



Tyrone Guthrie



Michael Langham



Jean Gascon



Robin Phillips

The Past is Prologue

The Stratford Festival's artistic triumphs have been shaped by its artistic directors—three Britons and a Canadian.

The fifth director, John Hirsch, a naturalized Canadian born in Hungary and a veteran of Stratford, is now standing in the wings.

Tyrone Guthrie changed the shape of the Shakespearean stage, literally and figuratively. His splendidly-robed actors, without props or curtains, spoke their lines trippingly in the midst of an intimate audience.

His successor, Michael Langham, who came in 1956, proved a director of power and originality. He took, for example, the tired Forum scene in *Julius Caesar* and made it startlingly his own. At its close the mob, wearing red scarves, roamed the streets in dim lights and found and surrounded Cinna the Poet. When they dispersed, the unfortunate Poet did not remain behind—he had been dismembered. This striking scene was modified for later performances, but its memory lingered on.

As the years went by the Festival repertory was expanded: first Shakespeare; then Shakespeare and other classics; then Shakespeare, classics and now and then a modern play. The direction of the plays was shared by regulars and guests. In Langham's last season, 1967, Stratford offered three of Shakespeare's plays, *The Government Inspector* by Nikolai Gogol, and *Colours in the Dark* by the Canadian James Reaney.

Jean Gascon, of Montreal's Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, succeeded Langham in 1968. John Hirsch was co-director. The expansion continued and by 1974, Gascon's last season, the Festival was an established North American spectacular. That summer there were three Shakespearean plays, plus *The Imaginary Invalid* by Molière, *La Vie Parisienne* by Jacques Offenbach, *Walsh* by Sharon Pollock, *Ready Steady Go* by Sandra Jones, and musical performances of *The Summoning of Everyman* by Charles Wilson and Eugene Benson and *The Medium* by Gian-Carlo Menotti, eight Saturday morning and five Sunday concerts, an international film festival, workshops, exhibits and seminars.

The Festival company was recognized as one of the three great ones in the English-speaking world. It was, however, clearly in third place and seemed unlikely to rise to the level of the two above. Susan Carson would later praise it faintly in *Weekend Magazine*:

"Basically [it] . . . had become almost too successful . . . Its actors were the cream of the Canadian stage. The costumes were exquisitely designed and beautifully executed. Lighting was expert, and the theatre comfortable and attractive. Its performances regularly sold out . . . but at the same time, the Festival was not attracting the critical acclaim it had in earlier years . . . There was less innovation, less effort to mount the unusual, more and more emphasis on maintaining its reputation for the spectacular."

Gascon resigned and Robin Phillips took over in 1974. Phillips was young and fresh from a shoe-string triumph in London's dockland district. He had taken the moribund Greenwich Theatre and begun producing plays back-to-back with only two-and-a-half weeks of rehearsals. He was (as he would demonstrate at Stratford) a compulsive worker, doing all jobs that needed doing himself (including scrubbing out the lavatories). He persuaded Mia Farrow, Joan Plowright and



Peter Ustinov in *King Lear*, directed by Robin Phillips.