



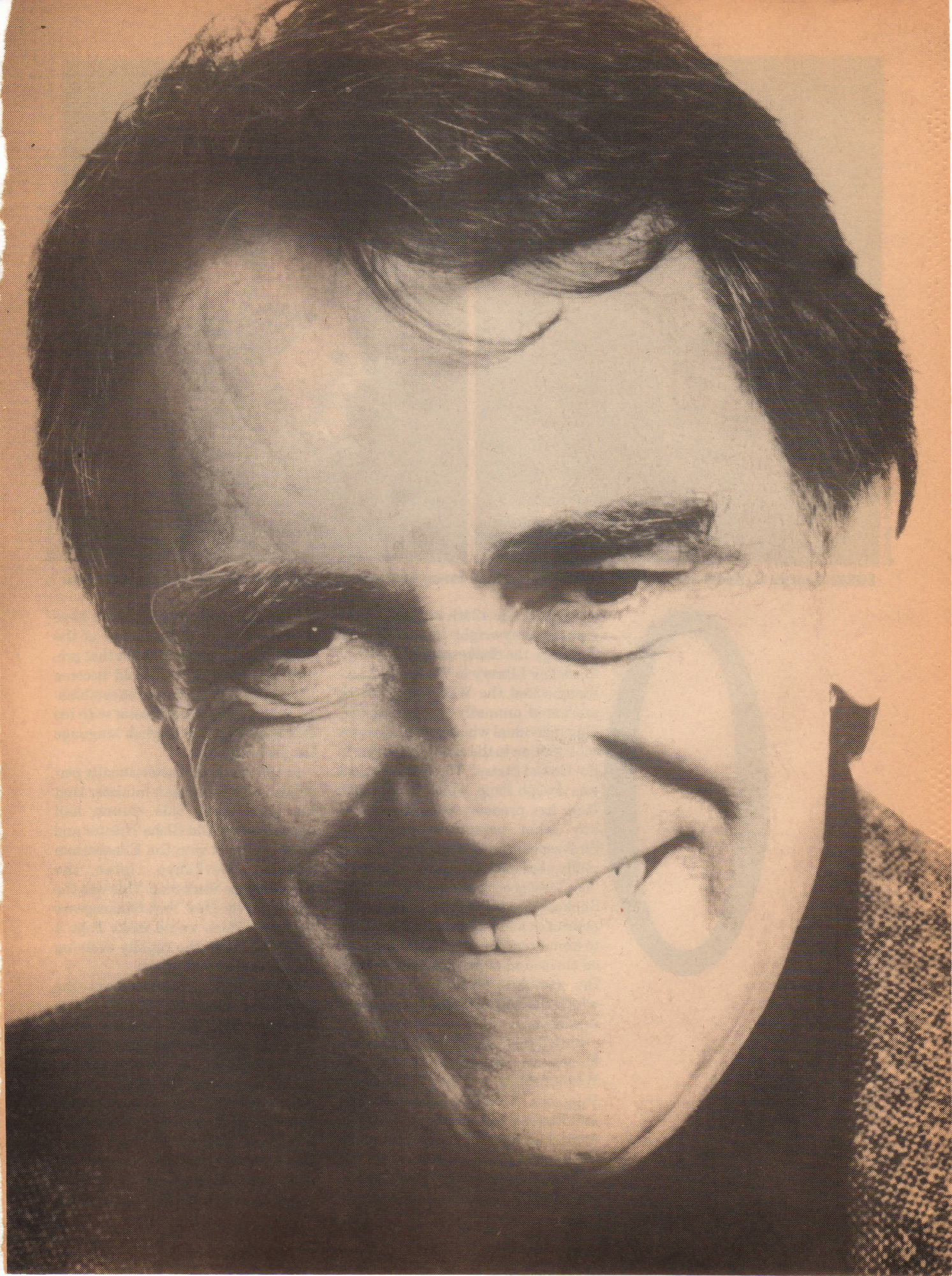
The Delacorte, then and now: Papp's outdoor theater attracts thousands of spectators each summer.

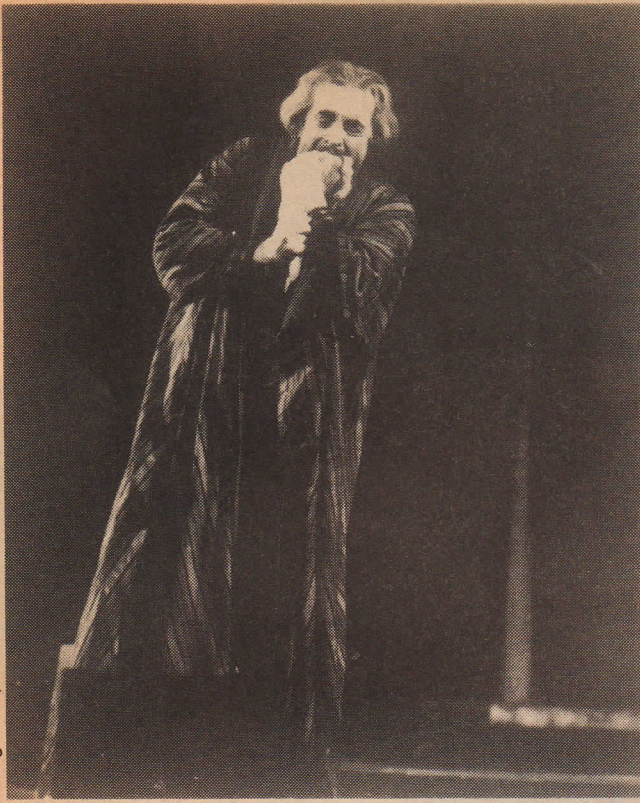
Marathon Man: Joseph Papp

*The indefatigable producer embarks
on his most ambitious project yet*

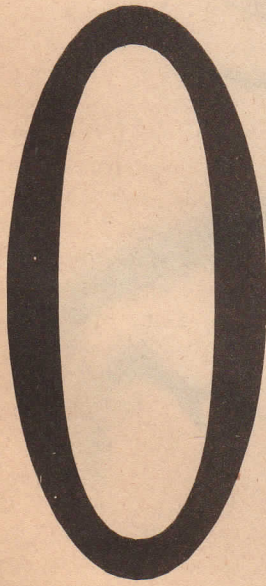
by **Gerard Raymond**

Jean-Marie Guyaux





1962: George C. Scott as Shylock; 1964: James Earl Jones and Julienne Marie as Othello and Desdemona.



On April 23, the 424th birthday of the greatest playwright in the English language, the Shakespeare Theatre at the Folger Library in Washington D.C. inaugurated the Will Award, to be presented annually to "an outstanding individual who has made a major contribution to the classical theater in the United States." The first recipient was Joseph Papp, which is only fair; Papp has probably done more than any other person to popularize Shakespeare in this country. "I don't really need another award," says Papp, "but I feel good about getting this one. Shakespeare recognition is always important to me, because I feel very close to him. From the very beginning I liked the sound of Shakespeare. I liked the speeches from *Julius Caesar*, which was the first play I was taught in school."

Born Joseph Papirofsky to Eastern European immigrants in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, Papp says, "We spoke Yiddish at home and English was a strange language to me. I became very observant about the language, very attuned to new sounds and new words. I developed an ear, which is related to music as well.

To appreciate Shakespeare you have to have a sense of the music of the language." He never thought that promoting Shakespeare would become his professional goal but the combination of his love for the theater with his fascination for the English language led naturally to it.

In 1954 Papp characteristically persuaded a Presbyterian minister that his lower East Side church hall resembled the Old Globe Theater and then turned it into the Elizabethan Theater Workshop, later the Shakespeare Workshop. This was the genesis of the New York Shakespeare Festival, which would make Papp a major figure in the rapidly evolving Off-Broadway movement.

In his book, "Off-Broadway—the Prophetic Theater," Stuart Little describes Papp as a "restless, commanding Diaghilev-like figure. Driven like Diaghilev to create theater without regard for the small inconveniences of cost or human interference, accustomed to dealing with difficult people and difficult situations, Papp was ambitious, animated, pugnacious, and given to feverish activity. Most of the decisions of the theater were his



Left: 1972: Stacey Keach and Colleen Dewhurst as Hamlet and Gertrude; Right: 1978: Meryl Streep and Raul Julia as Kate and Petruchio.

alone. Not himself a creator, not even predominantly a director, he was a discoverer of talent, a matchmaker of creative terms, and the sole chooser of the material his theater produced. Each part of the created production bore the essential stamp of his approval."

"You know, Shakespeare never realized how controversial a figure he would be," muses Papp. Yet although the history of the New York Shakespeare Festival has been fraught with financial problems and public controversy, its growth has been constant. Two years after founding the Workshop, Papp presented his first open-air production at the East Side Amphitheater at Grand Street. The following year a flatbed truck used by Papp for touring the city collapsed near Belvedere Lake in Central Park and the tradition of free Shakespeare in the Park was born (although not without a major battle with Robert Moses, then Parks Commissioner).

In 1962 the Delacorte theater was built on the Belvedere site and two years later the Mobile Theater was developed to take productions to other

city parks. In 1967 the New York Shakespeare Festival established the Public Theater, its year-round base, at the former Astor Library on Lafayette Street. Two years ago, Papp initiated the Shakespeare in the Schools project which, for one season, successfully presented multi-racial productions to New York public school children at Broadway's Belasco Theater. Last year he announced his most ambitious project to date: a Shakespeare Marathon, the entire canon of thirty-six plays to be produced within the next six years. This is the first time such an event has been planned in this country.

"The idea to do all the works of Shakespeare came to me when I was directing two plays in one season," explains Papp; last summer, the untimely death of Charles Ludlum and the illness of another director forced Papp to take over two Delacorte productions, *Richard II* and *Henry IV, Part One*. "Before I knew it, I wanted to do all the English histories. Then I thought, why not do some more? I know all the plays very well but I began to re-read a lot of Shakespeare in great detail.

"In the meantime, Bantam Books asked me if I would be interested in writing an introduction to their forthcoming edition of Shakespeare. I said I hated writing about Shakespeare and people who write about Shakespeare as well. Shakespeare has been so long in the hands of academics. He wrote for the stage and the thing that I have in common with him is that we are both stage people. On the other hand, I felt, well, if they are going to publish all the works why don't I get my two cents in on how to approach Shakespeare?"

Bantam then asked Papp if he would also write individual introductions to each of the plays. Although he initially balked at the enormity of the task, he completed all 36 introductions. "After I did that, I said to myself, gee, I know a lot about these plays. Why don't I just put them all on in a continuous way, open up the theater so that, as I've always said, there shouldn't be a day in the city of New York when there isn't a play of Shakespeare's on the boards."

Papp has very definite ideas about how Shakespeare should be performed. "I want people to speak well

on stage. There has to be a certain amount of eloquence, but I don't require people to speak British." He encourages actors to speak with their own native accents while warning that "there are certain obligations you have as an actor to a line. The obligation is to the structure, with slight variations. It's similar to music where one conductor will take a piece faster and another a little slower. But you can't fundamentally alter it to a point where it is unrecognizable." He mentions two well-known actors who have worked at the Shakespeare Festival, Raul Julia and James Earl Jones, as excellent Shakespearean actors. Papp's ideal is a good American



The Will Award

Shakespeare plays produced by the New York Shakespeare Festival

<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> 1955, 1956, 1961, 1972, 1973	<i>The Tempest</i> 1962, 1974, 1981
<i>Cymbeline</i> 1955, 1971	<i>King Lear</i> 1962, 1973
<i>As You Like It</i> 1955, 1958, 1963, 1973, 1985, 1986	<i>The Winter's Tale</i> 1963
<i>The Two Gentlemen of Verona</i> 1955, 1957, 1971, 1973, 1987	<i>Hamlet</i> 1964, 1967, 1968, 1972, 1975, 1982, 1986
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i> 1955, 1957, 1960, 1965, 1968, 1985, 1986, 1988	<i>Love's Labor's Lost</i> 1965
<i>Julius Caesar</i> 1956, 1959, 1962, 1979, 1988	<i>Coriolanus</i> 1965, 1979
<i>The Taming of the Shrew</i> 1956, 1960, 1965, 1978	<i>Troilus and Cressida</i> 1965, 1973
<i>Titus Andronicus</i> 1956, 1967	<i>All's Well That Ends Well</i> 1966, 1978
<i>Macbeth</i> 1957, 1962, 1966, 1974, 1986	<i>The Comedy of Errors</i> 1967, 1975
<i>Richard III</i> 1957, 1966, 1970, 1974, 1983	<i>King John</i> 1967
<i>Othello</i> 1958, 1964, 1979	<i>Henry IV, Part I</i> 1968, 1981, 1987
<i>Twelfth Night</i> 1958, 1963, 1969, 1986	<i>Henry IV, Part II</i> 1968
<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i> 1959, 1963	<i>Henry VI, Part I</i> 1970
<i>King Henry V</i> 1960, 1965, 1976, 1984	<i>Henry VI, Part II</i> 1970
<i>Measure for Measure</i> 1960, 1966, 1976, 1985	<i>Timon of Athens</i> 1971
<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> 1961, 1964, 1975, 1982, 1988	<i>Pericles</i> 1974
<i>King Richard II</i> 1961, 1987	<i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i> 1974
<i>The Merchant of Venice</i> 1962	

actor who can both act and speak well. However, he says that if has to make a choice, "I would rather watch an actor, whose speech may not be as good as I would like, but who is good on stage, rather than watch a person who has excellent speech but who is not a good actor.

"I think the richness of this country is something that we should use in Shakespeare" says Papp, referring to the racially mixed casts in the schools project. "If I could, I would improve that same concept further, because the audience is essentially Black, Hispanic, Asian. You don't want to see only white actors on the stage. This is a principle of mine—to give a sense of the community in which we live. It is a mixed community and I feel the theater should reflect that. Apart from social justice, it makes the plays extremely accessible and interesting. I know a lot of traditionalists don't like it. I don't have to answer those criticisms, because a good actor he can play any role. But the standards still have to be maintained nevertheless.

"My interest in Shakespeare is interwoven with my own interest in the social life of the country. But fundamentally the artistic results are primary for me. The show has to be good. You can't justify things because you want to see social justice. You are not doing any service giving a lousy performance or having an inferior actor out there. But you always have to be conscious of the way you cast your plays. You have to have an affirmative feeling about it. You have to say yes, I'm not going to have an all-white company on that stage. I'm not going to have just one Black actor or one Hispanic.

"People who say they are not conscious of color are lying. It's the way you deal with it that's important. I'm very conscious of color. When I see only two black actors on stage in a play I'm very conscious of that. I count how many women there are in a symphony orchestra. I am very conscious of this because there has to be some way of dealing with these problems of discrimination."

Papp's unconventional ideas about Shakespearean speech and casting have generated much criticism in the past. He feels that the theater and the



1982: Michele Shay and William Hurt as Titania and Oberon; 1985 Kevin Kline as Henry V

Papp intends to attract leading actors who spend most of their careers in film. "Half of these actors started here."

press will always be "natural enemies. I make no pretense of being friends with any critic, no matter what they say. I don't need any advice they give me. I don't suck up to them. They know my feelings about them and that's it. I take my chances. I worry sometimes that because they're angry with me they may take it out on a playwright of a new play. Sometimes I feel that that's done and I feel bad about that. I love a good fight but the attacks on your integrity are painful."

Two plays into the marathon (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Julius Caesar* have come and gone), it is already clear that this new venture will generate much controversy. With the marathon, Papp intends to attract leading American actors who spend most of their time on successful film careers. "Half of these actors started work at the Public," he says, among

them Meryl Streep and William Hurt. Knowing that he cannot get stars to make long-term commitments, Papp offers them five weeks rehearsal and a maximum of eight weeks playing time. The project's lengthy time span enables him to book actors well in years in advance. "I know a lot of actors want to do these plays," he says. This way, he adds, they cannot tell him that they are too busy. He aims at unorthodox casting: Jane Fonda to play Portia and Liza Minnelli to play Katherine the Shrew. He feels that this series will enable an "American ensemble of actors to come together and work on Shakespeare, so that they will have a body of experience, indirectly forming a sort of shadow company."

Not only is the marathon a celebration of Joseph Papp's lifelong passion for Shakespeare, it marks the culmination of his thirty-year effort to

make Shakespeare more accessible to wider audiences as well. Such a long-term project is unusual in the not-for-profit theater. "You normally can never plan that far ahead. In the theater you think, well I hope we survive this year, maybe the next year. We got almost two thousand people to sign up as subscribers plus hundreds of others who have assured an audience for each of the plays."

The third play in the series, *Romeo and Juliet*, with Cynthia Nixon, Peter MacNicol, Anne Meara, Milo O'Shea, and Courtney B. Vance, started previews last week. This will be followed by *Much Ado About Nothing* at the Delacorte in June featuring Kevin Kline and Blythe Danner. Whatever the fate of individual productions, Papp's master plan is unique in the American theater. If he hasn't earned his Will award before, he'll certainly earn it now. □