



Anglomania in Paris

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Melinda Camber Porter interviews Patrice Chéreau

In Paris at the moment you could spend every evening at the theater seeing British plays and you might be tempted to conclude that Parisian audiences are verging on anglomania. But after seeing Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion* deprived of wit and message, and an unrecognizable Pinter play which turns out to be *The Collection*, you might also wonder why directors chose an English text. All too often the original is lost in the process of adaptation. Only a minority of directors who have taken up this challenge succeed in providing a faithful yet accessible interpretation.

In one of the converted barns of the rambling Cartoucherie de Vincennes, a few steps from Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil and a pony club one is surprised to stumble on an imaginative and startling solution to the problem. Stuart Seide, a young American director together with the talented and committed company of the Théâtre d'Ivry have treated John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* with loving respect and intelligent daring. Seide neither chose to update nor to offer a slavishly faithful interpretation. He retains and explicates the atmosphere of the early seventeenth century by means of a simple but effective device.

Extracts from Shakespeare, Donne, and Webster are integrated into a ruthlessly simplified and shortened version of Ford's text. These serve to underline and clarify the central themes of the play; but more important, they situate the play in its historical context and extend its field of reference to reveal Ford's work as an expression of the epoch. Seide's adaptation gives the play a Racinian clarity and austerity and yet retains the rhythm and the earthy, vivid feel of the original.

The verbal symbolism is pared down and finds expression on the set: the stage consists of a banqueting table and at either end are two raised platforms containing a bed and a throne – three regions of earthly pleasure which, in turn, become cemeteries for the dead. The only prop is a clay bowl of fruits, placed in the center of the stage which again expresses the intimate connection between death and sensuality. Every detail of the performance is made relevant to this central theme. As Annabella's lover and brother dies, his murderers hand him the instruments of his death, two glasses of full-blooded red wine, which they tilt and let slowly trickle to the earth.

Seide applies another process of stylization which captures and controls the violent, melodramatic quality of the play. Each actor has a set of gestures and a particular rhythm and tone of declamation proper to his role. Seide told me that he had attempted to integrate the lessons of Japanese theater, commedia dell'arte and mime.

In the basement of the Recamier, underneath Bourseiller's grotesquely and ineptly lavish production of Genet's *Le Balcon*, a young woman called Garance is making a courageous attempt to introduce Sylvia



Plath's dramatic work, even though the main body of her work is, as yet, unfamiliar to the French. The play, *Three Women*, is, in fact, a poem for three voices, originally intended for the radio. The powerful lyricism exists at the expense of dramatic force. Despite Garance's efforts, the performance degenerates into a poetry reading, an activity which is less popular than in England. But the production initiated the publication of an excellent translation of *Three Women*, and this is probably the best method of introducing Plath's work.

Patrice Chéreau, the maturing *enfant terrible* of French theater is continuing to find his inspiration in British drams. Five years ago at the new *Théâtre de France*, he provoked and startled with his production of *Richard II*. Now, at the same theater at Villeurbanne-Lyon, he is directing Edward Bond's *Lear* (whose work has already been made familiar by Claude Regy's production of *Saved*). Chéreau's production is macabre in the original and modern sense of the word. It is an exploration of death and dying in terms of the earthly and the living. As in the medieval *danse macabre* there is a morbid fascination with the material, carnal aspects of death, without hope of renewal or rebirth. With the help of Richard Peduzzi's desolate, blighted landscape and the acting ability of Francois Simon and Gerard Desarthe, Chéreau creates an unpalatable image of human life on the verge of annihilation.

Although such views are reminiscent of those expressed in the literature of the waning middle ages, Chéreau points to their relevance today: "What I am trying to say is, what revolutionary situation today can give one any hope? It is like the magic mountain; it withdraws the closer you get to it. Or like the promised land: it is always promised to future generations. And so, just as some people feed on hope, I feed on despair. For me, it is a spur to action." Chéreau is, however, aware that his audience might not find the spectacle of absolute despair as invigorating as he does. "There is in Bond an immense derision, a terrible humor. Bond is English. If one doesn't give back the play its roots one ends up organizing a museum of horrors. And that isn't interesting."

But the particular dimension of English humor that Chéreau strives for is missing from his production. Translation of attitude seems to be as problematic as language translation and the adaptation of differing theatrical traditions. But the tragic and the macabre lends itself more easily to French adaptation; the comic resists. And so do the Parisian audiences: they are prepared to make the effort for the sanctified, familiar dramatists. The experimental or relatively unknown dramatist is rarely given a hearing. It seems that anglomania is blighted by the prevalent and generalized Parisian vogue for nostalgia.

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