



## Jean Anouilh, a playwright in exile

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By: Melinda Camber Porter

The pitfalls of quoting and reorganizing a conversation become apparent when you talk to Jean Anouilh: to communicate the wry humour, the tone of good-natured resignation which accompanies his remarks, would demand a dramatic representation. Sitting in the lobby of a Lausanne hotel, he is oblivious to the reaction his views provoke in the curious spectators. It is difficult to tell whether he intends to set himself up as a fall-guy in order to criticize a society in which he has served and from which he has exiled himself.

“I am played in private theatres, so I write for the bourgeoisie. One has to rely on the people who pay for their places; the people who support the theatre are bourgeois. But this public has changed: they have such a terror of not being in touch, of missing out on the fashionable event that if they no longer exist as a decisive force. I think this public has lost its head. They now say that a play can’t be that good if they can understand it. My plays are not hermetic enough. It’s rather Molièresque, don’t you think?”

Anouilh might laugh at the foibles of his public, but his exile in Switzerland suggests a refusal to comply. He once referred to the audience as the most important actor in a performance, Disillusioned with his principal actor, one wonders to whom he addresses his plays. His past successes have been assured a public by being incorporated in school syllabuses throughout the world. But he no longer writes for the bourgeoisie or any avant-garde.

“Intellectuals bore me. They have their private, exclusive language. I can understand them, but I think the theatre is a rudimentary art because it is collective. It’s not the same as addressing a reader or the audience in a cinema. Past dramatists, including the Greeks and Shakespeare, have known, by instinct, that the theatre is not a hermetic art. Even the great ancient philosophers try to express themselves clearly and simply. The mind is still the same instrument and the Greeks knew as much about human nature as we do.”

Anouilh, out of sympathy with modernist theatre, fraternizes with his mentors, supplements contemporary gossip and cabal with historical anecdote: he talks of Molière as if he were a close friend. Every generalization takes flight in a detailed hagiography of the playwrights he learns from and is forced to measure himself against. But his easy familiarity with the past can get him into difficulties with his contemporaries:

“Nowadays, imbeciles think intelligently; one can appear to be intelligent in modern terms while remaining essentially stupid. The intellect has been popularized and mass-produced. Once it was reserved for the innately intelligent people. Engines should only be made for the Rolls-Royce. I’m not a socialist and I come from very simple origins. That’s not in good taste nowadays, is it?”

Anouilh's reverence for views that were once conformist transforms him into an outcast and rebel. His inability or refusal to voice views that are acceptable to contemporary society makes him appear to be a writer coming before, rather than in advance of his time. But this does not mean that his views are any the less subversive.

"I do not use the instrument that is used for thought. I work by instinct; I never intend to communicate a defined idea. I never know what will happen in my plays; they aren't reflective, serious or thought out. When I've finished a play it doesn't obsess or haunt me afterwards. It's a job, and that's how Molière and Shakespeare saw it. I get irritated when people call me a man of letters. I have a defence mechanism against the world of literature. The idea that I make a living by exposing my states of mind is very disturbing for me. Aristocrats, in the past, shuddered at the thought that they might be classed as writers."

This heretic form of traditionalism is revealed in his latest play, *L'Arrestation*, which is showing in Paris at the moment. He attempts to reinterpret the Day of Judgment in his own terms, which disregard atheistic and Christian doctrine. He approaches a disquieting subject with supreme calm and reassurance. Humour, which he uses as a weapon in both his life and work, alleviates the macabre plot: one learns that, the action is merely the imaginings of a criminal in his death agony. But it is a double-edged wit which prevents the audience from aggrandizing and elevating the problem death. One is even more surprised to learn that Anouilh derived such fun from a tragic moment in his own life:

"At my father's death-bed I said to myself that he was sinking into the interior of his last dream. He was smiling happily. I see no reason why one has to give up one's last second of consciousness. I believe sincerely that one can live forever that last moment of one's life; but there is an operative side which transforms the worst horrors. The theatre allows everything to become a game. In the theatre, you lie for nothing. The actors mime the feelings they do not feel. It's a religious phenomenon—a ceremony of lying. But it resembles the games of a child. When children pretend to be ill so as to avoid going to school, they are indulging in a lie that is close to the theatrical lie."

Throughout his career, Anouilh has tried to persuade us that he is like an irresponsible child, having a good time, or a conjuror who is able to move puppets but never ideas; in the last resort, he refers to himself as a shoemaker, except that he happened to make shows and not shoes. This attempt to absolve himself of responsibility for his views might be intended to save the public from feeling the need to listen to justifications or critical interpretations. But it becomes more suspect when Anouilh tells you that he is intoxicated by the power he experiences when watching his plays performed.

"What is so marvellous about the theatre is that you have a group of people with different fantasy worlds and lives and you impose another reality on them. You impose a reality that is not real, but you make it real for a group of people. They abandon selves to a collective reality. It is only possible in the theatre. With a book or a film you re-read your fantasies in solitude. I am often ashamed of the feeling



of power this gives me.”

Indeed, during the Occupation, when *Antigone* was performed, Anouilh managed to create a collective experience for people with very different fantasies and lives: Resistance and the both the Nazis thought that Anouilh was on their side. Anouilh will not take a stand on this matter. Such an extraordinary and extreme situation does, however, highlight the disquieting implications of his playful stance:

“When people ask me whose side I was on, Antigone's or Creon's, I can't reply. To write a scene convincingly you must be on both sides. You must be two characters at different moral poles.”

Yet again it is the distant past which offers an explanation and gives an authenticity to Anouilh's apparently hypocritical position: the most traumatic and terrifying experience was coupled with a fortuitous, but extraordinary joy. In his formative years, two poles of experience became indissolubly linked. He relates one of the few memories of childhood to him very recently: for the first time he became conscious of his motive for and method of writing:

“My mother was a musician and so I would go to operettas every evening, for about four years. I still know all the scores by heart. I still see the theatre through the stereotypes of these operettas. Anyhow, one evening I was taken to a puppet show of *Romeo and Juliet* and I stayed out in the cold too long and caught a fever. I nearly died. But during the eight days of delirium I relived continuously that puppet show. And the images recurred with less violence throughout the 40 days of fever. I think that the "extraordinary shock of seeing a puppet show prolonged and realistic during the eight days of a mortal fever imprinted me with this desire to write plays.”

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