

*Agamemnon* and Theatre du Soleil: an Eclectic Mixture. Théâtre of the Soleil. Paris, France. May, 1991.

Théâtre du Soleil, under the guidance of Ariane Mnouchkine, has in its 28 years of existence gained international status as a leading edge experimental theatre company. This French troupe boldly explores a variety of styles, sources, aesthetics, and subject matter to create a rich vibrant, colorful, theatre experience. They freely mix styles and conventions together to achieve a brand of theatre that is uniquely their own. The company's 1991 production of *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus, directed by Mnouchkine, combines remnants of classical Greek settings; Kabuki movements, costumes, and makeup to make a strong contemporary feminist statement. By looking at 1) this specific production, 2) the company's creative process, 3) their origin and structure, 4) their production history, 5) the philosophy that anchors their style, a deeper understanding of Théâtre du Soleil's rich aesthetic can be reached.

*Agamemnon* is presented as part of a trilogy entitled *Les Atrides*. Two other plays, *Iphigenie a Aulis* and *Les Choéphores* perform in repertory with *Agamemnon*. These three works represent the body of Théâtre du Soleil's 1990-91 season. The text was translated from the original Greek to French by Mnouchkine and Hélène Cixous, a noted French feminist and playwright. *Agamemnon* tells the story of a wife's vengeance on her husband, the king, as he returns victorious from Troy. Clytemnestra has not forgiven him for the sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenia, or for bringing with him his lover Cassandra. Clytemnestra with her lover, Egisthus, plots to take over power. She murders Agamemnon and Cassandra while they sleep.

In this production, Mnouchkine has combined strong contrasting elements from Greek and oriental traditions, including eastern music, stylized choral movements, and heightened dramatic acting to produce a totally unified production. It is through these elements that the character of Clytemnestra emerges as a strong sympathetic heroine driven to murder by a chauvinistic, adulterous husband.

Mnouchkine employs several devices to sharpen this focus on her protagonist. While the chorus and other principal characters are dressed in intricate red and black Kabuki costumes, Clytemnestra is spot lighted in simple black pants, white blouse and red waist sash. Her makeup is plain, realistic; not at all like the white Kabuki makeup of the other players. Though always heightened and intense, she speaks to the audience in a straight forward honest manner. Her entrances are made from downstage by way of a Kabuki

kanamichi-type bridge that mechanically delivers her to the playing space. On the other hand, Agamemnon makes his first entrance majestically high atop of a slow moving scaffold amid much music and choral pomp. In contrast to the simple dignity of Clytemnestra's entrances, his entrance becomes a mockery of the victorious male returning from war with his mistress sequestered in his rolling "throne."

A chorus of women narrate the action; giving warnings of the vengeance of the gods. They are clothed in heavy embroidered dresses, in the Oriental style, which flow like dervishes. They punctuate the language with expressive dance and the percussive tapping effect of their shoes. The dance is at times warlike, at times lascivious. Their hands move like Indians or Gypsies. This dominant pulsating chorus serves as a distancing effect. Clytemnestra, on the other hand, with her grief, her anger, her vengeful spirit, stands in sharp relief. She pulls focus, sympathy; her acts of violence seem justified based on the mental cruelty heaped on her by her unfaithful husband.

The music that accompanies all the action strongly contributes to the unity of this production. Jean-Jacques Lemêtre (who collaborated with Mnouchkine on her production of *L'Indiade* and her Shakespeare series) has created a musical score that becomes a central part of the narrative. It punctuates, intensifies, warms, supports. A large platform to the right of playing space holds a myriad of Eastern instruments: pipes, drums, strings. Lemêtre and his assistants play constantly, moving smoothly from instrument to instrument, always lending support to Clytemnestra's tragic decision.

Théâtre du Soleil's flexible performance space has been reshaped into a cross between a Greek amphitheater and a Spanish bull ring. The audience, seated on steeply raked bleachers, looks down into a large square earthen pit or arena. This space is bordered on three sides by a solid earthen wall or fence. Each wall has an opening protected by a gate that allows chorus members to hide much as a matador protects himself from a raging bull. A large gate is located up center, opened by ropes and pulleys. This provides the primary access to the stage and is used for entrances of heightened importance. As Clytemnestra never used this gate, it becomes a subversive symbol of the traditional male-dominated Greek world.

The ceiling above the playing space appears to be draped in blue fabric, the back walls surrounding the space are blue as well. Mnouchkine wants to create the outdoor carnival feel of an ancient Greek theatre experience or the open air exhilaration of awaiting the bull's entry.

This carnival atmosphere is not reserved for the stage alone. As is characteristic of Théâtre du Soleil's productions, the experience begins as spectators enter the rural wooded grounds of the Cartoucherie, the company's

home. The facility, an old ammunition depot, was given to Mnouchkine by the French government in 1971. It is located in the Bois de Vincennes on the outskirts of Paris. A festival-like atmosphere pervades as hundreds of people make their way on to the rustic grounds and into the Cartoucherie itself. A large receiving area or lobby is full of people. Several booths selling Greek food, another programs, posters, and books, cut through the center of the room. Displays of previous productions and photos of the current show line the walls. The program is also meticulously created. It contains not only cast and production staff information but also a map of the Greek isles tracing in red the Chemin du Feu or Trail of Fire. Two large family trees are provided depicting the lineage of Agamemnon and the origin of the gods. Definitions of key Greek theatre terminology are also given. The audience is casual, even noisy as they wander into the performance space. On either side of the hall leading to the bleacher seating are deep earthen pits in which life size statues of ancient people leading livestock and carts are partially submerged in the dirt. These pits resemble archeological digs and produce an eerie sense of history, of the presence of ghosts who have a story to tell. It is obviously Mnouchkine's intent to totally immerse the audience in this unique world to awaken all the senses to the coming experience.

Many of the elements present in this production of *Agamemnon* are not new to Théâtre du Soleil. This experimentation with combining styles and conventions has been evolving since the birth of the company in 1964. Eileen Blumenthal, in an article for *American Theatre* noted that "they have explored, de-constructed, adapted traditional forms from Japan, China, India, Southeast Asia, Western circus and comedia del 'arte'."<sup>1</sup> Juli Thompson, in her doctoral dissertation, says of the group, "In seeking to create a role for theatre in contemporary society, a role as active participant rather than merely a passive mirror, they have continued to take risks with new material, new styles, and new production methodologies."<sup>2</sup> Thompson continues to note that "Mnouchkine's actors deliver the text in a fashion which includes the audience in direct address." Couple this with the combination of various styles and techniques, "her productions have palpable intimacy and immediacy."<sup>3</sup>

Another theatre scholar, Rinda Lundstrom described Théâtre du Soleil's work as being "exemplary of the efficacy of frank theatricality; the company has been widely recognized for their innovative combination of circus, mime, puppetry and comedia to form a lively and frankly political theatre."<sup>4</sup>

To achieve this eclectic and exuberant theatricality, Mnouchkine and Théâtre du Soleil rehearse a play for many months. Their eight hour production of *Nordum Sihanouk* rehearsed for eight months. *Richard II* was in preparation for seven months, three of those before the play was even cast.

Rehearsals are truly collaborations with all company members making suggestions and offering input. Much of the work is accomplished through creative improvisations. The actors are given a great deal of freedom. "Mnouchkine provides her performers with enough time to experiment with and explore the text. All suggestions are tried; nothing is pre-determined. She asks questions that help actors to discover the most immediate way to present the character."<sup>5</sup> Even casting evolves gradually as the different actors experiment with the roles that capture their imaginations.<sup>6</sup>

The company is ultimately more concerned about process than final product.

Mnouchkine calls the process a journey of discovery into the unknown. There is a text, the company of actors, an assortment of costumes . . . a collection of pictures to stimulate the imagination of the actors and provide a stylistic starting point. Slowly and tentatively at first actors begin to explore the characters, experimenting from the beginning, not only with voices and movement but also with costume and makeup.<sup>7</sup>

Théâtre du Soleil even encourages audience participation during the creation of their productions. "They invite subscribers and other interested people to the theatre at different points during the rehearsal process."<sup>8</sup> If a particular piece focuses on a specific segment of society or profession, the company has sought input from people in the community with similar jobs or experiences. For their production of *The Golden Age* in 1973, "they invited groups of miners and factory workers to come and talk about their concerns—which the company tried to dramatize on the spot."<sup>9</sup>

It is not surprising that Théâtre du Soleil looks to its audience for inspiration and subject matter given the founding philosophy of the group. The company was formed in 1964 by Mnouchkine with a group of friends studying together at the university in Paris. Their aims were theatrical, social, and political. They wanted to form a theatre of the people dedicated to social change. The company was set up as a worker's collective, "deliberately avoiding a traditional hierarchial power structure."<sup>10</sup> Mnouchkine and her company believe "their art can affect change, political and social, and they have dedicated themselves to creating productions that served this purpose."<sup>11</sup>

It is evident in the recent production of *Agamemnon* that their philosophical base has remained consistent. The Cartoucherie still offers an invitation to the working class audience. The rustic settings, the hangar-like buildings, the relaxed atmosphere certainly lacks the elitist-feel found in many commercial, mainstream theatres. Every attempt is made "to see to the satiation of all needs for everyone: the audience: pleasure will be made the

final art . . . Nothing is left to the 'non-story', the outside real stays out: the feeling starts at the door."<sup>12</sup>

Théâtre du Soleil performers interact with audience members from the first to the last moments they are in the performing location . . .

The company's actors are always just that, people who perform for the enjoyment of others. Actors rotate among themselves the task of vending refreshments before and after the show and during the lengthy intermission. They also dress and make up in full view of the incoming spectators.<sup>13</sup>

All aspects surrounding the process, the product and the organizational structure bear the stamp of its founder and artistic leader Ariane Mnouchkine. It is widely believed that she, with the strength of her personality and her charisma as a director, is the sole reason for the survival of the company. She is the "official leader of the company from an administrative point of view . . . she is constantly involved in the process of decision and execution at all levels of the companies activities."<sup>14</sup> She also directs the productions. "Since the foundation of Théâtre du Soleil there have been only two productions which have not been directed by her."<sup>15</sup> It is also important to note that, particularly early in her career, Ariane Mnouchkine was extraordinary in being the only notable woman theatre director in France.<sup>16</sup>

The company's production of *Agamemnon*, with its curious mix of styles, can certainly stand alone as a pinnacle of artistic achievement. However a study of the production history of Théâtre du Soleil reveals that "the interrelation of one production and the next creates a theatre that weaves itself as it grows . . . that which results from one production becomes part of the support of the next."<sup>17</sup>

Mnouchkine was strongly influenced early in her career by Brecht. His model encouraged the exploration of "magnificent and long forgotten elements from periods of truly popular art . . . boldly adapted to new social ends."<sup>18</sup> It was the desire to distance the spectator from traditional patterns of consumption that propelled Théâtre du Soleil to explore circus traditions in their early production of *1789*, a spectacle about the abuse of power in the French Revolution, in which *comedia grand guignol*, puppets and pantomime were combined to create a large scale carnival.

From 1981-1984, Théâtre du Soleil immersed itself in Shakespeare. It was here that the Eastern influence surfaced. They presented three Shakespeare productions in Oriental styles: the two histories *Richard II* and *Henry IV*, Part II used a startling melange of quasi-Noh, quasi-Kabuki, quasi-Peking Opera, and quasi-Balinese styles, along with Western clowning."<sup>19</sup>

When asked in 1974, if the use of several traditions in their production of *The Golden Age* "might not create three different conventions on the stage, Mnouchkine said "There will not be three different conventions, there will be different tonalities, some things that are red, and others pink. I believe, even, that we should accentuate that a bit."<sup>20</sup>

The prominent use of music in *Agamemnon* has its roots in earlier work as well. Mnouchkine's collaboration with Jean-Jacques Lemêtre began during the company's Shakespeare series. Lemêtre created a score "as part of the organic whole of each production, the music spoke as eloquently as Shakespeare's text and played as important a role as the imagery of the texts."<sup>21</sup> The musicians attended every rehearsal and "improvised along with the actors to develop a role for the music and to find a rhythm and tempo appropriate for each different character and scene."<sup>22</sup>

Lemêtre also composed music scores for the 1985 production of *Sihanouk* and in 1987 for *L'Indiade*. According to Eileen Blumenthal, Lemêtre created "a splendid original gamelan orchestra, combining all manner of Asian and European instruments that not only establishes tone, . . . but offers an ongoing accompaniment and punctuation."<sup>23</sup>

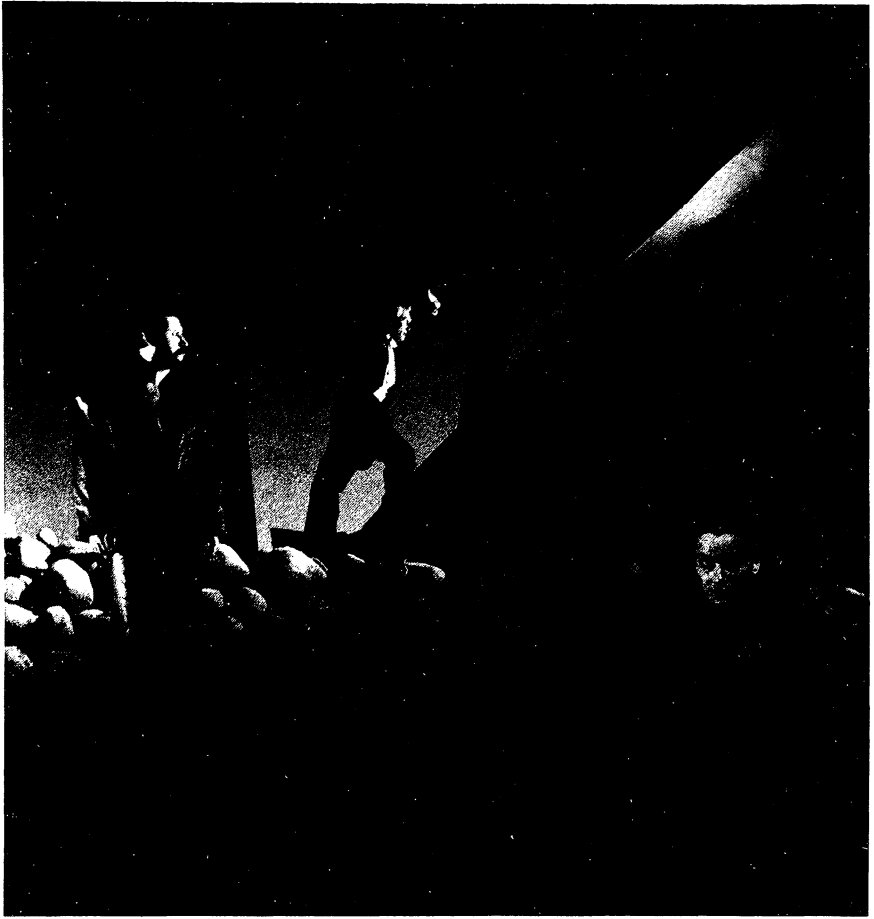
Though this production of *Agamemnon* was stirring in and of itself. By looking at Théâtre du Soleil's creative process, its characteristic aesthetic, and its production history, the spectator is given a broader base from which to view this current offering. "Mnouchkine urges the actors to simplify, clarify, see themselves: 'Don't ornament or enrich things,' she tells her actors 'irrigate them with blood, give them life but not fat.' Yet for all simplified language, Soleil's . . . productions dazzle with richness of sound, color, and movement."<sup>24</sup> *Agamemnon* is a sterling example of the quality, scope, depth, and majesty of this vital French theatre company. This production assaults the senses with color, energy, movement, intensity and sound, providing a most engaging theatrical experience.

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## Notes

1. Eileen Blumenthal, "The Unfinished Histories of Ariane Mnouchkine," *American Theatre* (April 1986): 6.
2. Juli Thompson, "Ariane Mnouchkine and the Theatre du Soleil" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Washington, 1986) 160.
3. Thompson 130.

4. Rinda Lundstrom, "Two Mephistos: A Study in Dialectics," *Modern Drama* 28 (1985) 164.
5. Thompson 331.
6. Adrian Kiernander, "The Role of Ariane Mnouchkine at the Theatre du Soleil," *Modern Drama* 33 (March 1990) 331.
7. Kiernander 331.
8. Thompson 85.
9. Blumenthal 7.
10. Kiernander 323.
11. Thompson 115.
12. Anne-Marie Picard, "L'Indiade: Ariane's and Helene's Conjugate Dreams," *Modern Drama* 32 (1989) 25.
13. Thompson 89.
14. Kiernander 328.
15. Kiernander 328.
16. Kiernander 321.
17. Thompson 148.
18. Thompson 154.
19. Blumenthal 7.
20. Blumenthal 8.
21. Thompson 125.
22. Thompson 128.
23. Blumenthal 9.
24. Ruby Cohn, "Twenty One Years of Theatre du Soleil," *Theatre* (1984) 84.



Left to right Mario Arrambide as Ulfheim, Alvin Epstein as Rubeck and Stephanie Roth as Maya in Act III of Henrik Ibsen's "When We Dead Awaken," adapted and directed by Robert Wilson from and English version by Robert Brustien. Photo credit: Dan Nutu.



**Robert Wilson. Director/Adaptor of *When We Dead Awaken*. By Henrik Ibsen. English version by Robert Brustein. The Alley Theatre in collaboration with the American Repertory Theatre, Cullen Theater, Wortham Center, Houston, Texas, May 22-26, 1991.**

The burnished opulence of the Wortham Center housed Texan Robert Wilson's adaptation and deconstruction of Ibsen's last play, a production that is quite distant from the ambience of urban Houston and the brick and brass of this arts center.

Wilson's vision, or in this case re-vision, is about art, and this production is an experience of dreams, art, image, and sensory environment. Henrik Ibsen hoped that his plays would make people uncomfortable, forcing them to think and confront unpleasant truths. Unfortunately, his plays often are remembered primarily for the ideas, becoming nothing but springboards for discussion of the social issues posed.

Written in 1899, *When We Dead Awaken* explores memory and desire and bares a consummate artist's struggle to reconcile the compulsion to create and the hope for meaningful relationships. Ibsen examines the price of artistic endeavor and illuminates the fragile balance between idealism and yearning, aesthetics and utility, and commitment to art or to life.

Robert Wilson is author, designer, and director of nearly 100 theatre, opera, dance, film, and video works. He staged the premiere of Muller's *Quartet* and is known for his ambitious creations such as *Einstein on the Beach* with Phillip Glass and *the CIVIL warS*, a collaboration with an internationally diverse group of artists. His work has been seen around the world and has been honored by numerous grants and awards.

"But what," Arthur Holmberg asks, "does Robert Wilson, the high priest of post modernism, have up his sleeve? . . . Wilson and Ibsen. What strange bedfellows . . . the coupling of the wizard of stage images with the windbag of the drawing room?" When this production premiered in Boston, *USA Today* praised its "unforgettable visual images that haunt you for days," and *The Wall Street Journal* noted "the most exciting stage pictures to be found anywhere in theater today."

On May 22, Wilson, a native of Waco, Texas, returned to his home state, and although Houston boasts a sophisticated appreciation for the arts, neither postmodernism nor Ibsen is common fare. How would this city that enthusiastically hosts a major retrospective of Wilson's art, sculpture, and videos at the Contemporary Arts Museum respond to his directing vision?

Wilson's productions always remind his spectators that this is theatre, removed from the outer appearance of life and dedicated to inscape. *When We Dead Awaken* epitomizes what theatre can do so well—create indelible images and sensations that reinforce and go beyond intellect. It synthesizes Wilson's vision of objects and images from the exhibit, adapts and transports Ibsen's text, and shapes it with actors.

Robert Brustein states that he rendered Ibsen's language into a style that would spark Wilson's "imagistic imagination." Brustein's purpose was to eliminate everything that "could not be rendered through the symbology of the stage." Wilson uses Brustein's work to launch an environmental engagement. In this theatre event, the words functioned in the way T. S. Eliot contends the 'meaning' of a poem functions: "to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him" (*Use of Poetry*). For Wilson's Houston audience, the verbal meaning acts as the desired diversion, the thread upon which to string the aural and visual images and the echo to hear during the periods of stillness. Wilson's percepts displace Ibsen's concepts. The visual escapes the bonds of idea.

Wilson creates spectacle to dramatize inner tension or crisis. The emotional estrangement of sculptor Rubek (Alvin Epstein) and his wife Maya (Stephanie Roth) functions organically as automated chairs and partitions mechanically move husband and wife toward and away from each other. The hoof of the satyr-like Ulfheim (Mario Arrambide), the doubling of Irene into the fair, ghost-like form (Elzbieta Czyzewska) who haunts the sculptor and the umbra (Sheryl Sutton) who portrays shadow world of Irene's pain and power give new dimension to the characters and their relationships. Visually, a moving river of light, a scaffold-like labyrinth, the molded chair and rocky pulpit, a huge rock slide, and a magic glowing orb—all seem at time innocent, sometimes dangerous, but always provocative. Wilson's images move his audience in the same way that Dali or Chagall, or maybe I should say, the way Wilson's other visual art resonates directly with some inner knowledge of his spectator.

The powerful sound environment by Hans Peter Kuhn was compelling—at times delicate and haunting at others painful and distracting. Juxtaposed to this environmental sound are the humorous, touching songs or the legendary Charles "Honi" Coles, performed in the three "Knee Play" interludes by Coles as the spa manager. In front of the bright, carnival-like drop, his lyrics destroyed any sense of comfortable continuity that a previous scene might have generated. One song tells us that "Love is the cause, the cause of it all / Picks you up, then lets you fall." Another laments the fate of unrequited love: "I lived a life of ease, and I did just what I pleased / But since then I am fenced

like a dog." After his blues numbers, Cole is joined by the cast in soft shoe patter. Closure of the Knee Play interludes, the contrasting sound environment, the harsh visual images, of Ibsen's text is left to the audience.

Choreographed movement intensified the production's ritualized discoveries. The boldest, and most effective element in his work, however, is Wilson's grasp of the power of emptiness and interval. In all of the strong sensual assaults in his work, none is as evocative as the silence, the wait, and the stillness of his tempi. His vision and the world he creates feel particularly bold in Houston, a city whose pulse beats to the Western rhythms of speech and change. Wilson's work requires a submission to the process of the journey, a demand usually not associated with occidental acquisitive achievement.

On opening night, the avalanche that destroys Rubek and Irene failed to materialize, leaving the character awkwardly frozen and assaulted only by Kuhn's menacing, overpowering roar. This technical problem did not dampen the enthusiasm of the Texas audience, however. Although a tenth of the spectators vanished during the intermission, the majority remained, possibly because they understood that they were part of an important, challenging event.

The partnership of the regional Alley Theatre, and the American Repertory Theatre successfully gave this audience the opportunity to experience the magic of Wilson's vision of Ibsen's play. Funding for *When We Dead Awaken* also was provided by AT&T: *On Stage*, the National Endowment for the Arts Inter-Arts Program, Louisa Stude Sarofim, and the Cullen Trust for the Performing Arts.

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Natalia Gandareva as Lady Hamilton in a scene from *Victoria?*



Review of *Victoriia? . . . (A Bequest to the Nation)*. By Terence Rattigan; translated into Russian by Sergei Task.

On 31 March 1992 a premiere performance of *Victoriia?...* at Moscow's Mayakovsky Theatre was played before a packed and enthusiastic house. The production, retitled *Victoriia?...* from Terence Rattigan's *A Bequest to the Nation* (1970), billed as a melodrama in two acts, was directed by the Mayakovsky Theatre's artistic director Andrei Goncharov. The action of the play is set in England, 1805 and portrays the relationship between Lord Nelson and his mistress Lady Hamilton during the three and one-half weeks prior to the battle of Trafalgar. The story of this relationship proved popular in the West and spawned four films on the subject: two silent versions entitled *Nelson* (1918 and 1926), *That Hamilton Woman* (1941) and Rattigan's screenplay, *The Nelson Affair* (1973). This premiere marked the first adaptation of the topic for the Russian stage.

The house, including all three balconies, were filled to capacity and the audience, a pleasant mixture of young, middle-aged and senior citizens, anxiously awaited the opening scene. In the preshow glow one could see a large bronze relief of an Amazon hanging above stage right. The helmeted woman, bare to the waist, faced directly across the stage, her long tresses frozen in mid-air, as if fighting against the wind. The object of her gaze was the bust of a military officer located downstage left. As a prologue to the first scene, military drums and trumpets announced the entrance of the corporeal embodiment of the static figure—Lady Hamilton. Dressed in a chiton, she passionately quoted Shakespeare, specifically Cleopatra's tributes to Marc Antony. This allusion was an addition to Rattigan's text and focused the action on the obsessive nature of Hamilton's relationship with Nelson.

The play is factually based. Lord Nelson left his wife late in his career (after she refused to divorce him) and lived with Lady Hamilton whenever he was not at sea until his death. Although the relationship was considered scandalous, Lord Nelson's reputation as a brilliant naval strategist was never called into question. Before he left England aboard his flagship, *Victory*, for what would be his last engagement at Trafalgar, Nelson signed a document which indicated the depth of his devotion to Lady Hamilton. He dubbed his lover a "Legacy to the Nation", the source of the title of Rattigan's play, and proposed that she be provided a pension for life. The play includes this history, but also portrays the pain and guilt which these lovers inflicted on themselves and those around them.

Lady Hamilton, a fading beauty whose propensity for alcohol is only equaled by her sharp and unerring tongue, is a role which has attracted an impressive list of actors, among them Vivien Leigh, Glenda Jackson and Zoe Caldwell. In this production, Natalia Gundareva created a dynamic and moving portrait of the "other woman." As Lady Hamilton, Gundareva commanded attention through a combination of wit, bluster and brazen sensuality. Appropriately, Lady Hamilton's first scene occurred in her boudoir the morning after an evening of excessive drinking. A scantily dressed Hamilton is visited by Nelson's young nephew, George Matcham, played by Mikhail Gorevoi, and shamelessly paraded around the room. Eventually Hamilton moved behind a glass screen to dress, where a well-placed lamp illuminated her voluptuous figure for Matcham and the audience. This and other moments in the play emphasized Hamilton's sensuality, but Gundareva's performance revealed more compelling aspects of this complex woman's personality.

At a banquet held shortly before Nelson was to leave to command the naval forces at Trafalgar, Hamilton, having already consumed generous quantities of her favorite libation (champagne spiked with brandy) provided after dinner entertainment by reciting lines, written by Nelson's brother, about the fate of Andromache after the fall of Troy. Hamilton was reputed to be a good actress in the histrionic mode of Mrs. Sarah Siddons. Hamilton's "attitudes" and emotionally charged speeches provided Gundareva ample opportunities to fill the auditorium with her powerful voice. The irony of the subject, Andromache's lamentation over the death of Hector, was palpably felt by the audience and was undercut only when Hamilton paraphrased Shakespeare, lines from Cleopatra and Hamlet, as a means of embarrassing some of her guests. Gundareva's performance enthralled the audience; late in the production, when the news of Nelson's death was reported, some patrons burst into tears with the actress and audible sobs continued until the curtain call.

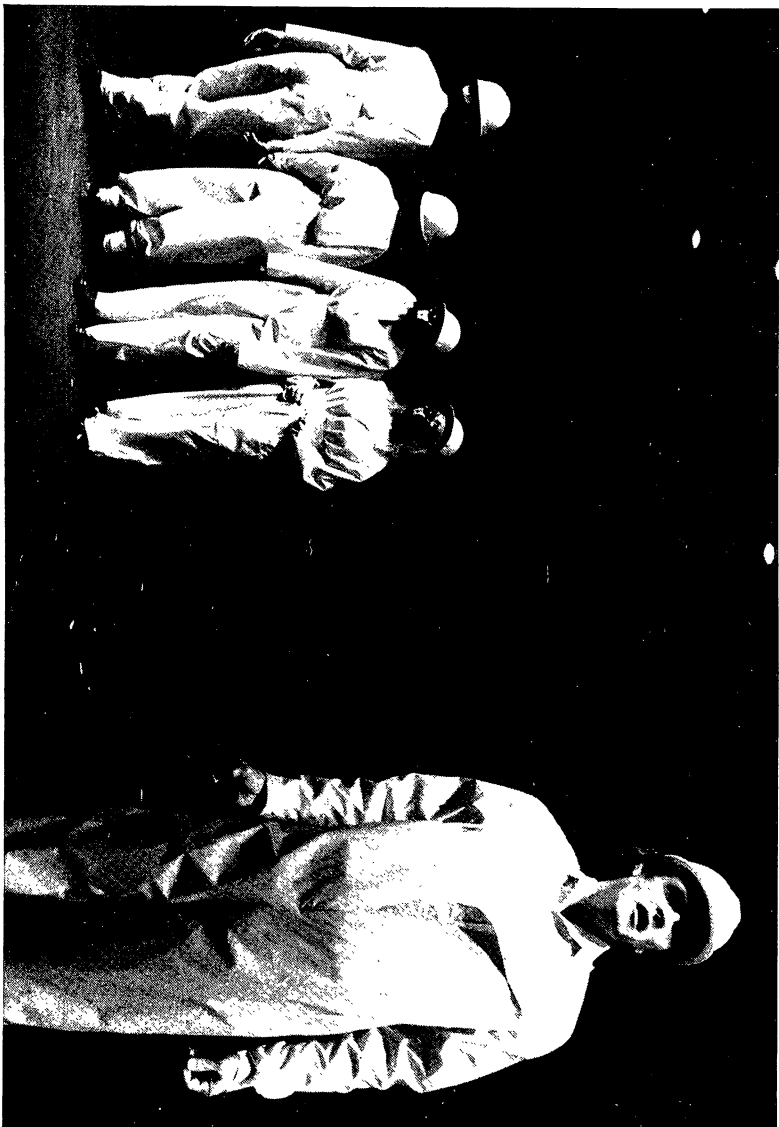
Emmanuel Vitogran's performance as Lord Nelson approached the required heroic scale of the role, but it paled in comparison to Gundareva. He was, however, capable of exhibiting passionate behavior. One particularly effective scene featured an argument between Hamilton and Nelson which ended with the latter smashing several pieces of china. The scene prompted audible responses from the audience, but it was unclear whether the response was directed towards Nelson or the shattered plates. Interestingly, Vitogran was most successful not when expressing his love for Hamilton, but rather when besieged by pangs of guilt over their affair. Late in the play, Nelson, the contrite penitent, was depicted on his knees making his final confession aboard

his flagship, the Victory. The crossed beams which had been used to represent the masthead were then highlighted to make a massive crucifix behind him. It was the most sentimental moment in a production which fairly oozed sentimentality.

Andrei Goncharov's direction effectively emphasized the melodramatic aspects of the text, but his efforts to titillate occasionally seemed hamfisted. It was unclear, for example, why Lady Hamilton's Neapolitan servant, Franceska, was played in blackface. And Western audience members were understandably estranged when the theme from "Bridge on the River Kwai" and "Anchors Aweigh" were used as nineteenth century British martial music. Goncharov's strongest staging choices were allied with the set. Boris Blank's designs featured a large steel and plexiglass structure which was mounted on a turntable. This set-piece was turned to create numerous interior scenes as well as the bridge of the Victory. The battle of Trafalgar and Nelson's death as seen from this theatrical representation of a battleship was the most spectacular moment in the production.

Trends in theatrical productions are changing in the former Soviet Union. When asked why Moscow audiences want to see productions like *Victoriia*?... one patron responded: "Because too much reality dulls the soul." This production successfully aims at the hearts and souls of its audiences.

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Jason (Douglas Rye) and the Argonauts in the Contemporary Arts Center's production of Heiner Müller's *Despoiled Shore/Medeamaterial/Landscape with Argonauts*. Photo by Richard Russell.



**Despoiled Shore/Medeamaterial/Landscape with Argonauts.** By Heiner Muller. The Freeport-McMoRan Theater, Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, LA. June 7-22, 1991.

Since 1966, Heiner Muller has created theatrical visions of failed Western political and industrial systems through Greek myths like his *Herakles 5*, *Philoctetes*, and *Oedipus Tyrant*. Muller claims that his plays, though dark and ironic, actually exalt in the tragic. His "theatre of images," though rooted in the montage of early Russian cinematography, reflects today's fragmented visions of flickering videography and linguistic assimilation of phrases and slogans.

This American premiere of his *Despoiled Shore/Medeamaterial/Landscape with Argonauts* assembles a collage of Medea and Jason fragments that challenge the spectator with the themes of the devastation to the spirit, rape of the Earth, and the domination of cultures through colonization. He reinterprets the Medea myth as an environmental apocalypse, casting Earth as the wronged mother who kills her children in an act of revenge and positing that transgressors carry within their action seeds of global destruction. His vision confirms his own assertion that his is "neither a dope—nor a hope—dealer."

With this production, The Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans, serving contemporary visual and performing artists and audiences, continues its dedication to exhibitions and performances of new and original work. Muller's poetic theatrical text served as the foundation for this collaboration of language, music, song, visual art, videography, movement, and dance.

Director Julie Hebert set its action in Louisiana's controversial "cancer alley," the industrial corridor on the Mississippi between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Her successful choice added trenchant focus to the action. Partial funding from the National Endowment for the Arts Inter-Arts and Theater Programs placed Hebert's name on the "endangered artist list" in a *Village Voice* article concerning funding of controversial projects. The rape and destruction of Earth, however, must not have seemed sufficiently pornographic.

The lobby exhibit "Statements of the Environment" initiated the audience into ecological concerns for Louisiana's water, ground, and air with sculpture, photography, paintings, and kinetic installations. It was a logical movement from these works into the intimate black box. The stage was dominated by the backdrop, an evocative night landscape of a refinery with smoke, small lights,

and heliotrope sky. Huge gates crossed the apron, flanked by solid waste including rubber gloves, polystyrene, stuffed garbage bags, worn tires, and plastic of every ilk. Buried in the center of civilization's trash were three television monitors.

The prologue began with video images, live combo music, and a trio of gospel singers serving as Chorus of what will be. Scene One "Medeaplay: Prologue." is an early piece (1974) with no performance record and was Muller's first published exploration of a theater of images. Medea in a bridal gown was led to what seemed to be a sacrificial ritual of matrimony. The Death Masks that escorted her, bound her wrists and ankles to the four corners of the upright bed frame, and leered at her growing distress while a grotesque Jason cavorted and danced around her. The ramifications of the bondage are heightened by the white Jason's domination of the African American Medea (Drena Clay). The photograph that represents the child that Jason births from beneath her white gown is torn into pieces.

*Despoiled Shore* (Scene 2), written over 30 years ago, evoked the world of decayed housing, mountains of waste, and trapped wildlife. The poignant St. Gabriel, an egret (Ana Sa), struggled to live within an oil soaked body, while the Chorus from the dumpster lamented the despoiled shore, the "Gateway to Cancer Alley 150 miles long." There was grief in realizing that "this tree will not outgrow me." This collage of anger, loss, and futility gave no relief to the Earth that was dying like the egret, named for the poisoned industrialized Louisiana parish, St. Gabriel. This scene conjoined the rape and abuse of the bride with the development, abuse, and disrespect of the fertile bottom land by its exploiters.

The more recognizable story of Medea and Jason structured *Medeamaterial*. Throughout Scene 3, Medea (Amanda White) in her songs connected her pain with that of Earth: "I am the water, I am the dirt." Colonization and betrayal were her themes when she sang to Jason "You drank me up like wine." Her revenge, she reminded us, will be a catastrophe caused by our disastrous land use. "My wounds and scars make a splendid poison," Medea/Earth growls. Hebert's casting again underscores the African American/third world plight at the hands of a white, western "civilized" Jason (Douglas Rye), although Rye never brought intensity or danger to Jason who seemed to remain detached and weak. The depiction of the children, however, was compelling, represented by enlarged black and white photographs pinned to the backs of two actors' costumes. They were loved, addressed, and destroyed on stage, as Medea sang "Give back into my womb my offspring." Jason's children, one black and one white, return in the cycle toward dust from folly. This climactic segment unfortunately seemed too long, too deliberate,

### Vaclav Havel: The Tragi-comedy of Convocation?

Vaclav Havel, during his recent and second state visit to the United States as President of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, received a special academic award from New York University—"The Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws," presented by E.L. Doctorow. I was privileged to be present at this prestigious convocation. The overt theatricality of the event, something noticeably complete in every Aristotelian element, is worth reporting here.

Beginning his theatrical career as a stagehand for the Theatre on the Balustrade, after he had been denied entrance to a university, he now "finds himself on a larger stage, cast in a history-making role," the "artist become architect of democratic rule and reform."<sup>1</sup> The program notes, though limited, were informative, whetting one's appetite for the performance to follow. We, the audience—though holding official tickets, initially distributed to a select minority—after standing on line, outside, for a considerable length of time, were finally introduced to President Havel on an Italian Renaissance inspired stage in a NYU Law School Hall, following a spectacular, trumpeted, procession of academics in full medieval regalia. One's initial response was that this elaborate costumed ceremony was part of something transplanted from the time of Henry VIII, at once dignified and bloated in its pomp and circumstance, serious and yet dreadfully comic simultaneously. Were we all part of a Court Masque I asked myself. The star, surprisingly short and youthful, apparently drowning in his heavy robes, smiled with a shining confidence, clearly drinking in the heady atmosphere.

NYU Vice Chancellor C. Duncan Rice welcomed the protagonist, newly elevated from his previous position in the world of ordinary men, this ex-political prisoner, as a "humane statesman," a "luminous representative" with whom we can "rejoice of freedom from totalitarianism." Diction, thought, spectacle, music from the Tarogato Brass Ensemble, the plot and superior character of a man moving from initial affluence to the degradation of prison-life, then returning to his nation's highest office; nothing was left out of this powerful theatrical experience.

On behalf of the students at NYU, Jeffrey Chang—an example of brilliant casting by the university administrators—thanked President Havel for his work on Chapter 77, an action which brought imprisonment on the former dissident playwright.

Edward W. Lehman, on behalf of the faculty, saluted Havel's power as a man who "abundantly personifies [the] challenge to build a democratic

republic . . . a new struggle one generation to the next . . . a torch worth passing on." Dr. Lehman's intent, clearly, was to highlight Havel's role as hero, embodying an abstract condition, or system of values.

The University Trustees were represented by the Honorable Henry A. Grunwald, who returned to the concept of plot. "No plot," he informed Havel, and a hushed audience, could be "as implausible as your own life. [You] could not invent that . . . a drama of suspense, with no guaranteed happy endings." Grunwald continued by reminding us all of the "ambiguous power of words," their capacity to both heal and destroy, of the difficulty of pinning down even that "noblest of words, freedom." But, he also recognized Havel as a man not only of "words" but of "idea" and "action." We, the audience, were beginning to witness the embodiment of the personification of political dissident as hero, rising to leadership and, through action, constructing a new concept of freedom hitherto unknown in his nation: an action statement worthy of any good dramatic fable. Nevertheless, one was left with the disturbing question as to whether Aristotle would have approved of this action. Or should one anticipate one more twist, an ultimate catastrophe?

L. Jay Oliva, NYU's President-Elect, offered his "Remarks" next, considering a more Platonic concept, that of the "ideal of the Philosopher King," occupying a position on the "world stage" where "moral strength" is of key importance. Oliva recognized Havel as a man for whom the "modern history of Czechoslovakia is his own biography—the Velvet Revolution," and saluted him as "a world leader with the soul of a poet."

For this individual member of the audience at least, the Langerian theory of dramatic destiny was suggested by the next participant in the event. E.L. Doctorow's presentation reminded one, in Langerian terms, that Havel's plays have been part of the process of "virtual history."<sup>2</sup> The contemporary theorist Carlson informs us that for Langer, "The drama presents virtual history in the mode of enactment, as a series of actions working toward a completed pattern, a fulfilled form. The mode of literature in general is Memory, while that of drama is Destiny."<sup>3</sup> Doctorow, himself a "politically astute critic," a phrase he used to describe Havel, also said of the playwright/critic/national leader and central figure in our current drama, "How well he plays the role that destiny has presented," recognizing his position "at the spiritual crossroads of Europe" in a nation formerly guilty of a "subversion of reality" via "a culture of lies." One began to think of Oedipus at his crossroads and Pericles, the almost perfect man. Do memory and destiny create reality?

After a further "Citation," by Oliva and the "Investiture" by C. Duncan Rice, the "hero" addressed the audience in his own language, immediately

**La Tragédie du Roi Christophe.** By Aimé Césaire. Directed by Idrissa Ouedraoga. With Roland Bertin. Comédie Française, Paris. July 19, 1991.

In June 1991, *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe* by Aimé Césaire finally entered the repertory of the Comédie Française in Paris. It is not hard to see in the reception of the theatrical masterpiece of the founder of the *négritude* movement the signs of a certain success. A play's arrival at the institution founded by Molière himself is still a mark of prestige in France where official culture is sanctioned by literary prizes, the ministry of culture, and even the moribund Académie Française. Too long considered a museum of theater, the comédie Française has in recent years, thanks to two brilliant, if controversial administrators, Jean-Pierre Vincent, and until his untimely death, Antoine Vitez, produced stunning, daring new interpretations of the classics from Molière to Brecht.

Antoine Vitez himself made the decision to bring *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe* to the Comédie Française with the intention of directing it himself. Vitez's interest in Francophone literature is well attested, since he personally introduced the work of the Haitian writer Jean Métellus to the theater-going public with his staging of *Anacaona* at the Théâtre National de Chaillot. His death in 1990 did not allow him time to complete the project. Jacques Lassalle, Vitez's successor at the Comédie Française, chose Idrissa Ouedraoga, a filmmaker from Burkina Faso, to stage *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe*, his first attempt to direct for the theater. As winner of the *Grand Prix du Jury* in 1990 at the Cannes film festival for *Tilaj*, as well as the *Prix de la Critique Internationale* in 1989 for *Yaaba*, Ouedraoga has been widely acclaimed for his filmmaking, although he no doubt deserves greater recognition in North America. His staging of *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe* certainly displays his cinematic bent, since by skillfully linking scenes, he was able to make a two hour play from a text that, if performed exactly as written, would last almost four hours.

Seen from within a North American context, the most controversial aspect of the performance was the decision to cast white actors in roles representing Haitians. Of course this decision was dictated in part by necessity, since the *sociétaires* of the Comédie Française are white. The choice of using white actors or not producing the play thus presented a very real dilemma. The casting of *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe* with white actors was, potentially at least, more explosive than the flap over *Miss Saigon*, or even Peter Brook's

interracial casting of the *Mahabarata*, for example. *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe* is precisely about race, identity, colonialism and nationhood, national culture and national aspirations. As it tells the story of the rise to power of Henri Christophe, former slave, now King of Haiti, Césaire's play raises political, social, and cultural questions about profound, and possibly irreconcilable, conflicts of values, European (or French) values on the one hand and African (or Haitian) values on the other. Casting white actors in *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe* is, it would seem, a travesty in the literal sense of the term. In his staging, Ouedraoga does nonetheless manage to figure "Africanness" by casting a single African actor, Toto Bissainthe, in the role analogous to the chorus in a Greek tragedy. Through her presence, her dress, her voice, her song, the rhythms of her dance, "Africa" is connoted. As for the rest, when all physical signs of race have been erased, the racial system, as it is constantly evoked in the play, becomes, or rather is seen to be, a purely linguistic system. Christophe, as played by Roland Bertin, is Black because he says he is. If this staging in some measure succeeds, and I am not sure that it does entirely, it is not because racial, cultural, national differences have been erased, or absorbed in an all-embracing ideology of universality; it is because spectators are obliged to see and finally to accept difference in another way. Thoughtful spectators must confront the deeper implications of *négritude* when a ready-made interpretive grid based solely on race is denied them.

Reflecting on; the meaning of this play for a Haitian, Jean Métellus quotes Antoine Vitez: "Theater above all must not try to talk about the here and now. Its role is to talk about elsewhere now, or here once upon a time" (my translation). Perhaps this is the best commentary on Idrissa Ouedraoga's staging of *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe* at the Comédie Française.

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**Marriage Play.** By Edward Albee. The Alley Theatre. Houston, Texas, 2 February 1992.

Creating new and unique characters, the formidable mind that gave us *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* again gauges the blight in wedlock. If Edward Albee's new *Marriage Play* seems less acidic, its finish is more perplexing and haunting. Albee uses what Bergson called "a stroke of laughter" to issue disdain for the "malady of sameness" in a long relationship. But the aftertaste of laughter can be bitter.

If we get past the specificity of sexual language which in recent years marks Albee's plays, we find a well-written piece of literature that works as theatre. In the 1960s, director Alan Schneider correctly defended the playwright against claims at home and abroad that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* contained highly offensive language. But like other early-Albee, that play held more hint than substance in its sensual phrasing. Now, alas, schoolmarms and thought-police may find that *Marriage Play's* language rivals the worst of David Mamet's. To refrain from wagging a finger takes forbearance.

With *Marriage Play* at Houston's Alley Theatre, Albee returns to the American scene after a decade of opening works abroad rather than at home.

This play premiered in 1987 at Vienna's English Theatre, where Tennessee Williams, Harold Pinter and others have traditionally introduced their plays. What Albee offers in his American premiere is classic comedy that dips into pathos. He quickens an audience's pity and compassion for the inability of his violence-prone pair, Jack and Gillian, to alter their behavior or to end their sad marriage.

For the play's setting, designer Derek McLane uses Renoir-like timelessness and everywhere-ness. Omitting specific background from the couple's living room, McLane makes Albee's image of married life universal. Equally clever is the setting's rear wall of glass, letting us in on the husband's swift approaches to his home and angry departures from it. We see Jack before he enters, wiping sweat from his face and bracing himself to face his wife, who sits alone in the living room. At his exits, after striking Gillian (too many times, she says, and once too often) he is visible again beyond the glass.

Albee gives his actors, Shirley Knight and Tom Klunis, full measure of droll repartee in *Marriage Play*. As Gillian, award-winning Shirley Knight deftly mimes, vamps, and clowns through scenes of tension. Like Agnes in Albee's Pulitzer play, Gillian tries to maintain the couple's "Delicate Balance."

One ploy is to remove herself from hurt in her marriage by deeming herself superior to her mate, holding him at best "a piece of filth." With Knight's comic bent, Gillian seems untouched by her husband who, like a Nietzsche satyr-hero, longs for the innocent conscience of a beast-of-prey; after dallying he wants to return like a prankish schoolboy. Knight, appropriately aloof, lets Gillian merely smart off.

As the smug and narcissistic husband, Shakespeare veteran Tom Klunis is more of a straight man for Knight than when he played the role in *Vienna*. For Jack's self-obsessions, Klunis blends the ludicrous with the pompous. He projects his character's shame at the prominence of his breasts; and he feels Jack's ire at life's brevity and deceit. Unlike Kafka's "hunger artist," who starves rather than eat the savorless food life offers, Albee's less fussy hero eats but then rails. Klunis catches the disenchantment of a long-wedded male who still needs from intimacy the joys of "relief"—what he terms "company and coming"—but who suddenly "turns a corner of his mind" to find the thrill of sex vanished.

The pathos of life's mutability and of our own mortality pierces Albee's audience not only from what his characters say and do but from the implications of what they are NOT saying or doing. Jack and Gillian are not saying "Goodbye," nor are they changing. We are hard put to believe that Jack and Gillian (wed twenty-three years in *Vienna's* script, thirty in *Houston's*) can hurt each other. With Albee's earlier play, George and Martha overcame our better judgment and convinced us they loved and attracted each other. Jack and Gillian's rejections and remonstrances, both verbal and physical, draw lofty talk but no tears. We must stretch to perceive that one even hears the other.

Albee's rationale at first escapes us. Is there a tragedy if the two neither love nor hate? Do we say to abuse and apathy, "That's life," lift brows, look away? Albee's characters do. As the play begins, Jack comes home from work to announce "I'm leaving you," but Gillian goes on reading, mumbling "I know you are." Later, Jack is unmoved by Gillian's lifting and pointing her breasts at his face. (Except for Jack, Albee-husbands do not suffer from the distaste that bisexual Salvador Dali felt for his wife's mammae.) In 1962 George reacted strongly to the approach of Martha's bobbing "melons." *Seascape's* husband shows pride of possession in his wife's healthy breasts. And why doesn't Gillian cry or scream rather than quip dispassionately about his absence from her bed? Does Albee think wives wholly remove themselves, rise above vulnerability? We understand a George or Martha, wounded, bitter, vocal—never uninvolved!



But as *Marriage Play* unfolds, Albee supplies a rationale for the baffling apathy of his pair that helps with our response. His intent does not surface early or easily, but materializes from the counterpoint that Albee composes with his couple's narrative voices. Their motifs develop, re-state and counter each other as Jack brags or rails and Gillian mocks or spoofs. "Sad life," says Albee through his characters: "sad husband, sad wife." Gradually we deduce that thirty years of wedlock have indeed locked them into a classic dilemma: whether to keep the security of a stale marriage, or to face the void that could engulf them if they leave. Their fears are emanations of our own, and rouse some to pity, if not ridicule.

How we relate to Albee's couple varies with the staging we view. At Vienna, a hard blow is delivered as Gillian sits in her chair, and the knock-down brawling between the two is intense. At Houston, no blow is delivered, and brawling is less protracted. A second shift occurs in the blocking of the final scene where the husband at both stagings half-heartedly repeats his threats from Act I of "I'm leaving you, you know," and his wife as routinely responds, "So it would seem." Vienna keeps the two on opposite sides of the living room, sunk in their easy chairs as they gaze straight ahead. Houston puts the pair close and center-stage, facing three-quarters front where, emotionally drained, they reach resolutely to clasp hands.

As a result of disparities like these, audiences of the separate productions seem to see Albee's intent differently; and surely the blood, guts and ego of a playwright must run hot and cold at our singular readings. On the up-side, what should warm this playwright's cockles at either staging is audiences' deep involvement with *Marriage Play* as they ponder his closing scene. A colder turn may be this: one piece of stage business—the trapped pair's hand-clasp—leads some in the Houston audience to smile and say, "Oh good, now they WILL stay together!" While both sets of viewers accept the pair's tribulations as those we, too, must face, Houston's audience rejoices that Jack and Gillian opt to perpetuate their apathy and violence beneath an overlay of love.

Albee has often claimed delight in diverse readings of his ambivalent endings, but—a joyous one? Does the raw laughter of Act I in Houston's staging throw some off in their final reactions to the couple's cool facade? Or, does laughter only prove that comic and tragic views of life no longer exclude each other?

Surely Albee's play pushes for change and resolution. Though the human grasp be weak, aren't we to reach for the might of a George and Martha who drop their facade and duke it out to a finish, trying for a healthier union? Whatever our answer, *Marriage Play* works as vital theatre at both venues, for its characters are ineluctably patterned after us. Whether they face reality or

dissemble, they arouse great anguish as they squander life and time, pitilessly fleeing.

Jeane Luere

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Marriage Play by Edward Albee. Photo Courtesy of Jim Caldwell, Houston, TX.

**The Servant of Two Masters.** By Carlo Goldoni. Deutsches Theater, Berlin. 16 June 1991.

An important result of the reunification of Germany is the present interaction between the theatres of the East and West. A good example is the current production of *A Servant of Two Masters* in Berlin. The production was directed by Niels-Peter Rudolph with settings and costumes by Götz Loepelmann, both free-lance theatre artists from the West. The role of the servant was played by Dieter Mann who has just completed seven years as the Artistic Director of the Deutsches Theater (formerly East Berlin). The production of this famous play lived up to expectations created by memories of the famous Max Reinhardt production with Hermann Theimig in the Deutsches Theatre in 1924 and Giorgio Strehler's production at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan in 1947.

As the current Truffaldino, Dieter Mann played the role to perfection, maintaining a wonderful tempo, and a delightful relationship with the audience. As the play began he appeared in contemporary clothing (worn trousers, a plaid shirt, an old jacket with the back seam burst open, and a nearly shapeless hat). Looking a little lost, he called from the back of the nearly dark stage, "Hallo, hallo", then as he worked his way to the center of the stage, appeared to be blinded by the spotlight suddenly turned on him. Becoming accustomed to it, he began to play with it, making it wider, narrower, much wider, and finally making it so small that he opened his jacket and tucked it inside.

In the various lazzi, he and the director had worked out many variations on gags, and these were performed with great energy, physical agility, and comic skill. At the beginning when he wanted to be the servant of the first master and carry his suitcase into the inn, he performed the desperation of trying to get the impossibly heavy item off the floor and into the building. Taking it away from the servant who was struggling with it, Mann dropped it on his foot. Dancing with pain, he perceived the master looking critically at him and turned it into a charming actual dance. Making another effort, he turned the suitcase over on his hand. When he moved away from the suitcase, his hand was missing (covered by the sleeve, of course), and he sought it vainly, asking the audience where it was. Perceiving it inside the sleeve, he mimed turning a crank, and the hand emerged in a machinelike way, finally sticking out much too far. Determined to solve the problem of the heavy suitcase, he rushed at it, opened it, and discovered that, ludicrously, it was empty. Meanwhile, the master was showing signs of impatience, so he

gathered his energies, took a run at it, grabbed the handle which came off, and hurtled offstage full force, following which there was a tremendous noise of falling and breaking objects. Returning to the stage with the handle in his hand, he held it up to his ear like a telephone receiver, and finally stuck it in his belt and returned again to the intractable suitcase. Rehearsals for the play lasted for nine week (a relatively short time for this theatre), and pieces of business were rehearsed and rejected, altered and polished, so that in a thorough sifting, only the best lazzi were kept and they all worked well.

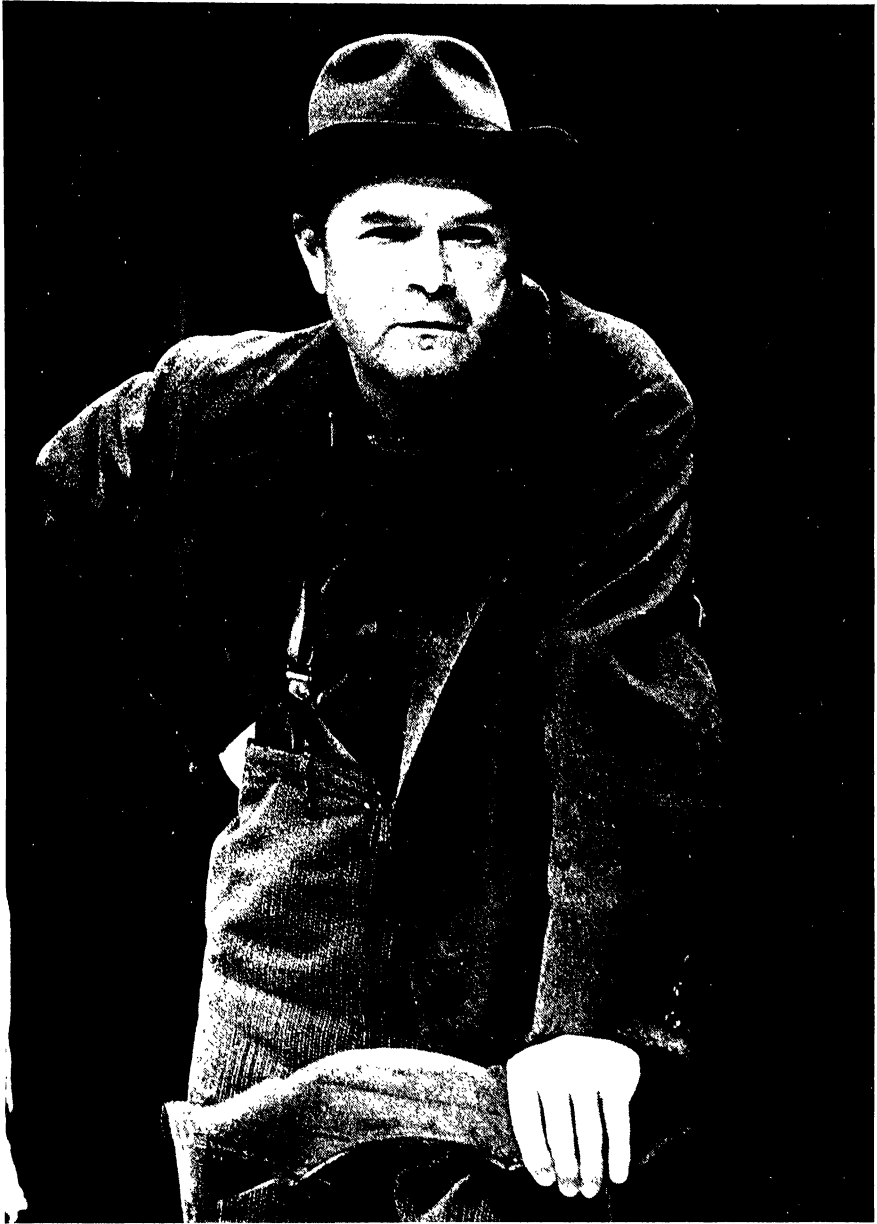
The great test of the play, of course, is the dinner scene. The setting was very good for this scene. The two masters were behind curtains upstage. In front was a platform, which Truffuldino could act on or stand behind. The cook was at the audience level in front of the stage, handing or throwing the food up to Truffuldino, who called to him repeatedly, "Tempo, tempo!" As the food appeared, his intense hunger and the desire to serve it came into conflict: succumbing to the former, he put a ladle full of soup in his mouth. Just then, his master called, and he spit it back and rushed to serve it. When the meatballs came, he couldn't remember which master had ordered them. Intending to divide them equally, he counted them out on the stage floor, ending up with one extra. He counted them again and finally shoved the odd one in his mouth just as a master called again. He grabbed four meatballs off the floor, flung them on a platter, handed it off stage, came back with the platter, picked up the meatballs still on the floor, flung them on the platter and gave them to the other master. A preposterously quivering pudding, which seemed to shake more, the more he tried to hold it still, moved him to shout, "It's still alive," and attack it in karate fashion, cutting it perfectly in half. The dinner concluded with one master calling for fruit, and Truffuldino feverishly crying, "Fruit, fruit, fruit!" The cook appeared with a crate of fruit. He swiftly threw a pear, banana, an apple and a bunch of grapes in a machinelike fashion. Truffuldino caught each with the right hand, slammed it on a plate held in his left, and shoved it off-stage. Then the cook swiftly threw six oranges, which Truffuldino, out of plates and at wit's end batted over the curtains to his masters with a frying pan.

*The Servant of Two Masters* stands or falls on the performance of the servant, but the supporting cast has to be good. In this case, the comic cook, the masters, and all the others were excellent so the comedy never ceased. As the servant, Dieter Mann not only performed with great energy (he lost a kilo of weight in each performance), he conveyed an intense sense of urgency, need, and humanity. His poverty and his hunger were poignant, and the present terrible unemployment in Berlin was a very real background to the production. In addition to the dazzling physical skills and the comic qualities,

his humanity, and his relationship with the audience were significant in the successful portrayal. He always took the audience with him. When he was making up lies to the masters to explain the confusion of the suitcases and the clothing, he glanced at the audience intermittently, seeming to say, "Will this work?" or "Whew, he swallowed that," or "Well, the other one believed it." Early in the play he gestured to the audience to complete a phrase which had been repeated several times, saying with dismay as nobody answered, "You have to work with me!", and when several people did call out the word, he sighed, "Finally." But these and other interpolations never became intrusive or slowed the action, the play moved full-steam ahead at all times.

One of the pleasures of theatre in Berlin is the possibility of seeing superb actors in great roles, in contrast to the all-too-familiar experience of seeing superb actors in New York in contemporary Sardoodledom. In recent years Berlin audiences have been able to see Dieter Mann in Claudel's *Break of Noon*, Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*, and other major plays. Actors in his theatre move from one great role to another in a repertory which includes 18 plays in the Schauspielhaus, and 14 in the Kammerspiele. As a result of the political changes, after 28 years at the Deutsches Theater Mann is now performing his first guest appearance as Lopakhin in *The Cherry Orchard* in Hamburg. With Berlin re-established as the capital of Germany, Mann and the other outstanding actors at the Deutsches Theater will become known to a larger number of Germans and visitors from abroad, and *The Servant of Two Masters* will be a major attraction in the repertory.

Yvonne Shafer  
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Dieter Mann in *Der Diener Zweier Herren*. Photo courtesy of Wolfhard Theile, Berlin.

## Books Received

