

# At the Play. (By St. John Ervine.)

## A FINE ROMEO.

In my first transports I meant to say that Mr. Laurence Olivier's Romeo is the best I have ever seen, and had I written this article then I probably should have said so. But a brief reflection made me realise that such a statement is less of a compliment than it seems to be; that it is, indeed, an empty remark, since no one knows how many Romeos or *what* Romeos I have seen, nor, indeed, can I remember them all as clearly as I can remember Mr. Olivier's. A man's ability to judge the value of any performance is not continuously equal, and a statement of that sort, therefore, to have any worth must be made by one who has seen several Romeos within a short period. If I were to judge the first Romeo I saw, Sir Frank Benson's, by the spell it cast upon my childhood, I should undoubtedly say it was the finest. And perhaps it was. For who will dare to say it is a smaller feat to transport a child's imagination than it is to transport a man's? I recall his Romeo as vividly as I can recall Mr. Olivier's. As clearly as if the incident had happened yesterday, I can remember my conviction that Juliet was to be married on the very next Thursday and my determination to be present at her wedding. I can see Sir Frank leaping into the Capulet's vault and smashing open the great doors of Juliet's grave. That was more than forty years ago—my play-going began very early—but who will dare deny genius to the man who printed his performance so deeply on my mind that its impressions are still fresh? Alas, the playhouse of so many lovely memories, the Theatre Royal, Belfast, has been pulled down and replaced by a cinema that looks as if it had been built by a confectioner.

But if I cannot say that Mr. Olivier's is the finest Romeo I have ever seen, I can say that I have very little hope of ever seeing a better one. Here at last is a young and gallant Romeo, a manly Romeo, a lad to take a girl by storm, and be taken so himself. Can anyone, seeing this Romeo, doubt for a second that, green-sick with unrequited love for Rosaline, he comes suddenly on the lovely girl Juliet and is instantly turned from a moonstruck boy into an enraptured man? His craze for Rosaline, who was probably his senior by several years, was no more than any self-respecting boy feels for some lovely actress, but the emotion that swept her out of his mind in a moment, although she was present at the Capulet's ball, and put Juliet for ever in her place, was a man's unquenchable devotion for the one love of his life. (Why, by the way, was there no row over Romeo's pursuit of Rosaline? She was Capulet's niece.) Romeo was *in love*; he was no longer moonstruck, nor was he, in the jargon of our own time, responding to a biological urge. He was *in love*. A man's love for a woman smites him as swiftly and as unmistakably as a lightning's stroke. Romeo is no more a boy: Rosaline's forgot; and Juliet takes her own. "O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!" It is the fervour of this boy turned man that Mr. Olivier displays with so much clumsy grace. Some critics, it seems, expect a lad whose age is, perhaps, seventeen, a lad who has just been smitten by a great passion, to talk like a young gentleman who has taken a dozen lessons in deportment, and is determined to open his lungs, throw out his chest, and give the world a good rousing dollop of what Rosina Filippi used to call *Ella Cution*. They forget that Shakespeare himself was still a young man, still within memory of the coltish stage of life, and only just emerging from the thrall of the University Wits whose example he had thought he must follow in the writing of plays. He was not yet free of their undergraduate conceits, but he was emerging from that cocoon, and would presently shake his wings free of the sticky stuff which clogged them, and away he'd fly to his own flowers to gather his own nectar. The youngness of Romeo and the youngness of Romeo's author are in Mr. Olivier's performance. The village lad, awed at first by the young gentlemen from Oxford and Cambridge, had taken that lot's measure and knew, beyond all peradventure, that he could write the heads off them! Them and their piffing bits of Latin and Greek! What did they know that he had not learnt far better in Warwick woods, by Stratford stream, with lads who rumbled their maids in sunlit meadows, or rolled them under the haystacks on long summer nights? If anything is plain in this play, this is plain, that its author now felt his power and knew himself to be a poet. What had hitherto seemed vanity was now known to be poet's pride. Shakespeare, still a little awkward and clumsy, still aware of his village and his grammar school, was as sure as he was alive that he had the measure of all men in his mind.

You see Mr. Olivier, as Englishly Italian as the play itself, coming bemused from Rosaline's repulsions, and see him, youngly chagrined by her indifference to his offers of love, suddenly dazzled by the beautiful child who is a Capulet and enemy of this Montagu. Must he then mouth at us as if he were reciting in a verse-speaking festival, holding the right hand so, and sweeping the air with his left arm thus? In some paper which I have forgotten I read a complaint by a critic that Mr. Olivier did not deliver the verse, and I wondered to myself what this captious person knew of verse that he spoke about it so slickly. He would certainly have called Shelley names, had he heard that poet's high, shrill, almost hysterical voice uttering aloud his noblest lines, and would have called for an *Ella Cutionist* to come and teach the fellow how to speak fine verse. I have seen few sights so moving as the spectacle of Mr. Olivier's Romeo, staggered with Juliet's beauty, fumbling for words with which to say his love. The impetuous boy, struggling to be articulate, is the expression at once of the young man's and of the mumness that still clogged his creator's pen. I am not bold enough to say what Shakespeare would or would not have liked, but I think his eyes would have shone had he seen this Romeo: young and ardent and full of clumsy grace.

The play is full of youth, despite the tradition that packs it tight with age. What I demand of heaven, should Juliet's mother, played with nice authority by Miss Marjorie Fielding, be drawn in the shape of an elderly woman? She was probably lying about

her age in the third scene of the first act when she told her daughter that she

was your mother much upon these years  
 That you are now a maid.

but she cannot have been lying excessively, and I think we may warrantably believe she was no more than thirty when Romeo came courting her daughter. By her own count, she was twenty-eight or nine. The Nurse, too, superbly played by Miss Edith Evans, is made to totter as if her legs had been racked with rheumatism for half a century. Yet she wet-nursed Juliet less than fourteen years earlier. The tradition of production of this piece is that youth shall be done to death by crabbed age, but that's a tradition as false as our own, that only the young were slain in the war, that the old, like Jeshurun, waxed fat and kicked. Mr. Gielgud, who produced the play, calls out the youth in Romeo and Juliet and in his own Mercutio, but it runs through all the play. The Nurse is as young as Lady Capulet: a bearing woman, not a woman that's had her day and is done. I liked Mr. George Howe's Friar Laurence and Mr. Alan Napier's Prince of Verona, and Mr. Alec Guinness's Apothecary, and Mr. Frederick Lloyd's Capulet and Mr. H. R. Hignett's Montagu—there's a good actor that never lets an audience down—and I was enchanted by Miss Ashcroft's Juliet after she had passed the beginning of the Balcony Scene. She had a harder fight with me than Mr. Olivier, for I remembered the lovely Juliet of Miss Jean Forbes-Robertson, but although the fight was hard, she won it. I must not fail to mention the scenery by Motley, scenery as efficient as it is beautiful.

The last word must be Romeo's. This was the boy turned man that Shakespeare made: a gallant lad, whose courage is seen in greatest force when, new from his marriage, he meets the fiery Tybalt and refuses to fight.

Tybalt, the reason that I have to love thee  
 Doth much excuse the appertaining rage  
 To such a greeting: villain am I none;  
 Therefore, farewell; I see thou know'st  
 me not.

It is *then* the tragedy begins that draws the young pair down to death. In this scene Mr. Olivier reveals the deepening nature of the boy. His deepening nature's ability to grieve is shown in manly sorrow in the Franciscan's cell when, overcome by his expulsion from Verona, he throws himself on the floor and weeps. Here's no pupil of Dr. Arnold, restraining his tears and remembering to keep a stiff upper lip and a poker face, but an Elizabethan Englishman that wept when he felt like weeping, and ran a sword through a rival when a rival had the insolence to mock his tears. This legend that all Englishmen are descended from Dr. Arnold and made in that monstrous man's image is not founded in fact. The last man to be deceived by it was John Galsworthy, yet who was so consistently emotional as he? There was nothing distasteful to Elizabethans in the sight of Romeo rolling on the floor and sobbing his heart out, nor anything in them that could cause them to cry, "Look at that wop blubbing on the floor!" This grief was natural to them as it was to any Veronese, and they would have been astonished, if not indignant, at any tut-tutting and oh-dear-me-dear-me-ing from buttoned-up, tight-lipped persons who thought it unmanly to cry or betray the signs of feeling. My readers must not delay to see this Romeo, but hasten to the New while there is yet time. And when they have seen Mr. Olivier's Romeo they must run hotfoot to the box-office and take a seat for another day when they can come to see Mr. Gielgud's.

And let me crow over the fact that our poet, even in his young manhood, could write a play that would make the agencies buy seats three hundred years after his death before even the curtain arose on the first performance of its revival.