



Five and Eighty Hamlets

J. C. Trewin

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Hamlet is probably the most famous play in the world. The distinguished English critic, J. C. Trewin, saw his first performance of it in 1922, and thereafter, professionally, as drama critic successively of the *Observer*, *Punch*, and the *Illustrated London News*, he saw it repeatedly through sixty years of theatrical history.

In this most unusual book of theatrical criticism he discusses all the leading Hamlets, including John Barrymore, John Gielgud, Maurice Evans, Michael Redgrave, and Laurence Olivier. He reflects on how the play has sounded through its many productions, how it has looked to audiences, how the critics reacted, what were the backstage arguments and the changing mores of theatrical life.

Trewin's criticism is not only judicious. It is impassioned:

"In March 1924, I had my first overwhelming theatrical experience. "Great," often implying no more than a night's enthusiasm, is a word like "marvellous" and "wonderful," to use sparingly; but after sixty years I use it for the Hamlet of Ernest Milton...an American actor of Jewish descent who had settled in England, and who had conquered the Old Vic with his romantic passion and the surge of his verse-speaking.... On seeing the Ghost he had indeed a supernatural visitation; he became a man possessed. "Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" was breathed, barely audible, as he swung round from Horatio. When he was left alone on the battlements the haunting cry, "Hillo! ho! ho! boy! Come, bird, come!" rose as I would never know it again. From the distant night I think still of throat-tightening excitement, of an emotional force sometimes almost demonic. Speech after speech he double-charged. I cannot say at this distance how many Hamlet problems he answered, though the voice speaks unblurred. For me, with his felicities and faults, his leaping across every chasm, he governed the stage as the man himself, of "the courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword." A joy of a book.

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