

AVON BANKSIDE

Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh in 'Macbeth' in England's Stratford

By BROOKS ATKINSON

STRATFORD-ON-AVON.

ALTHOUGH Macbeth may have been a baneful influence on Scotland, he is a stimulating man in the theatre. In Shakespeare's tragedy he has provided Sir Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh with the best parts they have had so far this season. Macbeth has also jostled the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre out of the mediocrity that has characterized its two previous productions.

Presumably "Macbeth" is the major event of the 1955 repertory. Neither "Twelfth Night" nor "All's Well That Ends Well," already in performance, is half so impressive. And "The Merry Wives of Windsor," which opens on July 20, and "Titus Andronicus," which opens on Aug. 16, are not plays that compare with "Macbeth" for insight into the soul or for dramatic poetry.

The current assumption that "Macbeth" is not basically a good play seems supercilious when a good director, like Glen Byam Shaw, and some good actors take hold of it. Not that this is a memorable production. Olivier's Macbeth substitutes introspection for the power and barbarism that are more effective in the theatre. A slight woman of delicate beauty, Miss Leigh is not ideally cast in the majestic part of Lady Macbeth.

The Acting

But Sir Laurence's sensitive understanding of Macbeth's ordeal by fire and his candid recognition of Macbeth's imperfections result in a moving character portrait. It is modern character analysis expressed in some of the finest poetry ever written in English. Miss Leigh's Lady Macbeth has similar qualities. It has surprising strength when iron is needed, and it makes the transition into remorse and terror with perceptivity and skill. It is one of Miss Leigh's best performances.

Macbeth and his Lady Macbeth are well mated. For neither of them is naturally corrupt and villainous. They have been lured by ambition into infamies that are just outside their real nature. Conscience has not made cowards of them. But there is always a soft thread of conscience running through the terrible fabric of their lives.

This is a picture-frame pro-

duction with competent settings by Roger Furse. In the stage direction Mr. Shaw has kept well inside the familiar conventions. But it is good to see "Macbeth" done intelligently again. For Shakespeare was very nearly at the top of his bent when he wrote it.

The pleasures of a visit to Stratford are not confined to the quality of the plays. For the Warwickshire countryside from which Shakespeare gathered the honey of his poetry is still green and golden. This is the peak of the outdoor year. Around Stratford the fields are strewn with buttercups and daisies. The flowering trees are in bloom, canopied in pink and white.

The Town

Probably the birds are speaking the same language Shakespeare listened to when he was a boy and young man. According to modern usage he may have been a little inaccurate in some of his bird nomenclature. But this verse from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" might come straight out of Warwickshire today, if we do not ask too many questions about the ousel:

*The ousel cock so black of hue,
With orange-tawny bill,
The throstle with his note so true,
The wren with little quill.
The finch, the sparrow, and the lark,
The plain-song cuckoo gray,
Whose note full many a man doth mark,
And dares not answer nay.*

On Sunday afternoons fathers and mothers in Stratford take their children to walk in the woods to enjoy natural splendors identical with or similar to those Shakespeare carried in his heart during the years he worked in London. The early plays and some of the last are saturated in Warwickshire. In his middle years, when "Macbeth" was written, Shakespeare was absorbed in strange thoughts of death in other lands. But even in "Macbeth" some of the poetry sounds like Warwickshire. Listen to what Lady Macduff's little son has to say to her when she tells him that his father is dead. It has the innocence and rustle of nature.

Even if Shakespeare had not been born here, it is possible that Stratford would be a tourist cen-

THE BIG TEN

The Seven Year Itch . . .	1,030
Can-Can	887
The Teahouse	706
Victor Borge	674
Anniversary Waltz	503
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ter. In town and in the region roundabout there is plenty to see. Obviously the theatre draws most of the tourists. Since it seats 1,300 people and is sold out every night from April through November, the tourist trade is enormous. Most of the theatregoers come from out of town, some from considerable distances. During the day, they dutifully visit the birthplace and the church where Shakespeare is buried.

A livestock and trading town, the center of a brewing industry and some small manufactures, Stratford has other things than Shakespeare on its mind. But it manages to assimilate the tourist into the town about as pleasantly as one would think possible. Although the attendants at the birthplace have to repeat their little homilies of comment and information innumerable times a day, they contrive to look interested in their guests. If they are bored, they do not show it.

The demand for theatre tickets and hotel accommodations, however, is greater than the supply. Tourists who come without making previous arrangements are frequently disappointed.

The Tickets

But the theatre has not forgotten the emergency needs of people who come without having made reservations. Thirty-eight seats in the rear of the orchestra are placed on sale at the box office before each performance. At the same time the theatre also sells standing room for seventy eight persons. Somehow the needs of tourists and theatregoers seem to get looked after as civilly as possible. The people who want to see "Macbeth" will probably see it one way or another. If not, there are other plays in the repertory.

For instance, "Titus Andronicus," which is seldom acted and has never been done in Stratford before. That ought to be interesting if only because the text calls for one of the most gruesome and bewildering entrances in dramatic literature. Says the text: "Enter Lavinia, her hands cut off and her tongue cut out and ravish'd."

There's a pretty problem in stage direction.