



Stacy Keach as *Hamlet*

John Barrymore as *Hamlet*

The Bard, Barrymore, and Zoom Theater

By Matthew Cain for *TheOdysseyBlog*

This coming Friday, April 23rd, the world celebrates the birth of William Shakespeare, considered by many to be the greatest playwright/poet in the English language. His plays have embodied memorable characters that have endured the test of time, ranging from kings and clowns, to villains and vixens, and have challenged both actors and actresses with their depth and complexity.

American actor John Barrymore achieved great Shakespearean triumphs in the 1920's as both *Richard III* and *Hamlet*, even though *Richard* closed after only 31 performances, owing to the fact that Barrymore collapsed onstage from the physical and psychological challenges of the role. He played *Hamlet* on Broadway for 101 performances, and was universally praised by critics as 'the best *Hamlet* they had ever seen.'

Actor Stacy Keach began his Shakespearean career at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in the summers of 1962 and 1963. At that time, drama critic of *The Saturday Review*, Henry Hewes, after witnessing Keach in the title role of *Henry V*, and Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*, compared him favorably to a 'young Christopher Plummer', whose interpretations of Shakespearean roles were becoming legend in both his native Canada and New York.

Ironically, Keach was a drama student at the University of California, Berkeley, and when he applied to the Yale School of Drama for graduate work, his then professor and mentor, William I. Oliver, in his letter of recommendation to Yale, compared Keach to a 'young John Barrymore. Some years later, in 1972, he played the title role in *Hamlet* in New York's Delacorte Theater, and New York Times drama critic, Clive Barnes, declared, 'Mr. Keach must surely be the finest American classic actor since John Barrymore, and this *Hamlet* is there to prove it.'

Five years later, in 1979, Keach was playing the lead in Ira Levin's *Deathtrap* on Broadway, and came up with the notion of a one-man show playing John Barrymore. He had seen Julie Harris' magnificent performance in William Luce's one-woman play, *The Belle of Amherst*, and decided to hire Luce to pen *Barrymore*. Keach secured a six-month option, then invited Luce to his home in California, where they spent a week together creating a foundation for the play. Luce then returned to his home in Oregon to complete the task, where he did so and submitted the play to Keach, who was disappointed with the result and did not renew his option. A month later, the headline emerged in *Variety*: 'Christopher Plummer to star as John Barrymore on Broadway.' Plummer's performance earned him a Best Actor Tony award in 1996.

A further irony, connecting Keach to Barrymore, occurred in 2014, when Keach was playing Falstaff (for the second time in his career) in a production of both parts of *Henry IV* at Washington's Shakespeare Theater, and Falstaff's sidekick, Bardolph, was being played by Brad Bellamy, who gave Keach a closing night gift of a fragment of John Barrymore's backstage make-up mirror, given to Bellamy by his antique-collector parents.

Last year, Mr. Keach created stacykeachzoomtheater with his wife Malgosia Tomassi, as the Artistic Director, and, happily, the coming together of all of these elements can best be appreciated this coming Sunday, April 25th, celebrating Shakespeare's Birthday Weekend, in a zoomed adaptation of *Barrymore*, starring Keach as Barrymore, and Bellamy as his prompter, Frank. Free admission, donations only to benefit the Actor's Fund of America.

For further information, you may check the following link: stacykeachzoomtheater.com