The Theatrical Innovations of Charles Laughton

Gary Joseph Jones

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THE THEATRICAL INNOVATIONS OF CHARLES LAUGHTON

A Thesis
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of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Gary Joseph Jones

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THE THEATRICAL INNOVATIONS OF CHARLES LAUGHTON

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To my wife whose faith, trust, and patience have made any achievement possible.
PREFACE

In most journalistic studies the film career of Charles Laughton overshadows his theatrical activities to the extent that the reader is hardly aware of the importance of his theatrical innovations to the theater of our time. The more commercial side of Laughton's career was publicized while his artistic efforts, as characterized by the innovations, were frequently forgotten. More people remember him as the man who played Captain Bligh in the movies than as the man who worked with Bertolt Brecht, created the First Drama Quartette and developed a new American art form, Readers' Theater.

The rationale of this study is to show the artistic Laughton in vivid enough detail to reverse the journalistic formula of emphasizing his film work and subordinating his theatrical innovations. If he had been strictly a commercial minded artist this study would not be needed. But he was anything but a commercially oriented individual. He was instead a pioneer whose total theatrical accomplishments, as mirrored through his innovations, were as outstanding as his film triumphs. These accomplishments are worthy of attention with his film career acting as a secondary consideration.
The four major theatrical innovations of Charles Laughton to be covered in the study are:

The Old Vic Innovation: Laughton's 1933-34 season with the Old Vic Sadlers Wells Company in which he turned down a lucrative film salary to play a season of repertory consisting of seven classical roles.

The Solo Reading Innovation: The famous Bible readings and storytelling of Laughton beginning in 1943 with his oral presentations to disabled and convalescent war veterans in California hospitals and growing into nation-wide reading tours under the direction of Paul Gregory.


The First Drama Quartette Innovation: The creation, in 1951, of the first professional Readers' Theater production, a collaboration of Laughton and Paul Gregory.

there appears to have been no academic study made of Charles Laughton before this study.

Two published biographies fully devoted to Laughton's life and career exist. The first is *Charles Laughton and I* by Elsa Lanchester, published by Harcourt-Brace in 1938 and currently out of print. The second is *The Laughton Story--An Intimate Story of Charles Laughton* by Kurt Singer, published by the John C. Winston Company in 1954, thus covering the major portion of Laughton's life. The latter treats Laughton's innovations on a par with other stage and film projects or else leaves them in relative obscurity, but it provides valuable research information that may be weighed and utilized accordingly.

There are several lesser articles and overviews of the Laughton career in periodicals and film books but most of these emphasize his film career and only briefly deal with his theatrical activities. These articles provide good material for filling the gaps between theatrical innovations.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The acting career of Charles Laughton was a marvel of versatility. Laughton was one of the most famous film actors of this century, and yet his career as a Hollywood film star did not prevent him from experimenting in the theatrical realm. He had more than fifty film credits in his distinguished career, many of them now classic portrayals such as the gluttonous Henry VIII in 1933’s The Private Life of Henry VIII and the infamous Captain Bligh in 1935’s Mutiny on the Bounty. Relative to his film successes, his theatrical projects are little remembered. It is unusual to find an artist who will sacrifice the comfort and security of a large film salary in order to satisfy his yearnings for the stage in such genres as lecture readings, Readers’ Theater, and untried plays by foreign playwrights. But Charles Laughton was just that sort of artist. He was the rare genius who could turn the most anomalous theatrical project into a notable, if not always commercially successful, venture.

Charles Laughton was born on July 1, 1899 in Scarborough, England, the son of Robert Laughton, a provincial hotel keeper. He received his early education
at Stonyhurst College, a Jesuit school in Lancastershire. An average student who excelled in mathematics, he chose a volume of Shakespeare's plays when he won an award for his arithmetical proficiency. He participated in school theatricals and quickly became infatuated with the theater. His mother, Eliza Conlin Laughton, was especially disturbed by his ambitions to become an actor. Thus in 1915, at the age of 16, he was sent to London to train at Claridge's as a hotel clerk. The London theatrical atmosphere served merely to accentuate his love for the theater. Most of his leisure was spent attending plays in the West End.

After a stint in the British Army in World War I as a private in the Infantry in which he was gassed and wounded in France long before the Armistice, he returned to Scarborough and, following his parents' wishes, worked for seven years as a hotel keeper. To escape his mundane existence, he turned to local amateur theatricals. His ambition to become an actor became so great that his father finally agreed to allow him to pursue such a career. In January of 1925, he passed his entrance test to London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

After a year at the Royal Academy, Laughton was awarded the highest honor available to any student, the extremely coveted Bancroft Gold Medal. He went straight from the Academy into a most auspicious early stage career, beginning with the role of Osip, the drunken servant in
Nikolay Gogol’s *The Government Inspector* in April of 1926 and appearing in more than twenty-two plays on the London stage in the next five years.

Laughton’s success in such plays as *The Pillars of Society*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Three Sisters*, *Lilith*, *The Greater Love*, *Mr. Prohack*, and *Alibi* brought him a film contract as well, and he appeared in a small role in the 1929 British movie, *Picadilly*, beginning a film career that was to span more than thirty years.

During the production of *Mr. Prohack* in November of 1927, he became acquainted with Elsa Sullivan Lanchester, a former dance student of the great Isadora Duncan and a protege of writer H. G. Wells. Miss Lanchester was a talented young actress who had won raves from the London critics and was spoken of with regard in select London society. Laughton married her in February of 1929. Elsa became his most ardent admirer as well as his most severe critic in the years to come. She appeared with her husband in many plays and films and is probably best remembered for her performance of Anne of Cleves, the ugly wife in *The Private Life of Henry VIII*.

The play which brought Laughton to America was *Payment Deferred* in which he played William Marble, a suburban Cockney murderer, with chilling authenticity. Elsa appeared as Marble’s daughter in the play and was praised for her performance in a very difficult role.
But it was Charles who won the rave notices from London critics and who overshadowed the remainder of the cast. After playing three months at the St. James Theater, the show was transferred to the Lyceum Theater in New York. Laughton was an instant success on Broadway. He followed *Payment Deferred* with the American version of the play *Alibi*, retitled *The Fatal Alibi*, in February of 1932. After returning with Elsa to London, he received an offer of a Paramount Studio film contract. He accepted and stole the show in his early American film, *The Devil and the Deep*. He made six other American films in 1932, becoming a well-known movie actor praised by American critics and audiences.

World fame and lucrative advantage came to Laughton because of his performance in the leading role of the Korda film, *The Private Life of Henry VIII*. The portrayal won him the 1932-33 Academy Award for Best Actor and assured him of a lasting film career. The film itself, made in London, became the first British movie to gain a large international audience, and its success is a milestone in the building of the British film industry.

It is at this point in Laughton's career that his artistic consciousness was quite evident. With a great number of Hollywood contracts as well as lucrative stage possibilities from which to select, he chose instead to return to the London stage in a season of repertory at
the Old Vic Sadler's Wells Company. His innovative season at the Old Vic included seven different roles in a nine-month period. It marked the first time that an internationally famous film actor had performed on the legitimate stage in an entire season of repertory.

He returned to film work in grand fashion after his season at the Old Vic. The films in which he performed from 1934 through 1939 were the most famous of his career. They included such Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer classics as 1934's *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* with Charles enacting the stern Mr. Barrett, 1935's *Ruggles of Red Gap* in which he played an English butler in the American West, the same year's *Les Misérables* pitting him as the obdurate policeman Javert against Fredric March's Jean Valjean, and *Mutiny on the Bounty* with Laughton's triumph as the evil Captain Bligh. Critic Mark Van Doren wrote of the Bligh portrayal: "This performance fixes him in my mind at any rate as by far the best of living actors."

The New York Film Critics Society agreed on the merit of Charles' 1935 film performances and indicated as much with the presentation of the Best Actor citation for his performances in both *Ruggles* and *Mutiny*.

But despite the success of his Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer films, he was dissatisfied with what he considered

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to be a lack of artistic success in his career. Whenever it was evident to him that his film work was not artistically satisfying, he would return to the stage. In May of 1936 he became the first English actor to appear at the historic Comédie Française in Paris, playing the role of Sganarelle in the second act of Molière's *The Doctor in Spite of Himself*. As a young boy he had learned French at a convent school directed by French nuns. His mastery of the language astounded French critics, and he drew praise from audiences and critics alike. This was but another experimentation that set him apart from the rest of the film world.

He next traveled to London to make the film biography, *Rembrandt*, under the direction of Alexander Korda. He was weary of playing unsympathetic roles, and remembering his success with Korda in *Henry VIII*, he went eagerly into the project. The resulting film, although not as commercially popular as the earlier work, was one of the greatest movie biographies ever produced. The cast included Elsa as Hendrickje Stoffels and Gertrude Lawrence as Rembrandt's housekeeper, Geertje.

After *Rembrandt* he appeared as Captain Hook in a 1936 Christmas performance of Barrie's *Peter Pan*. Elsa played Peter, and the London Palladium performance was well received by youthful audiences. The reviews, however, were somewhat dubious. Author James Barrie was not happy
that Laughton was playing the villainous role. He felt that he would frighten the children too much. Because of Barrie's reservations Charles toned down the role of Hook greatly and did not enjoy playing it nearly as much as he might have had Barrie not interfered.

Upon the death of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer producer Irving R. Thalberg in 1936, Charles became independent. He attempted to form his own film company, a British and American organization called Mayflower Pictures Corporation. His producer-partner in the company was Erich Pommer, a pioneer in the German film industry. Laughton produced three films at Mayflower, playing leading roles in them. The greatest success was an adaptation of a story by Somerset Maugham called Vessel of Wrath in England and retitled The Beachcomber in the United States. Two other films, St. Martin's Lane (1938), costarring a youthful Vivien Leigh, and Jamaica Inn in 1939 under the direction of Alfred Hitchcock, were less than successful efforts. But Charles returned to his full power in the 1939 production of The Hunchback of Notre Dame, playing the grotesque bellringer, Quasimodo. Despite his deformed appearance, Quasimodo was a most sympathetic character and is remembered as one of Laughton's greatest screen creations.

With few exceptions his greatest film performances were behind him after 1940. His film work during the
1940's was criticized severely by reviewers who had earlier championed him. After making eight mediocre films from 1940 through 1943, Laughton found himself in a state of agitation. He had conducted a vigorous war bond drive over the country in 1942 and had applied for American citizenship with Elsa the same year, but his activities outside these patriotic actions were disillusioning. He felt that he needed to break away from the monotony of routine scripts and mediocre films and do something worthwhile both artistically and altruistically.

Thus out of pure boredom with his film work he was driven to seek solace in the activity of reading to disabled and convalescent war veterans. His readings in California hospitals became so popular that he soon began to make national television appearances. Entering into partnership with concert manager Paul Gregory, he toured the nation reading the Bible and great classical works to thousands. This solo reading innovation started a second career for Laughton as a storyteller.

Another of Laughton's theatrical innovations began in 1945 with his collaboration with German playwright Bertolt Brecht on the translation of the play Galileo. The subsequent performance of the play in 1947 drew mixed reviews from critics. The production was ephemeral but it remains important because of its attempt to break new ground in a stifling artistic atmosphere.
In 1951, Laughton and Paul Gregory brought American audiences the first professional Readers' Theater production, Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell*. The production was presented by the First Drama Quartette, and it received overwhelming praise from the critics. It brought Laughton deserved recognition as a creator, a performer, and a director. A later production of Benet's *John Brown's Body* under Laughton's direction was far more elaborate in presentation but much less historically important since it only followed what *Don Juan in Hell* had begun.

Laughton continued to make films between his innovative efforts. Although his peak as a film actor was past, he made an occasionally fine film such as 1954's *Hobson's Choice* or 1957's *Witness for the Prosecution* in which both he and Elsa acted superbly. The experimental nature was evident even in his film career as can be seen by his first and only effort as a Hollywood director in 1955's suspenseful *The Night of the Hunter*, a thriller that died at the box office but has since become a small film classic.

The stage productions which Charles directed in the 1950's were excellent indications of his ability in yet another area of the theater. In addition to the two

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Readers' Theater productions, he also directed the Broadway production of *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial*.

In 1956, he performed in a revival of Shaw's *Major Barbara* in New York, and 1958 marked his efforts to play Shakespeare once again in the title role of *King Lear* and as Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Britain's Stratford Memorial Theater. The last play of his career was *The Party*, a dull play in which he and Elsa gave stirring performances in a short London run.

Laughton died from cancer at the age of 63, not long after completing the 1962 film, *Advise and Consent*, in which he played a shrewd Southern politician named Sheb Cooley. In his thirty-six years as a professional performer he had more than forty stage credits, more than fifty feature film credits, and an infinite number of solo readings of the Bible and the great literary classics of the world. He was such a versatile performer that it is difficult to discover where his greatest talent was exhibited. At times during his life he was equally effective as an actor, director, storyteller, and theatrical innovator. Never a handsome man, Laughton is, nonetheless, remembered more than many a matinee idol whose face has long since faded from the minds of film and theater lovers. As a popular periodical described him following his death:
"I have a face like the behind of an elephant," was his own crack about himself. But he could afford to say such things—for the voice in which he said them was that of an archangel.  

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CHAPTER II

THE OLD VIC

The Old Vic season of 1933-34 represented a challenge for Laughton. His early stage career brought him many admirers, and his film work in the early 1930's made him a world famous movie star. His portrayal of Henry VIII was enough to insure him of a profitable future in the movies. But he realized that his world fame as a film actor did not compensate for the fact that he lacked a classical education. He was familiar with the great classics of the theater, but he had never played them. His goal was the same goal of many serious actors: to play Shakespeare brilliantly. Success early in a film career often tends to ruin an actor through type casting and an endless repetition of poorly written scripts. Laughton must have been aware that artistic ambitions disappear with age and a permanent position in the money-making class because he refused many lucrative film offers in order to return to the British stage and meet the challenge of a season of classical repertory theater.

While making the Korda film in England, Laughton talked with his actress friend, Flora Robson, who had been invited to play at the Old Vic for the 1933-34 season.
He admired Miss Robson’s acting and told her that he would very much like to be a part of such a season. Miss Robson relayed this information to Old Vic resident director, Tyrone Guthrie. The three of them met at Miss Robson’s residence for dinner and plans were set for Charles to perform during the coming season.4

But Guthrie’s enthusiasm to direct Laughton was overshadowed by the problem of Laughton’s general dislike for Miss Lillian Baylis, the manager and founder of the Old Vic Sadler’s Wells Company. Miss Baylis had taken over the management of the company in 1912 when her aunt, Miss Emma Cons, died. From the beginning she had encouraged the production of good drama at the Old Vic. Between 1914 and 1923, the entire canon of 37 plays of Shakespeare had been presented. The productions were so successful that the Old Vic became synonymous with Shakespearean drama in the years to follow. Miss Baylis insisted upon low admission prices, and as a consequence the theater frequently ran short of funds for production expenses and actors’ salaries. Quite often appeals were made to the public for funds to aid the company.5


When Tyrone Guthrie approached Miss Baylis with the proposition that the internationally-famous Laughton play a season at the Vic, she expressed doubt as to the stout actor's ability to play Shakespearean drama. Guthrie assured her that his early London stage triumphs and his masterful playing of Henry VIII were proofs of his capabilities. But Miss Baylis remained dubious, insisting that the Old Vic audiences might not like Laughton. And besides, there was the question of money. Laughton would expect too much. But Guthrie pointed out the fact that his film salary would be several times as large as what he would expect from the Old Vic, in addition to the fact that his name alone would bring a great deal of money into the Old Vic season. The governors of the company were consulted and it was apparently their decision collectively, and not Miss Baylis', that Laughton be hired for the coming season.6

Laughton had a similar mistrust and dislike for Miss Baylis before he ever appeared at the Old Vic. He informed Guthrie that he was dismayed at the dowdiness of productions he had seen at the theater. He had concluded that the Old Vic's major problem was not poverty but a staunch determination of Miss Baylis to manage the theater in a most provincial manner. Thus it was that Laughton and Lillian Baylis were potential enemies before

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6A Life in the Theatre, pp. 118-119.
their first meeting. Guthrie had to serve as go-between during the season, attempting to soothe feelings whenever tempers seemed about to burst and emotions ran high.

An incident at the very beginning of the season threatened to precipitate a crisis that might very well have exploded in all directions. Laughton felt very insecure about the limited economy of the Old Vic. He was afraid that the season would be unsuccessful if financial trouble arose, so he appealed to the Pilgrim Trust for the needed funds. So that it did not go into the general treasury of the Old Vic and Sadler's Wells companies, he specified that the money was to be used for the Shakespearean productions of the season. As ill fortune would have it, Miss Baylis had for years been appealing to the Pilgrim Trust for funds and was always refused. Now a movie star who had never actually performed Shakespeare was given money at an instant request. Miss Baylis was appalled. To make matters worse, the stipulation in the bargain that the money be used only for certain productions implied direct criticism of her ability as a theater manager. Sycophants at the Old Vic who disliked Laughton sided with Miss Baylis, played upon her wounded pride, and in general added more fuel to the fire. They urged her to refuse the aid of the Pilgrim Trust.7

7Ibid., p. 120.
Miss Baylis, however, was a wise woman who loved the Old Vic and put it before her wounded pride. She accepted the funds for the benefit of the company. But she mistrusted Laughton more than ever. She felt that he did not like or understand her and was only using the Old Vic as a stepping stone in his own career. Tyrone Guthrie as the referee in the battle reported the seriousness of their mutual mistrust:

She treated him with an icy, rather naive hauteur. To this, naturally, he reacted by imagining her to be a scheming, small-minded, mean-spirited old shrew, whose one idea was to keep the reins of theatrical power in her own incompetent hands.

I felt that a bad situation could be made ten times worse by clumsy diplomacy, so made no attempt either to mediate or to take sides. I felt sure that, in long term, each was generous enough to appreciate the good qualities of a rival heavyweight; and that, in short term, each was shrewd enough to see that their mutual interest would not be served by open warfare. 8

Charles and Elsa found themselves excited about the approaching season despite the obvious ill-feeling with Miss Baylis. The Old Vic was at that time beginning to get away from the old fashioned type of Shakespearean production with its cumbersome scenery. Guthrie's modern ideas in set design had led him to hire architect Wells Coates. Coates designed a large "structure" similar to the Elizabethan open stage.

8 Ibid.
He included a set of stairs leading to a balcony, and a small space underneath the stage in which intimate scenes could be played. This permanent structure provided the background throughout the play, and eliminated long pauses while the scenery was being changed. 9

The distinguished company for the 1933-34 season was composed of some of the finest actors in Great Britain. In addition to the Laughtons and Miss Robson, there were Athene Seyler, Ursula Jeans, Leon Quartermaine, Morland Graham, Marius Goring, Roger Livesey, and the youthful James Mason.

The repertory for the 1933-34 season consisted of *Henry VIII*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Tempest*, and *Macbeth*, as well as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Love for Love*, and *The Cherry Orchard*. The season had opened with a production of *Twelfth Night* in which the Laughtons did not take part. The second production of the season was *Henry VIII*. What had been Laughton's cup of tea on film was not nearly as effective on the stage. It seemed merely a repeat of what had been seen before and was not given outstanding notices.

*Measure for Measure* followed and was, in Guthrie's mind, the best production of the season. Guthrie

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9Ibid., p. 121.
contended that although Laughton and Robson were very strangely cast as Angelo and Isabella, their scenes together were magnetic.\textsuperscript{10}

The greatest challenge of the season for Laughton was to be the role of Macbeth. From his childhood his desire had been to act the famous role of the murderous king. It would have given him great personal satisfaction to have triumphed in such a role, but it was not to be. The \textit{Macbeth} production which was to have been the highlight of the Old Vic season was exciting in rehearsal, but disappointing in performance. Although he seemed full of magnificent, fresh ideas during rehearsals, the critics were very disparaging in their notices. Guthrie tried to pinpoint the cause of Laughton's failure in Shakespeare by suggesting that the experience of working in the cinema had caused him to rely on inspiration to get through a big scene. While this type of spontaneous method was fine for film making because a scene could be shot as many times as was necessary for inspiration to result in creativity, the sustained acting which the stage required was a different matter. If inspiration were called upon and found to be lacking, the actor was forced to use technique. The rapid transition from four years of film work back to the stage

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid., p. 122.
forced Laughton to realize that he lacked technique. When inspiration failed, he seemed lost without benefit of strong voice or effective movement. Flora Robson, the Lady Macbeth of the production, suggested that Charles' problem had been a lack of feeling for the Shakespearean verse. He seemed to have more than enough intensity for Shakespeare, but the verse rolled out like a steam roller. He had the power to play the great role, but lacked the delicacy needed for a really successful interpretation.

Lillian Baylis could not resist going to Laughton's dressing room on the disappointing opening night of Macbeth to "console" him after his woeful performance. A very dejected Laughton never forgave her for her visit, feeling that she sought revenge for the matter of the Pilgrim Trust funds. Guthrie did not feel that Miss Baylis was insincere, for Laughton's failure had in a great sense been the Old Vic's failure and she loved the Old Vic above all else. But there is no doubt that in some measure Miss Baylis viewed Laughton's failure at Shakespeare as a justified comeuppance.

The size of a star actor's ego often makes him unappealing to those around him, but when that ego is

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11 Ibid., pp. 123-124.


13 A Life in the Theatre, pp. 127-128.
deflated in a great way, the actor is almost equally pitiable. Laughton resembled a king who had been reduced to instant poverty. All his life he had loved Shakespeare and he was sure that his acting efforts in the Bard's plays would be triumphs. They were anything but. The last Shakespearean production of the year was the same story. His Prospero in *The Tempest* was undistinguished. Elsa's strange portrayal of Ariel, light and lyrical, was the only memorable performance in the play.\(^\text{14}\)

The irony in Laughton's experiences with Shakespeare's works is that in the coming years he was to read Shakespeare beautifully on his lecture tours, despite his inability to perform the great heroic roles successfully. Although he never attempted to play Shakespeare's plays in the cinema, he never gave up the hope of some day doing the Bard justice. As late as 1959 he attempted the role of King Lear at Stratford-on-Avon. The performance was admired by many critics and was certainly more successful than any of his Old Vic performances. But Laughton is still remembered most as the man who read Shakespeare's works better than he acted them.

The three non-Shakespearean plays were far more interesting and successful. Laughton's Lopakhin in *The Cherry Orchard* was a most subtle and interesting performance, as was Elsa's portrayal as the eccentric

governess. Guthrie directed the play as a comedy, treating Chekhov as the knowledgeable humorist that he had always insisted he was. 15 Although The Importance of Being Earnest had shortcomings in production, Laughton came through brilliantly in the role of the ridiculous Canon Chasuble. 16 His success in these lighter roles suggests strongly that while like most aspiring young actors, he fancied himself a tragedian, he was really a master comic actor. The color in his great portrayal of Henry VIII had been a result of the very comic detail that he put into many of the scenes. Too often it is forgotten that great comic talent is rare. Serious acting is something that all actors strive to do well, but comic acting is even more difficult. Laughton certainly had the gift of comedy, and many mediocre serious actors would have given anything to have possessed that talent.

Laughton's failure at Shakespeare may be attributed to over-effort as well as his lack of proper technique in lieu of inspiration and his inability to handle the difficult verse. He may have simply tried too hard. In preparing for the roles, studying for lines and background information, and getting down the meticulous details

15 Ibid., p. 126.
16 Ibid., p. 127.
of a particular character, he worked in excess of fourteen hours a day.\footnote{Singer, p. 126.} He had little time for leisure and relaxation. No other renowned film star had ever left the comfort of the plush studios in Hollywood for the rigid schedule of one of the world's greatest theatrical companies. After his triumph as Henry VIII, Laughton could easily have earned in excess of $2,500 per week making films. At the Old Vic he earned only $100 each week. His artistic desire is evident from the comparison of these figures alone. After taking such a gigantic cut in salary and finding himself in a bitter battle with Miss Baylis, it is understandable why he worked so hard to make this experimental venture a success. If the artistic actor is to be measured on any scale of accomplishment, the effort he puts into his work must be taken into account. If the effort is maximum, even though the current project might fail, he is sure to find some success in the future if he takes his failure and finds the "why" behind it. It can never be known how deeply Miss Baylis' dislike affected him. He was a very sensitive man and may have suffered in his performing because of it. But unlike many narcissists, Charles did not attempt to conceal his failure. He admitted to all that he was disappointed in himself and that he "stank up" the roles
that he played. 18

But the season was not a complete failure for him. He was able to develop his voice, rediscover the power of it, and later in his career use it more effectively than ever before. By 1936, he was making the memorable Gettysburg Address as Ruggles of Red Gap, and his courtroom speech as Javert in Les Misérables was another vocal triumph. The Hollywood actor with the camera right on top of him was for the most part deprived of the need for a powerful voice after years of downplaying and "non-acting." But Charles, thanks to his season at the Old Vic, was able to utilize his voice and make it an asset to his film career. Audiences have never forgotten the way he addressed Clark Gable as "Mis-tah Christ-yann" in Mutiny on the Bounty. 19 Although the cinema's greatest theorists regarded film as strictly a visual medium, Laughton was to prove conclusively that the voice could be a vital part of a great performance. And even more important than the effect this vocal improvement had on his film career was the indispensable effect it had on his career as America's greatest storyteller in the 1940's and 1950's. His voice was to become

18 Louis Kronenberger, "The Happy Ham," Time, March 31, 1952, p. 64.

famous all over the world through lecture tours, recordings, and television and radio broadcasts. The command of spoken English that he developed from his eight months at the Old Vic was to make him a wealthy man in his very successful venture into solo reading.

And despite the generally disappointing reviews that he received from most of the English critics, there were a few dissenters. The London Observer, for example, felt that he "communicated what Shakespeare originally craved, something to make the senses giddy." And Tyrone Guthrie, despite the failure of Macbeth, felt that he had been fascinating to watch in one rehearsal.

Laughton was longing to play it and full of interesting ideas. At the dress rehearsal his performance was electrifying. He and Miss Robson worked up an extraordinary tension in the sequences of Duncan's murder. His scenes with Banquo and the three murderers, his visit to the Witches, the desperation of the end, were all felt and transmitted with the utmost power and assurance. His acting that night bore the unmistakable stamp of genius. Alas, he never again, except momentarily, fitfully, recovered this greatness.

If an actor is capable of reaching such heights, he is certainly a talented and dedicated performer. So Laughton was not a total failure at Shakespeare. There were those who admired his momentary genius and never forgot it. When he played Bottom and King Lear at

20 Singer, p. 130.

21 A Life in the Theatre, p. 123.
Stratford in 1959, the reviews were, again, disappointing in a majority of cases, but *Time* magazine reported that Laughton had given a new twist to the role of Lear by subtly suggesting the "storm inside" the old king.22

Such stalwarts as Laurence Olivier, Michael Redgrave, and Alec Guinness were to follow in Laughton’s footsteps in the next few years, playing seasons at the Old Vic and doing film work as well. Although these great performers had considerably more luck with Shakespeare due to their early training in the Bard’s works, they had to work many years to achieve the world renown that Laughton had already achieved. Seldom is a man remembered for what he failed to do successfully as much as for what he accomplished, but Laughton did so much in his lengthy career that even his failures were interesting. In the end every one of his failures served to intensify his determination to succeed in what he next attempted.

CHAPTER III
THE SOLO READINGS

An actor's career can rapidly go downhill as Laughton discovered in the early 1940's. The triumphant film roles of the mid-30's, which marked the prime of his movie career, overshadowed the roles that he was offered in the early years of World War II. The up-down syndrome of an actor's career was in evidence, and the 1940's were the down years for Laughton the film actor. In 1939 after his performance as Quasimodo in The Hunchback of Notre Dame, there followed a series of lackluster portrayals: the cuckold Italian husband, Tony, in the film version of Sidney Howard's They Knew What They Wanted; the aged matchmaker in 1941's It Started with Eve—a Robert Cummings and Deanna Durbin trifle; the head of the lackadaisical family in the ersatz Tuttles of Tahiti in 1942; the small role of the poverty-stricken musician whose rented tail coat rips apart when he finally gets the opportunity to conduct at Carnegie Hall in Tales of Manhattan; and the cliché part of a Rear Admiral in the war-glorifying Stand by for Action.23

Laughton was quickly relegated to the position of supporting actor in the early 1940's. By 1943 he had reached the point of playing a butler in a 79-star film, *Forever and a Day*. Seven different directors worked on this typical Hollywood wartime extravaganza. His career had turned, according to the critics of the time, mundane. The staunchest Laughton supporters were forced to be satisfied with only the shadow of the great actor who had performed Henry, and Bligh, and Ruggles, and Quasimodo.

The state of ennui quickly swept over the dissatisfied Laughton. He felt the flagrant disappointment that so many film actors, before and since, have discovered, that disappointment of being a part of a machine-like process. His films were being produced in assembly line fashion, ground out by big studio equipment. His performances seemed at their best competent and generally uninspired. World War II had taken many of Hollywood's most popular stars, such as Clark Gable and James Stewart, away from the bright lights of the studios to the battlefronts of Europe. The patriotism that swept America infected the film industry in such a way that flag-waving, heroic war epics and all-star-pitch-in-and-help-the-effort musicals became material for the platitudes of this period of American history.

24 Brown, p. 156.
Laughton had gone through a most traumatic experience when he was gassed in France in World War I, and the British government assured him when he offered his services in any way whatsoever for the fight against Hitler, that his status as an entertainer in America would best serve to help the war effort. But Charles was not satisfied with such a torpid existence. He had always been exceedingly active, and suddenly it seemed that he was doomed to a quite passive, artistic life. He could not serve on active duty, and yet he wanted to break out of the great slump into which his career had fallen and do something genuinely helpful for the war effort.

It is to his credit that he did more than his share for the United States war effort. Carole Lombard, his beautiful co-star in They Knew What They Wanted, met a tragic demise in a plane crash while on tour selling war bonds in 1942. Laughton's grief at the news of Miss Lombard's death prompted him to start a war bond drive of his own. Starting in California in September of 1942, he worked tirelessly for sixteen consecutive days, arriving at the WEAF studios at Radio City in New York in a state of utter exhaustion. He launched an unprecedented


one-man war bond drive over this 50,000-watt station on that September morning. He marched into the studio looking fatigued, having had only three hours sleep the night before, and unapologetically interrupted a musical program, stating in his exquisite British accent that he had arrived in New York City from Connecticut where he had shared the platform with eight American sailors who were home to relate their war experiences to the American people in hopes of persuading them to buy bonds. These eight men had been at sea for one hundred and seven days and had seen their ship damaged in one battle and sunk in another. When they returned to San Francisco they were so overjoyed to be home again that they knelt and prayed, cried tears of joy, and even kissed the ground, as onlooking civilians laughed at them. Laughton's famous voice addressed the American people in a stinging and direct manner:

Ladies and gentlemen, don't fool yourselves. American democracy is the last hope left to mankind, and you are the keepers of the flame ... and make no mistake about it, that flame is flickering. God help you and your children and your children's children if that flame ever goes out. ... I'm here on this program today to sell you war bonds. Why don't you call me up at Circle 6-4250 and buy a bond. By the way, I'm answering the telephone myself.27

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27 Singer, p. 215.
He rushed from studio to studio, broadcasting and using his dynamic personality and his great histri-onics to reach the American people. Seventeen and one-half hours later, he found that he had reached the people to the tune of $300,000 in war bond sales. Laughton's one-man drive exemplified his great need to be in the midst of wartime activity doing his share to help the American soldiers who had fought bravely for a cause that all Americans needed to understand.

Although he did not carry a rifle, Laughton did make his patriotic presence known in a permanent way. The war bond drive had been only the beginning. What was to follow was one of the most satisfying accomplishments of his career. Films had become stale, and Charles looked for fresh ground to break. In 1943, his opportunity came finally with the visit of two young soldiers from Birmingham General Hospital, near Los Angeles, to the Universal Studios.

In 1940, R.K.O. Studios had sent Laughton on a public appearance tour to publicize the film, They Knew What They Wanted. Rather than using the standard star-interview technique for the tour, Laughton used a series of oral presentations consisting of passages from Shakespeare, the Bible, and some of his greater film roles.

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28 Ibid., p. 216.
that were especially familiar to the public. Ironically, the film was very disappointing while the tour proved to be extremely successful. It was a case of the means becoming more important than the end.29 But not until he met the visiting soldiers on that day in 1943 did Charles think of such an oral presentation as an end in itself.

He asked the two young men if they thought it was possible that he be allowed to read to the men at the hospital some evening in the near future. They were delighted with the idea, and soon afterward Charles showed up at the hospital in the San Fernando Valley with books in hand, offering to entertain the convalescent troops. The hospital officials welcomed him, expecting him to entertain the men with excerpts from his classic film portrayals. Every seat in the auditorium was filled when Laughton walked in, looking disheveled, as usual, in his wrinkled suit. When he announced that he was going to read to them, the mass of soldiers reacted as one with a long sigh of definite disappointment. It was evident that they expected an evening of boredom. Such a reaction was, for an artist of Laughton's magnitude, a challenge, and yet at the same time it was somewhat frightening. From his earliest days in the theatre, Charles had suffered from acute stage fright. Facing a

29 Brown, p. 112.
new audience was always a very difficult experience for him. But drawing up all of his courage, he proceeded to read to the capacity crowd, and what resulted from such an experimental venture was awe inspiring.

He began the program by reading a selected group of limericks to the soldiers, thus providing a few easy laughs and giving them the opportunity to relax. One of his solo reading trademarks was an opening gambit of putting the audience at ease and allowing them to feel at home in the atmosphere that he was about to create for them. The more serious material would usually come later in the program after the audience had dropped its defenses, allowing itself to "meet" Laughton and to enjoy the introduction by way of material of such a levity that it might be relished.

More humor followed the opening limericks as he read James Thurber's Little Red Riding Hood in up-date version. He then proceeded to an emotionally-taut story of a French streetwalker. Next came a brilliant reading of Marvell's classic poem "To His Coy Mistress," followed by readings of some of the marvelous character-creations of Shakespeare and Dickens. As a closing piece on this first visit to the California hospital, he chose to recite the Gettysburg Address of Abraham Lincoln. His interpretation of the same speech in the comical Ruggles of Red Gap had been one of the classic moments in his
film career. The capacity crowd of more than five hundred broke into deafening applause at the close of the famous speech. Crutches pounded against the floor in exaltation. Laughton responded by exiting into the audience and greeting the men who thronged about him. He did not leave the hospital until he had shaken hands with all of the men who were present. He was so overcome by the enthusiasm for his readings that he promised the men he would return the following week with readings that would be superior to those he had just presented. 30

The next week's offerings were eagerly anticipated by the Birmingham General Hospital audience. The something that Laughton had promised would be even better than before turned out to be readings from the world's greatest book, the Bible. Once again the initial reactions of the audience, upon hearing what he intended to read them, were dubious. The ailing soldiers had never thought of the Bible as a piece of dramatic literature, but Laughton changed their limited viewpoints by presenting them the Bible as a magnificent epic story. His unforgettable voice rose and fell with emotion as he colored the various passages in tones of grandeur. The dramatic overtones and inflections brought the Biblical

30Grady Johnson, "When Laughton Reads the Bible," Coronet, August, 1952, p. 93.
passages stirringly to life. What had for most of the men present been nothing more than a big, boring, sanctimonious book was suddenly given fresh meaning and insight through the interpretative efforts of a very talented fat man in a loose-fitting suit.

Laughton chose to read the Bible to these men because he knew them to be in great need of what the Bible, in its most convincing utilization, had to offer the lost souls who had become victims of apostasy, and hate, and prejudice. He understood these vituperative traits for he had played a long line of villains who embodied them in various forms. He faced the task of reaching men who were without arms and legs in many cases, who were psychologically disturbed, who were filled with bitterness and self-pity, and who felt there was nothing left to live for after experiencing the horrible realities of war. Other Hollywood entertainers were offering songs, and dances, and a variety of jokes to ailing servicemen. Charles was offering them the Bible. And there was a sense of urgency in his readings that reached the men as no mere musical-show troupe could ever reach them. Laughton was offering them a spiritual medicine. He knew that if a man's body were to be healed, first his mind and heart had to be healed. There were many sick hearts and minds at the Birmingham Hospital before Charles read the Bible on that 1943 night.
By the time he had finished the applause served to show him that solo reading was a humanitarian activity, that it reached men in ways that other forms of entertainment could not. The Bible readings had decreased the percentage of sick souls. Hospital authorities assured Laughton that his altruistic readings had entertained the men. Charles had found a new vocation that he was to turn into a worthwhile artistic venture.

Hollywood was more than a little shocked when they realized the success that arch-villain Laughton was having with his Bible readings. Although he had fought against type casting throughout his career, he was most remembered for his malevolent roles in films. But movies were suddenly of secondary interest to him. His solo readings took precedence over all other artistic ventures. His heart was in the readings to the point that the majority of the eighteen films that he made in the decade from 1940 through 1949 were by Laughton's own standards highly forgettable.

But to many who heard them, the readings were unforgettable. Laughton began a personal campaign to rejuvenate Bible reading in the American home.31 He felt that great words were powerful instruments and voiced his feelings to all he encountered. He told a

31Charles Laughton, "Do You Read the Bible?" American Magazine, November, 1949, p. 117.
young corporal at Birmingham Hospital who told Laughton he had never believed that he could get such a thrill out of mere words, the following:

My boy, never speak of words as if they were minor weapons. Words have accomplished more than all the bombs ever dropped. Moses wrote the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone from divine inspiration. The tablets of stone have long been dust, but the words live. Man's greatest and noblest works of genius built from brick and mortar crumble and perish, but words do not die. 32

In 1945, while working on the film Captain Kidd for United Artists, Charles received a most challenging invitation to make an appearance before a group of ministers in the home of Dr. Remsen D. Bird, the president of Occidental College at Eagle Rock, California. The forty-eight ministers who were present at the meeting were there for the express purpose of hearing Charles read the Bible. His reading reputation had grown in leaps and bounds, and now he faced another demanding situation. These ministers represented a cross-section of California Christian Protestants. Although Eagle Rock is only twenty minutes' driving time from Hollywood, it forms an atmospheric contrast to the filmland capital. Charles knew that his performance for the ministers would be very unlike his performances for the heterogeneous groups at military hospitals. This would be a more sophisticated group, and a highly knowledgeable one.

32Johnson, p. 93.
Charles did not know how they might feel about his reading the Bible as popular culture, contemporary entertainment. His sense of stage fright was evident once again. To give himself an extra degree of fortitude, he left his makeup on from the role of Captain Kidd and hoped that if he startled the preachers by appearing before them in actor's greasepaint, their critical faculties might be thrown off balance and his own self-consciousness might go undetected. The meeting represented a challenge to him. His trepidation notwithstanding, Laughton—somewhat paradoxically—welcomed such things. He solidified what was rapidly growing into the legend of Laughton the Reader. The ministers, like the hospital patients, were overcome by the artistry of Laughton. Florabel Muir described their reactions on that January evening in the year that World War II terminated:

Seated in Doctor Bird's spacious drawing room were forty-eight ministers of the gospel, some of more than local reputation... and all of them men with a practical grasp of the problems of workaday Christianity. The Old Testament in the hands of a skilled portrayer of emotion and mood lends itself wonderfully to dramatic interpretation. Under the magic of Laughton's soothing inflections, the magnetism of his voice, the artful interplay of ocular and facial expression, the familiar Biblical stories came vibrantly alive. He read the narrative of Noah and the flood, of Tobias and the angel, the drama of David with its
interesting supporting cast of Saul and Jonathan, Goliath, Uriah, and Bathsheba.\textsuperscript{33}

The ministers' reactions assured Laughton that he had passed a strenuous test. The Reverend Dr. Graham Hunter, a former member of the faculty at the University of Beyrouth, told Laughton that he had heard primitive Syrian peasants tell the Bible stories as he had told them. He insisted that ministers had made a fetish of the Bible while Laughton made it the earthy story of mankind, showing how it is directly related to contemporary life.\textsuperscript{34} The Reverend Ezra Ellis, a pastor in Glendale, California, believed that ministers should attempt to learn from Laughton and put more meaning into their Bible readings for the maximum benefit of the congregations.\textsuperscript{35} If his Birmingham Hospital appearances had given him seemingly his greatest satisfaction, impressing this group of ministers gave him even more satisfaction. His confidence in his ability to reach any homogeneous audience had grown by leaps and bounds.

Laughton's readings of the Bible were aided by the fact that he was something of a Biblical scholar. Barbara Britton, young actress in \textit{Captain Kidd}, was the daughter of Adna W. Brantingham who had formerly been a

\textsuperscript{33}Florabel Muir, "An Actor Discovers the Bible," \textit{Saturday Evening Post}, November 24, 1945, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{34}Ibid., p. 47.
\textsuperscript{35}Ibid.
Quaker and was at the time a Methodist Episcopal deacon of aggressive Fundamentalist stand. She had been brought up to believe in the literal Word, and she was a Sunday School teacher. Barbara and Charles were very competitive in their battle of Bible knowledge. One of their wagers consisted of Charles insisting that there was a literal description of a hangover in the great book. Barbara took the bet and lost. Charles read from Chapter 23, Proverbs, Verses 29 to 35 inclusive, which end in the words, "I shall seek it yet again," which—according to Laughton—meant the hair of the dog.36

By 1949, Charles had developed a completely new image. He was then foremost the Bible reader and secondly the film star. Housewives and children were beginning to become familiar with the grandest professional storyteller in the land through his recordings and appearances. American Magazine praised his attempts to bring the Bible-reading tradition of old into the American home:

The Good Book has never meant much to most of the characters Charles Laughton has portrayed over the years on the screen. However, in real life the Bible has meant a great deal to the celebrated movie villain and lately it has been taking up most of his time. Laughton's current mission in life is to revive in the American home the time-honored, but almost extinct practice of reading the Bible aloud.

This reading was once a part of most families' daily life. It brought the family together as one unit, at least for a time each

36Singer, p. 223.
day. But other diversions came in and Bible-
reading went out. Laughton feels something
was lost, and to bring it back he is currently
conducting a tour of 51 cities reading aloud
from the scriptures in his own distinctive
style, plus passages from Shakespeare, Dickens,
and Aesop. Laughton says that today the Bible,
while one of the best-selling, is the least ap-
preciated book in the English language. His one-
man campaign is to increase appreciation of its
understanding and beauty.

The fifty-one city tour mentioned above came about
through the efforts of a young theatrical agent named
Paul Gregory, a distant nephew of the magnificent orator,
William Jennings Bryan. Such was the widespread reputation
of Laughton’s readings that he was invited to appear on
a 1949 Ed Sullivan Toast of the Town television show.
As coincidence would have it, at the moment he appeared
on the television screen, Gregory happened to drop into
a Manhattan bar. He found himself mesmerized by the
agile movements of the gargantuan Laughton and by his
strong, resounding voice. He called Charles’ hotel imme-
diately after the show and suggested to him that he go
on a cross-country tour with his readings. Gregory was
an extremely handsome young man who complained of those
people who tried to make an actor of him and ignored his
business and organization abilities. He had played bit
parts in films and on radio but had gotten the job he
really wanted when he was hired by Music Corporation of
America as an agent. MCA sponsored the solo reading

37Laughton, “Do You Read the Bible?” p. 117.
tours, and they were so successful that Gregory quit his job and went into business partnership with Laughton in forming the historic First Drama Quartette. The partnership with Gregory continued a pattern of many such relationships in artistic endeavors in his career. Tyrone Guthrie had been his close comrade and director at the Old Vic, Alexander Korda had worked with him in producing the biographical films of the 1930's, Erich Pommer had been his partner in the defunct film company that produced three relatively unsuccessful British movies, and he worked with the controversial German playwright, Bertolt Brecht. But it is certain that both financially and artistically Laughton's most successful work came from his partnership with Gregory. Laughton was often accompanied by his partner and agent in his tours around the nation. They would usually travel by automobile, carrying a stack of worn books as equipment and playing before large regional audiences.

Thousands of people were entertained by Laughton's readings of the Bible and other great literature. Television appearances on the Sullivan show as well as his own show, This Is Charles Laughton, brought rave notices. His Decca recordings of Bible readings were purchased by


admirers throughout the nation. He traveled in excess of five hundred thousand miles in his first ten years of solo reading tours, and he traveled by every means of transportation imaginable, playing in very elaborate conditions as well as extremely poor ones. At his peak, Laughton as a solo reader was making up to four thousand dollars for one night's work. This figure broke every previous platform record in American history, including those held by such stalwarts as Mark Twain, Wendell Phillips, and Henry Ward Beecher. Random House publisher Bennett Cerf went so far as to compare him with the great Charles Dickens who had visited America in 1862, making dramatic readings. Since Dickens' novels provided much of Laughton's most successful reading material the comparison was appreciated.

Laughton's solo readings were successful enough for him to have become completely independent of Hollywood if he had wished. He had started a completely new career as America's master storyteller. Many people were amazed at his ability to interpret the Bible so effectively and yet remain merely an interpreter and not an evangelist. The power to control masses of people through the medium of the spoken word could be dangerous in the hands of

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40 Singer, p. 227.
41 Ibid., p. 232.
42 Ibid.
some men, but a man like Laughton did not seek to control people. He wanted, instead, to share with others the riches of the world's greatest books, and to communicate something human and basic and forever alive. He said of his Bible readings:

Reading the Bible gives me a feeling of great responsibility. I don't want to be an "authority" on it or ecclesiastical matters. That's for the clergy. I want to read it only for its richness and beauty.\[43\]

The question of what author he admired the most arose many times throughout his lecture tours. He had no single favorite for his love for great literature was of such a magnitude that he held a great many writers in high esteem. Among those from whom he read most often were Shakespeare, Thurber, Thomas Wolfe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Aesop, Charles Dickens, Hans Christian Anderson, and Guy de Maupassant. In a 1950 Life magazine article he admitted that his favorite childhood poem had not, surprisingly, been any of Shakespeare's verse, but instead Longfellow's lovely Song of Hiawatha.\[44\] After his initial years of lecture readings he seldom planned a program specifically beforehand. Experience had given him a sixth sense that enabled him to "feel out" an audience and know what to read next. Some audiences were

\[43\]Johnson, p. 94.

moved by the ruggedness of Julius Caesar, others by the lyrical quality of A Midsummer Night's Dream. Sometimes they were in the mood for the earthy tale of David and Goliath, sometimes for the sentimentality of a Dickens' Christmas story, and sometimes for one of many passages of exciting melodrama. The humor of Thurber and the sagacious old Aesop were always popular.

Perhaps Laughton's most valuable quality as a reader was his ability to enjoy whatever he read. Different audiences required different selections, but all of the audiences that he read before had one thing in common—they were able to enjoy listening to Laughton because Laughton enjoyed reading to them. The experience was infectious and unforgettable for millions of people. His love for great literature and for humanity in general was shared by all who heard him read. He was especially loved by the American family. He described his joys at encountering the people of America in a 1955 interview:

I often think that money is not the only thing people spend when they go to a theatre. They spend their time, and Paul Gregory and I often talk about giving them their time's worth as well as their money's worth. The most beautiful thing in the world to me is a sea of faces listening to a story. That is because I am an actor. I have often wished that I could make up my own stories and tell them, but then I remember that people who do write stories do not tell them well. As it seems no one can do both, I would rather tell them than write them, as I like
the contact with the people who like listening to stories, which is almost everybody.45

Other actors followed Laughton with successful solo readings of their own. The actor-playwright Emlyn Williams arrived from England to read Dickens on tour. Sarah Churchill and Edward Thommen read the letters of Ellen Terry and the great Bernard Shaw.46 The solo readings stretched into longer readings by multiple performers marked the transition of lecture reading into Readers' Theater. Laughton's escape from boredom had turned into an exciting new venture in the world of entertainment. He gave the young and old of the world immortal words from the past.

Laughton did not wish to monopolize story telling. He only wished to spread the gospel of effective story telling. What he did not state directly as helpful rules for the story teller, he suggested strongly. An example was the condition of the books that he carried with him on his tours. They were battered and beaten through repeated use. Pages were dog-eared with written notations in the margins and typed notes pasted onto them. Backs were loose and bindings shabby. It would seem at first appearance that treating the books in such a manner would


be disgraceful. Owners of fine libraries would be
appalled to see expensive old volumes in such tatters.
Laughton's feelings about the subject of care of books
were, from his actions, very close to those of Mortimer
J. Adler, Director of the Institute for Philosophical
Research.

There are three kinds of book owners. The first has all the standard sets and best-sellers-unread, untouched. (This deluded individual owns woodpulp and ink, not books.) The second has a great many books--a few of them read through, most of them dipped into, but all of them as clean and shiny as the day they were bought. (This person would probably like to make books his own, but is restrained by a false respect for their physical appearance.) The third has a few books or many--every one of them dog-eared and dilapidated, shaken and loosened by continual use, marked and scribbled in from front to back. (This man owns books.)

There is no doubt that Laughton was the third kind of book owner. After touring the United States, Canada, and England on his reading tours, it is no wonder that his well-loved books were in poor physical condition. But he knew that the words themselves and the ideas that sprang from those words were immortal and not the physical object of the book itself.

His effort to rejuvenate family reading brought many questions from people who were eager to improve their reading skills. He wrote down a few vital tips on family reading for the public to scrutinize:

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1. Choose a book you want to read. Reading aloud is simply a way to share something you like with someone you like. A book read because you feel you should read it will impress no one and bore you.

2. Don't make it an endurance contest. No book need be read doggedly from start to finish. Be selective if you like. Experiment with several different books at once.

3. Go at your own pace. This is the schedule I prescribe: read until you are ready to stop, read as often as you would like, don't worry whether it takes a week or a year to finish a book.

4. Be natural. Straining for effects sounds affected. Your normal speaking voice will be your best reading voice. Your own interest will lend the best emphasis to the story.

5. When you stop reading, begin talking. Reading aloud is fun in itself, but it is better yet when it prompts lively conversation after you've put the book aside. That is when it truly becomes a shared experience and a rewarding one.

It is important to remember that the solo readings of Laughton came first from a desire to escape a frustrating existence and second from the need to help his country in some way in the war effort. The innovation completely changed Laughton's life and touched many Americans at a time when the courage inherent in great words meant something. The new vocation made him a wealthy man, financially and artistically. But to hear it from Laughton, you would never have known there was money involved. He could have stirred a listener's heart even with empty pockets.

48 Singer, pp. 239-40.
CHAPTER IV

THE GALILEO EXPERIMENT

Laughton was fascinated by historical characters. His most exciting roles were those of characters whom he was able to study in detail: Henry VIII, Captain Bligh, Rembrandt, Captain Kidd, Nero in *The Sign of the Cross*, the father of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, and King Herod in *Salome*. All of these he brought to life in vivid detail. The fact that a character had actually lived was important to him. He wished to bring to his audiences as much truth as possible and thus studied the famous man he was portraying until he was able to represent that man with a high degree of verisimilitude.

It is not surprising therefore that he became fascinated with the life of Galileo Galilei, the Italian astronomer and physicist often credited with the founding of modern experimental science. Galileo’s accomplishments included the first use of the telescope to discover astronomical facts, the discovery of the law of the pendulum, the discovery of the law of falling bodies, the invention of a hydrostatic balance for use in physics.

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49 Brown, pp. 154–158.
the designing of the sector-compass to help draftsmen, and many improvements on the telescope.

Galileo's discoveries supported Copernicus' theory that the earth is a moving planet. But Galileo's beliefs were very unpopular with the churchmen of the time and with followers of Aristotle. He was tried and incarcerated by the Holy Inquisition in 1632. His last years were spent in isolation at his villa in Florence, Italy.

The German playwright, Bertolt Brecht, chronicled the life of the great scientist in his 1937 play, *Galileo*. Laughton was very interested in the play because of its concentration on Galileo the man. To him the play seemed honest in showing Galileo as a weak man in many ways, a man who feared physical pain so much that he quickly gave in to the Inquisition when merely shown the instruments of torture. Brecht's portrayal of Galileo was not that of a hero who functions as a rebel against society. It was, instead, the portrait of a very paradoxical human being who found himself in the midst of a world that betrayed him. The major theme of the work seemed to be that prudence, and not courage, furthers the cause of science.

Laughton's interest in the role is easy to understand. His greatest character creations had often been marked by elements of paradox. His King Henry VIII had its audience guffawing at his poor table manners in one
scene and in yet another scene cringing at the ease with which he disposed of a wife. Galileo fitted the popular concept of the ideal nonconformist in many ways, urging his students to pay attention to what their senses dictated rather than to what tradition told them was true, while showing himself at other times to be as uncertain and afraid as any ordinary human being. Brecht's Galileo, though understandable, was an interestingly complex character. Laughton admired characters into whom he could delve psychologically. He was constantly aware that human beings could not always be easily classified as good or bad, strong or weak. Even his most despicable villains were, at times, sympathetic creatures. Galileo was certainly a hero in the eyes of history, but he was a complicated hero, and Brecht had shown as much in his play. Laughton, upon reading the play, could imagine playing such a beautifully written role. He longed to get inside such a character and explore the mysteries of what made him function.

Orson Welles also had an interest in Galileo. In 1943 he went so far as to discuss plans for a joint production of the Brecht work with producer Mike Todd and Laughton. But two powerful egos such as those of Welles and Laughton do not easily work together on any project.
Realizing this, they discontinued their plans. But Laughton was determined to explore the possibilities of such a production in the future as soon as he found time away from his solo readings and film appearances. Thus in 1945 he approached writers Brainerd Duffield and Emerson Crocker and asked them to prepare an acting version of Galileo from a literal translation of the play which had come into his possession. The text that the two young writers presented Laughton after much concentrated work pleased him. Brecht, however, had already begun to reshape the play, and Laughton joined him in revising the work. Their joint effort turned it into a radical and interesting piece of drama. It was rumored that Brecht wrote the play after a confrontation with a Scandinavian nuclear physicist who told him that he was too appalled by the atomic truths that he was approaching to go on with his work. Brecht knew that Galileo had suffered similar nightmares. Galileo's life was a testimony to both the frustration and dedication present in the work of great scientists. The original script was too ponderous and depressing to interest any producers. It might

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51 Ibid.

possibly have ended as much of Brecht's earlier work in
the form of a published but unproduced play script had
Laughton not shown an interest in producing what he
believed was a bold and exciting play.

Brecht was delighted that a man of Laughton's
abilities should take such an active interest in *Galileo*.
The two artists worked at Laughton's house near the
Pacific Ocean. In the mornings they would meet in the
small Laughton library and discuss the current changes in
the script. The Laughton-Brecht discussions consisted
of much sign language and play acting since Laughton spoke
no German and Brecht knew very little English. 53 Laughton's
determination to work with such a brilliant playwright
as Brecht was not affected by such a "small" problem as
a language barrier.

Brecht's past attempts to enter American theatre
had been unsuccessful. Martin Esslin reports:

The production of *Galileo* was Brecht's
greatest chance to break into American
theatre. All his former efforts had failed.
He had tried to persuade Thornton Wilder to
adapt *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, but had met
with a rebuff. He had adapted *The Duchess
of Malfi* for Elisabeth Bergner, together with
H. R. Hays and W. H. Auden, but when Bergner
finally did the play on Broadway Brecht's
version was not used. Now a great star of the
stage and screen had recognized Brecht's
importance and was ready to launch him. More­
over, *Galileo* was a great play, and highly

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53Esslin, p. 74.
It can be argued that Laughton's interest in Brecht and *Galileo* had a selfish foundation since the meaty leading part was challenging in his eyes. But there were other considerations as well. Laughton was amazing to work with because he was always aware of the reality beneath the surface of the historical situation, and because his gift for character analysis was amazing. Brecht wrote that despite Laughton's indifference and timidity in all political matters, he would demand sharper formulations, or even suggest them himself in quite a few places in the script when he believed the passages to be devoid of the necessary feeling of reality. As they translated the play, they looked ahead to the production and discussed technical problems in detail. When Laughton discovered that Caspar Neher had made delicate sketches of scenes in many shows so that the actors could group themselves according to the designs of a great artist, he obtained an artist from the Walt Disney Studios to make such sketches for *Galileo*. The drawings turned out to be less than he had hoped for, but he used them with a degree of caution.56

54 Ibid., p. 75.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
Laughton's major idea for a production of the play was to recreate an Old Vic-like atmosphere. He wished to deemphasize the star system that was so prevalent in the American theatre by assembling a large cast and paying each member, from the leading actor to the smallest bit player, the same salary. As usual, his goal was to bring to the forefront something new and different, and in this case something extremely unconventional. Such experimental ideas frightened most producers. Laughton spent more than a year and a half searching for someone who would produce the show. New York producers would not touch the play because of the great costs entailed in a cast of more than sixty actors, ninety costumes, thirteen scenes, and an orchestra and dancers. T. Edward Hambleton was the producer who finally came to the rescue, allowing Laughton to open for a three-week run at the Coronet Theater in Beverly Hills on July 30, 1947. Laughton's major worry that July evening was the tremendous discomfort that the heat would cause. He was so concerned that he ordered that trucks full of ice blocks be placed around the theatre building and ventilators be turned on so that the audience might be able to concentrate.\footnote{Ibid.}
Unfortunately, despite Laughton's efforts to put the audience in physical comfort, the play itself was greeted quite unenthusiastically by the Los Angeles people. It was simply too unconventional in form for them to comprehend. The audience was confused by Brecht's methods: the mounting climaxes of the play, the "well-constructed" scenes, the loosely strung together dialogues, and the extremely simple stage settings. Dullness seemed to be the prevailing note of the evening. But Laughton's performance in the leading role was energetic and exciting. His brilliant acting in the role of Galileo was to win him many good reviews from critics who had been disappointed with his film work in the 1940's.

Laughton was disappointed with the play's reception in Los Angeles, but he kept faith with Brecht by planning a New York run later in 1947. He felt that the Hollywood audience had received the play in a manner completely different from that in which the New York audiences would receive it. Thus in December of 1947, *Galileo* opened for a run of six performances in New York, under the auspices of the Experimental Theater, an energetic young organization under the wing of the American National Theater and Academy. The Experimental Theater had been conceived in 1940 as a "showcase for actors and playwrights

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in the interest of stimulating more theatre. It was experimental both in play selection and methods of production. The experimental arrangement helped the theatre economy because of the Equity minimum salaries received by the actors, and the usual sparsity of scenery in the experimental productions. The Experimental Theatre’s first season in 1946-47 ended with the receipt of the Sidney Howard Memorial Award as “most important development in the theatre” for the year. The Galileo production opened at the group’s new theatre, the 900-seat, Maxine Elliot. The theatre ran on a subscription basis.

The New York production met with only relative success. Laughton’s performance was generally hailed by the New York critics, and much comment was made as to the cleverness of the adaptation of the original text. Laughton had turned a quite wordy, ponderous script into a rapidly paced, exciting piece of theatre. The cast was uniformly fine, including excellent supporting performances by such noted talents as John Carradine and Joan McCracken. Newsweek wrote that the production “furnished indisputable proof that even on Broadway Brecht stands out as a playwright too important to be overlooked.”

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59 Wenning, p. 60.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
was even more important for the Experimental Theater itself, marking the coming of age of the young organization. Joseph Losey's direction was strong, bringing out the best of Laughton.

But *Galileo* remains a minor effort in the twentieth century American theatre, not because of Laughton, but because of the political affiliations of Bertolt Brecht. Like many artists who are attacked because of their personal beliefs, Brecht found himself the target of conservative Americans because of his Communist sympathies. It was quite evident that Brecht was a Communist. His works echoed the teachings of Karl Marx and Lenin. He fled Nazi Germany in 1933 and lived in exile in the United States and other countries until the war had ended. In September of 1947 he had received a subpoena to appear before the Committee on Un-American Activities to testify in relation to his left-wing views. The great American post-war witch hunt was under way. Subversion was suspected everywhere. American artists like Arthur Miller were under suspicion. The Committee interrogated Brecht on October 30, 1947. Despite Brecht's obvious left wing views, he handled the Committee quite cleverly. The members had not read his works carefully, and Brecht was able to mislead them on the most important points by insisting that the English translations of his works distorted their true meanings. The Committee had no distinct
case against Brecht so it finally released him and commended him for his polite, straightforward answers. 62

In November of 1947, after returning to New York from Washington, he left America forever.

It is ironic that such a patriotic American as Charles Laughton should have become involved with a Communist artist. "Communism" was an especially dirty word in post-World War II America. Laughton, winning world renown as a storyteller and Bible reader, could hardly afford to risk his benevolent reputation in such a relationship. But he did not, naturally, know that Brecht was a Communist when he collaborated with him on _Galileo_. Kurt Singer's oversimplified remarks are typical of the conservative American's way of generalizing Laughton's predicament:

He had, more or less, been "kidnapped" by the Communists, who were very happy to have a person of Laughton's stature to lend prestige to one of their propaganda fliers. The figure of Galileo, torn between his own convictions and fear of the Inquisitor's rack, had been twisted to serve the ideological purposes of the Communists. Laughton had added new dimensions to the role, but his performance was not the whole play. The tone of the production reeked of Communist influence. To ears that could hear, the Marxist message was evident. Papers such as the _Daily Worker_ hailed it as the greatest thing on the American stage. "Laughton went beyond Stanislavsky," they said, according him the highest praise they could think of. But praise from such

62 Esslin, pp. 76-79.
sources was of dubious value. When the facts of the matter were put before Laughton by his manager, Charles saw that he was playing into Communist hands. He had fallen into bad company. There was nothing for him to do but to withdraw from the production of Galileo. 63

It is to Laughton's credit that he never criticized Brecht in any way at all. He recognized Brecht's tremendous talents and wished to work with him because of those talents, and if the production of Galileo was plagued by the political atmosphere around it, it nonetheless enabled Laughton the actor to shine in a brilliantly realistic role. When the play was revived at the Vivian Beaumont Theater in 1967 with Anthony Quayle in the title role, it again received mixed reviews. But Laughton's performance was not forgotten, as was attested by the words of critic Eric Bentley:

Not flawless, by any means, as Galileo, Charles Laughton brought far more to the role than Anthony Quayle ever will. First, he could effortlessly portray a self-indulgent guzzler; second, he was able to seem an intellectual and even a genius. The combination of physical grossness with intellectual finesse was theatrical in itself and of the essence of Brecht's drama. In regard to playing the intellectual, this too should be said. It is not done by playing intellect itself. It is done by making the characteristic attitudes of the intellectual live—emotionally. For instance, Laughton would always bristle when he talked with bureaucrats or businessmen; his Galileo was allergic to them. Conversely, when talking to his students he made it clear how much he got from their admiration of him; the classroom was his element. 64

63Singer, p. 250.

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST DRAMA QUARTETTE

Charles Laughton was an extremely active artist. His resources of energy approached the incredible. At the time of his production of Don Juan in Hell in 1951, he had recently finished work on The Blue Veil, but one of many Hollywood films in which he had appeared in a strong character role. In his film career, he had more or less fallen into the category of character actor, in Hollywood synonymous with supporting actor or featured player. But aside from his film work, his reading tours under the supervision of Paul Gregory were electrifying audiences throughout the nation. His popularity soared so much that he was able to initiate his very own television program, "This Is Charles Laughton," by 1953, highlighted by readings from the Bible, Dickens, Thomas Wolfe, James Thurber and others.

In 1951, Laughton must have seemed like Renaissance man. Television appearances, film work, lecture reading tours, work with the aspiring group of young Hollywood actors (Shelley Winters, Robert Ryan, etc.) dubbed "The Laughton Players,"65 and numerous publicity

65Singer, pp. 245-246.
appearances marked Charles as a most ubiquitous artist. The adipose performer whom most people had once recognized only because of his movie villainy had steadily broadened his field of endeavor until he developed into a master of versatility. He was never accused of being limited. His physical bulk never interfered with his agility as an artist. *Don Juan in Hell* was one of the important accomplishments of his career, demonstrating in one ebullient stroke his ability as a creator, a director, and a performer.

The Drama Quartette came into existence through the initial suggestion of Dr. Albert Rappaport, a chairman of the San Francisco Town Hall. Dr. Rappaport approached Paul Gregory, following an enjoyable evening of Laughton's readings, with the idea of four people reading a full-length play, tantamount on an expanded scale to Charles reading a shorter piece individually. Gregory, always enthusiastic about new ideas, considered the proposal for some time, and while driving to Canada for scheduled readings, he and Charles discussed the possibility of a reading production. The primary problem was choice of material. The script would certainly have to be cogent and universal in content, with

roles "meaty" enough to satisfy the artistic appetites of four talented performers. Charles, with his extensive literary knowledge, remembered George Bernard Shaw's elongated third act in *Man and Superman*, seldom performed due to its excessive length and its inherent static condition.

The *Don Juan in Hell* act of the play had as its foundation the Mozart opera, *Don Giovanni*. It is concerned, if its purpose can be captured in so brief a summation, with Shaw's philosophy of the world as expounded by Don Juan, the forsaken Doña Ana, the vindicating Statue, and the sardonic, mellifluous Devil. It is quite simply some two hours of brilliant dialogue concerning life, and love, and metaphysical awareness. It becomes, in retrospect, some of the greatest words ever written; words just waiting to be brought to life. But a perusal of the script was enough to convince Laughton that he would need four of the finest performers available in order to present such a work successfully.

Before any production could be undertaken, George Bernard Shaw's permission was necessary. Laughton wrote the master dramatist, reminding him of their meeting many years before, following a performance of Higgins in *Pygmalion* during Charles' days at the Royal Academy. The letter was well written, but the ninety-four-year-old Shaw was eccentric and his reply was impossible to
prognosticate. Weeks of anticipation and worry passed. Laughton wondered if any answer would ever come from the great playwright. When he was at the point of giving up hope as to a reply, the long-awaited document arrived. Shaw enjoyed reminding Laughton that he had predicted his success as an actor despite his disapproval of his obvious miscasting as Professor Higgins. But Shaw was not very enthusiastic about the idea of performing his famous Don Juan in Hell episode. He felt that such an experimental venture would certainly be unsuccessful. For the fact was that since the original 1903 publication of Man and Superman there had never been a successful production of the Don Juan episode, although it had been attempted many times in Britain and elsewhere. Shaw's description of the episode suggested his awareness that the act was quite superfluous to the rest of the play and was somewhat overwritten. He called the episode "nothing but a packet of words." But Laughton replied immediately reminding the pessimistic Shaw that the words of which he spoke so modestly were immortal words, and the flattery worked. Shaw stated his terms for the production, and plans for the first professional Readers' Theater presentation got under way.67

The problem of finding four brilliant performers for the Drama Quartette was handily solved by the sagacious

67Ibid., p. 257.
Laughton. Modesty notwithstanding, he found one of the needed performers in himself. The cunning, cynical Devil, spewing his negativism and narcissism, was a splendid role for the man who had already proven himself one of the great "storytellers" in the history of American entertainment. The wit and grandeur of the Devil's speeches were to be beautifully illuminated by Charles. The subtle transition from almost-likeable, ostensibly-innocuous commentator to unctuous fiend made Shaw's Devil as performed by Laughton the definitive historical villain.

Charles admitted that, in casting the show, he was not necessarily searching for the best actors in America, but for the best voices that he could find. The other three members of the Drama Quartette were notable for both their tremendous talent as actors and their interesting voices. Agnes Moorehead, a Hollywood alumnus of Orson Welles' Mercury Theatre, was chosen for the role of the pulchritudinous Doña Ana. Charles' old comrade, Sir Cedric Hardwicke, a brilliantly subtle stage luminary, was cast in the role of the Statue. Perhaps the greatest current romantic actor in the world, at least in the movie-going-public's eyes, Charles Boyer, was chosen for the role of Don Juan. Boyer was at first doubtful about taking the part, fearing that his very pronounced French accent might interfere with the proper presentation of the character, but the shrewd Laughton played upon his
notable ego and recruited the world's great screen lover. Boyer was superb in the role, a case in point of almost perfect casting. These four, Laughton, Boyer, Hardwicke, and Moorehead, complimented each other perfectly, creating an ensemble effect that had seldom been equalled. In their infernal debate, they brought out a menage of topics, ranging from evolution, super heros and dictators, to sex, war, pregnant females, and to Hell as the home of a variety of vices and virtues.

The casting of any production is a vital step in building a solid foundation for the structure that is to follow. Laughton himself had been miscast often enough in his career to realize the indispensability of good casting. The Drama Quartette's status as an experimental and innovational theatrical project did not make Laughton's directorial duties any easier. But if Laughton at times was superb as an actor, he was equally gifted in his directorial venture. The phenomenal success that Don Juan in Hell became speaks for his ability as a director. The casting was not merely good in this case, for good would not have been enough. It was exceptional, to understate the facts, and it was described by many critics through the use of that quintessential superlative, "perfect."

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But if Laughton's directorial skills were evident in the department of casting, they proved to be less obvious in his rather ostentatious ideas as to the physical aspects of the stage production. He saw the four players sitting atop tall stools, dressed in thick colored cloaks illuminated by four pools of color, scarlet for the Devil, with the Statue in white, Doña Ana in mauve, and Don Juan in orange. Paul Gregory did not like the idea, and persuaded Laughton to dress the four performers in evening apparel and to accent the performance with a note of extreme simplicity. There need not be, in Gregory's view, a great deal of background glamour to the production. He saw the success or failure of the show in the actors themselves, in their ability to communicate with audiences on the most basic human level. There was no room for fluff, or anomaly, or superficiality in presentation. The show had to be as straightforward and unpretentious as possible if it were to be as powerful as Gregory knew was possible. Thus Gregory, who usually only handled the "business" side of the shows, arranging contract negotiations, scheduling, etc., was primarily responsible for the powerful simplicity that the production radiated. The great honesty and beauty of the production was due, in large

69Singer, pp. 258-59.
measure, to this simplicity. It did not take Laughton long to realize that the mere presence of the multi-talented four interacting among themselves with the powerful words of Shaw as their communicative tools was all the show needed. The practical Gregory reminded Charles of a second advantage to this simplistic format: the flexibility that was possible for the touring production.\textsuperscript{70} As had been the case in the lecture-readings, the Drama Quartette would be playing in a great variety of places on a skip-and-jump itinerary of one and two-night stands. Tonight they might be playing in a club room, tomorrow night in a high school gymnasium, and the day after in a local church or temple. Adequate lighting would not always be possible. At times there would be no physical stage at all. Dressing room facilities might be limited. There was, in short, no room on such a tour for heavyweight scenery and elaborate lighting effects. What could not be actually shown had to be suggested by the actors. The characters were debating in Hell, yet Hell had to be sensed, suggested through the searing words of Shaw and the searing facial, vocal, and bodily attitudes of the actors. This idea of building mood, atmosphere, and character through suggestion was to become an integral part of Readers' Theater in the years

\textsuperscript{70}Ibid.
to come. It was a defining element in this first professional Readers' Theater production, and Gregory must be given credit for negotiating with Laughton in such a vital area of the show.

Descriptions of the almost-hypnotic effect of the production were many. Readers' Theater was a lively infant and the voyeurs around the crib were enthralled most by the pure nature in the production, the honest simplicity of it all. Charles' pudgy countenance appeared in the traditionally venerable position on the cover of *Time* magazine in March of 1952, and Louis Kronenberger described the show's setting, erroneously giving Charles full credit for the clever staging!

Recollecting the "drama" of intent musicians turning the pages of their scores as they play, he perched the actors on high stools, got four music stands and four outsized, green-bound scripts to place on each stand. There is no curtain. Laughton merely walks on stage, makes a few pleasant, informal remarks, and introduces the other players. They get on their stools, open their books, and the play begins.

What the audience sees is not really simplicity, however, but deep theatrical cunning. Only gradually—and sometimes not at all—do theatergoers become aware that the cast is acting, without seeming to act. "Every movement of the body, even the turning of the pages, becomes important," explains Laughton. "You mustn't move, except for a startling effect." As the tempo increases, an actor will slip from the stool and move to center stage in time for his big prose "aria." As theater-wise director Jed Harris pointed out: "By appearing to read, but actually knowing their parts by heart, they make the whole thing come alive. In a theatrical production, the power of illusion would be much more difficult."
Playwright J. B. Priestley, who saw the show in Brooklyn, was inspired to write the actors a new play. "I got excited about it. I saw that there was in it the basis of a new form. You couldn't call it drama--perhaps heightened debate or oratory."71

The argument as to the true essence of Readers' Theater, whether it is an interpretative endeavor or an acting endeavor, or a combination of the two, has raged for years now. In the case of \textit{Don Juan in Hell} it is safe to say that a great deal of histrionics went into the show, for indeed the members of the Drama Quartette, with the possible exception of mentor Laughton, had made their names as actors and not as interpretors or readers. The fact that the scripts that the Quartette used were memorized would seem to nullify the idea of a reading experience. Yet memorization was a further step in adding flexibility to the production. The performers were free to concentrate more once the lines had become familiar to them. And memorization can be an aid to proper interpretation, while not necessarily constituting an acting experience. Memorization often carries with it the connotation of a very rigid, carefully-rehearsed, planned performance, but improvisation was present in abundance in \textit{Don Juan in Hell}. The immortal lines were memorized, but the mischievous gleam in Laughton’s eye and the way he gestured at times so spontaneously, evoking

\footnote{71 "The Happy Ham," p. 63.}
laughter or pity or disgust with the briefest movement of a hand or turn of the head, was positive proof that Readers' Theater was so much more than memorization of lines. It is a veritable experience of ultimate dimensions. It is a strange hybrid. In its purest sense it is not always easy to analyze. Certainly *Don Juan in Hell* did not answer the question of a rigid definition for Readers' Theater, but it did, in presentation, suggest what the Readers' Theater experience is all about. It is an honest effort at communication through the medium of the spoken word. Although interpretation seems different from acting in its purest form, *Don Juan in Hell*’s performers crossed the line more than once without diminishing the success of the production. Performers who work well together are certainly necessary for good Readers' Theater. Imagination which spurs creativity in gesture and bodily response, which gives birth to spontaneity and improvisation is an important part of the experience. Exciting, enthusiastic and versatile performers are needed. *Don Juan in Hell* as the innovative Readers' Theater production was to prove the validity of all of these things. Its overwhelming financial and critical success, and the success in the years that followed of Readers' Theater as an art form with a place of its own in the cultural world obviate any
question of the definition of Readers' Theater as an interpretative or an acting experience.

The rehearsal period was grueling. Perfectionist Laughton was concerned with meticulous detail. Despite the years of experience of his fellow Quartette members, he drilled them like soldiers. Every gesture had to be "right" for that character at that moment in the play. Every inflection of the voice, every hesitation was vital to the success of the play. Maestro Laughton was constantly in motion, giving Boyer an extra piece of business to accentuate an important speech or steering Moorehead through a difficult section of dialogue. He would survey the Quartette from all angles, attempting to attain physical placement that was effective to a maximum degree at each important moment in the production. Although some of Charles' extensive preparation might seem picayune in retrospect, it paid off. He did not make the mistake of assuming that four great actors did not need direction, that he could simply provide scripts for them and the rest would be easy with everything falling naturally into place. He felt the very compelling responsibility to make this experimental venture a cultural success. His Galileo production had its roots in a similar dream to bring something new and different to American audiences. But the rather provincial success of the show did not fully satisfy Laughton's craving for the ideal. So he
put his artistic heart into *Don Juan in Hell*. The other three members of the Quartette were quickly infected by this spirit of idealism. They reacted to Laughton's direction beautifully in rehearsals. In performance, they reacted to each other expertly. The average audience member would never have known that the four stalwart performers had only been working together for a few weeks. Directing brilliant actors is often a matter of knowing when to remain silent; when to let the actor create in his own way. Charles was very respectful of his three performers and aware of the fine balance that had to exist between telling the actors specifically what to do and allowing them the freedom to interpret certain parts of the play on their own.

Boyer, for instance, was a noted hypochondriac. He was known for constantly checking his temperature during a day's work. He even took a thermometer on stage with him, during the national tour of *Don Juan*, and subtly concealed it with a cupped-hand over his mouth. One night Miss Moorehead threw an unexpected cue his way and Boyer had to sputter the instrument out of his mouth and continue the dialogue. Miss Moorehead, being the lone woman among three men, had her share of predictable tribulations. The witty, urbane Cedric Hardwicke commented upon her presence: "Miss Moorehead . . . naturally has

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a rough time of it, but she more than holds her own. I don't have to tell you that one woman is vastly more clever than any three men."

The most difficult problem faced by the shrewd Laughton as director of the show was not handling the temperamental Boyer or the lady in the cast. He had worked with inflated egos and sensitive personalities before. He knew people well, having encountered thousands of them in a lifetime that included an apprenticeship at Claridge's Hotel where an infinite parade of humanity had been witnessed. The question of how to direct oneself objectively arose. Some actors are lost without proper direction. They have no idea of how they look or sound on stage. Such actors lean heavily on their directors, even to the point that they are afraid to work without the particular director with whom they have been most successful. Self-direction is an arduous task. It demands of the actor an honesty and an objectivity that narcissism often distorts. It fails more often than it succeeds. Men like Laurence Olivier and Orson Welles have, at their best, been able to direct themselves successfully. It is apparent that Laughton faced an extra degree of pressure in evaluating himself for his role as the Devil. He invited constructive criticism.

73 Singer, p. 264.
from the other members of the Quartette and he used the
valuable experience that he had gained on his lecture
reading tours. Such a gargantuan talent as Laughton was
difficult for anyone to direct. His ability could be
twisted into many different forms. Unfortunately, Charles
had been misused a number of times in his career—especially
by banal Hollywood directors. Talent can be a curse when
it is of such variety that misconception may thwart it.
Charles knew this when he agreed to cast himself as the
Devil. His successful reading tours did much for his
confidence, but an ensemble production was a different
question. Fortunately Laughton’s casting was a wise
decision. John Houseman elaborated on the amelioration
of his performing attributes.

Charles Laughton has always been an actor of
great and conscious (sometimes overconscious)
style. For his virtuosity, which rarely found
expression in the films, he has sought and
finally found a perfect vehicle in the "read-
ings," classic and modern, which he has been
giving for two years now, with considerable
success, on platform, radio and television.
The experience thus gained, the lessons learned
in pitch, tempo, and acoustics; the effect of
words on an audience that has almost lost the
habit of listening to them, all these he has
now applied to the staging and presentation of
the Drama Quartette.74

Laughton never dreamed, in the beginning, that he
was to have an overwhelming "hit" on his hands. He and
Gregory decided that the experimental aspect of the

74 John Houseman, "Drama Quartette," Theatre Arts
Magazine, August, 1951, p. 15.
production deemed it too risky to open in New York City where the critics were like wolves. For the initial performance of Don Juan in Hell they chose the relatively out-of-the-way city of Stockton, California. The show opened on the evening of February 1, 1951. In its first six months of existence it played before more than one hundred and fifty thousand people, grossing close to a quarter of a million dollars. The show opened on March 30, 1951 in metropolitan Los Angeles at the Philharmonic Auditorium, devoted usually to musical concerts and similar elaborate musical spectacles. Thirty-five hundred people were fortunate enough to obtain tickets to the performance.75 The show had been sold out long in advance, and many disappointed patrons were turned away. Despite its proximity to Hollywood, Los Angeles was noted, ironically, for being an extremely emaciated show town. It had a population of over four million people in 1951, and yet it was hard-pressed to keep the lone playhouse in the city supplied with audiences for six months each year. Experimental drama and foreign drama had singularly calamitous results when attempted in Los Angeles. But such was the effect of less than two months on the road that by the time Laughton and company reached Los Angeles, there were no seats available for Don Juan in Hell. The Los Angeles

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75 Ibid., p. 96.
correspondent for *Variety*, who seldom exaggerated in his reviews, called the performance "one of the most exciting experiences of this or any other season."76

The Los Angeles showing was a precursor to the New York opening that was to endear *Don Juan in Hell* to the hearts of America's most caustic critics. But Laughton was an artist to the point that his first concern was never critical response. The touring schedule which was carefully planned by Gregory concentrated on small university towns. The Drama Quartette was presented to the people under cultural auspices. In its first six months it played thirty-four towns in twenty-three states.77 Much like the ephemeral Federal Theatre of the 1930's the Drama Quartette attempted to reach the small-town American who did not have the opportunity to experience professional entertainment. People from the surrounding small towns would converge on the university town at which the Quartette appeared. Many of them were witnessing professional acting for the first, and possibly, the last time in their lives.

It was the success of reaching the American people that pleased Laughton and Gregory most. The critics' enthusiasm and the increasingly copious gate receipts

76 Ibid., p. 14.
77 Ibid., p. 96.
were insignificant in comparison with the artistic satisfaction gained from such an experimental venture. The altruism inherent in the entire conception and execution of *Don Juan in Hell* gave the theatre a better name in parts of America where it had either been scorned or simply disregarded due to its pointed absence from the scene.

By March of 1952, approximately a year after its opening for a one-night stand in Los Angeles, the Drama Quartette arrived in Manhattan for an eight-week run. It marked the third trip for the celebrated four into New York City. The Quartette played a total of fifty-two cities in forty-two states. Its financial success had been astounding. It was not at all unusual for the Quartette to gross ten thousand dollars for a single performance. Weekly profits on the tour were in the vicinity of thirty thousand dollars. The gross profits of the company in its little more than a year of existence were in excess of one million dollars. These figures are even more phenomenal when it is considered that the cast disbanded temporarily in late 1951 to allow time for movie acting. Laughton embarked on another of his solo reading tours during the three months of Quartette inactivity and for six weeks' work was rewarded with some ninety thousand dollars of the one hundred and sixty-four thousand dollar gross. Laughton was happy to remind
the skeptics in the entertainment world that contrary to their ideas of popular fare, "people everywhere have a common shy hunger for literature." 78

When cultural value and artistic merit are considered in the American theatre, the last word, fortunately or not, usually lies with the New York critics. The Drama Quartette’s success on the road had prompted the Variety headline "STICKS OUTSHINE BROADWAY." 79 Don Juan had outgrossed such musical hits as South Pacific in many cities that it played. 80 Businessmen, school children, senior citizens, and housewives in Utah, Louisiana, Pennsylvania, and California were enthralled by the Quartette. It received long and enthusiastic ovations wherever it played. But New York was an altogether different atmosphere. Perhaps the quite simple presentation would not capture the hearts of the sophisticated coterie of New Yorkers. When the Quartette opened on October 22, 1951, at Carnegie Hall, there was a great deal of anticipation in the air. The next day everyone breathed easier. Walter Kerr opened his Herald Tribune column with the statement, "It is one of those theatrical ironies that the most stimulating show in New York last

79 Singer, p. 260.
80 Ibid.
night is no longer available this morning."81

The other major New York critics praised the performance lavishly. The venerable Brooks Atkinson described the show as follows:

Attired in evening clothes and standing before microphones they pretend that they are going to read their parts from a manuscript of the drama. But they are actors. The reading they gave last evening at Carnegie Hall is a thrilling performance. For they have looked below the surface gabble of Shaw's lines into their meaning; and without forgetting that he has a sardonic style, they have become his advocates. This is not only a performance but an intellectual crusade, and the First Drama Quartette comes to New York bearing ideas, ideals, and philosophical passion.82

William Hawkins was quite perspicuous in his praise of the show in the New York World Telegram, hitting at the heart of the Readers' Theater experience in which the audience supplies the details for itself—aided by the performers' suggestiveness.

It is both brilliant and generous. Brilliant because it conveys so expertly a glittering argument that is allowed to progress entirely on its own terms. Nothing interferes with the words.


It is generous because it leaves so much to your own imagination. You supply what setting and action you want, no more.83

Unfortunately, the successful New York opening was marred somewhat by technical difficulties. The microphones were not properly adjusted and were so disturbing to the ears of the capacity Carnegie Hall crowd that it shouted for the Quartette to speak louder in the beginning. Critic Robert Garland felt that this "led to an uneasiness on the part of the readers and restlessness on the part of the listeners."84 But this criticism seems a bit picayune in light of the total impact of the performance. The Don Juan in Hell act had never been performed professionally in New York before, and the audience received it most appreciatively. The critical response reached its zenith with the presentation of a special award to the Drama Quartette production by the New York Drama Critics Circle.

The individual performers received praise from the critics at large. The most common criticism of any one performer was directed towards Charles Boyer. Many viewers felt that his accent was not consistent with the


character of Don Juan. But if his French accent were a weakness, it did not overshadow his very powerful total performance. Walter Kerr wrote:

Boyer's work in the first act was relatively disappointing. Forced to cope not only with an accent but with the fact that the lighter and more impudent of Shaw's lines are decidedly English in feeling, he found the rhythm of the language working against him. But in the later portions of the piece, where Shaw is at his most serious and persuasive, the opportunities for straightforward and dynamic reading swiftly become greater, and Boyer rose to a level of emotional performance that hasn't been matched on the New York stage in decades. There was a moment when he seized his microphone and thrust it forward in a spasm of urgency that was at least twice as exciting as the top thrill in an ordinary melodrama. And when he came to Shaw's climactic speech describing the inhabitants of Hell—a listing of categories, a procession of balanced phrases which in the hands of a casual performer might well have proved intolerable—Mr. Boyer drained it of every nuance not by picking at it quietly but by hammering out its contrasts at the pitch of his powers. He did not dissect the speech; he waved it like a flag over the auditorium. Mr. Boyer is no romantic leading man, whatever the movies have done to him; he is a serious actor of extraordinary ability.

It is to Laughton's credit, as well as Boyer's, that such a tribute was paid to an actor who had become a movie "star" in the world's eyes, with his true ability often hidden behind the conventions of Hollywood. Boyer's Don Juan changed his image in the eyes of many and gave him great artistic satisfaction, something that often eluded him in his film work.

Cedric Hardwicke’s role as the Statue was the smallest of the four, but he fitted perfectly into the scheme of things. He accented it with his cunning humor and a subtlety that was supreme. William Hawkins described him in the following terms:

Cedric Hardwicke plays the Statue, the traditional military man. In lines it is a smaller role, but with timing, gesture and a full realization of the character’s self-satisfaction, he makes it a solid quantity of high value in the mixture.86

The elegant Agnes Moorehead had the reputation of being able to play any type of female from her days with the Mercury Theatre company of Orson Welles. Her part as Doña Ana was the least rewarding of the four, but she played it to the hilt. Brooks Atkinson was delighted with the manner in which she illuminated the social graces of the lady with “tongue-in-cheek humor.”87 Robert Garland felt that she resembled “some haunting Florentine painting.”88 William Hawkins wrote of her “exquisite poses” and her movements like those of “a self-appointed queen.”89

The critical opinions of Miss Moorehead’s performance bring forth another vital element of the Readers’ Theater experience, the inherent power of the mere presence of

86Hawkins, as quoted in Coffin, p. 193.
87Atkinson, as quoted in Coffin, p. 193.
88Garland, as quoted in Coffin, p. 194.
89Hawkins, as quoted in Coffin, p. 193.
the performer onstage even when he is not speaking. Both Hardwicke and Miss Moorehead, with much fewer lines than Laughton or Boyer, made their presences felt during their silences. The great ensemble effect of the production was due to the actors listening to their fellow actors when they had finished their own lines. The eye had little opportunity to wander away from the stage at any moment during the production, for there was always someone to watch, and that someone was not necessarily the person speaking. The thrill of the production lay in the constant switching of focus that the audience member underwent during the debate. It brought about an exciting effect, keeping the audience off balance to the degree that they did not know what to expect next.

If Boyer's performance was surprising to many critics, Laughton's was rather expected. His brilliant solo readings had endeared him to millions of Americans, and the role of the Devil seemed his cup of tea. The ultimate villainous role was in the hands of the man who had made a career out of portraying villains. Brooks Atkinson's critique stated the case faithfully.

As the Devil, moon-faced Mr. Laughton acts with diabolical gusto and gives dramatic weight to the whole performance. The long, closely-reasoned speeches he gives with great spontaneity, putting the emphasis where it belongs, using the words carefully, pointing the meaning with gestures and movements.
it a masterful performance and you cannot be wrong.  

Walter Kerr was even more vivid:

The first act was Mr. Laughton's, the second, Mr. Boyer's. Laughton opened the evening with a modest and ingratiating setting of the stage. But the shyness, the coy mannerisms, did not fool anyone; Mr. Laughton is a killer. He was out for blood, and within a very few minutes he was drawing it. He wagged his head, chucked his chin into his collar, went in for the twinkle and the double-twinkle, and then--just as you were fearing that some damage might be done by way of cuteness--he let rip with Shaw's blasting of man as a creature essentially in love with death in a manner that tore him to tatters, but not the sense of the speech. This might be ham, but it was delicious.

The Quartette performed once more on its initial trip to New York City, on the following Thursday evening at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. They returned to New York on two other occasions, their longest run being the eight-week engagement in early 1952. Thus the Quartette grew into something of a legend. The brilliant performances, the informality of the presentation, the de-emphasis of props and scenery, and the expert ensemble effect made the show popular wherever it played. Audiences were put at ease in the very beginning with the informal, improvised speech from Laughton, and they never lost the very personal feeling of being involved in the activities.

90 Atkinson, as quoted in Coffin, p. 193.
91 Kerr, as quoted in Coffin, p. 195.
they were observing. Although Shaw, who died in 1950, did not live to witness the success of the work of which he was so dubious, he did have a certain respect for Laughton as he proved when he allowed him to produce the work. Laughton's respect was reciprocal. He kept the work of Shaw as intact as possible, cutting only what he felt was unnecessary to his conception of the production. He even kept the brilliantly written stage directions of Shaw, serving at times as asides to the main dialogue. Laughton and Hardwicke read these side remarks quite beautifully, adding much to the performance.

The success of the Quartette brought about the elaborate production of Stephen Vincent Benet's long epic poem "John Brown's Body," from the Laughton-Gregory team, in 1952. The Benet work was over three hundred and fifty pages long. Its total reading time was in excess of twelve hours. While still on tour with Don Juan in Hell, Charles cut the long Civil War poem to two hours without adding or changing a single word. The purpose of the production was to evoke the style and atmosphere of the ancient Greek theatre.93

In contrast to the Shaw work, the Benet production consisted of a Drama Trio, with each of the three actors reading a multiple number of parts. A chorus of twenty, serving collectively as a fourth performer, vocalized in

93Singer, p. 275.
the background, helping to carry the dramatic action forward as the chorus did in the ancient Greek drama. Gregory recruited film actor Tyrone Power as one of the trio's members. Power had seen the Quartette perform and was eager to become a part of the new venture. The Lincoln-esque Raymond Massey was chosen as a second member, due to his past experience in playing the famous president as well as to his stature as a performer. The female member of the Trio was the most difficult to cast, but Laughton came to the rescue and suggested Judith Anderson, with whom he had been working in the film Salome at Columbia studios. Miss Anderson was a celebrated actress of extreme range and depth. Her performance in the 1947 Medea had won overwhelming critical approval. She played a pertinacious Northern mother, the irate Sally Dupre, and the God-admonishing Mary Lou Wingate, and gave each of the characters a sense of verisimilitude.

The major difference between the Quartette and the Trio was the much more elaborate presentation of John Brown's Body. Walter Schumann composed an intricate musical accompaniment for the heroic story. Atmospheric lighting effects were utilized. There was considerable movement by the performers, much more so than in the Shaw production. The only stage property used was a

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94 Ibid., pp. 275-77.
three-foot-tall railing, or "acting bar," for the actors to lean against, or sit on, or pray before, or to use in concealing themselves from the enemy. The particular use of the railing was dictated by the type of character being played at the time. The conception of the railing grew out of further consideration for the flexibility of the show. The Trio began performing in California and toured the nation, following in the footsteps of the Quartette. The two productions ran simultaneously for several months. When the Benet work reached New York on February 16, 1953, it was greeted with mixed reviews.95 Laughton's absence as a performer was, no doubt, a detriment to the show, but he was committed to the Quartette, solo readings, and film work, and was only able to be present backstage at a Trio performance when his busy schedule allowed.

Although the Trio was financially, and to a certain degree, critically successful, it lacked the simplicity and the force of the great Shaw work that preceded it. The philosophy inherent in the Benet work was ably conveyed by the actors. Miss Anderson and Massey turned in their customarily fine performances, and Power, much like Boyer had done earlier, surprised the critics with what a movie star could do. But the Trio's work

95Ibid., p. 279.
was less important than the Quartette's, being merely a more technically elaborate continuation of what *Don Juan in Hell* had begun. Laughton was praised for his thoughtful direction, and Gregory won another feather for his cap as the impresario who brought culture to the masses, but in spite of the plaudits, the Benet work was, relative to the innovative Quartette, a bit too cluttered. The Greek chorus in the background evoked a spectacular, larger-than-life feeling that was fine for New York's Century Theatre, but that must have destroyed any feeling of intimacy, of audience sharing, in the small towns of America where it played.

The Drama Quartette innovation shares with the solo reading innovation, the distinction of being the most successful experimental venture that the great Laughton undertook in his long career. The birth of professional Readers' Theater grew out of the solo readings of Laughton, and was, in one sense, merely a continuation of those readings, with several performers instead of one. The overwhelming financial success of both the readings and the Quartette contrasts vastly with the poverty of both the Old Vic season and the transitory *Galileo* production. But Laughton's artistic experimentation should never be measured in pecuniary terms. Just as the solo readings prompted similar tours from other artists, such as Emlyn Williams, the Quartette influenced later Readers'
Theatre productions, beginning with John Brown's Body. Such professional Readers' Theater productions as producer Paul Shyre's autobiographical three-show series of Sean O'Casey: Pictures in the Hallway, I Knock at the Door, and Drums Under the Window, Gene Frankel's exciting Brecht on Brecht with the six actors moving about a platform with a giant picture of Brecht hanging from the ceiling, John Dos Passos' mighty U.S.A. in which dialogue was delivered in the form of news flashes, and Dylan Thomas's clever Under Milk Wood with each actor, in the tradition of the Trio, reading several different parts were but a few of the many successful shows that followed what the Drama Quartette innovation had begun. In the 1960's such blockbusters as The World of Carl Sandburg, Spoon River Anthology, and In White America have gained great popularity. Readers' Theater, like all good theaters, has served as a mirror that reflects the social issues of mankind. Shaw's stirring words were a fitting beginning for much of the profound social and philosophical commentary that has followed in the medium of Readers' Theater.

But despite the popularity of Readers' Theater today, it is hard to conceive of a show as overtly powerful as Don Juan in Hell was in 1951 and 1952. Readers'

Theater today is hard pressed to compete with musical comedy, but the Quartette was known to outdraw popular musicals playing the same city. It achieved such financial and critical success under the most difficult conditions. Laughton had gone out on a limb before, and failed for his efforts. But he had the courage to attempt something new once again and he was richly rewarded, as were the other members of the Quartette, the fortunate audiences they played before, and, most important of all, the American theater in general. Laughton's constant quest to discover a new way of doing something old was spurred by an indomitable spirit. Although Laughton the man—the reader, the actor, the director, the innovator, the romanticist, the perfectionist, the supreme artist—is no longer with us, that spirit lives on.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

Few Hollywood film stars were as active outside of the cinema world as Charles Laughton. Because of the mass appeal of the cinema, he is remembered primarily as a movie star. But his work outside of the movies was not, as is the case in the careers of many film stars, intended to be extra publicity to increase his popularity as a Hollywood actor. His major theatrical innovations were undertaken as projects to balance his career as an artist, and not as projects to support his image as a star. It is unfortunate that so many people seem to remember him only for his movie roles, for he was versatile to such a degree that his career took an entirely different course than those of his fellow film stars. Laughton seldom had more than one project going at any given time. He would skip from a film to a solo-reading engagement to work with his group of young Shakespearean actors to a planning meeting with an artist like Brecht. On his solo reading tours, he appeared in person before hundreds of thousands of Americans. Millions heard his voice on recordings and countless others became acquainted with him through television or radio.
He was not, then, merely a movie actor. He was instead one of the great artistic minds of this century in the field of American entertainment.

The pattern of his four major theatrical innovations consists of a series in which an unsuccessful project is followed by a project of overwhelming critical and financial success as well as personal satisfaction. The 1933-34 Old Vic season marked Laughton's comeuppance as an actor. He was a failure at Shakespeare, and he never really overcame that fact for the rest of his life. But his second major theatrical innovation, the magnificent solo readings that electrified his audiences in the 1940's, marked his rise to the top in an experimental project. His work with Brecht on the ephemeral production of Galileo was unsuccessful to a great degree because of the dark atmosphere of a suspicious America that feared Brecht's left wing affiliations. Laughton's salary for Galileo was the Equity minimum, his performance in the leading role won praise from tough critics, and yet the production itself is not even mentioned in many accounts of Laughton's career. But the Galileo innovation was followed by the creation of the fabulous First Drama Quartette that toured the nation with the first Readers' Theater production, Shaw's Don Juan in Hell. The effect of the Drama Quartette on future Readers' Theater
productions can scarcely be measured. It was the definitive production, complete with magnificent performers, excellent script, and tasteful and forceful stage format. Its financial and critical success as a new form of theater was unprecedented in 1951.

But despite the relative disappointments of the Old Vic season and the Galileo project, it must be remembered that Laughton used his adversities as steps to achieving his future successes. And there were good points to come out of both of the unsuccessful projects. At the Old Vic he learned that he could read Shakespeare's works better than he could act them. And he developed his voice so that it was a boon in his film career. The Galileo production gave him the opportunity to work with a foreign artist, Bertolt Brecht, and to give a really successful stage performance once again after many years of absence from the legitimate stage.

Despite his talents as an actor, it is safe to say that Laughton was equally gifted as a reader. His storytelling activities touched the entire nation, and helped him to realize that acting was only one outlet for his great talent. He also proved through his innovations that he was a much greater comic performer than he was a serious actor. During the Old Vic season his most outstanding roles had been his comic ones. His readings were often accented by humorous overtones, and his Devil in
Don Juan in Hell was frequently as funny as he was frightening. Even in his most serious portrayals, such as Galileo, the humorous side of Laughton came through often enough to entertain audiences.

Laughton's directorial work was yet a further example of his versatility. Don Juan in Hell, John Brown's Body, An Evening with Elsa Lanchester, and The Caine Mutiny Court-martial were critically hailed plays of the 1950's. His only directorial effort in films, 1955's The Night of the Hunter, is an excellent study in atmospheric detail.

It is always difficult to describe a stout man as being versatile, for the adjective somehow connotes lightness and agility. But Laughton was a marvelous exception to the rule. His mountains of flesh never stopped him from attempting any role that he felt was worthy of his efforts. Although he was physically unappealing to many people, he was in the truest sense of the word, a beautiful man. We may never see his like again.
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