The icy fear that grips us is built up out of all these elements. And when we put the scene on the stage we do not serve Shakespeare's drama as we should serve it until we have given each of these elements its full value and its proper emphasis.

As we dwell upon these great examples of the use of light in the theatre we cease to think of harmony and beauty and think instead of energy, contrast, violence, struggle, shock. We dream of a light that is tense and vivid and full of temperament, an impulsive, wayward, capricious light, a light "haunted with passion," a light of flame and tempest, a light which draws its inspiration from the moods of light in Nature, from the illimitable

night sky, the blue dusk, the halcyon light that broods over the western prairies. We say with D'Annunzio, *I would that Nature could be round my creations as our oldest forefathers saw her: the passionate actress in an immortal drama. . . .* Here before us as we dream is the frame of the proscenium, enclosing a darkness like the darkness that quivers behind our closed eyelids. And now the dark stage begins to burn and glow under our fingers, burning like the embers of the forge of Vulcan, and shafts of light stab through the darkness, and shadows leap and shudder, and we are in the regions where splendor and terror move. We are practicing an art of light and shadow that was old before the Pyramids, an art that can shake our dispositions with thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls.

The creative approach to the problem of stage lighting—the art, in other words, of knowing where to put light on the stage and where to take it away—is not a matter of textbooks or precepts. There are no arbitrary rules. There is only a goal and a promise. We have the mechanism with which to create this ideal, exalted, dramatic light in the theatre. Whether we can do so or not is a

matter of temperament as well as of technique. The secret lies in our perception of light in the theatre as something alive.

Does this mean that we are to carry images of poetry and vision and high passion in our minds while we are shouting out orders to electricians on ladders in light-rehearsals?

Yes. This is what it means.

VII

TOWARD A NEW STAGE