

## Play Reviews

**Father was a Peculiar Man.** Conceived by Reza Abdoh and Mira-Lani Oglesby. New York Meat Packing District. June 30-July 5, 1990.

One of the most interesting and varied areas of theatrical experimentation during the twentieth century has involved the utilization of non-theatrical space for theatre and dance performance.<sup>1</sup> In recent years in New York two environmental productions, *Tamara* uptown and *Tony 'n' Tina's Wedding* in Greenwich Village, have enjoyed long and successful runs, and one major experimental company, En Garde Arts, has undertaken a whole series of "site-specific" productions, garnering a number of awards and attracting growing critical and public attention.

En Garde Arts was founded in 1985 by performance artist and environmental sculptor Anne Hamburger. Since that time the organization has offered a fascinating and extremely varied series of productions in a wide range of venues. Among these have been a set of three plays written by Maria Irene Fornès, Anna Cascio, and Quincy Long for a six story warehouse (1988), a series of evocations of the colorful past of the Chelsea hotel played in different rooms of that structure (1989) and the critically acclaimed *Crowbar* last season, using the balconies, boxes, aisles, and orchestra seats of the abandoned Victory Theatre on 42nd Street.

*Father was a Peculiar Man* was the most ambitious project to date of this ambitious organization. A cast of sixty actors and musicians took to the streets, roof tops, windows, doorways, and some interior spaces of a four square block area around Little West 12th Street (the original working title of this piece) in the New York meat packing district. In this grim area, unfamiliar even to most New Yorkers, with ominous carcass hooks hanging from tracks outside brooding warehouses, where the irregular cobbled streets and low-lying buildings give the impression of the dark corner of some late nineteenth century European metropolis, an audience of about 150 was offered a series of more or less focussed scenes and a seemingly infinite variety of other activities carried on by individuals or small groups of actors scattered up and down the streets.

The production was directed by Iranian-born Reza Abdoh and the text created by him and Mira-Lani Oglesby, of Los Angeles City College. It was their third collaboration and their first production in New York. The

inspirational text for the production was Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, but the scenes made no attempt to recapitulate the narrative of Dostoyevsky's sprawling novel. Rather the novel provided themes, characters, images, and situations as raw material, to which was added a vast array of other matter, much of it drawn from American popular culture of the 1950s and 1960s. Marilyn Monroe and Richard Nixon made appearances, and the assassination of John F. Kennedy was re-enacted in chilling and yet vaguely cartoonish detail, complete with a red Eldorado convertible making its way down the street among the audience.

The audience began to gather approximately an hour before the performance at the corner of Little West 12th Street and Ninth Avenue. Eventually the "box office"--Ms. Hamburger's white car--arrived with tickets for the performance. About 9 o'clock the performance began with most of the cast running, dancing, and singing all over the large square formed here by the convergence of several streets. Some actors were dressed in 19th century Russian costume, others in American clothes of the 1950s, still others in the motley garb of the present Village upon whose outskirts we were gathered. There were odder elements too--two ladies gossiping under hair dryers set up in one corner, two men pushing a wheeled open coffin down a street, a Russian monk offering cryptic religious advice and toiletries to audience members, a man chasing a woman with a chain saw.

At last much of this scattered activity flowed together in the first scene, as the audience was guided into a large circle around a small house with picket fence set up on astroturf in the middle of the street. Although scattered activity elsewhere in the street--two fencers, a woman singing suspended from a roof, a man being whipped tied to a bed, a running video screen, musicians, violent fights in darkened doorways--provided alternate appeals to attention, the majority of spectators and audience remained grouped around the house. Even there, however, focus was scattered, with several actors passing about microphones and making brief comments or undertaking longer soliloquies on different sides of the house. Some of these were direct passages or phrases from Dostoyevsky, others were scraps of song or doggerel verse (such as "Little Willie" poems). This "scene" ended with a campground song about Zacharias climbing his tree, each member of the company moving out to contact individual audience members and to illustrate each line of the song with nursery gestures. Then actors, musicians, and a few players acting as guides led everyone off to the next station, on another street.

Almost all of the play's eight sections (plus prologue and epilogue) shared this same general shape--a more or less guided procession to a new location, defined by a number of theatrical set pieces, this location serving as a central gathering spot for a variety of images, events, and speeches (but with tangential activity spreading away in various directions, and sometimes flowing in and out of the central location) and the sequence terminated by a "production number" involving much of the company in song and dance. The songs and dances were

varied in period and style, but most were popular and familiar--"Days of Summer," "Me and My Gal," "It Had to Be You," "Hot Ziggiddy," "Someone to Watch Over Me."

Despite this general structural similarity, each scene had its own distinct ambiance, and three struck this reviewer as particularly memorable. Section two, "The Banquet," literally took place around (and on top of) a huge banquet table extending down the middle of a street for almost half a block, with grotesque chandeliers hanging above it, and in the center a huge Poe-like pendulum constantly swinging. Audience and actors sat around this table, as in the famous Grotowski setting for *Dr. Faustus*, as seductions, births, deaths, carnival acts, and beauty queen pageants vied for attention amid the banquet furnishings on the table.

Section 7, "The Execution," crowded the audience onto a set of rough bleachers set up across a narrow street facing a curtain suspended from the overhead supporting girders of the West Side Highway and literally closing off the street from one side to the other. The scene began in front of this curtain, but it presently opened, revealing the street running for a block or more away and terminated by a far warehouse. The entire vista was thus "theatricalized" by the curtain frame, by lighting, and by its being filled with actors alone or in small groups carrying on a variety of activities, many of them having to do with death or the preparation for death.

Section 8, "Ivan's Nightmare," was the only part of the performance held indoors, and since the space utilized here was a relatively confined one, tickets were collected only for this section. The rest of the sections could, and did, allow passers-by without tickets to participate, if they wished, in the event. From time to time actors stationed in upper windows or fire escapes portrayed "residents" who commented loudly, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively (even to the dumping of "slops" onto the activities below). But the open-endedness of the production could assimilate actual residents as well, and I was told that in addition to residents, the show has attracted the curiosity and the attendance of passing drivers of taxicabs, Federal Express vans, and sanitation trucks. Such casual participation was acceptable, even desired by Ms. Hamburger, who is much interested in expanding the boundaries of theatre, not only structurally and spatially, but in terms of audience. Mr. Abdoh, who has also worked previously in non-traditional locations, shares this interest in bringing the theatre experience to a new and broader public, rather than waiting for a public to come to a traditional performance space. "Even three blocks away, if all you hear is the gunshots--then you're involved," he remarked in a *New York Times* article on the performance.<sup>2</sup>

"Ivan's Nightmare" was set in a series of interconnecting rooms on an upper floor of an abandoned packing house. A narrow, twisting stairway, cluttered with debris, led up into a hallway which gave access to several small cubicles and three large rooms with low ceilings. Erika Munk, who confessed herself overcome by the ghastliness of this section, vividly described these as

"rooms haunted by old death and filled with dreams of new death."<sup>3</sup> At first the audience was allowed to wander freely through these grim environments, past living tableaux of prisoners in cells or in confessionals, scenes of degradation and torture and scenes of religious and physical ecstasy. In one room banks of white material and white swags of material hanging from the ceiling suggested a winter environment, in another room darker hues, contorted nude bodies, and chiaroscuro lighting, with red accents, suggested an inferno, or perhaps a room for modern torture. After the audience had an opportunity to circulate through these rooms, a sequence of phantasmagoric scenes was offered in two of them. The nudity, the grim and claustrophobic quarters, and the necessarily close intermingling of actors and audience members gave the events in this section a quite different feeling than those outdoors, even though many themes were here repeated. There was much less of the carnivalesque and much more of the threatening and the transgressive.

Although the epilogue which followed this powerful section included such strong images as a mock crucifixion, its return to the open air effected a kind of release, and the death procession following the crucifixion gradually evolved into a kind of celebratory street dance, with cheering for the Karamazov family and the marching band swinging into a rousing rendition of "Dream a Little Dream of Me." Back at the evening's starting point, actors and musicians danced and marched off in a kind of reverse recapitulation of their original gathering, to the cheers of the audience.

All manner of references from the experimental theatre of the past quarter century were suggested by this remarkable production--the audience arrangements of the early Grotowski, the spatial manipulations of Ronconi's *Orlando Furioso*, the absorption of the city texture of Squat, the environmental experimentation of Schechner and the Performance Group--but despite all these relationships and possible influences, En Garde Arts is developing an aesthetic and a reputation of its own, and as *Father* clearly demonstrates, has become one of the most ambitious and innovative ongoing experimental groups in New York today.

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## Notes

1. Some of the implications of this sort of experimentation were explored in my article "The Iconic Stage," which appeared in v. 3 n. 2 (Spring 1980) of this journal.
2. Glenn Collins, "Street Theater Audience Must Make a Choice," *New York Times*, 19 July 1990, C19.
3. Erika Munk, "Meaty Metaphors," *Village Voice*, 24 July 1990, 102.

*Lear*, adapted by Mabou Mines from the Shakespeare play, directed by Lee Breuer. Manhattan Community College Triplex Theatre, New York, January-February 1990.

"Tragedies have causes." So says the Philosopher in Brecht's *Messingkauf Dialogues*. Shakespeare's *Lear* is "tied up in his patriarchal ideas," the Philosopher continues, "living in a new world and . . . smashed by it."

A similar historical-political view is put into action by the New York-based theatre collective Mabou Mines in their gender-reversed version, called simply *Lear*. Developed in workshop over a three-year period, this *Lear*, directed by Lee Breuer, exists both in the future (a world in which women have long been "tied up in their [m]atriarchal ideas") and in the past, rendered here as the American South of the 1950s. These elements, provocative in their own right, do not always cohere, but this is not to say that *Lear* doesn't work, for in a large measure it does, astonishingly well. It would satisfy more fully if a number of this tragedy's causes were foregrounded more clearly. Brecht's judgment of *Lear* is grounded in a careful reading of the play and an imaginative sense of Shakespeare's time, one in which the bourgeoisie rises to take power from feudal lords. Brecht's Shakespeare, and by extension his characters, are Galileo's contemporaries. Both artist and scientist were rethinking our place in the universe and our relations as individuals to society. Thus, as a playwright Shakespeare went with what worked on the stage. As Brecht puts it, he did not hesitate to note in the margin of an actor's playscript, "Choose whichever reading seems best to you," or "If this way of putting it is difficult to understand or unsuited to the audience, then use another." This attitude seems to govern Breuer's direction of *Lear* as well. *Lear* should not be rendered as the hero of "causeless" tragedy, but demonstrated as the living contradiction of the time, recognizable to each spectator from her own experience.

In their analogical, highbrow/lowbrow fashion, Mabou Mines' production, with Ruth Maleczek in the title role, accomplishes what Brecht did not have the opportunity to do. In this staging the uses and effects of power become visible because they are caught once again in the glare of current revolutions—this time sexual, but also political, geographic, economic. As Maleczek noted in an interview with Ross Wetzsteon, "When a man has power, we take it for granted. But when a woman has power, we're forced to look at the nature of power itself."

Breuer's relocation of *Lear* to a South familiar from American film and theatre, in which *Lear* becomes the matriarch of a "white trash" family, is another way of looking directly at power. This context requires a certain sleight of mind on the part of audiences: Goneril and Regan as male heirs waiting for their genteel but powerful mother to step aside; "Cordelion" as the maternal favorite, staying clear of his mother in a quiet effort to assert his manhood. Generally, the reversal and the Southern context enrich the mix.

In a jumping opening scene, announced by a crash of cymbals and drums, Lear's sons, daughters-in-law, servants, and dogs mill and mingle. It is Lear's birthday, celebrated at a family barbecue in the littered yard of her house. This setting reduces the scale of the play, but not its impact. Lear's rowdy knights become a pack of barking dogs, loud but leashed, making more obvious how gratuitous the son's cruelty will seem as Regan and Goneril kill them off. Dog dishes and trash are strewn across the playing space. At first this unsavory realm is clearly Lear's; the facades of her house at stage left and Gloucester's at stage right give it shape and character. Quickly, however, the space becomes an uncertain void into which first Cordelion (Lute Ramblin') is cast--his mother literally "throws him out of the house"--the Lear herself, circling in fury and bewilderment. The stage is invaded as well by Lear's lumpy purple convertible, which in her madness she will run into a telephone pole and abandon, and the family's snappy red ATV, the older son's shared status symbol (more often driven by Elva [Edmund], who of course is the plot's driver as well). At times the space seems to be taken over by a bizarre, vacuous 1950s car culture, best exemplified by Elva's ironic salute to Goneril ("Yours in the ranks of death"), as she drops him off and languorously steers the car backstage.

In the opening scene Goneril (Bill Raymond) and Regan (Ron Vawter), both in leisure suits, have set the tone of the family's tawdry, slicked-up greed by taunting one another in a game of touch football. When these two middle-aged bucks are soon out of breath, the flurry of opening noise and laughter subsides. In the crowd, watching sourly, Albany (Black-Eyed Susan) presents a clear picture of the 1950s aura: tight A-line skirt, kerchief over bouffant hairdo, pocketbook dangling from her arm. Throughout the first half of the play she carries a drink, recreating a filmic image of the family alcoholic. This weaving of cinematic and theatrical discourses made the first half of *Lear* fascinating to witness. The treatment of characters France (Clove Galilee) and Burgandy (Maya O'Reilly) as filmic types could also be cited. These and a number of other elements, however, are lost later in the fast shifts from scene to scene. Albany, for example, gratuitously abandons her drinking just at the crucial moment of her conversion to Lear's cause. Her miraculous recovery seems facile; it reduces her character. Together, these effects reduce the play as well.

Eva (Ellen McElduff), on the other hand, is interesting as a blond bitch in black. Skirting the horseplay, she hovers at the family's edge, waiting and watching, while nearby Gloucester (Isabell Monk) and Kent (Lola Pashalinski) jest comfortably through an open window about Elva's "making." Monk's Gloucester is an upright, warm-hearted woman in flowered dresses. Later, we see her struggle to communicate with her unhappy daughter, a struggle made visible as Gloucester picks her way barefoot through broken glass to reach her. As Lear's steadfast, tactful friend, and as an affectionate mother, Gloucester seems the emotional counterbalance to Lear's unwise excess. Similarly, Karen

Evans-Kandel's Edna (Edgar) is first a naive young girl, then wonderfully biting as "Mad Marie," a raging but un-vengeful spirit who climbs athletically around the stage. Often this portrayal, like others', seems color-blind, oblivious to the racial aspect of the Southern context. Yet that context is continually reinvoked. Gloucester, obviously, is not just Lear's friend, but her servant. Elva's disappointment at being held inferior because she is "natural" takes on intriguing ironies. But the production never articulates these ironies. It would seem, unfortunately, that the very different demands of color-blind casting and the foregrounding of racial questions, both working toward the same goal, sometimes can contradict one another.

Another element is added to the social-economic matrix when in the mayhem of the opening scene the fool (Greg Mehrten) appears inside the door of Lear's house and steps out onto the stoop carrying a large, obviously fake birthday cake from which two pieces have already been cut. (The division of Lear's kingdom, of course, with the remainder of the cake intended perhaps for her youngest, and favorite, son.) Played as a transvestite, the fool is gender-reversed in a different sense. Perhaps this fool is so effective because he clearly demonstrates how gender "lies," that is, how it is constructed, not given, and how both living and commenting on these "lies" can put an individual at risk in his community. Mehrten is hilarious and affecting in this role. Even in short-shorts and bolero hat, both fringed, he manages to project the fool's clarity and dignified loneliness, as well as his love for Lear. Later, the family (led by the predatory, butch Cornwall, played by Honora Fergusson) will see to it that he is punished in the manner reserved for blacks in the United States. Unfortunately the lynching, while a fitting idea, doesn't match the interest or complexity of the character himself.

In the opening scene the fool clears the way for Lear, stilling the raucous family and setting a dignified pace for his mistress. The latter appears leaning on a cane and smiling at her family, who scream their "pleasure" and applaud her. Her power over these people is apparent; small in stature, still she seems to hold them in suspense. She gets to business immediately. Stepping off the perch--"Now we shall express our darker purpose"--she announces the division of her property. Despite the familiar posture of well-established power, she does not evoke the image of the patriarch. Nor is she an overbearing harpy. Our wonder at Maleczek's performance lies in its self-contained understatement: the assumption that her power is the most "natural" thing in the world. And, as Maleczek has noted, that assumption directs us to the issue of power itself. Gender is visible as a marker; it highlights power by giving it a context. It seems appropriate, then, that Lear is a subject who knows. We are doubly aware that the fool is Lear's conscience, for between this woman and this "woman" there is a special friendship. Lear is not ignorant of her family's disordered state; but she is oblivious to her own part in its corruption, and her obliviousness is chilling. The implicating of Lear in the family dynamic is not always this visible in more traditional productions, certainly not in the

first moments of Lear's entrance, as it is here. The gender-reversal, though, makes us reconsider those male Lears once again.

Besides the gender-reversal and the Southern analogy, two other ways in which the production foregrounds tragic causes should be mentioned. First, while Mabou Mines have chosen to retain as much of Shakespeare's original text as possible, they have substituted gender-reversed, updated, or Americanized equivalents for certain lines. Lear's royal opening, for example, is followed closely by her casual order to the fool: "Bring the cake, dear" (as opposed to the original "Give me the map there"). Such small surprises have struck some reviewers as mechanical, even too reverential. This may be true--some of the reversals do not work. But we shouldn't let this blind us to the fundamental success of the Southern context in making the gender-reversal culturally understandable.

The second factor is the effect produced by miking the actors, about which there has been much discussion in the press. In the opening scenes the mikes had both beneficial and disorienting effects. Although the system was designed to "place" the sound so that it seemed to be coming from the actors, this only worked once voices and faces had been matched--difficult for spectators unfamiliar with the play. Early on, spectators could be seen scanning the stage for the actor speaking the lines. Only in one case did the production seem to intend such uncertainty: that is, the sullen behavior of the teenager Cordelion, who muttered his lines unintelligibly. Cordelion's love, and his unwillingness to declare his love, were never distinguished from his *inability* to declare it. As a consequence, Cordelion often seemed not conflicted, but indifferent. This problem, caused in part by the miking, was hard to overlook. On the positive side, the miking tended overall to throw the voices of the actors directly into our ears, a "graininess," to use the phrase coined by Roland Barthes, that drew us into the intimate relations of this family. Despite the striking visuals of this staging, its main preoccupation was *sound*. Maleczek's desire to "speak Shakespeare's lines" apparently launched this production. Amplification gave the actors nuances to explore and made Shakespeare's lines reverberate again, like a film frame that eroticizes the image. Aural images linger: the intimacy of Regan's and Goneril's voices as they sit on their mother's stoop, swig liquor out of a bottle, grumble and plot. The timbre of these stereotypical, *cinematic* Southern voices, languid, full of self-possessed cruelty and irony, might have been ruined by declamation.

All of these Brechtian points made, it must be said that certainly this is not an "epic" *Lear*. While this production does estrange the audience, I don't think it attempts to redirect our sympathy toward the minor characters, as Brecht suggested. Foregrounding their sufferings would seem rather pompous in 1990, something like the preachiness of agitprop. What the final scenes do accomplish is not clear. Regan and Goneril twitch endlessly in their death throes; Elva repents unconvincingly at close range, while Lear mourns Cordelion at the rear of the stage. The audience's expectations are being



thwarted to some end. On the other hand, as Michael Feingold suggests, the reconciliation of Lear to Cordelion is too effortless, the tableau of Lear's mourning too familiar. Maleczek's Lear, who has shaken us with her "O reason not the need," still holds us in this scene, but again to what end? Perhaps it would be helpful to reflect on another memorable role created by Maleczek, that of the Mother in Genet's *The Screens* (seen at the Guthrie in Fall 1989, under the direction of JoAnne Akalaitis). Whatever her blindness to her own faults, Lear, like the Mother, grows in self-knowledge and stature as she is displaced and discarded by her society. Unlike the mother, though, Lear does not seem distanced at the play's close so much as distant, fuzzy, out of focus. Breuer's direction and Maleczek's portrayal are much sharper when Lear is either giving her power away or experiencing its loss.

The clarity and excitement of the opening scenes deserve a correspondingly tight focus throughout the rest of the play. This production's most effective moments demonstrate that gender and power are both ways of thinking, sign systems implicated in one another. Lear, Elva, Cordelion, and we too lie tangled in these implications. It is difficult to imagine a Lear, male or female, who could rule happily and well. Thus, while there should be mercy and wit in Lear, she is, after all, smashed by her "new world." To borrow Ruth Maleczek's apt choice of words, this is a "mean" play to the very end.

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*The Dragon's Trilogy.* By Marie Brassard, et al. Theatre Repere, Quebec. Presented at the Knoxville World Festival, Knoxville, Tennessee. 4-9 September 1990.

Organized in conjunction with the early planning for an international theater research center in Knoxville, Tennessee, the 1990 Knoxville World Festival brought fifteen theater groups and individual artists to the city's tents and stages. For its international offerings, the Festival featured performers as diverse as Theater Drushba (Bulgaria), Ra Ra Zoo and Circus Burlesque (England), Diablo Mundo (Argentina), Theater Buffo and the Litsedei clowns (Soviet Union), and the TMU-NA Theater (Israel). Among the American groups performing at the Festival, Atlanta's Seven Stages performed *Orange Earth*, a play written and directed by the South African dramatist Adam Small, and the Road Company of Johnson City, Tennessee, collaborated with the Touchstone Theater of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in a piece exploring life in both communities entitled *Changes*. Mime Robert Shields and actor Paul Alexander were also featured, as were puppet artists Roman Paska, Jon Ludwig, and Jeff Sumerel.

Easily the most ambitious offering in this strong slate of productions was the monumental *Dragon's Trilogy*, produced by Theatre Repere from Quebec (Theatre Repere brought this play to Knoxville as part of a United States tour that would also include the Los Angeles Festival). Collaboratively scripted by the director, Robert Lepage, and members of the cast, *The Dragon's Trilogy* was presented in three and six-hour versions in the Clarence Brown Theater on the campus of the University of Tennessee.

Canada's history during the twentieth century, and its multi-cultural heritage, form the backdrop of this play's intricately woven and expansive story. Framed by the figure of a parking-lot attendant who watches, dragon-like, over the site of a former Chinatown, *The Dragon's Trilogy* explores the history of a family and its acquaintances (and, through these, a nation) between the years 1910 and 1985. The unabridged version of this play is organized into three movements that are divided into four parts. Part One ("The Green Dragon") opens in Quebec City, with two cousins, Jeanne and Francoise. As the years pass, their lives are influenced by those of Mr. Wong, a Chinese launderer, and his son Lee; William S. Crawford, a British shoemaker originally born in Hong Kong; Jeanne's alcoholic father, a barber; and Charles Bedard, Jeanne's red-haired lover. Parts Two and Three ("The Red Dragon") are set in Toronto, against a backdrop of world war and its aftermath. Forced to marry Lee Wong, Jeanne has given birth to Stella, a child (actually fathered by Charles Bedard) who catches a cold that develops into meningitis while watching a soldiers' farewell parade. Returning from Quebec City, where she has institutionalized her severely-incapacitated daughter and seen Charles Bedard, Jeanne takes her own life. These events are paralleled by the story of Yukali, a Japanese dancer in Tokyo who is pregnant by an American officer, and her daughter, who commemorates her mother's death on the ten-year anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing. Part Four ("The White Dragon") shifts to Vancouver in 1985, where Francoise's artist son, Pierre, meets the granddaughter of Yukali (also named Yukali, herself an artist) and decides to leave for China. Stella dies in the institution in which she has spent so many years, and William S. Crawford, now extremely old, perishes in a plane crash while returning to his native Hong Kong.

Engrossing as the story is in its historical and geographic scope and in its powerful narrative of fantasy and loss, any synopsis fails to suggest the brilliance of its staging and acting by the Theatre Repere. For *The Dragon's Trilogy* represents a stunningly original use of the theater's visual and spatial possibilities. In order to create the feel of a warehouse setting, the play's designers curtained off the Clarence Brown stage from the rest of the auditorium, and a central playing space was established between two banks of seats (the technicians, visible above the curtain line in the lighted windows at the back of the auditorium, served as spectral presences throughout the play). The main playing area was a rectangular surface covered with sand, and the small windowed shed at one end and a large wooden lamp pole at the other

comprised its only non-varying structures. This central acting space was bordered by a flat walkway, which was used by the play's actors for additional locales and scenes involving movement around the stage. Beyond one end of the central stage, additional space was used for the staging of scenes, while at the other end (behind the shed), a projection screen was used to announce the setting of each part and to display additional material at other moments of the performance.

Within this central playing area and its adjacent sites, the members of the Theatre Repere created a theatrical spectacle of powerful complexity. Just as the play itself moved between event, dream, memory, history, ritual, and myth, the performance moved seamlessly between theatrical styles and moods, borrowing eclectically from sources as varied as cabaret, pantomime, Asian shadow theater, domestic realism, expressionism, and Theatre of the Absurd. These styles were often juxtaposed within a single scene: moments of poignant tenderness were played against other visual modes, within a stage that was continually being recast and reimagined, broken up into the different and the new. An actor lying on a prop with his arms stretched out became the pilot of a plane flying over the Pacific, and offstage boxes became the Hong Kong skyline to which he was flying. The sandy floor became a parking lot, the basement of a laundromat, an art gallery, and a dream landscape, while the surrounding walkway was transformed into a series of routes, actual and imagined, over which the play's actors walked, ran, marched, and rode. Frequently, the overlap of such fictional spaces and their interference with each other created an overwhelming sensory and emotional montage. Nowhere was this more evident than in the climax to Part Two, when Stella (rushing around one end of the stage, holding her head in agony) and Yukali (atop the shed at the other end, abandoned by the father of her unborn child) both screamed against a deafening music, while the soldiers departing for World War II marched around and across the stage in ice-skates, slashing sand and neatly-arranged pairs of shoes as they moved.

The play's scenic transformations and juxtapositions were reflected in an impressive variety of acting styles. Cast in multiple roles for this vast panorama of individuals and generations, the actors of *The Dragon's Trilogy* moved fluidly between the naturalistic, the expressionistic, and the epic in their performances, often shifting between such styles from moment to moment within a single role. As a result of this presentational fluidity, the play's characters became richly layered: at once personal and stylized, emblems within a surrealist tableau. Characterization, in other words, was continually being recast, thrown into new relief, within a scenic field that was itself multiple in style and focus.

The plasticity of space in *The Dragon's Trilogy* derived, in part, from the production's imaginative uses of lighting. Spotlights from above isolated pools of light on the central stage and illuminated the walkway (often while the central playing area was in darkness). But some of the play's most spectacular

effects of illumination came from lighting sources within the playing area itself. The street lamp shed a pale light on its end of the stage, while the opposing shed was rigged with internal lighting capable of sending blinding beams through its windows and open doors across the darkened stage. A basement scene in Part One was lit entirely by a candle held by one of the characters; at other times, the stage was bathed in colored light, transforming the sand's appearance and texture.

This sand served as a powerful component of the play's meanings and effects. It was a challenging environment for the performers who had to move over and through its surfaces, though it also proved strikingly receptive to the actors' human presence. Carefully raked in different patterns, by the end of each act the sanded arena was covered with footprints and other markings, and with the holes and mounds left by characters who had plied it in order to bury, unearth, build. In this way, the stage surface became a register of the actions and emotions that were played out upon it; in a play so concerned with what is left behind, it offered itself as a site of traces, testimonies. The sand also worked to frame the props and furnishings set upon it, endowing them with the strangeness and incongruity of objects on a beach. A barber chair standing on a floor is one thing; propped on the sand, it becomes something both ludicrous and poignant, a relic even in the midst of its use. At times, this stage had the playfulness of a sandbox; at others, it evoked the desolation and discontinuity of a junkyard.

The "quotation" of props and furnishings was an important feature of the play's overall texture of meanings, for despite the simultaneous stagings, the swirls of movement and colors, and the music that helped give this production its epic punctuation, *The Dragon's Trilogy* relies heavily upon the symbolic investment of individual objects. Through its various transformations, for instance, the onstage shed acquired the symbolic force of a watchtower, at the same time as it loomed as a kind of gateway or portal between historical periods and cultural worlds. Of all the objects that negotiated the play's meanings, none was more symbolically complex than the shoes that pervaded its actions: bought, sold, worn, discarded--even, in one of the play's most dreamlike sequences, delivered as the product of childbirth. Through their appearance and reappearance on stage, shoes became symbolic repositories of issues crucial to the play's characters: accommodation (or "fitting") with oneself and the world, pairing and its failure, the making of beauty and use with one's hands, the poignant vulnerability of the human body. In no form, for instance, was time more evident in its promises and its inevitable privations than in the visual emblem of empty shoes.

Intimately attentive to individual dreams and disappointments, *The Dragon's Trilogy* follows its characters through the unfolding of private and family history in a narrative that is pervaded by a deep sense of individual aloneness. But the play is also about cultures, and their interactions within a nation that has directed its face across two oceans. Françoise dreams of

England, while her Quebecois world is even more deeply marked by its European cultural roots. A continent away, Pierre meets a Japanese artist in a city that boasts, next to San Francisco, the largest Chinatown in North America. With whole scenes spoken in Canadian French, and shorter segments spoken in Chinese (and Italian), *The Dragon's Trilogy* is a genuinely multilingual play, and the shift among languages creates a powerful theatrical experience of cultural and national difference. If the United States is a melting pot, this play depicts a Canada profoundly multinational in character, where the contemporary pressures toward assimilation do not manage to erase the richness, and the barriers, of cultural otherness. The program notes to this production state that "*The Dragon's Trilogy* is built around a blending of cultures," but the play's mosaic of languages suggests that this blending is less an assimilation than a coexistence, in which each culture retains its communal voice.

Amidst all these cultures and voices, though, one group stands less autonomous within the play, less fully vocalized in its own terms. Most of *The Dragon's Trilogy's* Asian-Canadian characters seem to exist on the play's edges, as figures invested with fear and fascination. The play's music, costumes, and performative styles draw heavily upon the Asian arts, but this Asia, and the characters of Asian descent, remain caught within the boundaries of stereotype, infused by exoticism and strangeness. Although the younger Yukali and her mother acquire voices and identities, the play's other Asian characters feel bound by representational clichés: sinister opium-den, laundry, Madame Butterfly. Hiding the faces of the play's Asian "extras" within tightly drawn nylon masks heightens the effect of objectification and exoticism. "Hong Kong: the dark, the mysterious," says the pilot flying across the Pacific, and his passenger Crawford is not the only character in the play who looks to the Orient as a mystical source. With its exchanges between the younger Yukali and Pierre about art and emotion, and the latter's decision to go to China, the play itself seems to view the Orient as a place of rebirth, as a spiritual refuge from its generational isolation and despair.

This hoped-for Asian renewal contributes to a pronounced weakening of the play in its concluding sequence; indeed, *The Dragon's Trilogy* moves somewhat aimlessly after the death of Jeanne. The final part has its theatrical moments, but its sketches of redemption have little grounding in the tale of solitude and loss that preceded it. For all the talk of Zen and the symbolic marriage of *yin* and *yang*, East and West, the play's final images of beginning are less powerful than the pathetic image of Stella, a dysfunctional child within a body that has grown old, or of the *danse macabre* that accompanies Crawford's final moments. But the effect of this play is cumulative, and even the weakest moments in its final section are infused with the powerful pictures that preceded them: Crawford lost in an opium hallucination, the married Jeanne racing frantically around the stage's perimeter to meet and escape from Charles Bedard, Françoise singing at an army show in London against dream-

like activity onstage, a parking lot built over the remains of Chinatown. This is a play of remarkable imaginative power: offering both a world and a theatrical vision.

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*Brand* av Henrik Ibsen. Regi: Carl Jørgen Kjøning.

*Brand* by Henrik Ibsen. August 31, 1990. Nationaltheatret, Oslo.

The production of *Brand* opened the 1990 Ibsen Stage Festival in Norway and was an exciting and memorable event. It is a major challenge to any theatre to present a work of this scope, and the Nationaltheatret company, under the direction of Tor Edvin Dahl, met the challenge. The three and a half hour production was stimulating and did not seem long, even though I had just arrived after a very long flight the day of the performance.

Dahl chose a non-realistic approach to the play and utilized the very impressive stage and facilities for a full effect. As the play began, two small boys, apparently the youthful Einar and Brand, were playing hopscotch on the forestage. Behind them was a curtain of plexiglas panels which was raised and lowered throughout the production. An appropriately gloomy and misty landscape pierced by shafts of light could be seen through the curtain which raised to reveal Brand determinedly crossing the dangerous mountains. The actors in the production made use of various platforms which were covered with weedy, heathery looking material. These were of various heights, one about thirty feet high with a stairway leading up to it. In the final moments Gerd, the Gypsy girl, was at the top of this stairway, shouting in her demented fashion and shooting at the hawk, while Brand shouted warnings at her regarding the avalanche. In another scene, an extraordinary stage picture with a torrent of rain provided the background for the anguish of the characters. Both the rain and snow used in the play were very dramatic.

A number of visual effects complemented Ibsen's text. At the beginning of one scene far upstage a man held up a very non-realistic representation of a child and plunged it into a tub. This vivid picture of *kinderdord* (which figures in several Ibsen plays) was slightly puzzling for a moment, but gained significance when the mother of the child rushed in wildly downstage crying for a priest to come to her husband who had killed their starving child. The motif of death which dominates the play was intensified through strong visual effects. In the scene in which Brand must choose between life for his son and his calling in the grim valley, Agnes stood pointing toward the road to the great world saying, "This way," but Brand raised his hand and pointed to the house, saying, "No, this way." Immediately behind the plexiglas curtain there appeared a procession of mourners with a very tiny casket. Again, after Agnes accepted Brand's demand that she give Alf's clothing to the greedy, wild gypsy woman, she exited through a trap in the stage, and behind the curtain another funeral procession appeared.

The action was not limited to the stage. Brand burst into the house on several occasions, at one point giving a monologue standing on the edge of a proscenium box, and at another roaming the auditorium, then rushing madly back onstage. In the role of Brand Bjørn Sundquist was wonderfully human: this was no one-dimensional fanatical puritan, but a complex being anguished by life and searching for answers to the major existential questions. Sunderquist performed with great honesty, power, and excitement--at points weeping profusely, at others a solid rock of determination. He seemed capable of playing great roles such as Faust and Hamlet and, indeed, he was recently very successful in the latter role. In the role of Gerd, Giske Armand conveyed the wildness and semi-madness, but never became tiresome. Her seemingly uncontrolled movement about the stage was fascinating, and she went beyond the usual actorish madness to convince the audience that she was a being

larger and stranger than life. It will be very interesting to see her Nora in 1991.

It was surprising how much comedy there was in the play, particularly in the role of the mayor played by Sven Nordin. He played with wit and a rascally quality which delighted the audience. At one point he came to Brand with a serious proposal which was undercut by his taking off his boot, dumping water out, taking off his sock and wringing it, and stuffing the shoe with paper, all the while talking about his ideas. He played a range of emotions and at one point, having brought a bouquet of fresh flowers to Brand, he burst into rage and slapped Brand three times across the face with the flowers, knocking all the heads off so that he was left with only the stems which he furiously flung on the stage. These three performances stood out, but, in truth, so did all the performances--this was an outstanding company capable of giving the vitality and passion necessary for this epic play.

Dahl's direction was fresh and imaginative--only at a few points too much so. For example, after Einar became a fanatical preacher, he entered on a motorcycle at the rear, riding down the extremely deep stage with the lighting shining at the audience. But this was minor; on the whole Dahl's approach to the play was consistent and effective. He avoided the pitfall of a realistic avalanche at the end. Instead, Gerd raved at the top of the tower, we heard the gunshot, there was music and noise and the plexiglas came down, with the scene turning to black. Again the two innocent boys came onto the forestage, this time carrying prayer books. They read the speeches from the last scene, and on the line "He is the God of love" Brand hurtled through one of the panels--apparently rejected by God and kicked out of his own play. I could not agree with it entirely, because it obviated the ambiguity which I find appealing in the whole play and especially in the ending. Nevertheless, it was a surprising and theatrically effective ending for the production. Certainly the audience responded positively with cheering and many curtain calls for the cast.

Yvonne Shafer  
*University of Colorado at Boulder*





Giskin Armand as The Gypsy Gerd and Bjørn Sundquist  
in the last scene of *Brand*

*The Bacchae*. By Euripides. Translated by William Arrowsmith. The Shared Experience Theatre Company, St. Bride's Centre, Edinburgh, Scotland. Edinburgh International Festival 1988. September 3, 1988. (Production opened on August 29, 1988.)

The three-quarter round rectangular open space playing area is surrounded by strips of golden sand, bowls of clean water, benches for actors to sit on when not playing, musical instruments and a shrine with burning candles for Dionysus' mother Semele. The audience is allowed to enter shortly before curtain to a heart-beat like drum sound, played on one side by an actor and echoed on the other by an actress. The musical overture is gradually expanded to include members of the entire company (a randomly mixed black and white cast), using rattles, whistles, vocalizations and various makeshift percussion instruments. The music builds from a regular but foreboding rhythm to a discordant, loud, frenzied and painful crescendo and comes to a sudden halt and silence just before Dionysus' entrance for his opening soliloquy.

The performance that follows (done without intermission) is not a revolutionary interpretation of Euripides' play, but it is a competent one and

a couple of unique aspects make it eminently memorable and deeply engaging, even disturbing. The interpretation presents Dionysus (and the Greek gods in general) as amoral representatives of natural forces. If these forces are denied their proper role in human life, they will nevertheless find release; if long pent up, the release can be uncontrolled, frenzied and fatally destructive.

Euripides' often lyrically beautiful dialogue and choral passages are spoken simply, clearly and effectively by the cast. Simon Tyrrell's Dionysus is a cool, controlled, unimpassioned god, with a somber touch of femininity. He is contrasted effectively with Peter Hamilton Dyer's shallow, oppressive, self-righteous Pentheus and Claire Benedict's sensitively underplayed Agave of ultimately searing passion. The semi-comic touches of Teiresias' and Cadmus' political expediency are also well-played.

Nancy Meckler's direction does not significantly alter Euripides' script, but it does shift emphasis in ways to benefit the production. Pentheus' comic, semi-delirious dimension (after the quake) is reduced in playing time, thus helping to shift attention increasingly to the important offstage events and to Agave, who after all is the real antagonist to Dionysus (else the play would never rise from melodrama to tragedy). But more importantly, with the director's inventiveness and able choreography, the bacchic chorus becomes a very active entity, perhaps the most important theatrical force in the play. Dressed as ordinary (contemporary) housewives at the beginning, they are not portrayed as passive, moderate followers of proper Dionysian worship. Rather, their action is shaped to create a gripping, spellbinding ritual enactment of the play's theme. Getting caught up in the uncontrolled frenzy of their new-found freedom--which reflects and brings sensuously close to us the important offstage dramatic actions of the rebellious Theban women led by Agave--they gradually sink into the ritualistic worship. Through feast, wine and sensuous dance, they participate with increasing fervor and decreasing inhibition, culminating their ritual in ecstatic, drunken writhing on the ground with blood-smeared, glassy-eyed, semi-stripped bodies first filling themselves, then numbly vomiting out the ugly stuff of their overindulgence; sobering up only at the sight of Pentheus' torn up body and bloody head.

Though the entire production is well-choreographed and vocally controlled, it is finally the Chorus' seemingly *spontaneous* power that takes hold of the performance. The Chorus, always a sensitive gage and forecaster of the play's rhythm, foreshadows Agave's state of mind subtly and beautifully and her gradual realization of the powerful implications of her tragic deed penetrates our minds and feelings all the more deeply. In the end, the Chorus and Agave become one in spirit and it proves to have been an effective directorial choice that Agave is played by one of the members of the Chorus.

Bela Kiralfalvi  
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*The Uncle Vanya Show.* Irondale Ensemble. RAPP Arts Center, New York. October 10-28, 1990.

The recent thaw in Soviet-American relations has naturally inspired a rich variety of artistic exchanges and initiatives. Soviet scholars and theatre artists are becoming familiar visitors to the United States and vice versa. It seems very likely that before long we shall see a variety of more substantial interactions, such as joint theatrical undertakings by merged Soviet and American companies. A pioneer in such activity, and one of particular interest because of its already established reputation in theatrical experimentation, is the current collaboration between the Irondale Ensemble of New York and the St. Petersburg Theatre Salon of Leningrad.

Irondale is a theatre collective that for a number of years has been offering New York audiences familiar works in the theatrical tradition, such as *As You Like It*, *Peter Pan*, or *Peer Gynt* seen through the prisms of modern culture--TV talk shows, advertising jingles, chorus line routines, gangster films, radio variety shows, and so on. The results have been enormously entertaining, and often moving and enlightening re-readings of familiar material, definitely post-modern in the mixture of high and low culture, the playful parodic tone, and the delight in the constant shifting of stylistic approach.

The St. Petersburg Theater Salon, founded in 1988, by Evgeniy Lukoshkov in response to a feeling of disillusion with the highly formalized and traditional style of the large institutional theatres in Moscow and Leningrad, produces little-known or forgotten Russian plays, previously banned plays, and the works of such Western artists as Albee, Pinter, and Cocteau. Their performances often draw upon the artistic styles, trends, and ideas of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and like Irondale they have a strong interest in both the classic and popular tradition. During a recent three-month tour of the United States, they performed Lermontov's *Two Brothers*, in the passionate style of the romantic theatre, and an evening of jokes, songs, and skits from early twentieth-century Russian vaudeville.

The culminating event of the Theater Salon's tour was a collaborative festival with Irondale in New York held from October 10 to 28, 1990. One week was devoted to offerings in Russian--poetry readings and evenings of Russian vaudeville from the St. Petersburg repertoires of 1912-1914, and two presentations were given of Chekhov's *Ivanov* in a rather free seven-character English adaptation performed by the Irondale company under the direction of Leningrad director Evgeniy Lukoshkov.

The central event of the festival was the performance of *The Uncle Vanya Show*, a "radio vaudeville" utilizing members of both companies and containing sections both in Russian and English. It opened the festival with performances the week of October 8 and closed it with performances on October 27 and 28. In addition to providing a highly entertaining theatre experience, this complex

production explored in a stimulating and challenging way two central concerns of contemporary experiential theatre--the relationship of the traditional repertoire to postmodernist performance (a long-standing interest of Irondale) and the performance implications of truly intercultural theatre. The text and events of Chekhov's play served as an organizing framework for the production, but, unlike *Ivanov*, *The Uncle Vanya Show* used Chekhov only as a framework, developing within it a constantly shifting collage of vaudeville routines, dance numbers, direct conversations with the audience about the play, the production, and Russian-American relationships, and all manner of Chekhovian and non-Chekhovian material was presented in a dazzling variety of theatrical styles.

Often Irondale in the past has achieved striking effects by carrying out an extended conflation of a classic dramatic text and some structure from popular culture, as in combining *As You Like It* with the images of mobsters in general and in particular the pursuit of Pretty Boy Floyd. The first half of *The Uncle Vanya Show* clearly showed this influence. Although constantly interrupted with other images and other concerns, it was essentially set in a "Russian" broadcasting studio, radio K.I.E.V., which was presenting a kind of Monty Python-esque version of the popular American radio show of the 1940s, the "Breakfast Club," complete with guest stars, commercials, and an onstage "Walter Thompson Radio Orchestra."

Many, but by no means all of the routines, musical numbers, and dramatic interchanges (in both English and Russian) can be traced back to specific passages and situations in Chekhov, and a plot summary in the program provides some help in spotting these. Indeed, fairly early in the performance, an actor steps forward to inform the audience where they are now in Chekhov's script and to suggest that the audience may wish to orient themselves from time to time by relating key words in the performance to those in the synopsis. He points to the sentence "Vanya enters half asleep" and recalls that a scene in the radio station we have just observed had to do with an actor sleeping there overnight. This apparently helpful advice is in turn undermined however, as the actor goes on to note that the associations are of various kinds, and may include such connections as alliteration. As the audience attempts to come to terms with this bizarre information, the next scene begins, and defies any attempts by most of the audience to apply the strategies just given by being conducted entirely in Russian.

On the whole the American actors speak English and the Russian actors Russian, but there is shifting back and forth, and in one memorable sequence Josh Broder, the American Vanya, delivers his lengthy late second act monologue entirely in Russian (although with an obvious American accent). Part way into it, another actor, speaking English with a thick stage Russian accent, comes on stage to explain at some length (as the monologue continues in the background) that this section is so famous and so beautiful in the original that translation of it would have been impossible. Nevertheless, after

speculating on its effects in a variety of other languages, he begins trying to translate it, offering the most outrageous fractured Russian interpretations of various phrases.

Often, as in this case, various lines of action, sometimes involving the two languages, overlap each other, providing multiple areas of focus and a circus-like dispersion of interest, until a main line again emerges, not infrequently after a company dance number. The dance routines, also in the parodic and popular vein, are ingeniously designed by choreographer Annie-B Parson and marvelously executed by the company.

The Irondale Ensemble has been working on various versions of *The Uncle Vanya Show* since the spring of 1986, when they presented a workshop version at the Cooper Square Theatre. Obviously their work with the Salon Theater, beginning last winter, has had an enormous effect on the evolution of this production, although this reviewer had the impression that the dominant influence is still the Irondale one (certainly the majority of the piece, at least three-quarters of it, is in English). Further assimilation and interplay will surely take place, however, as the companies continue their collaboration in preparation to tour *The Uncle Vanya Show* to Leningrad, Minsk, and Kharkov in March of 1991. It seems very likely that by this time the English and Russian elements may be reversed in importance, or at least more evenly balanced.

In any case, *The Uncle Vanya Show*, complex and successful as it is, is conceived by the companies as only a first step in an extended program of intercultural exploration. After the Russian tour next spring, the companies plan an official merger to form the first permanent Soviet-American Theatre Company, a continuing focus for intercultural experiments.

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