PRAXIS: An Editorial Statement

By Kent Neely

Theatre de la Jeune Lune, a Minneapolis theatre troupe, featured their original play, *Children of Paradise*, for several weeks this winter. The production created a stir locally, toured both to Yale University and the La Jolla Playhouse, and then returned in February for an extended run fascinating audiences with its fluid-like blend of the making of Carne's film, *Les Enfants du Paradis*, within a larger play structure. The play within a play convention would not be particularly noteworthy without a coincidental and integrated performance technique that reconfigured the event within an experiential aesthetic. The play, produced in Jeune Lune's newly converted warehouse home, simultaneously placed the filmic space of representation within the theatrical space of representation that, coincidentally, surrounded and intersected the audience's virtual space.

Unconventional staging and design approaches like Jeune Lune's have gained acceptance within larger and more mainstream venues and have affected how we absorb the theatrical moment. One thinks of JoAnne Akalaitus, Anne Bogart, Peter Brook, Lee Breuer, and, of course, Robert Wilson, whose work in professional regional theatres during the last decade broke new ground for many audiences previously unfamiliar with such visions of representation.

The studies in this section of PRAXIS offer us two new instances of plays reconfigured into unusual spatial arrangements that affect how works, considered classics by many, are understood. Marvin Carlson provides an extended look at a recent creation by artist Martha Clarke, whose contributions to music, dance and theatre are significant. Yvonne Shafer gives a glimpse, somewhat reflexive upon American ideology, into current perceptions of two plays realized by Berlin's Maxim Gorki Theatre.

Wer Hat Angst Vor Virginia Woolf? Photo by Barbara Köppe.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? By Edward Albee. **Death of a Salesman.** Arthur Miller. Maxim Gorki Theater. Berlin. In repertory January 1992.

Two American Classics are currently enjoying popular and critical success on the Berlin stage. *Death of a Salesman* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are part of the repertory of nineteen plays at the Gorki Theater. They would be of interest simply because of the high quality of the productions, but to an American viewer they have the added interest of non-realistic productions which sharply contrast with the usual productions of these plays in America.

To those familiar with Miller's comments on his most famous play (originally to be called *The Inside of His Head*), Eberhard Keienburg's expressionistic setting and lighting seems a thoroughly appropriate treatment for the play. Characters such as "The Boss," "The Mother," "The Son," etc. show the strong influence of expressionism. For this production, the audience arrived to see a stage with no curtain. An overstuffed armchair was positioned downstage right, and upstage left, a refrigerator. Between these pieces stood a kitchen table and three chairs, illuminated by a hanging lamp. The forward half of the deep set was covered with dead leaves. The walls, extending from the proscenium to the back of the stage, were very high and slanted at strange angles. The lower three feet were painted as if covered with larger-than-life-sized flowered wallpaper, while the top created the impression of windows in tall apartment houses. Keienburg designed two tall, narrow openings upstage in which characters appeared in harsh yellow lighting as if in another world, or at least another framework. So, when Biff and Happy played their first scene, they stood in their pajamas in the central opening. Ben appeared first in the opening up left. Sometimes the buildings and skyline of New York City were projected on the walls behind these openings.

Within this setting the four chairs were swiftly moved from one configuration to another for the scenes in the office of the Boss, in the restaurant, etc. The setting gave the effect of everything that was permanently in Willy's mind, with one segment or another erratically foregrounded as his mind leaped about in time and space. The use of symbols (Linda's washbasket, the stockings, and a brightly colored bird suspended downstage left, to mention a few) worked well within this setting. The costuming, too, was simplified and archetypal. Willy was always dressed like a salesman. Linda wore the same red checked dress with an apron. Biff had to change costumes, but his pajamas, sweatsuit, and business suit were all the same shade of blue.

Music composed for the play emphasized the action at many points. When Ben appeared there was music typical of an exotic adventure film. The light

music of a flute called up an aura of a happier past. The lighting changed dramatically and swiftly throughout the play, and featured the bright jarring colors characteristic of expressionistic paintings. The restaurant was a strident green with red, blue, and yellow neon on the edges of sections of walls. At the end of act one, the sons went out the central upstage door, and Willy and Linda off right. The stage was dark, but the upper part of the setting was lighted to give the effect of illuminated apartment house windows surrounding the Loman home. When Willy was planting the seeds, the only light source was his flashlight which he shone on the faces of those who came to talk to him. Throughout the play the lighting set the mood and created a tension-filled environment.

Arthur Miller was quoted in the program as saying, "If I directed the play myself, I would make it as comic as possible." Klaus Manchen played comedy at unexpected points throughout the play, called up pity and angst where it was appropriate, and at some points showed flashes of what he must have been like as an appealing, hotshot young salesman. As Biff, Götz Shubert had the great physical fluidity and control needed to convince an audience that he was a high school football player in one scene and a thirty-two year old man in the next. Everything from Ben's booming voice and appearance as the archetypal adventurer to Bernard's transition from a wimpy kid to a successful lawyer worked effectively. At the end of the play the cast was greeted with great applause, stamping of feet, and whistling, demonstrating the strength of the audience reaction to this beautiful ensemble production and to the play itself.

Matthias Kupfernagel's setting for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was less obviously non-realistic, but so peculiar as to have been almost surrealistic. Like Keienburg's design, there were very high walls appropriate for an old New England house, but they were utterly devoid of trim or architectural detail. They were painted a sickly green and topped with a white ceiling of some sort of synthetic material with dozens of apertures for light. Like a Baroque setting, the room was oddly angled with only two walls and a vanishing point up right, giving a sense of tension to the setting. There were only two pieces of furniture: a small sofa along the wall stage left and an armchair against the wall stage right. There was one picture on the wall right, and a television set down center on the floor. "What a dump!" indeed.

The action was often non-realistic. The kitchen was off left and could be entered from an opening downstage left or from quite narrow opening upstage left. George, who went back and forth getting drinks, often appeared unexpectedly at one of the openings to give a line. When he got the drinks there was no pause to allow for finding more glasses or for filling them—he simply went into the kitchen, then came out with four glasses of liquor. Taking a cue from George's early ironic remark to the guests to put their things on the floor

or anywhere, the empty or half-empty glasses were set on the floor. By the end of the play, after George had thrown the flowers at Martha, the setting reflected their lives: strangely barren, chaotic, and littered with the evidence of an excess of alcohol.

The audience responded to the comedy in the play immediately. The comedy of the dialogue was enhanced by effective business. When George felt that he was being mocked by the three others who sat on the small sofa, he walked to them and smilingly sat down as if there were room. They sat looking very surprised and uncomfortable and he looked quite satisfied. While Martha and Nick were upstairs, Honey made her entrance, dazed and puzzled, and fell onto George in the armchair, clutching him like a bat when he tried ineffectually to shake her off.

Naturally, Anne-Else Paetzold as Martha and Hansjürgen Hürrig as George have the showiest parts and they played them very well, but similar to *Death of a Salesman*, this was a true ensemble piece. Honey can be simply dreary or pathetic. As played by Gundula Köster, she was continually interesting, even when her character was boring or stupid. Jörg Schüttauf as Nick, reacted wonderfully to the other characters, revealing his ambition, his self-satisfaction, and his complex attitude toward Honey. The absence of detailed realistic properties and furniture put the focus on the characters, and they opened up fully, revealing the bizarre qualities each possessed and the spontaneous combustion which resulted from their late night interaction. Like *Death of a Salesman*, the audience response was tremendous.

Before the Berlin Wall was destroyed, American plays were in the repertory of theatres of East Berlin. For years there was usually a play by Neil Simon at some theatre, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* had been a popular part of the Maxim Gorki presentations, and, last spring, a fine production of Shepard's *True West* opened at the Deutsches Theater with a shattering performance by Udo Kroschwald as Lee. Now that there is greater freedom and greater interaction with the West, more American plays will be performed, thereby opening up the concept of America for Germans. In March 1993 the Berlin premiere of O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* will open at the Deutsches Theater with a bizarre, raked, non-realistic setting on a revolving stage. For Americans in Berlin these presentations are eye-openers. Familiar American plays reveal new power and new facets in non-realistic presentations which explore a new range of production possibilities and choices for actors.

For the Maxim Gorki Theater, *Death of a Salesman* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* have been important in drawing theatergoers from the western part of Berlin, many of whom had never been in the theater before. This is an important economic element in a time of high unemployment. The audience for

both plays included young students, middle-aged career couples, and senior citizens. The appeal of the American plays was clear, and the interpretations were positively received. This is a time of great change and stress in Germany, and these plays speak to the Germans about America and about themselves.

Yvonne Shafer
University of Colorado at Boulder

Tod Eins Handlugsreisenden. Barbara Köppe.

The Magic Flute, by Wolfgang Mozart. Directed by Martha Clarke. Glimmerglass Opera, Cooperstown, New York. July 15, 1992.

With such original and visually haunting pieces as *Vienna Lusthaus*, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, *Miracolo d'Amore*, *The Hunger Artist*, and *Endangered Species*, Martha Clarke has become widely recognized as one of America's leading contributors to the international dance/theatre movement that includes such European artists as Maguy Marin in France and Pina Bausch in Germany. This summer, for the first time, Clarke undertook the staging of an opera from the classic repertoire, Mozart's *Magic Flute*. The result, as might be expected from Clarke's previous work, was a dark yet playful reading of Mozart's ambiguous story, filled with striking visual imagery.

An upstate New York production, even by an artist of Clarke's stature and reputation, did not prove particularly attractive to New York reviewers, and so reviews of the production appeared primarily in regional press. Few of these were strongly positive, most were confused or disturbed by the production, and none showed an acquaintance with any of Clarke's previous work. The unconventionality of Clarke's visual approach to the opera clearly disoriented them, and even those who spoke positively of the experience tended to do so in terms (such as "Martha Clarke's Brechtian theatre") highly inappropriate to the actual endeavor.

The unconventionality of Clarke's approach was apparent from the moment the audience entered the Glimmerglass theatre. There was no curtain, and the visible but still unlighted setting was so far removed from traditional *Magic Flute* stage design that many must have thought they had made some mistake in the production, wandering perhaps into *The Turn of the Screw*, also in the summer repertory. Ordinarily, of course, the curtain opens to reveal a more or less theatricalized wooded glade, the direct visual descendent of the rather stiff original setting in Vienna, an excellent example of the veneration for original performance images recently and strongly defended by Robert Donington in his study *Opera and its Symbols*. Even when directors or designers have departed from this convention, eschewing a realistic or cartoonish glade, they have tended to move toward more abstract representations still suggestive of an exterior. Robert Wilson's 1991 Paris production is a striking recent example of this tradition, its ragged blue rock sharply outlined against a bright yellow sky closer to the evocative monumentality of Appia than to the theatricalized realism of late eighteenth and most nineteenth century operatic design.

Robert Israel's design for Clarke was far removed from either of these approaches, though perfectly in harmony with Clarke's interpretation of the opera.

So successful a fit is not surprising. Although Israel is perhaps best known for designing the 1986 Seattle *Ring*, he has also designed almost all of Martha Clarke's productions, and this long association, as in the case of a number of contemporary French and German designer/director combinations, contributes greatly to the depth, richness, and integrity of the work of each. What Israel offered for the opening scene of Clarke's *Magic Flute* was not a woodland, not even an exterior, but a stark, rather grim room setting, its dimensions distorted, its walls fragmentary. The room tilted oddly down to the right, its distortion emphasized by a large wardrobe up right with even more exaggerated angles, and two doors, one whose lines followed those of the room, the other tilted even further right so that it seemed to rest on the floor only at one point of the sill. The right wall of the room had two huge arched windows. There was no left wall—only, at the rear of the stage, a flat painted to suggest a cloudy night sky, perhaps a faintly ironic concession on the part of the designer to the audience's awareness of the missing traditional exterior setting of this scene (rather in the manner of Thornton Wilder's Stage Manager's tolerant "There's some scenery for those who think they have to have some scenery") and perhaps (a point I will return to presently) to remind us that this part of the play takes place in the realm of the Queen of the Night.

The opening sequence was as surprising as this unexpected setting. When the action began, the major lighting was provided by a bank of footlights along the tilted front of the setting. Although more conventional stage lighting was also utilized in most scenes, these continued to provide a distinctly theatrical, nineteenth century accent to the lighting of the entire production. In many scenes these footlights were in fact supplemented by even stronger lights from the same position, so that the characters were doubled by their own huge dark shadows on the rear wall, an effect that added not only to the fairy-tale quality of the whole, but also to the dark and ominous tone that Clarke brought to many of the scenes. Even more specifically suggesting a fairy tale was Tamino (Tracey Welborn), discovered in the tights and cape of a fairy-tale prince, sleeping center at a rough table. We might almost be in a tale from the brothers Grimm, with a Prince mysteriously but typically out of his element in a rough peasant cottage. The serpent, almost always represented by some kind of puppet, projection, or faint cousin of a Chinese New-Year dragon (even Wilson had a rather geometric red monster to set off his blue rock and yellow sky), was taken in a totally different direction by Clarke, in a change central to her interpretation of this opera. Her serpent was a gaunt and sinuous black man (Gus Solomons, Jr.), naked to the waist and bearing a large scythe, who crept quietly into the room from the windows on the right. We saw this figure often in the subsequent scenes, and never with the touch of the rather frolicsome serpent that has become common

in modern *Magic Flutes* but rather as something much closer to Emily Dickinson's "narrow Fellow in the Grass," whose passing leaves a feeling of "Zero at the Bone."

Those who have seen previous productions by Martha Clarke will be familiar with how significantly and appropriately she draws upon the tradition of Western painting as a basis for her visual vocabulary. Often a single painter (Brueghel in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Tiepolo in *Miracolo d'Amore*) has seemed dominant, but although Clarke herself has mentioned the paintings of James Ensor as an important visual inspiration for her *Magic Flute*, other visual echoes abounded in this staging. Ensor might have been the primary inspiration for dressing Pamina (Rebecca Caine) in the white tutu and point shoes of a classical ballerina but when she posed in the strong footlights I found the resemblance to Degas stunning. One reviewer quite rightly noted that the image near the end, where Tamino and Pamina mounted Martha Clarke's own huge white Percheron horse, and prepared to ride off in triumph, seemed to come directly out of one of Seurat's paintings. The tilted planes of the setting and the Germanic costumes of most of the characters stimulated some reviewers to invoke German expressionism, Georg Grosz, even (highly inappropriately in my opinion) Bertolt Brecht, apparently under the assumption that tilting the floors and adding elements that were not "pretty" or that were "out of place" made the production Brechtian. For this reviewer, a more appropriate over-all analogy might be to the dark fairy-tales of Maurice Sendak, where one finds also the faintly disturbing mixture of the familiar and the grotesque, a world where ballerina heroines and heroes in tights and capes might well encounter villainesses (the Queen of the Night) in Prussian military dress with attendants dressed as 1920 usherettes and eccentric magicians (Sorastro) in top hats, spectacles, and shoulder-length hair who number among their adherents men with bears' heads. It is perhaps not coincidental that Sendak recently designed *The Magic Flute* himself in Houston, though in a much lighter vein than Clarke.

The variety of costuming—ballerinas, usherettes, military frockcoats, angelic wings for two of the three boys, working class German village clothing for Sarastro's followers, a rather rumpled suit for Papageno—disturbed some reviewers of this production, but the tone and visual imagery was in fact highly unified (hardly surprising, since Robert Israel was responsible for costumes as well as setting). Early twentieth century Germany clearly provided the base line for the costuming, with individual departures, such as Pamina, Tamino, and the Serpent, clearly understandable in light of their symbolic functions. Any thoughtful production of *The Magic Flute* must surely deal in some significant manner with the shift at the heart of the opera from the realm of the Queen of the Night (Sharon Takács) to that of Sarastro (Wilbur Pauley), and this

production strikingly suggested this shift both in costumes and in physical setting. Throughout the first act the tilted planes and distorted angles remained disturbing but unexplained features of the stage world, disturbing not only in their defiance of normal linearities on stage (and there was nothing calculatedly "angular" or distorted in the acting or over-all costume style to suggest an overarching "expressionist" approach), but also in their defiance of traditional visual expectations for this opera.

Not until the beginning of the second act did the relationship of this scenic distortion to the structure of Mozart's opera become clear. At first glance the act two setting seemed identical to that of act one, but a closer look revealed that the distortions had now disappeared. The floor was now true, the doors and wardrobe upright in normal relationships to the walls and to each other. Like the first act setting, this room essentially filled the right two-thirds of the stage, but at the left, where the first act had an isolated flat representing the night sky, the second act setting allowed us to see the right third of the previous set, as if it had been simply pushed directly offstage to the left. Thus a bit of the tilted floor and the distorted wardrobe and door of that set were still visible. The order and rationality of Sarastro's world thus literally supplanted the more erratic and unstable world of the Queen. The Queen's realm and the Queen's influence are only eclipsed, not entirely supplanted, however, as this new stage arrangement clearly suggested. The distorted world of the first act still impinges upon the visual field, and remains as a locus for the forces of disorder in the rest of the opera.

Other images supplemented this contrast, most notably perhaps the use of the two wardrobes (I seem to be encountering a lot of productions lately in New York which wardrobes serve as theatrical entrances to alternate worlds, though these are hardly familiar objects in our culture. Maybe it is the influence of C. S. Lewis or even of *Time Bandits*). In his defense of strict faithfulness to the original stagings of operas, Robert Donington specifically mentions the appearance of the Queen of the Night insisting that for the Queen to gain her proper effect "the mountains open (and they must really be seen to open.)" Doubtless Donington would have been deeply disturbed had he seen Clarke's Queen of the Night revealed, not by opening mountains, but by the opening doors of her grotesque wardrobe, even though the traditional brilliant night sky appeared behind her. Nevertheless this entrance was powerful and highly theatrical, and it helped to establish the wardrobe as a mystic portal, precisely the sort of "ambivalent archetype" that Donington argues is a mark of all great art. The solid, four-square wardrobe in Sarastro's orderly world served a variety of functions, all building upon its clear parallel with and contrast to the Queen's wardrobe, which remained visible throughout the production, and indeed, because

of its size, became the defining element of the "Queen's" space when that was moved to occupy only the left third of the stage from act two onward. Perhaps most strikingly, Pamina and Tamino entered the undistorted wardrobe for the fire and water tests (suggested by the boys with appropriately colored lights) and through it came the huge white horse that would carry them off in triumph at the end. Their final exit on horseback was also through this portal, while simultaneously, the Queen, Monostatos, and the three ladies watched, in apparent chagrin, from within the distorted wardrobe in their own domain.

The production had many light touches. Gregory Rahming as Papageno quite satisfactorily made such traditional comic points as his fear in the temple, his consternation at the romantic advances of the old lady, and his threatened suicide, and shared a marvelously comic entrance sequence with a large black hen whom he put on the central table to busily peck corn while he sang his birdcatcher song. Judicious scattering and placement of the corn make it almost appear as if the sagacious bird had been trained as an accompanist. Sarastro also, with his air of a country guru and perhaps even a bit of benevolent charlatan, mixed a warm humor with his more serious persona as the guarantor of Pamina and Tamino's tests. The three boys displayed a sometimes cherubic, sometimes mischievous spirit of fun. One of them, I might note, was clearly a girl, a casting choice that seemed odd until it was eventually revealed that this was in fact Papagena, a central figure in the education of the suitors from the beginning. Despite these light touches, a more sinister tone was never far from the surface, as has often been the case in Clarke's work. The chiaroscuro lighting, with the frequently projected shadows contributed importantly to this, as did the ominous edge to the characters of the Queen, Sarastro, and especially Monostatos (Cesar Ulloa), a heavy gangster type with scarcely a touch of humor whose advances to Pamina ultimately come perilously close to out and out rape. The central focus for this darker tonality, however, was surely Gus Solomon, who having established his presence as the serpent in the first scene, often appeared thereafter, hovering on the edge of the action as an observer, or even making a more central appearance whenever death was mentioned, among the dancing animals as the bells were played, and, in a sequence that extremely effectively mixed the threat of death with farcical humor, providing props and encouragement as Papageno flirted with suicide. If one were to pick a single feature of this work that marked it as belonging to the memorable series of dance theatre works created by Clarke in the past it would be, I feel, not the visual imagination, nor the rich pictorial intertextuality, but the deeply evocative mixture of evocations of eros and thanatos so often at the emotional core of her works. In this production's memorable final sequence Pamina and Tamino ride off triumphantly into their wardrobe, and Sarastro and his followers file out through the upcenter main door

of this setting, as the Queen and her followers watch from within their own wardrobe. All three doors close together, leaving only a shaft of light falling across the stage. All this has been highly theatrical, full of a childlike fairytale wonder, and admirably drawing together many of the visual referents of the production. One major element was not a part of this totalizing pageant, however, and its utilization as a coda provided a highly effective and chilling summation to the work. The three upstage doors closed at the same time behind the departing principles and chorus. The footlights were extinguished, and only a thin shaft of light fell from above across the stark blank rear wall of the setting. In it were the unmoving head and shoulders of the serpent death, excluded for now from the celebrations, but patiently awaiting the time when all these figures, heroes and villains alike, must come to their final encounter with him. Human knowledge, love, sacrifice all have their day in this rich visual pageant, but Clarke's final and memorable image is of Dickinson's "Zero at the Bone."

Marvin Carlson
CUNY Graduate Center

The Magic Flute. Photo by Martha Leigh.

Book Reviews