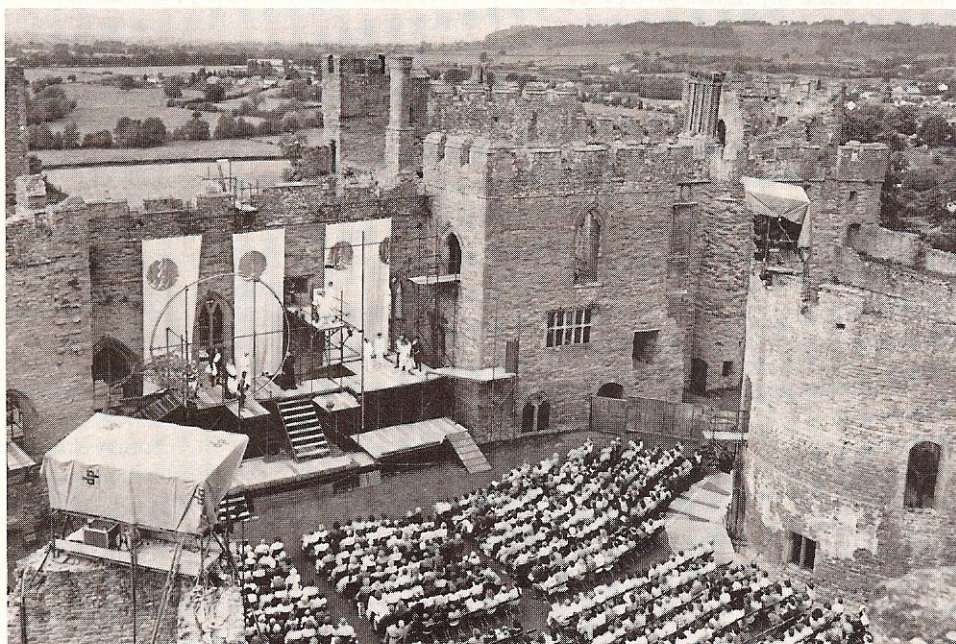


Shakespeare
strides the halls
of a 900-year-old
castle

Theatre in the ruins



Richard II at Ludlow Castle.

PHOTOGRAPH: CHARLES BAYNON

THE MASSIVE CASTLE in the small town of Ludlow, England, has always had a bent for drama. A nobleman was kept captive in a tower here. A lady killed her lover then leapt to her death here. A man who would be King Arthur of England died here before he could be crowned. An earlier prince became king of England here, but disappeared with his brother from the Tower of London before his coronation.

Ludlow Castle, a nine-hundred-year-old fortress which by the fourteenth century had become the mightiest in a line of English castles along the Welsh frontier, is now a roofless shell of stone walls with tufts of weeds and yellow popcorn-blossom wallflowers growing in the niches. It still is an imposing castle, set on a rocky bluff above the River Teme valley and visible for miles around. Its size, its intricate stonework on doorway arches, its graceful gothic window traceries echo its once glorious past.

Yet there is still drama at this castle every summer when it stages open air

productions of William Shakespeare's plays as the centerpiece of the Ludlow Arts Festival. For two-week runs beginning in late June, a professional theatre company builds a stage against the wall of the Great Chamber, pitches tents for dressing rooms on the trodden grounds of the one-time royal apartments, rigs lights onto two twelfth century Norman towers, and arranges 1,200 seats in the castle's inner courtyard on ground sloped to form a natural amphitheater.

So, over the past twenty-nine years, Ludlow Castle has seen drama of a different sort than its bloody past. Cleopatra was kept captive in her monument here. Othello killed his lover then killed himself here. Hamlet, who would be king of Denmark, died here before he could be crowned. And the actor in *Richard III* who played the same prince who became king here but disappeared in the Tower used a dressing room in the apartment where that young prince actually lived.

Last year when Ludlow staged *Richard II* and the king appeared on the battle-

ments of Flint Castle in the play, the actor in the title role stepped onto Ludlow Castle's battlements, some fifty feet above the main stage. With Bolingbroke, York and Northumberland on the ground and Richard standing on his eyrie, audiences at Ludlow experienced act three, scene three of *Richard II* like they never had before.

It was one of those soul-stirring theatrical moments that come too infrequently for many people but happen so readily in Ludlow Castle. Drama is natural here.

So are rain, wind, and mud. After three weeks rehearsing in London, the *Richard II* company moved to Ludlow a week before opening night. It rained every day that week. Two days before opening night the cast slogged through a technical run-through of blocking and cues on the just-completed stage. It was to have been a dress rehearsal, too, but in a driving downpour the actors wore knee-length raincoats and brandished umbrellas.

Backstage, technicians and stagehands scurried about on duckboard walkways slowly sinking in mud. Actors huddled in their dressing room tents with mugs of hot tea to ward off the chill of a wind whipping around the Great Chamber walls. This was the first open air experience for most of this company, and on this evening most were vowing it would be their last.

"We were hoping for sunshine and all we've gotten is rain," said set designer Bruno Santini. "We should be doing *Lear*: have everybody in fur coats."

With opening night looming the crew was two days behind schedule, not just because of cancelled rehearsals but also rain delays on building the set. "When it's wet and slippery, for safety reasons you can't do much," said Patrick Frazer, production manager. "It is not just working in a theatre without a roof here, it is working with a patch of grass and stonework."

Wet weather had also hampered installation and setting of the lights. During a rain-soaked technical rehearsal the festival's

BACKSTAGE ON BROADWAY

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chief electrician and lighting specialist, G. Wilson-Lloyd, still tinkered with fuses and connections in the light console booth, a sixteenth century apartment that joins the gatehouse to the inner courtyard with a stone-mullioned window facing the Great Chamber and stage. On this evening Wilson-Lloyd was working in the driest, warmest place in the castle, but the rain had retarded his work, too.

"These are temporary installations here," he said of the banks of lighting instruments rigged to the top of the inner courtyard towers. "The cables have to run over the ground, and the connections invariably end up near a puddle." Another problem, he said, are the lighting instruments themselves, most of which are designed for indoor use and are not sealed against rain.

Yet rain rarely affects performances. According to Wilson-Lloyd, a native of Ludlow and a member of the Festival Council who has worked for every castle production since 1970, in the past twenty years only one and a half performances have been cancelled by rain. The experienced audience comes prepared for the worst.

"You can always tell who has been here before and who hasn't," Wilson-Lloyd said. "The initiated bring cushions, sleeping blankets, all-weather gear, and picnic hampers full of thermos bottles and Scotch."

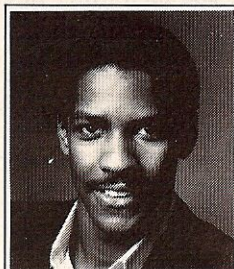
MANY OF THE MEDIEVAL CASTLES abound throughout the country stage occasional plays and pageants, but Ludlow's productions carry a high prestige. For its Shakespeare plays, the festival contracts a noted theatre director who then assembles a professional cast.

Said *Richard II* director Paul Marcus: "Ludlow Castle is quite a well known event on the theatrical calendar in England." Marcus took the helm of *Richard II* at Ludlow after two and a half years as resident associate director with the Royal Shakespeare Company.

One of Ludlow's attractions is the castle itself. Part of it dates back to 1085 and additions and modifications were made through the sixteenth century. By then it was the strongest castle on the English-Welsh border and was headquarters for the Council of the Marches of Wales, which governed the border lands, from the late fifteenth century until 1689. Because of the council's close ties with Britain's royal court and the noblemen's taste for fashion and culture, several troupes of players performed at Ludlow. It is possible that even then audiences in the castle saw the plays of London's most famous playwright of their time, Shakespeare.

Aside from his portrayal of young Edward V and Ludlow Castle in *Richard III*, Shakespeare presented another character in another play who actually lived in the castle, Catherine of Aragon. She lived here as a bride of the Prince of Wales, Henry

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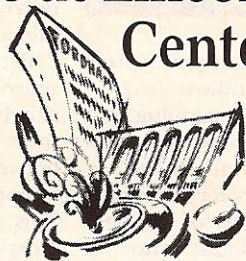


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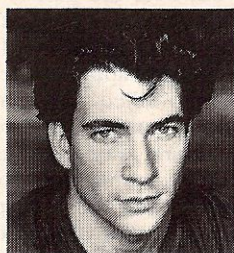
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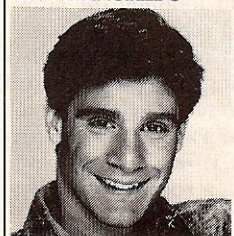


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VII's eldest son, Arthur. Prince Arthur died at Ludlow Castle in 1507, and both his right to the throne and his wife went to his younger brother, Henry, whose divorce from Catherine Shakespeare treated in *Henry VIII*.

Shakespeare's history plays might seem to be naturals in such a castle, but the Ludlow Festival has staged only four: *Richard II* and *Richard III* each twice, and *Henry IV, Part I* and *Henry V*. On the other hand, *Romeo and Juliet*, set in "fair Verona," has been produced twice at Ludlow, as has *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Twelfth Night*. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, suitable in any type of space, has had three stagings in the castle. In twenty-nine seasons the castle has presented twenty different Shakespearean works.

Dramatic as the castle appears in its own right, the canon of Shakespeare works requires a varied use of the space. Some directors and their set designers have chosen to mask the stone backdrop, some build their stages without acknowledging the wall's presence, others try to fuse their sets with the existing castle structures. All companies face a legal restriction when designing their sets: though in private hands, the castle is listed by the British government as a national monument, and it is illegal to damage or deface any such structure. Nothing can be attached to the stone walls, nor can the walls be painted.

For Marcus, directing *Richard II*, the challenge was how to make the most of the castle's natural potential. "It's a building with history where people lived and died, and sometimes died violently. There are ghosts here," he said. "My instinctive response to this space was we must make this a living space."

He used as much of the castle as he could. When characters leave England in the play the actors walked off the stage into the courtyard and out past the audience. When they returned to England they appeared from beyond the walls of other inner courtyard buildings. Bolingbroke addressed his followers from the window of a round church tower in the middle of the yard. Then there is the Flint Castle scene.

"If you have a scene in a play where the king appears on a castle battlement, and you've got a castle battlement right there for your play, that's beautiful!" Marcus said.

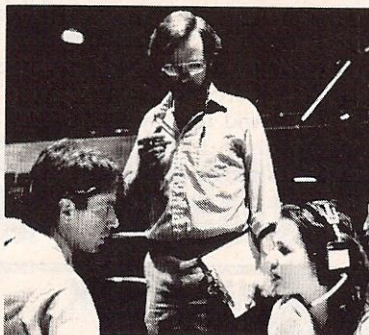
In addition to utilizing the castle's natural ambience, Marcus needed a set to fit his thematic approach to *Richard II*, which he saw as a play about government hierarchies and complex levels of politics, where the participants rise and fall in a highly ritualized world.

He found just the man to carry out his desires in Santini, a native of Switzerland whose credits include designs in Great Britain's major opera and dance companies, London shows and a year as resident designer for the Tehran Opera and Tehran Ballet before the Khomeini regime. Santini

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particularly liked Ludlow Castle for its state of disrepair; the castle has had no restoration since the Wales Council was abolished three hundred years ago. "I hate over-restoration," Santini said. "But, then, I loathe what the car has done to the old village."

Santini's first concern was creative. "I didn't want to put an alien set here," he said. "I didn't want to compete with the building." He also faced constraints in budget and building time.

He found his answer in scaffolding. He designed a set that, other than two platforms making up the lower stage, consisted entirely of scaffolding. A half-dozen levels were positioned along the Great

Chamber's wall and adjoining towers all the way up to the battlements, where Richard appeared in the Flint Castle scene. Because the interaction in *Richard II* is verbal and the play has little physical activity, the playing space of each level was barely large enough to hold three or four people.

In short, it looked like a construction site, and that suited Santini's historical sense, as well as Marcus's thematic needs. "It looks like the castle is being built," Santini said. "And they were building castles such as this in Richard's time."

Santini is as much an impressionistic designer as he is a practical one, and his choice of scaffolding had its aesthetic

purpose, too. "I like scaffolding. Some people think it's ugly and utilitarian, but I think scaffolding is very beautiful."

He also added two more abstract devices to his set. On what he called an "inspirational whim" he fashioned a large gold circle and placed it on his model. "Then it began to take on all sorts of meaning," he said; it could represent the crown, the sun, the cycle of history, a wheel of fortune. Next to the circle he placed a line, a rod running some twenty-five feet which turned during the play as imperceptibly as an hour hand on a clock. This could represent time, the rise and fall of fortune; combined with the circle it could represent the English king's scepter and orb. "I wanted to keep it abstract like the scaffolding," Santini said.

Costumes likewise combined the practical with the abstract. The actors wore outfits that resembled jogging suits with boxing shoes, costumes that had a timeless quality about them but hinted at medieval fashion. They also served well the actors who had to climb up and down scaffolding ladders, scale medieval towers and clamber onto the stage from the castle's inner courtyard. Richard had to descend two seven-foot ladders from his Flint Castle perch on the battlements to the next level in a span of three spoken lines.

As with the set designer, the Ludlow Castle productions present lighting designers a unique set of artistic challenges, but here they have less to do with the castle itself and more to do with time of day and Ludlow's location north of 52 degrees latitude. At this locale in the Northern Hemisphere in June, the day lasts twenty hours. Lighting designer David Lawrence had to contend with daylight when the play started at 7:30 p.m., twilight in the second half, and the dark of night by the curtain call.

"I took into consideration the lighting conditions from early evening to late evening and all the tonality of colors one gets with a sunset," Lawrence said. "I guess overall tonalities of light will be soft, and I'm using fluorescents to bridge the fading sunlight to theatre lights."

Lawrence improvises and experiments with light fixtures and has created his own units over a ten-year career. His talents perfectly suited Marcus' thematic needs of subtly illuminating the various levels within the set. Using fixtures on the platforms, Lawrence could shift from bold front-of-house lighting to modeling.

Before joining the *Richard II* company, Lawrence had spent six weeks in residence at the Munich Kammerspiele theatre, studying "the most advanced high-tech theatre in the world," he said. His mind was thus ripe for taking on a medieval castle, and he brought with him an enormous HQ1 floodlight used for lighting football stadiums and oil rigs. He was the first to import the fitting from Germany into Great Britain for the entertainment industry, and he hung it inside the Great Cham-

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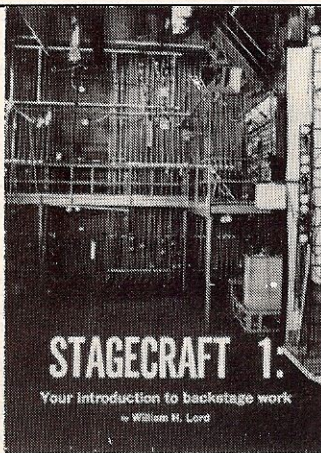
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ber to backlight the wall against which the stage is set.

The powerful lamp not only poured light through the gothic windows and doors to cast eerie shadows across the courtyard, it made the limestone chamber wall itself seem to glow from inside, like a glow-in-the-dark clockface or a phantom castle.

FOR THE ACTORS, Ludlow Castle is simply another stage on which to prove their wares. Like any other theatre, it comes with its good points and bad, though on the night of the technical rehearsal the bad was pounding down hard on the canvas dressing room roof. But like other difficulties in theatre work, bad weather can't be permitted to interfere with the performances of professional actors. "We carry on until someone tells us not to," said Brian Deacon, playing Bolingbroke and the only member of the company who had played at Ludlow before.

John Duttine, playing Richard II, like Deacon coming to Ludlow with a long list of credits in film and television as well as on stage, said that while he was playing in his first open air theatre, the experience was not totally new. "This is much like working on film," he said. "This castle is like being on location."

Both actors felt that from a performance point of view, acting at Ludlow requires little alteration in technique. "In pure terms there shouldn't be any difference at all between acting here and anywhere else," Deacon said. "The fundamentals are still the same."

Though Ludlow is an open air theatre, the walls help contain voices. Actors need to project to reach the back rows, but Deacon said more energy needs to be channeled into maintaining the nuances of character in so vast a venue. Barometric pressure and atmospheric conditions also affect performances. On one cloudy, still night when he played Orlando in the 1981 *As You Like It*, Deacon said his voice carried over the outer courtyard gate into Ludlow's downtown.

That experience gave Deacon the edge over his companions in knowing the castle's dramatic qualities. For a play like *Richard II* he confidently anticipated those stirring moments he knew were forthcoming in the approaching fortnight.

"When the audience is there and the sky is still and the voice carries, something very extraordinary will happen with this play," he said. "I think it happened a couple of times last night when the sky was still and heavy with damp. It's kind of a hallucinatory experience; the whole thing seemed sort of surreal."

When those dramatic moments happen at Ludlow, perhaps even the ghosts sit in awe.

Free-lance writer Eric Minton lives in Suffolk, England.