

MY SHAKESPEARE CONNECTION

A Tribute to George Skillan (1893–1975)

. . . Actor, Writer, Scholar

by David Skillan

George Skillan was an English actor and Shakespearian scholar who edited, designed, and illustrated 21 of publisher Samuel French's acting editions of Shakespeare's plays, including *As You Like It*, *Macbeth*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *The Tempest*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. He annotated the plays, designed and drew the sets, gave stage directions, and made suggestions regarding costumes and lighting. Each one took two to four years, written in long hand and on an old portable typewriter. A prodigious amount of work by any standard.

He was also my uncle.

George started acting in 1910, when he was just 17. Over the years he played many different theatres, including Stratford-Upon-Avon's Memorial Theatre, but mostly in London's West End. Many of those theatres have long since closed down. They included the Old Vic, Shaftesbury Theatre, New Oxford Theatre, Lyceum Theatre, His Majesty's Theatre, St. James's, Drury Lane, Royal Adelphi, Duke of York, Gaiety, Aldwych, and of course the Theatre Royal, built in 1884 in Stratford, East London, literally around the corner from George's home. He lived at 55 Broadway, "above the shop" (which I believe is still there), with his parents, three sisters, and two brothers, including my dad). The shop was a news agent, confectioner, and tobacconist, frequented by members of the acting fraternity and the casts of whichever shows were playing, as well as by audience members who bought Rowntree and Cadbury chocolates, pipe tobacco, and Benson & Hedges, Woodbine, Craven A, and Player's cigarettes. My father, George's youngest brother, told me George used to hang around the stage door exit, in hopes of speaking to the actors and asking for their autographs after their performances.

He knew them all, most when they were first started out and before they were famous—Lawrence Olivier, Alec Guinness, Jack Hawkins, Charles Laughton, Noel Coward, Alfred Hitchcock, John Gielgud, Michael Redgrave, Ivor Novello, Peggy Ashcroft, Sybil Thorndike, Matheson Lang, Oscar Asche, Lily Brayton, and Leslie Howard and Vivien Leigh of *Gone with the Wind* fame. He played opposite many of them. He knew the writers Graham Greene and Somerset Maugham, who were contemporaries of his. George Bernard Shaw attended at least one of George Skillan's performances, and praised it in a newspaper article.

It is fascinating today to see old photos of George in every conceivable role, and to read about his acting in numerous clippings from *The London Observer*, *The Morning Star and Daily Telegraph* (as it was then), *The Birmingham Post*, and *The Manchester Guardian*. It is also interesting to read old theatre brochures. One from the Streatham Hill Theatre, printed in 1932, reads, "A presentation of Julius Caesar by William Shakespeare. Every evening at 8 o'clock. Matinees every day at 3 o'clock." And overleaf, in the cast: "George Skillan as Marcus Antonius."

At six foot, two inches tall, with an aqualine profile and sonorous voice, George had a commanding presence. As well as stage acting, in which he played all kinds of parts, including musical comedy roles, he did quite a lot of radio work. As a young man, he joined the original production of *Kismet*, and toured with the company in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. In 1939 he came to Canada as an adjudicator for the Dominion Drama Festival of Canada, travelling from coast to coast for a year and presiding over no fewer than 74 plays, no doubt encouraging many would-be actors. He was described as "a distinguished actor and writer" in *The Curtain Call*, which was published "In the interest of the Arts" and sold for 15 cents. He also worked in a few movies, most notably as Mr. Royce in *Spitfire*, with David Niven, filmed in 1942 and produced and directed by Leslie Howard. Toward the end of his long and illustrious career, George was best known as a character actor who played small parts in television shows, including Owen Webb in the 1960s and '70s *Crossroads*, the long-running British soap opera.

But his great strength was Shakespeare, both as an actor and, later, as the editor of many of publisher Samuel French's editions of Shakespeare's plays. He was considered a giant of his time by many theatre critics, as the

many news clippings in his huge, musty old scrapbook (now in my possession) attest. It was reported in one newspaper that anyone studying or acting in any of Shakespeare's work in the British Commonwealth during George's time would certainly have heard of him, so impressive was his work.

Like many actors, he suffered from innate shyness, but once on stage he overcame it and became the person he portrayed. Julius Caesar, Othello, Coriolanus, the Prince of Morocco, Cardinal Wolsey—he played them all, sometimes brilliantly, according to the critics, and nearly always to audience acclaim.



George Skillan (centre), and as Brutus (left) and Richard III (right), circa 1930s and '40s.

For many years George lived with his wife Isabella at 5 Hathaway Hamlets, one of several old stone row cottages a stone's throw from Anne Hathaway's Cottage (which later burned down and was rebuilt in the 1980s) in Shottery, on the outskirts of Stratford-Upon-Avon, Warwickshire. He'd moved there in 1926 to be closer to the Bard's presence. When World War II broke out, he was 46 and too old to enlist (he'd been wounded while serving with the British Expeditionary Force in France during World War I), so he carried on acting. When not writing at his modest home or riding his bicycle to the grocery store, he took long walks across the nearby fields and meadows, no doubt to find solace and inspiration, just as William Shakespeare would have done nearly 400 years before.

I did not know him well. After all, he was 45 years older than me—when I was a mere 20, he was 65. But I clearly recall the few times I went to visit him. We would walk together along a nearby footpath as we talked and he recited poetry (he was an accomplished poet and philosopher in his own right) and spouted lines from different Shakespearean plays. His memory was remarkable. He seemed to know almost every character's part. Years later, when I got married in Bangkok, he sent a congratulatory telegram with a quote from Shakespeare's *King Richard II*, Act IV, Scene 1: "May you enjoy many years of Sunshine Days." Despite the huge generation gap, I did appreciate his great knowledge and talent. Indeed, I was in awe of him.

For a number of years, George occupied no fewer than three pages in *Who's Who in the British Theatre*. But like many pioneers in various fields of endeavour, he never got the full credit or recognition he deserved—not that he cared. He died in 1975, soon after completing *King Lear*, his longest and apparently most satisfying work, in relative obscurity at his home in England. As one newspaper had put it years before, "He was a highly respected actor, but not very well known." No doubt because he was very modest, reserved, and quiet when not on stage. But what a full life he led, doing what he wanted most to do. I think it true to say that he knew more about Shakespeare's life and work than any other person alive during his lifetime—or perhaps ever. At the end, he got a fine obituary in *The Times* and a number of other newspapers.

Even late in life, George had admirers. A few years before he died, a Miss Willard, a librarian at Harvard University's Houghton Library and an ardent fan and student of Shakespeare's works, well acquainted with George's contributions to the arts, tracked him down and visited him at his home. George was a longtime widower by then. She told me, at our one and only meeting in 1969 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, that she idolized him. It is

thanks to her that his last published work, the proofs of *King Lear*, are carefully preserved at that venerable institution.

Despite his enormous contribution to the arts, George never made much money. Toward the end of his life he became a bit of a recluse, hiding away in his tiny cottage and devoting almost all of his time to writing and interpreting Shakespeare's works. He enjoyed this work so much that he was still doing it two weeks before his death. A regular churchgoer for most of his life, he is buried in the same cemetery as Shakespeare.

If anyone could be called dedicated to a cause, it would be George Skillan. He spent more than 60 years telling the world about William Shakespeare and his work through acting and writing. It was George who brought to my attention the quote "I speak of Africa and golden joys" from Shakespeare's *Henry IV*.

The more I unearth about George, the more surprised and impressed I am. He was certainly a man of many parts. On going through his papers, I discovered that as long ago as the 1930s, his editions of Shakespeare's plays were being performed throughout the United Kingdom, Eire, the Channel Islands, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, Kenya, South Africa, Rhodesia, Malta, and Singapore—most of the English-speaking world.

A few times, when I was with him, I realized I was in the presence of a great person. He was a remarkable man. I am privileged to have known him, and wish I had known him better and for longer. I can tell from some of his writing that he was particularly fond of Canada and most things Canadian. I think he would have been pleased to know that my family and I settled in Canada.

But George was much more than an actor. He interpreted Shakespeare's work in several different ways—as an actor, writer, producer, and stage manager. He was also an expert on heraldry. Sooner or later, I must have him added to Wikipedia, so a comprehensive record about his extraordinary life and deeds is in place, once and for all. Without it, you would be hard put to find anything about him, and that would be a shame.