

PRAXIS: An Editorial Statement

By Kent Neely

The Happenings of the '60s, Robert Wilson's *Overture to Ka Mountain*, Peter Brook's original French production of *The Mahabharata* and Squat Theatre's storefront/street theatre all played with the geographic relationship between performer and audience. Within the last two decades artists have created site specific performances often choosing the locations for social or political relevance. Examples of this sort are reviewed by Marvin Carlson, Mark Jennison and Johan Callens in this issue of PRAXIS.

Upon considering Carlson's and Jennison's observations, one is struck with thoughts about the geographical operation of the performances. Carlson notes the differing effects of two New York productions, one in the Upper East Side versus a more bohemian one in lower Manhattan. Perhaps the construction of the productions and the audience response is attached to the social and political privilege (or lack thereof) that functions geographically. Since these are site specific performances, their relevance and significance are inextricably tied to geography.

Performance relevance and significance have been studied vis-à-vis gender, sexuality and race. Should we not apply a geographic paradigm in performances positioned when the relevance is contextualized by location? The unique experience of viewing a performance within a geographic context affects one's intellectual response which emphasizes, if not preserves, the prevailing political and social conditions which surround the event. The text of the performance becomes intertwined with these conditions and the existing political and social situation becomes manifest in geographic divisions or boundaries that may, in fact, be self perpetuating. Some might argue that geography can be a means of affirming identity or even solidarity within a given group (i.e. the Castro district of San Francisco, East Los Angeles or Harlem). But the same geography defines marginality as surely as reservations do for various Native American tribes.

Jennison's review of *Le Tartuffe* is a good case. Molière's play deals with an impostor, greed and hierarchically maintained justice (in the form of the king's messenger). But the geographical context of Le Theatre du Soleil's production imbues the text with additional significance: terrorism, ethnic/religious segregation and the possibility of physical injury. Jennison remarks on Ariane Mnouchkine's protest of the West's (read United States) solution for the Bosnian situation. The performance becomes intentionally ironic within the current political and social context of France and of the former Yugoslavia. It functions on a theatrical level, certainly, but also as metatheatre due to its geography.

Although Johan Callens' review of *Edmond* is less affected by geography, relevant questions still apply to the Théâtre Varia production. Mamet is arguably the most "American" playwright currently working (excusing such worthy contemporaries as Sam Shepard and August Wilson). Is the impact of Mamet's indictment of America's values as potent when produced in Belgium and names are localized to French referents? Likewise, would the loss of emotional and intellectual relevance be ameliorated by techniques which manipulate the audience's actual and perceived proximity to the performance by stage design and the use of film?

Some other experimental theatre artists articulate geographically imposed and related significance. For instance, Ping Chong's *Deshima* and *Chinoiserie* play upon geographic segregation as a function of racism. *Deshima* is the name of the island used to separate Dutch traders from their Japanese clients. Chong travels from those early trade encounters through time and space to present other instances when power and privilege functioned geographically including Commodore M. C. Perry's treaty with Japan and the infamous internment camps of World War Two.

Chong goes further in his recent *Chinoiserie*. That production places Chong as subject and voice for the intersection of geographically defined divisions in power and privilege. Chong interweaves his own experiences of racism with larger stories about East and West; from the Opium Wars to the tea trade with George III's England to the experience of a Chinese woman in America. Chong's role as narrator blurs the division between being within and being outside performance just as he has been within and been outside the margin of geographically dictated and maintained racism.

American consciousness and history are attached to a predilection for geographically defined divisions of power and privilege: whether Manifest Destiny, the Monroe Doctrine, the Spanish American War, Desert Storm or even the IFOR occupation of Bosnia. It is a consciousness that dates to the opening of America's West. Stephen Ambrose's excellent biography of Meriwether Lewis (*Undaunted Courage*, Simon and Schuster, 1996) gives an insight into the attitudes which colored Lewis and Clark's interaction with Native Americans and their mission of finding a water route for trade; one that would supposedly benefit the Indians. But the expedition's imperial nature characterized a country whose population was at once fascinated by the wilderness and determined to conquer it (see William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann *The West of the Imagination*, W.W. Norton & Company, 1986). The successful conquering of the West has pervaded popular cultural depictions of the past century. Richard Slotkin's exhaustive critique *Gunfighter Nation* (Atheneum, 1992) identifies the movie idioms which confirm geographically established divisions that have been maintained violently.

Geographic divisions are a xenophobic answer to a shrinking world (as implied with Jennison's review of *Le Tartuffe*). Some might see a future postmodern world redefined in cyberspace as an infinite and boundless space devoid of geographical divisions. In fact the same conditions prevail as in physical geography; access is a function of economic privilege and separation is accommodated by discreet divisions: "chat rooms," web pages and e-mail addresses.

Xenophobia ensures geographic separation as a response to the interaction between different racial, ethnic, religious (et cetera) groups; a response which merely perpetuates xenophobia. The performances noted here are part of a worthy discourse. The theatre's unique feature is its socialization function, people communally experiencing the same art. The performances reviewed by Carlson, Jennison and Callens demonstrate the potential for viewing, understanding and tolerating difference.

C'est la Vie by Veronique Guillaud. Lincoln Center, New York, July 1995. *Junior Black's Office*, a project created by Chashama, with assistance from Movement Research. Church Street between Thomas and Worth, New York, September 17 - October 8, 1995.

Given the fact that the theatre, and especially the modern realistic theatre, has so deeply voyeuristic a quality, it is a bit surprising that our common metaphor for the opening we peep through is this "picture frame" stage, suggesting a quality of display or ostentation, rather than a "window" stage. Or perhaps it is not so surprising, since this latter metaphor might indicate a bit too clearly that in safe darkness of the theatre we are often rather more like titillated voyeurs outside our neighbors' windows than like staid aesthetes coolly contemplating the contents of "picture frames" in sanitary and well- lighted museum galleries.

Film-makers have much more often called attention to this aspect of their work than have theatre artists. One thinks immediately, of course, of Hitchcock's wonderful *Rear Window*, though Peeping Toms and views through windows have long been a familiar film trope, especially in thrillers and suspense films. The symbolists, both as painters and as dramatists, were fascinated by windows, offering glimpses not only into domestic secrets but even into souls, as can be seen in Maeterlinck's *Interior*, Hofmannsthal's *The Mine at Falun* and perhaps most familiarly in Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata*. More recently, plays commenting metatheatrically upon their similarity to window peeping are much rarer, though Anthony Schaffer's comedy thriller *Murderer* comes to mind, featuring an ingenious protagonist who "stages" fake murders in front of his plate glass windows so that his neighbors will become accustomed to such display and suspect nothing when he really murders his wife. Tadeusz Kantor in *The Dead Class* had actors bring window frames on stage to appear behind, probably quoting the symbolist painters. Experimental theatre in New York has also explored the window as stage, perhaps most memorably in the early work of Squat Theatre in New York, which considered the reactions of passersby to the activities inside their street-front plate glass window a critical part of the performance. Again, interestingly, these various productions emphasized less the voyeuristic activity of the spectator than the actors' use of a window as a means of attracting and focusing the attention of a potential viewer.

Coincidentally, New York has recently seen two large-scale environmental theatre works centrally and practically concerned with the stage as window and the window as stage, both of which engaged in an unusually direct way the frequently unremarked voyeuristic quality of this activity. In July of 1995 two well established New York performing organizations Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors (founded in 1970) and Dancing in the Streets (founded in 1983) co-

commissioned a site-specific “exploration of voyeurism” by French performance artist Veronique Guillaud called *C'est La Vie*. The work, according to its creator, was inspired by riding an outdoor segment of the Paris Metro, glimpsing through a window fragments of the “homes and daily lives of strangers.” Guillaud first experimented with this concept in a 1993 production in San Francisco, *Free Fall*, for which audience members sat on the steps of the Old Mint Museum to observe actions in the windows of the Aston Pickwick Hotel across the street.

For *C'est La Vie* five writers (Lucy Grealy, Gil Kofman, Ann Nocenti, Rob Singer and Peter Steinfeld) created 51 sequences, lasting a total of approximately an hour and a half, each sequence performed by one to six actors behind lighted windows in the Empire Hotel, across Columbus Avenue from Lincoln Center. Chairs were provided at the front of the Lincoln Center Plaza and patrons could rent binoculars and headphones to observe and hear the performances across the street. Eleven rooms were used, corner rooms (Columbus Avenue and 63rd St.) on floors 4, 6, 10, 11 and 12, and contiguous rooms facing out onto either Columbus or 63rd on floors 5, 7 and 9. For each sequence actors mimed the activity, while other actors provided the voices for the headphones. A program listed the sequences and the rooms, but very little such guidance was necessary. The lighting up of a room suggested where the audience should look next and the scenes played out were predictable and not very complex seductions, domestic quarrels, office business, party chatter and so on. On the whole, as is a danger with site-specific theatre, the concept proved rather more interesting than the text and the event itself. Certain scenes, like the “new couple,” that were particularly voyeuristic, attracted alert attention, but as the event went on, some spectators drifted away while others turned the binoculars to other windows in the hotel and the neighborhood, apparently hoping to catch something rather more interesting and unrehearsed than the calculated and predictable “actions” really on display.

A considerably richer and more provocative “window show” was offered for a week in the fall in a very different part of the city before a very different audience by a very different producing organization, Chashama, which has coalesced around a number of artists formerly associated with Reza Abdoh's company, Dar A Luz. The death of Reza Abdoh has left a gaping hole in the New York experimental theatre scene and indeed in contemporary experimental theatre in general. While his unique vision and theatrical imagination will never, of course, be recaptured, it is some consolation to report that at least some of the company he worked with have moved on to new projects that continue to provide a much-needed expansion of our current rather desiccated theatre environment.

Chashama, joining a number of former Dar A Luz participants with other performers, offered in September and October 1995 a production called *Junior Black's Office* in Tribeca, the southernmost area of Manhattan which only recently

has begun seeing the development of theatre and dance activity. For their production, Chashama took over the entire second floor of an office building facing onto Church Street not far from the World Trade Center. The building takes up the entire block between Thomas and Worth Streets and was erected in the early twentieth century, when New York commercial and office buildings still reflected a beaux arts elegance. Although the windows facing out onto Church Street from these offices are not the solid banks of glass of high modernism, they are still much larger than those of the Empire Hotel, eighteen of them taking up the full length of the facade divided by substantial but by no means thick stone elements. Clearly the last two windows at the corners serve large corner offices (which also have two windows on the side streets). From the street it is difficult to tell which of the other windows serve one office or two, but most seem to serve single offices.

Junior Black's Office, like *C'est La Vie*, provided a program listing the sequences and locating their windows, but beyond that the similarity was not great. Although there were a few vaguely realistic sequences in *Junior Black's Office*, far more were exaggerated, grotesque, hallucinatory, nightmarish, far removed from that genteel world of sit-coms and domestic drama suggested by the *C'est La Vie* sequences, and closer indeed to the imaginative universe of Abdoh. Not surprisingly the audiences of the two productions seemed to me to reflect the orientations of these different works. As is the case in most major theatre cities, different theatres, and indeed different districts in New York offer quite distinctly different theatrical fare to quite different audiences, and that was certainly the case here. The mostly seated audience for the balmy summer evening at Lincoln Center was very genteel, very much reflecting the relatively well-off young professionals who are now particularly associated with the upper West Side, where Lincoln Center is located. A very similar crowd can usually be seen inside Lincoln Center, at the Vivian Beaumont productions. Tribeca, as I have noted, has only recently been offering much theatrical or artistic activity, but it is definitely at the developing edge of Off-Off Broadway, its nearest artistic and geographic neighbors being Soho and the Lower East Side. A typical "Tribeca" audience has not yet developed, but that assembled for *Junior Black's Office* was similar to one that would gather for more experimental work in Soho or on the Lower East Side, a distinctly "downtown" artistic crowd, certainly rougher and more Spartan than the Lincoln Center gathering. No chairs were provided or expected by this group, which was content to stand huddling in their black leather jackets and similar protective garb against the brisk fall winds whistling down Church Street.

There were threads of a story, or several stories, in *Junior Black's Office*. A character called The Rev-Rake is born, washed, dressed, goes to school, grows up, has sexual encounters, and (I believe) dies. Mr. and Mrs. Rowan suffer crimes, tortures and frustrations of all sorts in their almost-adjointing offices, gleeful and

grotesquely masked torturers work their way from window to window, inflicting pain and mayhem on each of the other characters in turn, but as in Abdoh's work, the threads of narrative were much less interesting than the continual carnival of sounds, images, dances, acrobatic acts, songs and video sequences (one of the windows offered an almost continuously running video, and elsewhere projections of various sorts appeared). Tal Yarden, who did the video and film for Abdoh's stunning *Tight, Right, White* (which I reviewed for PRAXIS, spring 1994) and *Quotations from a Ruined City*, provided these visuals. Hillary Moor, often the costumer for Dar A Luz, performed the same service for *Junior Black's Office*, and Marion Appel, whose stunning masks and props contributed so much to the visual power of Abdoh's *Law of Remains* was happily also working again with the new group. A number of familiar actors from Dar A Luz appeared, among them founding Dar A Luz members Anita Durst, Tom Fitzpatrick, Peter Jacobs, Tom Pearl and Tony Torn as well as James Williams and Dana Moppins, two of the key performers from *Tight, Right, White*. Among the new actors, Julie Atlas Muz was particularly impressive in her energy and imagination.

Instead of the more theatrically conventional headphones of *C'est La Vie*, *Junior Black's Office* had microphones in each performance space and broadcast its dialogue, sound and music by radio. Two cars belonging to the company were parked on Church Street with their radios on high and their doors open and company members circulated among the spectators with boom boxes, providing an in-and-out and multi-directional aural experience that worked very effectively with the phantasmagoric quality of the production as a whole. The listing of scenes in the program suggested a linear order, and this had a general relation to the progression of the evening, but many scenes overlapped or ran simultaneously, so that one often had to choose just where to direct one's attention. Almost always at least two window-stages were lighted and full of action, and occasionally the entire block length series was illuminated, for example in company dance numbers, providing a fascinating variation in the spaces utilized. Occasionally, also, action broke out of the voyeuristic windows, when an actor would open the window to speak directly to the audience across the street, or appear on the street itself in front of the building. In a mysteriously and surprisingly moving moment at the end, papers from the "office" were thrown from the windows like a miniature ticker tape parade and swirled and eddied in the brisk fall winds.

By 8:30 in the evening traffic on Church Street has considerably diminished from its daytime volume, but there was a fairly steady flow of cars passing by during the performance, especially the ubiquitous New York taxis. As these drove up Church Street, not heavily populated with pedestrians at this hour, the spectacle of suddenly encountering a single heavily populated block naturally caught the attention of most motorists, and the gaze of this body of spectators then

directed their attention to the show across the street. Traffic often slowed to a crawl or stopped entirely and the honking of surprised drivers in the rear was a common occurrence. During one particularly striking sequence, a gymnastic nude *pas de deux* beautifully executed by Anita Durst and George Rosario, the traffic stopped entirely, and not a few of the automobile passengers and drivers (including a fair number of cabbies) pulled around onto the side streets and came to join the audience. I was delighted to see that performance still has the power to lure people even from the hermetically isolated world of the modern private automobile. Unlike *C'est La Vie*, where some members of the audience drifted away before the end of the performance once they had experienced the idea of the event, the audience of *Junior Black's Office* steadily grew during the evening, partly from interested casual passing pedestrians, but mostly from intrigued passing motorists. The difference, surely, was that *C'est La Vie* ultimately had little to offer its audiences beyond the gimmick of voyeurism, while *Junior Black's Office*, while less immediately accessible, provided a far more theatrical mixture of visual elements and activity. Despite its much less comfortable venue it thereby proved a clearly more engaging performance experience.

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Le Tartuffe by Molière, Le Theatre du Soleil, Paris, October 25, 1995.

Ariane Mnouchkine's rendition of *Le Tartuffe* has been playing to a full house since its opening at La Cartoucherie in October. This is no small feat when Parisian theatres are presently having great difficulties filling more than 40% of their seating capacity on a nightly basis. Attendance is so low, that many shows close before they even have the time to open. Theatre professionals blame this on the economic crisis. Yet, when one must reserve tickets at Le Theatre du Soleil days in advance, the question of public apathy vis-à-vis the theatre begins to shine under a different light.

Aleksandr Volodin once said that the reason we go to the theatre is to experience the unforgettable impressions that "blow upon all the trumpets of the soul." If one believes in this premise, it is not surprising that attendance is so high at the Theatre du Soleil. It is a rare pleasure to witness a performance where the theatre and reality coincide and clash with such force. Mnouchkine appears to have once again applied the magic formula in which the text and the actors become archetypal contemporary figures in the public's collective conscience: Orgon's dilemma is our dilemma, and his struggle becomes real to us in all its terror and ecstasy. The performance is capable of striking a cord deep within the psyche of the individual that resounds in harmony with every other spectator in the audience.

Such a theatrical event is indeed rare, and further investigation into the socio-political climate in France may shed some light upon the means by which this performance managed to "hit its mark." France has been plagued by economic difficulties for quite some time now. The 12% unemployment is at least partially the source of an ever-increasing social unrest and insecurity. The suburbs of major city centers have become military zones: Young Africans and Arabs, who are essentially rejected by French culture and society, are beginning to rebel. This is creating an atmosphere of growing crime and violence.

One of the sources for such violence comes from a social situation that is esteemed as being hopeless. This is not only felt by those who are the cultural minority, but it is an opinion held by the greater population as a whole. The number of homeless on the streets of small towns and city centers are increasing in frightening proportions. Students prolong their studies as long as possible because they feel that finishing school will lead directly to unemployment. Blue and white collar workers live in daily fear of losing their jobs.

It is important that one take into account these generalizations because it is from the social debris of fear and hopelessness that zealots, hypocrites, impostors—Tartuffes—arise. Every day one hears of a politician or an executive director being tried for corruption. The Front National, (the extreme right-wing political party that preaches a sermon of racism and hatred), gained a frightening



FRANCE. *LE TARTUFFE* d'Arianne MNOUCHKINE

Décor: Guy Claude François; Costumes: Nathalie Thomas & Marie-Hélène Bouvet

DORINE: Juliana Carneiro da Cunha

MARIANE: Renata Ramoz Maza

POTE: Marie Paule Ramo Guinard

CLEANTE: Duccvio Bellugi Vannuccini

ORGON: Brontis Jodorowsky

LAURENT: Jocelyn Lagarrigue

EXEMPT: Nicolas Sotnikoff

ELMIRE: Nirupama Nityanandan

VALERE: Martial Jacques

DAMIS: Hélène Cinque

Mme PERNELLE: Myriam Azencot

TARTUFFE: Sharokh Meshkin Ghalam

Mr LOYAL: Laurent Clauwaert

Le marchand: Sergio Canto

LE TARTUFFE by Moliere, production of the Theatre du Soleil, Paris. Renata Ramos as Mariane, and Martial Jacques as Valere. ©Franck Martine/MAGNUM PHOTOS

15% of the votes in the presidential primary last April, and they subsequently won seats in three major cities (the municipalities of Orange, Toulon and Vitrolles are now governed by the Front National). Equally dangerous, the GIA (Armed Islamic Group) seems to have declared a “holy war” upon the French territories. They are the prime suspects in the terrorist bombings that have plagued the capital since the end of July.

This is only a small selection of the most “visible” extremists, yet we have the impression that their numbers are growing. This is a problem that is not exclusive to France, and it can be found throughout the world. It is precisely this dangerous social phenomenon that Mnouchkine’s *Tartuffe* is based upon.

To better appreciate the means by which this production is capable of tapping the contemporary conscience, it is important to remember that, as audience members, we always come off the street and into the theatre. Many performances, particularly those that serve as detractions, demand that we leave the “street” behind; that we check our social baggage at the door. Le Theatre du Soleil, however, insists that we bring this baggage with us. In fact, signs in the theatre announce that personal items left unattended will be considered suspect (i.e. a bomb threat).

With this in mind, it is best to describe a few examples of the kind of carry-on luggage the public brings with them into the theatre. For those who come to the performance by means of the subway, they are greeted at the Vincennes station by at least ten paratroopers armed with automatic rifles. They randomly check the identification of those who enter and exit the station (part of a governmental plan to prevent terrorist activity). Upon arrival at the theatre, personal bags are thoroughly checked and coats are frisked. It is important to note that this is not merely atmospheric theatricals. The danger is very real and these precautions are welcomed by everybody.

Once in the theatre, one crosses a large courtyard surrounded on three sides by a ten-foot brick wall that is topped with barbed wire: a prison. In considering what one has gone through just to get to the theatre, this metaphor could not be more potent. The audience must cross this courtyard to gain access to the stage that is enclosed by an iron fence. It becomes immediately apparent that this space, containing both the house and the acting area, is nothing more than a graveyard. If in fact the world resembles the theatre, the graves stand as silent witness to the violence that numbs our present condition; a violence that is not only exclusive to urban crime in France but can be found in Bosnia, Germany, Algeria, Israel, Tibet, Russia and regrettably countless other nations, cities and neighborhoods.

The acting space is composed of tombs and niches that line the stage both left and right. This cemetery serves as the courtyard in Orgon’s house, and it opens

onto the street through an iron fence that runs along the back wall. Various props, chairs and Persian carpets give one the impression that the play is set in an Arabic country. This assumption is confirmed in the opening tableau: an Arabic street merchant appears with his wares at the back gate. He tries to wake up the household by playing a traditional melody on his Moroccan castanets. After several failed attempts, he pulls out a large boom-box that blares modern popular Arabic music which instantly brings the house to life. This scene not only sets the action of the play, but it alludes to one of the contributing factors behind racial tensions in France: a conflict that is partially due to the lack of a proper place for tradition in the context of modern society.

One of the results of this conflict is acutely felt in what is probably the most impressive scenic element in the production. It is never used by the actors during the course of the show (it sits neglected in a backstage corner) yet its power as an image presides in its simple and unobtrusive existence: an open, rusty, old propane bottle (the bombs that have terrorized the French citizens since July were fabricated out of empty propane bottles filled with nails and washers). This silent testimony to French daily life was brought painfully to life by Cléante early in the show when he tells his brother:

D'autant plus dangereux dans leur âpre colère,
 Qu'ils prennent contre nous des armes qu'on rêvère,
 Et que leur passion dont on leur sait gré,
 Veut nous assassiner avec un fer sacré.¹

The moment these words were spoken a hush descended upon the audience, then a sudden murmur rushed through the auditorium: "C'est vrais," "C'est ça," "Exactement!" It was as if Molière's words, over three hundred years old, were stolen from the lips of the audience and uttered for the very first time.

Mnouchkine's choice of creating a Tartuffe as an Islamic zealot and impostor clearly touched a sensitive nerve. His first entrance is announced by the sound of a chanting religious mob reminiscent of events taking place in Algeria today or Iran a decade ago. He then appears attended by a crowd of devout worshippers/body-guards/criminals. He often calls upon this "intimate circle" in times of crisis so that he can hide within the security of numbers. This Tartuffe seems to be a participant of the Islamic Jihad which is so familiar to French society today.

It is important to note that although the sets and costumes depict the Arab world, Mnouchkine assures that Molière's text remains unaltered. This can be seen, for example, when Orgon speaks of Tartuffe:

Chaque jour à l'église il venait, d'un air doux,
Tout vis-à-vis de moi se mettre à deux genoux.²

One may ask what a Mussulman is doing in a church, yet this contrast creates a certain universality behind the director's intentions that goes beyond fanaticism and hypocrisy found in any one particular culture.

Like most extremists today, there is a current of violence that runs through this *Tartuffe*. He appears to be motivated by the deadly triangle of fear, hatred, and a lust for power. Nowhere is this more evident than in the famous "unmasking" in the fourth act when Elmire attempts to convince her husband of Tartuffe's real motivations. His fear of being discovered is pushed to the limits of extravagance at the beginning of the fifth scene. Tartuffe leaves no stone unturned to assure that nobody is hiding in the room. He even pulls a series of white sheets over the back fence so as to isolate the courtyard from the street (an ironic touch that makes one ask just whose dirty laundry is being put on the line).

This scene is void of the usual "coquetterie à la française" in which the encounter between Tartuffe and Elmire is treated in the manner of a drawing room farce. Instead, under Mnouchkine's brilliant direction, the secret "rendez-vous" begins as a hilariously desperate tug-of-war and ends in nothing more than a vulgar and violent attempt at rape. Tartuffe, convinced of his security, takes his clothes off and chases after Elmire in his underwear. His character becomes almost demonic when he coldly extinguishes the candles on the table with his bare hands: "Je vous répons de tout et prends le mal sur moi."³ Losing patience, Tartuffe, with a violent sweep of his hand, then clears the table leaving fruit, dishes, wine and candles strewn about the floor. He brutally pins Elmire to the table. Elmire, in desperation, appeals to Tartuffe's paranoia and insists that he verify that her husband is not in the vicinity. Orgon appears from under the table to find his wife and his house ravaged (in the literal sense of the term). Tartuffe stands, in his underwear, naked before the eyes of his once devoted disciple. Unable to defend his already lost cause, the Impostor flees, howling like a wild animal, only to return with his body-guards to proclaim ownership of Orgon's house.

It is interesting to note that Monsieur Loyal, Tartuffe's chief henchman, is the only character in western dress. His clothes instantly remind us of the American gangsters of the '20s and '30s. This artistic choice is acutely felt at a time when American foreign policy is being judged with increasing severity in Europe: the stipulations in the GATT agreements concerning audio-visual trade is a prime example of aggressive American economics in which the sole aim is grotesque profit at the expense of others and maliciously disguised in the credo—Freedom of Speech. Thus it is not surprising that Americans are viewed as gangsters in world affairs. Mnouchkine's Monsieur Loyal projects this image

very clearly, and the possession of Orgon's house is accomplished with the cool aggression of a corporate take-over.

Cléante's prophetic advice comes true ("Qu'ils prennent contre nous des armes qu'on révère") when Tartuffe arrives later with a magistrate and armed soldiers. Orgon's family is seated on the edge of the stage at gunpoint. Thanks to Molière however, the magistrate convicts Tartuffe and saves the day. Mnouchkine adds an interesting touch to this scene by creating a judge that, while executing justice, overtly pockets the family fortune in the guise of a tribute to the king. The director seems to be telling us that hypocrisy is not limited to religion but politics as well. This point is well made at a time when three great hypocrites of peace (Trudjman, Milosevic, Izetbegovic) negotiate the fate of their citizens; a destiny that favors cultural and ethnic segregation over integration. Unfortunately, with due ceremony, a greater hypocrite (Bill Clinton) encourages this vacuous peace that appears to be nothing more to him than a means of covertly settling a political score with his opponents. Mnouchkine's "Declaration of Avignon" last July, created in conjunction with the opening of *Le Tartuffe*, exhibits her vehement opposition to these actions in ex-Yugoslavia.⁴ It is for this reason one finds it difficult not to extrapolate a reference to her position in the production.

Le Theatre du Soleil's mission has always been theatrical, social and political. *Le Tartuffe* more than adequately fulfills these goals: theatrical, in its stylized costumes, make-up and acting. Social, in its capability to touch the public's collective nerve center, and its capacity to incite reflection, discussion and debate. Political, with its message that encourages us to beware of the hypocrites in the world, and to be prepared to "unmask" the impostors that dare to rule our lives.

Mark Jennison

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Notes

1. Lines 377-380: "All the more dangerous in bitter anger/ They take against us the arms we revere./ And their passion, of which there is ample a word./ Wishes to assassinate us with a holy sword." (author's translation).

2. Lines 283-284: "Each day he came to church, with humility/ and on both knees he stood just next to me." (author's translation).

3. Line 1496: "I will make well, and the sin shall be on my head." (author's translation).

4. In response to the general political apathy with regards to the conflict in Bosnia, Ariane Mnouchkine and several other intellectuals created the "Declaration of Avignon." This document, signed by thousands of artists, demands:

1. The resignation of Boutros Boutros Ghali from the UN.

2. The immediate conviction of all war criminals.
3. To cease the threat to withdraw UN troops in Bosnia.
4. To put political and military pressure on Serbia.
5. The UN declares Serbia as an aggressor nation, and puts into action article VII of the charter.
6. Subscription to the "Declaration of Saryevo," created by its citizens, that demands that Bosnia remains a multi-ethnic country (author's summary and translation).

In the beginning of August 1995, Ariane Mnouchkine, and four other artists, went on a hunger strike to protest the political stagnation in Bosnia. The strike lasted until the 4th of September. In a letter to Jacques Chirac on the 14th of August, she warns the President of the American peace plan:

"Does the United States wish to divide Europe once again? If we cut-up Bosnia, it is, in fact, Europe that we divide. How is it possible, on the one hand, that we affirm the right to an autonomous military defense though nuclear testing, an act condemned by the entire world, and on the other hand, we let the United States determine our boundaries as if we were nothing more than one of the States in their Union. Mr. President . . . We insist that you resist the runaway American dictate, and that you oppose, in the name of France and the principles it upholds throughout the world, this inept proposition of partition that takes into consideration neither the past, nor the present, nor the future, that is—our destiny," (author's translation).

Call for Submissions

Death: (Re)Presenting Mortality and Morbidity

Were Ron Vawter's final performances laden with poignancy? Are productions of Craig Lucas' *Prelude to a Kiss* only significant in a postmodern world? What do recent presentations of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* or *Endgame* reveal about mortality?

These questions, among many, many more might be context for essays in the fall 1997 PRAXIS. That edition will be devoted to performance studies and reviews of artists, plays, productions and related theatrical events that are informed by or focus on death. Essays may explore how an artist's knowledge of impending death affects his / her work, how mortality serves as a play subject and subtext or how comedy incorporates moribund views.

Essays should not exceed 2500-3000 words or ten to twelve typewritten, double-spaced pages. Reviews of single performances should be 800-1000 words or three to four pages. All submissions should conform to the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 4th edition.

Essays should avoid exploring or engaging a theoretical discourse except to the extent that it illuminates a writer's position about performance and / or an artist.

Submissions should be sent before March 1, 1997 to:

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PRAXIS

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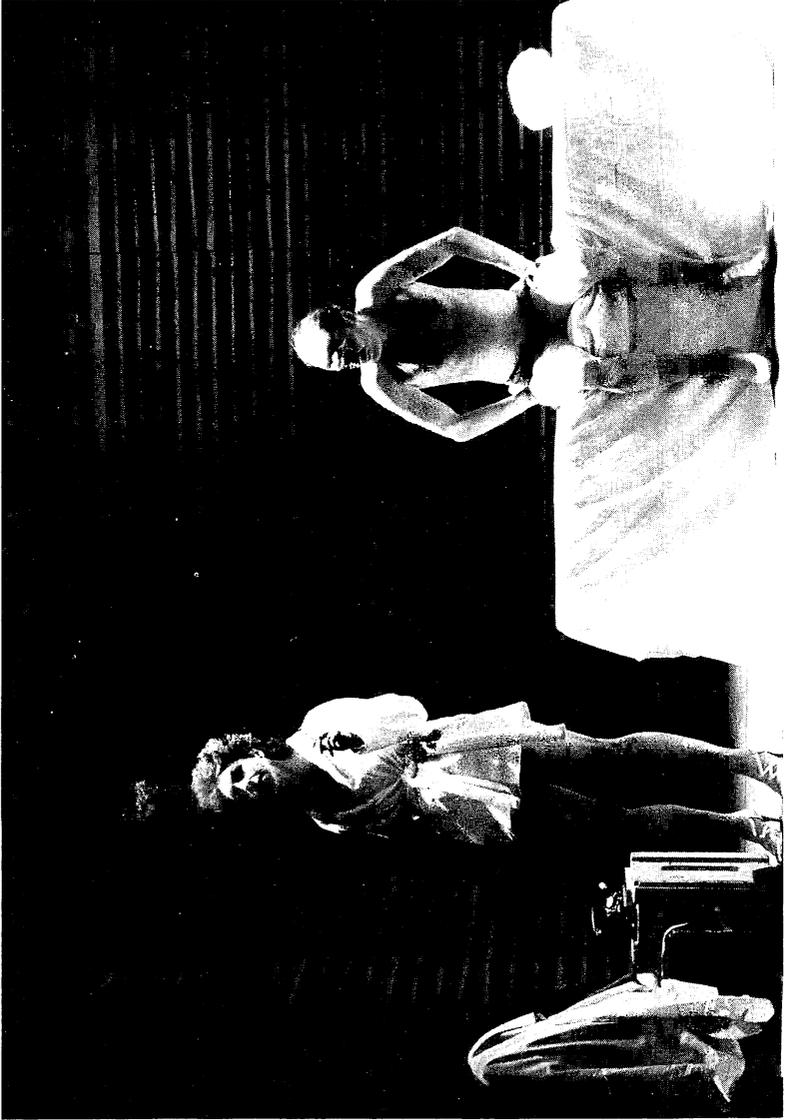
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Edmond by David Mamet, Théâtre Varia, Brussels. 16 January 1995.

While the Théâtre du Rideau in Brussels probably holds the record of French-spoken productions of Mamet plays in Belgium, up to *Oleanna* late in 1994, it was the Théâtre Varia who at the turn of the year drew the attention with a spectacular *Edmond* (1982). Except for the opening two and the last four scenes, played in a transformed costume shop, an intimate room with risers facing each other across the floor, the rest of the play took place in the gutted house, where third-year architecture students of the Horta Institute had built a bright lights, big city-scape littered with wooden crates and oil drums (for seating). Overlooked by screaming billboard-size posters and a huge filmscreen, the action took place on the house floor as well as on four minimally outfitted stages, not counting the life-size glass cage for the peep show and the (off-stage) bar whose doors opened wide, spilling organ music, mock-divine light and a preacher's thundering voice-over during the mission scene. No scene changes here impeded the flow of action. The woman with the hat mingled with the bystanders, who shared the brunt of Edmond's angry retaliation and were personally handed leaflets by a perambulating barker, and the deception of three-card monte was practiced everywhere through the actors' taped and amplified lines. To bring the action even closer to the spectators, Stearns and Harrington had become a Belgian insurance company ("les A.G." or "Assurances Générales"), Mrs. Brown had been wittily turned into Mad. Lebrun and Edmond Burke into Eddie Debrueque. In the first transposition, the intertextual link was lost with Mamet's film script for Barry Reed's *The Verdict*, written around the same time as *Edmond* and resorting, as Dennis Carroll has remarked, to Stearns and Harrington as a symbol for the archetypal bourgeois firm.¹ The third transposition hazarded Mamet's reference to the eighteenth-century conservative English political philosopher, who has criticized the savagery of America's burgeoning democracy and pleaded for order and moral restraint.² The French text by Pierre Laville was delivered with different accents by a cast consisting of native and non-native Belgians, all of which added to the local color of a multicultural cosmopolis.

The audience's total immersion (visual and sensorial, through the physical movement and the vibrations of the blasting musical intermezzos) complemented and doubled the performers' total identification with their parts. Taking his cue from Stanislavski's preparation for Maxim Gorki's *Lower Depths*, director Marcel Delval (who also played the pawnshop owner) joined his team on an exploration of the red-light districts of major Belgian towns, letting Geoffroy Legrelle register on film the performers' immediate reactions as well as interviews with their real-life models. The latter footage was presented in edited form after the play as a twenty-minute docudrama. The former in a preliminary phase enabled the players

Nicole Colchat and Freddy Sixx in *Edmund* by David Mamet as produced by Théâtre Varia, Brussels (photo courtesy Danièle Pierre, Brussels).



to “build their characters” and during the production furnished impressions, used mostly as transitions between scenes, sometimes as theatrical reference (to Tennessee Williams), sometimes as mere backdrop or neon-filled setting (for the second encounter with the cardsharps), all enhancing the film-like quality of the dramatic whole. Further to step up the integration, two dramatic actions were staged and filmed in a natural environment. The assault on the pimp, like any event infringing upon decorum in neo-classical drama, though begun on stage, was finished on film, where it was followed by Edmond’s emotional release in the form of an exuberant run across town. His abrupt departure from his wife (Micheline Hardy) was filmed too and projected after its enactment on stage and the audience’s move from the side-room to the central space, with the difference that the second time round Edmond instead of his wife was watching on television the famous shower-scene from Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and that the medium allowed tarnishing close-ups of her “offensive” skin flaws. Rather than castigating the media in any moralistic fashion as the cause for the violence and depravity of our world, the Brussels production erased the distinction, thereby answering its own question, serving as subtitle to *Edmond*: “Du théâtre comme au cinéma: mission impossible?”

Despite the cinematic structure of *Edmond*, theatre differs from cinema and no amount of actors’ preparation, analytical and sensorial recollection can undo this difference. Despite theatre’s greater “reality” factor due to the live presence of the performers, so the paradox goes, anything close to film’s naturalistic verisimilitude or television’s “reality shows” (recently lambasted in Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers* or Almodovar’s *Kika*) is hard to achieve on stage. Going by the playwright’s own description of *Edmond* as “a fairy tale, a myth about modern life” and comments in his essay “Radio Drama,” the identification between performer and role, and the truth-to-life detail resulting from emotive memory may even interfere with the morality influence, noticeable in the typecast characters with generic names and the overall abstraction.³ Designating *Edmond* as a contemporary *Everyman*, Delval was clearly aware of this allegorical influence (equally acknowledged by Mamet in *The New Theatre Quarterly*.⁴ But even if *Edmond*’s constricting patriarchal and capitalist construction of the masculine and feminine identities, expertly exposed and named by Carla J. McDonough, for all its growing strains and slippage, may still be pervasive in contemporary America, and that includes *Edmond*’s ultimate “feminization,” his trajectory from sadistic, misogynist heterosexual violence to a masochistic homoerotic affection, as Daniel Dervin has argued, is hardly common or “normal,” in Foucault’s sense, i.e. sanctioned by the public at large or the licensors of its values.⁵ And the scaffold-like scenes and the peripatetic staging seemed more inspired by the environmental theatre of the sixties than by medieval practice. For sure, the relative difference

between these two disappeared in this production, like that between Stanislavsky (insisting on verisimilitude to reality) or Strasberg (insisting on verisimilitude to the self) and Sanford Meisner (insisting on truthfulness to and pursuit of the superobjective or through-line of action), the true source of Mamet's commitment to what Richard Eder has called the playwright's "new" realism and what others have variously characterized as lyrical, renovated (Bigsby), spare (Carroll), post (Wiles) or artificial (Roeder-Zerndt).⁶

The deeper artificiality of the Brussels production and its flawed premise were underscored by the guided-tour feeling created by the "drivers" (silent Expositors or "meneurs du jeu," as they are called in French medieval drama), the elision of the few simultaneous speeches in the pawnshop scene, and the avoidance of any informational overkill, as in some of The Wooster Group's high tech productions. Such over-codification is symptomatic of real life but also capable of turning it into the expressionistic nightmare (hopefully with the attendant exorcism and cleansing), which Mamet's play in several respects is, like Martin Scorsese's *After Hours* (featuring Dudley Moore and Roseanna Arquette) with which *Edmond* invites comparison. No less than Glenna within the play and the spectators of the play, the cinema medium, as used by Delval, on both the story and discourse levels was denied a radical autonomy that might chaotically have interfered with Mamet's preconceived action. At most there were overlappings or fades between scenes and their filmic complements.

Nor was the artistic control relinquished in the generously sprinkled humor, relieving what is probably Mamet's bleakest play. Except for the parodistic portrayal of Edmond's wife as a dowdy drudge, lounging on the couch in kitschy slippers and drab housecoat, and gorging herself with the tell-tale potato chips while concentrating on the television set, the wry humor was carefully measured and textually integrated. Denis Mpunga as the black prisoner played the tom-tom on an upturned metal bucket, while Edmond, a riveting Freddy Sixx, in a reverse striptease put on his prison garb before being sodomized. Thus racial fear and fantasy, for "Every fear hides a wish," their irrational grounds as well as misguided rational superstructure, already ambiguously exposed in Mailer's *White Negro* (1957), were humorously and thrillingly contextualized within cultural prejudice, not to mention the intertextual echo of Brecht's *Jungle of Cities*.⁷ Ultimately, it was humor's subversive bent that helped to release the evening's participants, press-ganged into this "American Rake's Progress," this grueling ambivalent picaresque quest for freedom, sexual satisfaction, self-realization, human feeling and truth.⁸ The initial laughter at the naiveté and ineptitude of Mamet's middle-class businessman, inherent in the text (e.g. the admission of his inexperience, his formality in the brothel) but expanded by the staging (the meticulous folding of his trousers, his mounting nervousness as the prospect of sexual gratification receded),

though elicited by the feeling of recognition, tended to distance the character's plight. By the time Glenna (Delphine Bibet, wearing a T-shirt ominously and also conventionally inscribed with Hamlet's crux, "To be or not to be") was murdered for resisting Edmond's coercive importunities, painful grimaces replaced the smiles, even pity for the failure of human contact and good intentions. The humor and pity generated by this collective initiation helped to found Mamet's audience, kindling the hope and imaginativeness with which to oppose the loneliness, perversity and false Darwinian determinism of a social world mistakenly modeled on that of predators. Small wonder that in Sixx's and Mpunga's rendition a tone of quarrelsome banter, reminiscent of that between George and Emil in *The Duck Variations* (and of the garrulity with which Richard II peoples his empty cell before his execution) was intercalated between the last scene's contemplative opening and its final redemptive embrace of two races, a voluntary gesture countering these men's exclusion from society and enforced relationship.

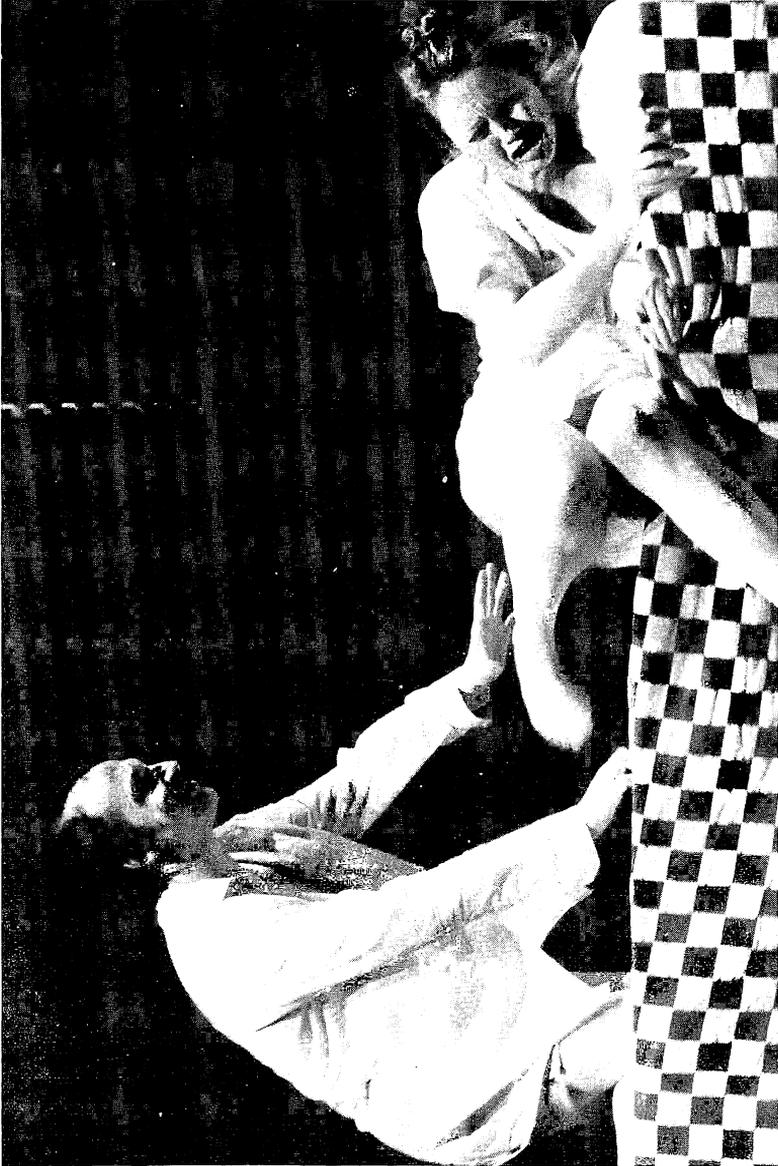
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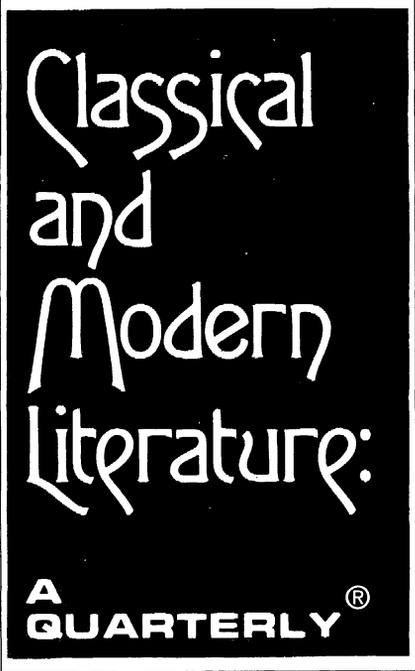
Notes

1. Dennis Carroll, "David Mamet," *Modern Dramatists*, (NY: St. Martin's, 1987) 92.
2. Anne Dean, *David Mamet: Language as Dramatic Action*, (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1990) 172-74.
3. Don Shewey, "David Mamet Puts a Dark Urban Drama on Stage." *The New York Times*, 24 October 1982, II, 1, 4.
4. David Mamet, "Celebrating the Capacity for Self-Knowledge: Interview with Henry I. Schvey," *New Theatre Quarterly* February 1988, 89-96.
5. Carla J. McDonough, "Every Fear Hides a Wish: Unstable Masculinity in Mamet's Drama," *Theatre Journal*, May 1992, 195-205; Daniel Dervin, "Edmond: Is There Such a Thing as a Sick Play?" *Psychoanalytic Review*, Spring 1986, 111-19.
6. Richard Eder, "David Mamet's New Realism." *The New York Times Magazine*, 12 March 1978, VI, 40-7; C.W.E. Bigsby, "David Mamet," *Contemporary Writers* (London: Methuen, 1985); Carroll, *Modern Dramatists*; Timothy J. Wiles, "Talk Drama: Recent Writers in American Drama," *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 1987, 65-79; Martin Roeder-Zerndt, "Lesen und Zuschauen. David Mamet und das amerikanische Drama und Theater des 70er Jahre," *Gorum Modernes Theater* 12 (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1994).
7. Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," *Advertisements for Myself* (London: Granada, 1968) 269-89.
8. David Mamet quoted in Dean. *David Mamet: Language as Dramatic Action* 185.

Freddy Sixx and Delphine Bibet in *Edmund* by David Mamet as produced by Théâtre Varia, Brussels (photo courtesy Danièle Pierre, Brussels).



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