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"This Famous Duke of Milan of Whom So Often I Have Heard Renown": William Hutt at the Stratford and New Burbage Festivals

by Robert Ormsby

In the third season of the television series *Slings and Arrows*, director Geoffrey Tennant (Paul Gross) tells "legendary Canadian actor" Charles Kingman (William Hutt) that seeing Kingman's Falstaff is the reason he joined the theatre. Kingman, suffering from terminal cancer, replies, "I am the personification of that particular cliché and, like the theatre, I am boldly fighting a slow, undignified death" ("That Way Madness Lies"). Playing the lead in Tennant's *King Lear* at the "New Burbage Festival," where *Slings* is set, the exchange adds resonance to the actor's impending demise. Kingman's swansong mirrors Lear's tragic death while recalling Hutt's own voluntary retirement from the Stratford Festival (the real-life model for New Burbage) in 2005. The association of Kingman's mortality with the death of the theatre also emphasizes *Slings*' elegiac depiction of classical theatre surrendering to commercialization. Neglected by administrators more concerned with merchandising and musicals than the Bard, the Kingman character draws on and solidifies Hutt's reputation as the nation's foremost Anglophone classical actor by making him the emblem of deliverance from American commercialism and celebrity culture.

Unlike Kingman, Hutt was a Stratford fixture who, Prospero-like, controlled his fate at the Festival. In 2004, he casually informed Stratford's Artistic Director Richard Monette that he would end his career as the exiled magician in Monette's upcoming *Tempest* (Ouzounian). The connection between Prospero and Hutt's persona as Canada's leading classical actor featured prominently in the Festival's promotion of *The Tempest*. As *Globe and Mail* theatre critic Kamal Al-Solaylee commented, "The festival . . . plastered his image [as Prospero] on all the season's brochures and promotional material, making Hutt, at 85, the oldest poster-boy in the business." English professor Alan Somerset's essay in *The Tempest* program similarly framed Hutt's departure, quoting Prospero's epilogue, "As

The Tempest, 2005. William Hutt as Prospero.
Photo by David Hou. Courtesy Stratford Shakespeare Festival Archives

you from crimes would pardoned be / Let your indulgence set me free” (5). Somerset notes that the couplet will “mark the end of the last major role of Mr. Hutt’s distinguished, magnificent career at the Stratford Festival, a career that spans 128 roles as an actor or director over 40 seasons, including turns as four of its six Prosperos” (5). He subsequently invokes the well-known tradition that “Shakespeare contrives, through Prospero, his farewell to the stage” (9). Eliding Hutt’s, Prospero’s, and Shakespeare’s farewells to their careers, while emphasizing Hutt’s long-standing centrality to the Festival, Somerset implies that the actor’s last performance will mark the conclusion of another Shakespearean tradition.

In helping to define the production’s public identity outside the theatre’s walls, many reviewers followed the Festival’s lead, interpreting the audiences’ exuberant response as confirmation of Hutt’s quasi-celebrity status: theatregoers “erupted in prolonged applause at the first sight of Prospero entering centre stage” (Duke) and at the end, “his waves to the audience were warmly returned amidst thunderous applause” (Vrbanac) as he “stood basked in respectful adoration” (Smith). But for Al-Solaylee, these celebratory comments elevated Hutt at the play’s expense: “When actor and character become that

intertwined, and when the story of the performance eclipses the story in the play, it’s inevitable that our focus is on one and not on the other”

Al-Solaylee’s apprehension evokes theatre scholar Michael Quinn’s argument that acknowledging the “personal, expressive function of acting”—i.e., that which resists a performer’s transformation into a fictitious character—allows us to recognize celebrity as “a tendency of acting rather than a higher order of performance” (155). Quinn’s definition of celebrity is particularly helpful for thinking about Hutt’s Prospero; his singularity as an actor is not a form of celebrity associated “with the rise of modernity and mass communication and with the politics of large-scale industrial cultures” (Hodgdon 47). Stratford’s sophisticated promotional machine may have made Hutt “the oldest poster-boy in the business,” but such ubiquity is nothing like the media exposure that Hollywood or even Broadway celebrities experience. That is, even as “North America’s Leading Classical Theatre,” and one that attracts tourists from Canada and the United States, Stratford does not have the reach or mass audience that might transform it from a regional cultural concern to a global or even a continental one.

The Festival stage may have physically distanced Hutt from audiences, but the emotional reaction that critics reported suggests a powerful intimacy between actor and audience.

The accolades Hutt received do not exemplify celebrity per se, but rather something similar to what Chris Rojek calls “renown,” the “informal attribution of distinction upon an individual within a given social network” (12). Unlike celebrity, which “distance[s] performers] from the spectator by stage, screen, or some equivalent medium of communication,” renown “depends on reciprocal personal or direct para-social contact” that confers on individuals “a localized fame within the particular social assemblages of which they are a part” (12). The Festival stage may have physically distanced Hutt from audiences, but the emotional reaction that critics reported suggests a powerful intimacy between actor and audience. Reviewers emphatically describe their sense that it was Hutt’s charismatic presence that forged the connection: his “commanding” (Reid), “mesmerizing” (Dale), and “spellbinding” (Johnson) performance “held a starry audience in thrall” (Smith).

Feelings of public intimacy and personal magnetism are certainly basic to conceptions of celebrity, but Hutt’s fame remained localized, and thus closer to renown, largely

because it was so closely aligned with the Festival. Limited-run productions like *The Tempest* restrict the number of potential theatre-goers, and media coverage of the production reflects this circumscribed public: besides a few articles in Michigan publications, the majority of reviews appeared in Southern Ontario newspapers (though, admittedly, Southam News service did syndicate a review in several of its regional newspapers and the *Globe and Mail* is a national publication).

indignation, anger, frailty, and . . . love” (Johnson), and thus becomes “the theatrical catalyst tying together the Bard’s greatest themes” (Dale). Such approbation suggests that Hutt’s renown did not diminish or detract from Shakespeare’s play or the life of his characters; despite his celebrated status he was not a celebrity who “transcend[s] media and genre” (Marshall 7) and so did not undermine the production of “authentic” Shakespearean theatre.

The Tempest, 2005. William Hutt as Prospero.
Photo by David Hou. Courtesy Stratford Shakespeare Festival Archives

This coverage, in turn, emphasized the particularity of the social assemblages—national and local—of which Hutt was a part: as “the white haired icon” (Smith) and “patriarch” (Gardiner) of the national stage, his retirement was “a milestone in Canadian theatre” (Duke); as “one of the finest actors in the company’s 53-year history” (Johnson), he was so “instrumental to the Festival’s reputation and success” (Ralph) that “it might be appropriate to subtitle the festival’s first half century as the William Hutt era” (Reid).

Reviewers reconciled the personal “celebrity” aspect of Hutt’s performance with the “authenticity” of his portrayal of Prospero. In addition to admiring his technical speaking skills and ability to make Shakespeare seem “natural,” they praised his success in conveying emotionally complex humanity: “both human and humane” (Reid), this Prospero was “charged with real humanity” (Garebian); “Hutt knows Prospero in all his complexity” (Portman); he is able “to portray his humanity and his fragility” (Vrbanac), “with its full measure of pride,

Hutt’s public identity as Prospero made him an ideal figure to help conclude *Slings*’ representation of celebrity. In its first season, *Slings* connected celebrity to the negative influences of puerile American popular culture and predatory commercialism on Canadian theatre companies and large festivals such as Stratford. These influences converge in the figure of Holly Day (Jennifer Irving), the representative of New Burbage’s largest corporate sponsor, Cosmopolitan Lenstrex. She is keen to produce a musical about John Lennon; but her ultimate ambition, which she pursues by seducing Festival manager Richard Smith-Jones (Mark McKinney), is to transform New Burbage into “Shakespeareville,” a gaudy “theatrical wonderland where middle-income families can come and enjoy the world of theatre in a non-threatening atmosphere of accessibility and comfort” (“A Mirror Up To Nature”).

Holly is central to *Slings*’ revival of the narrative—one repeated forcefully in the inaugural issue of *CTR*—that

promoting institutions like Stratford could protect Canada from overwhelming American culture (Rubin). Holly shares with Richard a populist's love of musicals and a profit-oriented disdain for Shakespeare, but she is decidedly the senior partner in the relationship: ruthless and sexually aggressive, she bullies Smith-Jones into abetting her efforts to control New Burbage. Her principal adversary is May Silverstone, a kindly patrician Festival board member who has been part of New Burbage since it began in a tent and whose only concern is maintaining the Festival's "integrity" ("Outrageous Fortune"). Day so harasses Silverstone that she hospitalizes the elderly woman, and subsequently puts her into a coma by showing her an architect's diorama of Shakespeareville. Through Day's machinations, the *Slings* writers not only offer a strong critique of the commercialization of theatre in general, but also comment more specifically on how postwar Canada has employed Shakespeare to assuage American cultural dominance.

An analogous dilemma unfolds in the parallel plotline about the stunt-casting of Hollywood celebrity Jack Crew (Luke Kirby) as Hamlet (a sly reference to Keanu Reeves' portrayal of the same character at the Manitoba Theatre Centre in 1995). Unlike Hutt's circumscribed fame, Crew's popularity is widespread (he is mobbed for autographs even in isolated New Burbage). However, he is marked as a celebrity "other" at the Festival primarily through his relationship to Shakespearean performance: leading actress Ellen Fanshaw (Martha Burns) dismisses him as a martial artist rather than

an actor; Tennant accurately predicts the critics will "slaughter" Crew simply because he is a Hollywood star ("Playing the Swan"); and Crew is the only company member not to speak Shakespeare's verse in rehearsal until he "owns" the scene, claiming he is Method acting. Eventually, Crew becomes disillusioned: fearful that he is not a "real" classical actor but only "a face" used to "sell tickets" ("Playing the Swan"), he bitterly observes that performing Shakespeare has forced him to confront how his public self has become an "alienable, transferable" (Rojek 14) commodity and has overtaken his private identity.

The celebrity's salvation, as well as the Festival's, lies in Shakespeare. Before his disillusionment, Crew recognizes

that "playing a part like Hamlet, even in Canada, helps your credibility in the States" ("Outrageous Fortune"). But the American gets more than credibility from his Canadian theatrical experience; he learns how to be a "real" actor and recaptures his private self. After Tennant explains that this *Hamlet* will be about the characters discovering their own identities and compels Crew to surrender to Shakespeare by speaking the playwright's actual words, the star triumphs on opening night. Despite his wooden acting, the audience's tremendous response testifies to his charisma and talent. By helping Crew overcome the stigma of celebrity, furthermore, Shakespeare drives the American barbarians from the gate by allowing Smith-Jones to discover *his* humanity. When Tennant says critics will pan the show because of Crew's fame, the manager is scandalized: "They can't ignore what happened on this stage tonight!" ("Playing the Swan"). When Tennant's

prediction proves correct, a repentant Smith-Jones realizes that Shakespeare must not be commodified and dehumanized; he spurns Day, coldly returning her Shakespeareville model and telling her "You are a terrible, terrible person" ("Playing the Swan").

Slings downplayed such issues in its second season but concluded its three-season run by dramatizing the grim triumph of theatre's commercialization. The third season represents celebrity bleakly through the character of Barbara (Janet Bailey), an actor on hiatus from her screen career, who comes to New Burbage to re-join her friend Fanshaw in the theatre. Whereas the self-

effacing Jack Crew worked with big-name stars, Barbara is a narcissistic careerist who works the science fiction fringes of cable television. But the truly sinister threat comes from within, as Canadians internalize the American vices of season one by aspiring to celebrity and commercial art forms. Encouraged by Barbara, Ellen leaves the theatre only to find herself on a vacuous science fiction show that she hates. Urged by board member and loathsome Canadian businessman Mr. Archer (Peter Keleghan) to re-exert control over Festival programming, Smith-Jones encourages the specifically Canadian *East Hastings*, a musical about Vancouver drug addicts. Working on *East Hastings* deprives Richard of the humanity that *Hamlet* had conferred upon him: he becomes

William Hutt's star on Canada's Walk of Fame.
Photo by Marlis Schweitzer

A mock festival brochure cover for the New Burbage Festival featuring William Hutt, Paul Gross, Martha Burns, and Sarah Polley.

Courtesy of Rhombus Media

vain, irresponsible, sleeps with a much younger actress, and acquires the moniker “Big Dick,” denoting his Holly Day-like selfishness and sexual appetite.

The more *East Hastings* trumps Tennant’s production of *Lear* at the box office, the more the Shakespearean tragedy embodies the qualities associated with Hutt’s renown. As Kingman’s health deteriorates, the show’s public radically diminishes: the increasingly popular musical takes *Lear*’s place in the Festival’s large theatre; *Lear* moves into a studio space, is then cancelled due to Kingman’s illness, but is surreptitiously remounted in a church hall. However, members of the resulting tiny para-social group are rewarded with a remarkable performance. There is no physical stage separating the twenty-odd audience members from the cast, who deliver a profoundly moving *Lear*. Hutt-as-Kingman is easily the most compelling actor, especially in his final scene where he carries in the dead Cordelia (Sarah Polley). Here he offers a powerful performance of a defeated, pathetic old man: his voice cracks as he repeatedly shrieks “Howl!”; his palsied hands play over Cordelia’s face; and we hear the tragic defeat in his final words. Audience reaction shots encourage viewers to experience the sense of communion generated in this sacred space, to understand the emotional connection between the actors’ portrait of tormented Shakespearean humanity and theatregoers’ deeply felt response as theatrical

renown is distilled to religious experience.

Slings ends on a Manichean note—“true” Shakespearean performance does not merely reveal a shared humanity, but miraculously offers transcendence for those on the cusp of this world. Kingman dies in his dressing room, prepared for the afterlife with his dignity restored, while the ghost of the Festival’s previous Artistic Director, Oliver Welles, who has been haunting Tennant, his former protégé, since season one, is finally released from his earthly limbo. *Slings* is less sanguine about Shakespeare’s earthly fortunes as its narrative arch implies that true art and commercial appeal are mutually exclusive. Smith-Jones ejects the last adherents of “authentic” Shakespeare, ensuring more “accessible” (i.e., commercial) programming for the Festival. Having illegally broken her television contract, Fanshaw plans to help Tennant resurrect his impecunious company Théâtre Sans Argent, thus ensuring their destitution but also their artistic integrity while fulfilling a vaguely Canadian mandate of being “bilingual” (*Slings*, “The Promised End”).

Yet the finale’s pessimistic depiction of theatre’s future underlines the disingenuousness of the series’ take on celebrity. As a cultural phenomenon, *Slings* did not strictly separate “authentic” and commercial art but incorporated the former into the latter. Like Gross’ earlier series *Due South*, *Slings* was a Canadian-made show whose producers sought and enjoyed success on U.S. television; like Mountie Benton

Fraser, Gross’ character on *Due South*, who teaches Americans the “Canadian” principle of civility, Kingman embodies the Shakespearean principle of becoming “human.” Using television to bring Canadian tidings of Shakespearean renown to a continental audience, *Slings* turned the notion that Shakespeare can counteract American influence back upon the U.S. By doing so, the series assumed a proselytizing role that had its Canadian creators championing an anti-commercial, anti-celebrity vision of the theatre. However, while *Slings* and *Arrows* brought North American viewers word that theatrical Shakespeare is, finally, too refined for this fallen world, they

Promotional photograph for *Slings & Arrows* with Paul Gross, William Hutt, and Sarah Polley.

Courtesy of Rhombus Media

nevertheless conveyed their message through that celebrity-producing medium, the U.S.-dominated television industry.

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