

PRAXIS: An Editorial Statement

Kent Neely

The items in this issue of PRAXIS have a decidedly international bent. Each represents a personal connection to the theatre event that blends together individual experience with ideas that extend beyond the private and contemplative to public discourse.

James Fisher offers a glimpse into the latest effort by Peter Shaffer who, again, questions the morality of individual action within events of extraordinary repercussion. As Fisher notes, Shaffer has struggled with this demon in his past work and, similar to those, the crisis in *The Gift of the Gorgon* rests on life and death and how the living reconcile their relations to the deceased. The irony of this Shaffer work lies in its setting. It revolves around the theatre.

Joe Brandesky's review of a recent Russian production of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* relates his experiential involvement. Certainly uncharacteristic of the Chekhovian plays most people have seen, this rendition, staged by Sergei Artsybashev, freely involves the audience in performative events. The virtual reality one brings into the theatre ceases to be distinguishable from the hyperreality of the stage.

Another entry is a fascinating study of two American productions of the same play, Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, by the same director, Heinz-Uwe Haus. The twelve year interval between the two held remarkable portent for Haus. During the staging of his first effort, Haus mounted what was an East German's politically correct view of Brecht, one carefully monitored by the notorious Stasi. The second followed the unification of East and West Germany and demonstrates a liberated artist's efforts to re-examine the formerly enforced ideology.

Several of the productions operate as praxes in very different ways: Shaffer's dramaturgy, Artsybashev's stage direction and Haus's politics. Perhaps they may serve as examples of artistic risk shadowed by life's consequences.

The Gift of the Gorgon by Peter Shaffer. Presented by The Royal Shakespeare Company, Barbican Pit Theatre, Barbican Centre, London, England. First Performance: December 3, 1992. Performance reviewed: January 20, 1993.

In a recent *London Times* interview with Peter Shaffer on the eve of the premiere of his latest play, *The Gift of the Gorgon*, the playwright remarked that "Theatre is a risky enterprise because it is so vulnerable to criticism. But I think it is a tremendous task, the most enjoyable, startling, unnerving and grand task that one can pursue." Shaffer has certainly been vulnerable to critics who have long been divided on his work. Some have viewed his plays as pretentious, superficial treatments of difficult themes, while many others have found his passionate theatricality and the complexity of his subject matter thrilling. Not surprisingly, when *The Gift of the Gorgon* opened December 3, 1992, at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Barbican Pit, the reviews were respectful, but decidedly mixed along the usual lines. Without a doubt, *The Gift of the Gorgon* is quintessential Shaffer, a play with all of the characteristics of his most acclaimed works.

As with *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, *Equus*, and *Amadeus*, the plot of *The Gift of the Gorgon* seems simple, but through Shaffer's facile construction, complicated and unanswerable questions are raised in a mind-bending collision of ideas, values, and human emotions that would easily fill half a dozen works by writers of lesser ambition. Shaffer's drama begins with the death of a celebrated British playwright, Edward Damson, who has most recently been living in a self-imposed exile on a Greek island. Damson's widow, Helen, is unwilling to see or talk with Philip, the playwright's son by an early first marriage. Damson has never acknowledged his son, now a young drama professor who has been obsessed with the father he has never known. Subsequently impressed by Philip's persistent desire to write the definitive book on his father, Helen relents, stating ominously that Philip may never forgive her for learning the truth about his father. In recounting her relationship with Damson, Helen paints a frightening portrait of a man totally driven by his passions and a horrifying sense of justice directly inspired by his love for blood-drenched classical literature. Damson sees himself as the artist and Helen is his muse—to him they are a latter-day Perseus and Athena. Initially, Damson's plays profit from Helen's impassioned pleadings for reason and forgiveness in the face of his fiery belief in the cleansing quality—and necessity—for violent revenge. When heady fame causes him to turn away from his trust in Helen's civilized views, Damson writes a play in which his blood lust triumphs in the graphic advocacy of violent death for IRA

terrorists. When critics and audiences are appalled by his untempered views, Damson goes into a tailspin leading to his own personal encounter with the gorgon of revenge and justice. His death is worthy of his most savage instincts; a punishment that seems at once both just and horrifying.

Sir Peter Hall's adroit and tightly-paced direction made the small Barbican Pit seem much larger, particularly when John Gunter's large white-walled set spills open to reveal Damson's (and, ultimately, Helen's) alternating visions of Perseus and Athena on a golden ramp bathed in searing, uncompromising lights (designed by Rick Fisher) and a misty haze that wraps the mythical characters in an aura of gruesome mysticism. The simple set, which must swiftly accommodate many locations and time periods, was both efficiently utilitarian and evocative, allowing Hall to make the play's over-used flashback gimmick seem fresh through his fluid blending and overlapping of scenes from the past and present. The masked mythological characters, strikingly reminiscent of Hall's 1981 National Theatre production of *The Oresteia*, were seen in effectively vivid counterpoint with the contemporary characters, with Judith Weir's haunting music and Terry John Bates' simple choreography unifying the seemingly disparate periods.

It was the quality of the acting, particularly by the three principles, that illuminated the intense emotions and complicated relationships of the play. Michael Pennington's dangerously driven Damson propelled the pace and power of the play throughout. Damson must on one hand repulse the audience by virtue of his ecstatic, paganistic worship for bloody revenge, while at the same time eliciting their sympathy by demonstrating how easy it could be for anyone to become a Damson in a world filled with unspeakably unjust acts. Jeremy Northram as Philip was impressive in a similarly difficult, though considerably less flashy role. As the pallid young college professor his father disdains on principle, Philip must also show some glimpses of Damson's fire and wit while serving as little more than someone to listen to Helen's recounting of the playwright's life. Northram accomplished this with ease, and managed, in his subtle depiction of his evolving relationship with Judi Dench's Helen, in his fluctuating reactions to the image created of the father he has never known, and in his emotive reactions to the harrowing story she tells, to become for the audience more than the interested observer that Shaffer had seemingly made of him. Dench was most impressive of all in a performance that captured moments of the youthful graduate student Damson was initially attracted to, as well as the tortured, and ultimately vengeful, survivor. Dench's Helen does not simply recount and react to the tale she tells; she, in her own heartbreaking way, must also face the gorgon.

The Gift of the Gorgon is an important and fascinating play. Questions about the relative values of restraint and swift justice, traditionally accepted codes of moral behavior and law, the innate savagery and destructive bent of humanity, and the modern quality of mercy in the face of unspeakable terrorist acts and violence swirl through the play. Shaffer manages to make the play about both the desire for revenge and, perhaps more significantly, about the irreparable harm done to those who seek revenge. Shaffer wonders, ambiguously in the final analysis, if revenge has anything to do with justice—regardless of the horror of the act being revenged. By making Damson a playwright, Shaffer calls into question the theatre's role as a platform for reason and justice. Shakespeare saw it as such, so did Euripides and numerous other dramatists—but Shaffer is not so sure. He seems to feel that life itself ultimately doles out the only justice—and in ways that are often impossible for humankind to completely accept or understand. Shaffer also examines the question of the artist's right to present ideas that, to many, may seem repugnant or even obscene; why, he asks, do outrageous ideas and acts seem acceptable if they occur in the art and literature of the long past but not so when placed in a modern setting?

In *The Gift of the Gorgon*, Edward Damson believes that revenge is a disease only if it is repressed—he loathes those who meekly forgive violence; Shaffer leaves the audience to ask the difficult—and perhaps unanswerable—question: Can violence be avenged without destroying the avenger in the process.

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Invitation to the Feast: Sergei Artsybashev's Production of *The Three Sisters*

Finding innovative productions of Anton Chekhov's plays can be daunting, and once found, they frequently fail to excite. Too often, "Chekhovian moodiness" and static stagings meant to evoke "inertia" overwhelm the fascinating variety of life experiences contained in Chekhov's major plays. Such were my thoughts as I scouted the Moscow neighborhood where I was to see *The Three Sisters* at the Russian State Experimental theatre on Pokrovka Street, April 2, 1993. Fortunately for me, once found, this production (directed by Sergei Artsybashev) proved well worth the search. This time, I was invited to take a place at the Prozorov table.

The playhouse is not located near other well-known theatres, but, proudly inconspicuous, somewhat off the beaten path for non-residents. After I found the street, a member of the company steered me to the alley where the building was located. Ramshackle, tumbledown, it was more dilapidated looking than the usual "Moscow-theatre-in-need-of-repair." Once inside, I was treated to the scent of fresh paint as I climbed up a flight of stairs. At the top was a long hallway with chairs on one side and doors to offices on the other. No more than thirty chairs were available and all of them were filled quickly.

An energetic ambiance was established early as a tall, pleasant-looking fellow walked up and down the hall, loudly ringing his bell as a warning that the show was about to begin. In fact it had already begun: this actor (Vladimir Sveshnikov), aged no more than forty, with long, dirty-blonde hair and an open, smiling face was playing Ferapont, the aged, hearing impaired porter. He and all the characters in this production were dressed in contemporary, rather than period, clothing during the first half of the performance.

Action began as the sisters made their entrances. Doors would open, characters would speak and then retire into the rooms beyond the hallway. Masha (Elena Staradub) appeared wearing a black cocktail dress and quickly walked up the hall and then down again, scanning the audience as she went. When Tusenback, Fedotik, Solyony and others showed up they were in good moods—even Masha was playful and enthusiastic. The men chased each other up and down the hall; Tusenbach (Viktor Poliakov), with his arms crossed, leaned against a door and fell into a room; he was picked up and carried away like a corpse in a mock funeral. This was not over-emphasized, but was simply absorbed in the characters ongoing freeplay. As they sang songs and told jokes, the audience was treated familiarly, like visitors at the Prozorov home. Actors addressed each other and the audience directly, in close proximity. We were

invited to join the family as they celebrated Irina's nameday party, and thus identify our roles in Chekhov's life play.

Eventually, Andrei Prozorov (Oleg Paschenko) was heard practicing his violin. A tall, handsome man, he was played like a tentative adolescent who had not grown into his body. Natasha (Olga Bitiutskaiia) appeared wearing a pink patterned dress with ruffles and a narrow sash. Her costume and heavy makeup, combined with an ironing board figure, marked her as a source of derision in early scenes.

Later, audience members carried their chairs into an adjoining room for the meal. They were seated around a large table which was set with glasses of champagne and mineral water, fruit, pies, and antipasto. Less fortunate ones occupied risers at the far side of the room. As we toasted the characters, our glasses were promptly refilled by servants, including Anfisa (Vera Molchanova). We sang a song in honor of Irina (Elena Borisova). The officers recited poems and jokes, specifically one about Natasha's small breasts. When she fled, Andrei followed. This set the tone for a series of quick entrances and exits between Andrei and Natasha as she tried to coax him into announcing their plans to marry. She finally won Andrei's approval, and everyone else's attention, by fondling his crotch while seated at the table. This unabashedly sexual tactic left no doubt about her personal goals. Typically, when she made her final exit from this scene, we heard her scream victoriously in the hall behind us—a sound repeated later on those occasions when she got what she wanted.

Breaking bread with characters made them seem real. One became fascinated with the table interactions and etiquette which united us all. How could you not feel something for Irina after she had kindly invited you into her home and offered you homemade pie? Artsybashev carefully blended two volatile sets of experiences, stage fiction and personal truth, into a tasty, evanescent stew.

Aural effects supported the action throughout the play, but this was especially true while the table was set. The first half of the scene was filled with the sounds of guitar played by Fedotik (Vladimir Stukalov) and the voices of Rode (Andrei Iaryshchev), Chebutykin (Gennadii Chulkov) and other cast and audience members. Taped music cues were also used to augment the action. As the scene progressed, it began to feel like the party had gone on too long and all the participants (audience included) had consumed too much alcohol. Tusenbach and Solyony (played by Artsybashev) exchanged words and eventually blows—they had to be separated by other characters. After this, taped passages of slow piano music reinforced the acute sense of melancholy which usually follows excessive drinking and precedes the trauma of walking hangovers. It was clear that the party was over.

Loud warnings of a fire prompted the quick removal of the table as the action of the scene swirled around us. We moved our chairs "to safety" next to the walls in the room. After the initial anxiety of the fire had been quenched, Vershinin (Iurii Lakhin) opened a window to let in fresh air while he chatted with Masha. This action provoked expressions of relief and gratitude from both characters and audience. But as I breathed the air and viewed the tumbledown disarray of backyard Moscow, another impression quickly took over: the contradiction between the sisters' idealistic memories of Moscow and the crumbling reality which I beheld. It prompted an intense longing to visit their version of Moscow, if, indeed, it had ever existed. Artsybashev had once again drawn his audience and characters together, although ironically in this case.

The action continued, but once the room had been cleared, actors now re-entered the room wearing period clothing. Chebutykin and the other military officers donned uniforms, the Prozorov sisters changed into long dresses and Natasha exchanged her pink patterned dress for a pink satin gown. Having drawn the audience into the Prozorov's world with contemporary clothing and familiar behavior, appropriate costumes were added without creating undue distance—their life situation still provoked a shared sense of immediacy. We had experienced their joy and partook in their meal, now we were asked to participate, like members of a family, in their life experiences. Thus, the audience was carried on a wave of understated emotion to Tusenbach's parting scene with Irina. It was played with subtlety, never punctuated by the sound of a gunshot. Afterward, Chebutykin's tired pronouncement, "it's all the same," was followed by the sisters tearful final gathering. During their last lines, curtains were drawn, stage lighting faded and the sisters had to light candles which cast shadows on their expectant faces. A moment which could have reeked of trite sentimentality, had we not spent time with our newfound sisters.

In a production filled with ingenious additions Artsybashev didn't make excessive cuts in the text. Chebutykin *did not* present Irina with a samovar, but this deletion was barely noticeable. As an actor, Artsybashev played Solyony with passion and eccentricity. Solyony's near-fight at the table with Tusenbach was followed by a memorable enactment of the act II scene wherein he declared his love for Irina. The two were left alone for a few moments in the dining room. Solyony rushed to Irina, grabbed her by the back of her thighs and lifted her off the ground. He made his passionate appeal for her affection from this awkward, sensuous position. The exchange of lines continued as Solyony pressed his head to Irina's stomach. Irina resisted, but also visibly responded to his caresses. Only Natasha's entrance prevented Solyony from pressing his advantage any further.

The love triangle was fleshed out with vigor by contrasting a youthful, handsome and refined Vershinin with a middle-aged, oversized and somewhat dim Kulygin (Gennadii Zhmurov). The effect was not unlike an opera where a dark-haired baritone and a fair-haired tenor fight over a woman. Olga (Valentina Svetlova) did not have to contend with rival lovers, but her inner strength was clearly portrayed during the fire scene. The sisters filled their shared scenes with subtle dynamics which illuminated their predicaments without becoming tedious. This was often reinforced by innovative blocking—like the moments before Baron Tusenbach's fatal duel. He sat, with his eyes closed, while others moved around, even referred to him directly, but as an object rather than a person. Of course, tears flowed profusely, but genuinely in the last scenes. The characters proved more believable than an audience member who cried loudly for the last forty-five minutes of the play as if mourning for the last forty-five years of her life. Was it inertia? Probably, in her case. Not in this production, though, where inertia existed only as a term descriptive of the physical universe, not a lame and outdated performance aesthetic.

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Freedom to Create: Two Productions by Heinz-Uwe Haus of Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*

In the fall of 1980 Heinz-Uwe Haus staged a production of Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* under the combined auspices of the University of Pennsylvania, Temple University, Villanova University and the Annenberg Center for Communication Arts and Sciences in Philadelphia. The premiere was November 12, 1980, at Villanova's Vasey Theater. The production afforded Haus, who until then had been a director at the Deutsches Theater and the Institut für Schauspielregie (Institute for Theater Directing) in East Berlin, his first opportunity to work with a Western theatre group, comprised of both students and professionals.¹ Beginning on February 21, 1992, Haus staged a new production of the play at the Hartshorn Auditorium of the University of Delaware, the culmination of a three-year project in the university's Professional Theatre Training Program. Both stagings used the English translation by Ralph Mannheim.

The Villanova performance took place during the Cold War, at a time when visitors from the East German communist state were a rarity and obviously under surveillance by their country's secret police, the Stasi. The Delaware production was staged against the almost euphoric background of a peaceful German unification and before some of the harsher realities and problems of that process came to the surface. This article compares the two productions in terms of Haus's accomplishments and the historical context in which each was staged.

To the best of our knowledge, Haus was the first major East German theatre director to stage a production in the United States. He chose one of the five Brecht plays which have survived because of their poetic content despite their communist message, a politically correct play from an East German perspective: *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.² Haus retained the prologue, which is frequently omitted from American productions—with its Soviet collective farms and dialectical argumentation—and staged it in relatively straightforward, drab, traditional socialist fashion; the Villanova production emphasized simplicity.

Haus, following Grotowski, called it "armes Theater" (poor theater). The set consisted of sundry remnants of the Second World War scattered about the stage, which the actors used to perform the play-within-a-play. This version of Brecht's play consisted of little else but the cast themselves and whatever meager

props they could scrape together. It was a socialist-realistic stage stripped to the minimum, with little poetic flare.

Haus asserted his directorial artistic freedom, even while he thought he was being monitored by representatives of the GDR. Haus introduced the device of a camouflage parachute in several scenes, which served to connect wartime Grusinia with Vietnam. He cast an African American actress as Grusha. The parachute and the casting of Grusha were probably the only differences from a production in East Germany. Haus did not dare to let his imagination run free. He feared that there might be a member of the Stasi in the audience, leading to trouble when he returned to his homeland. Despite these constraints, the theatrical qualities of the production were such that Haus was repeatedly asked to come back to the U.S. and was eventually able to give his imagination free rein.

The 1992 Delaware production, by contrast, stressed ensemble performance, improvisation and professional acting training. The theater at the University of Delaware resembled a converted warehouse or gymnasium with half the space devoted to audience seats and the other half serving as a stage. On the stage were collected a World War II vintage motorcycle, a German army helmet, and several greatcoats left over from the East German People's Army. These authentic props were starkly different from the more poetic, long, silk streamers the prologue speakers carried as they ran about the stage in a graceful modern-dance style.

In the course of the play-within-a-play, the silks were used to suggest mountains, glacial waters, the walls of the palace and the brook over which Grusha conversed with Simon when he returned from the War. Haus had utilized a large white cloth backdrop in productions in East Germany, for example in "Pericles" at the Deutsches Nationaltheater in Weimar in 1978. In their stark whiteness, the silks employed in Delaware symbolized the innocence of children and the simplicity and naturalness of Grusha and Simon. The beautiful stage configurations which the actors achieved with the streamers reinforced the poetic images of the new staging.

The 1980 production had emphasized the cruelty of the soldiers, and played on the romantic American sympathy with the sufferings of the Soviets in World War II, and stressed the fact that the U.S. and the Soviet Union were allies in the destruction of the Nazi war machine. The human suffering of the Russians was historicized and faithful to the text and therefore a "safe" approach for an East German director working in America.

To relate the plot to the present day, the Delaware theater students were asked to collect newspaper and magazine articles, television news accounts and reports from the World health organization and Amnesty International dealing

with child abuse. Such varied locales as Cambodia, Lebanon, Iraq, Colombia, Cypress, Germany and Soviet Georgia figured in the materials which they located. In this way the actors for the 1992 production were able to set events in a contemporary context and at the same time distance themselves from the material.

Brecht's original prologue, which focused primarily on the immediate historical situation of the Caucasus, thus connecting it directly to post-war Soviet society, was abandoned for the 1992 production and replaced by a more universal chorus, which broadened and redirected the ideological perspective by referring to cruelty around the world, in particular child abuse. The traditional prologue, with its utopian presentation of the Soviet system, served as an example of Brechtian skepticism. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union and its social system Brecht's prologue would have overly historicized the audience's thoughts about social conditions. Additionally, Haus wanted to emphasize the welfare of the child rather than the legal question of parenthood. Therefore, the collective farmers and Soviet experts of the traditional prologue were replaced by the words of the chorus and the actions of the child.

In the Delaware production the child came on stage before the play-within-a-play, found the motorcycle, climbed on and discovered a book, which contained the story of the chalk circle. The child was the focal point of this production and it was he who read aloud the first words of the saga as well as the epilogue. While the child played among the remnants of war downstage, some twenty actors placed themselves across the back of the stage and recited the various reports and accounts which they had prepared in a kind of dramatic chorus, in free rhythms, in order to show the audience a connection between the world of 1992 and past events. As in Greek drama, the chorus commented on actual human behavior and contributed to the poetization of social reality.

In the Delaware staging the prologue was clearly a frame dealing with the well-being and suffering of children, with the difficulty which the younger generation has with the older generation, with the immutability of reality. The scenery against which the prologue was delivered was reminiscent of the paintings of Breughel in the style of old woodcuts: earthy tones dominated. The 1992 production was freer than the 1980 version and more theatrically motivated. In general, Haus felt less constrained in the United States in 1992 than he did when directing his first play here, and this was evident in every aspect of the new staging.

One of the most striking aspects of the 1980 Villanova production was the casting of a very talented, beautiful, African American actress in the role of Grusha. This production emphasized the question: To whom should the child rightfully belong, to its biological mother, with only a selfish interest in its

survival, or to the caring stranger, Grusha, who saved its life and looked after it. In an all-white cast, an African American Grusha underscored the fact that she could not be his biological mother. It also brought home the political message and made the audience focus on the portrayal of the underdog. This must have pleased a liberal audience and those who viewed Haus' Cold War-era production for its political correctness.

In the new version, Grusha had been "deprettified." She even had to conceal her striking red hair in a scarf. She was supposed to be a grown woman—not a young girl—with some experience and both feet on the ground, a "salt of the earth" type. The emphasis was intended to be upon her behavior rather than her appearance. Therefore, she was made to look average.

The role of the singer/story teller in the 1992 production was played by the same actor who played Azdak. Casting a single actor in both roles produced the effect of simultaneous alienation and identification and provided the complimentary perspective which Robert Weimann has noted in Shakespeare's plays.³ Azdak did not wear a traditional black judge's robe but a red cloak that suggested blood and fire, the elements of the troubled time in which he lived. The cloak had a tapestry effect which was well suited to the singer/storyteller. When worn by Azdak the matted fur suggested a "clochard" (a homeless person), another manifestation of the underdog. In addition, the robing and mocking of Azdak by the soldiers underscored his significance as a Christ figure and savior of the child.

Another striking aspect of the 1992 production was the way in which masks were used. The use of masks itself is quite common in production of Brecht's play. In the 1980 Villanova production, only three characters—Grusha, Simon, and Azdak—did not wear masks. The simple cloth mask worn by the other characters gave them a grotesque appearance, underscoring their lack of humanity and sensitivity towards others. The face masks used in Delaware were inspired by photographs from Tibet and Mongolia. The masks ranged in size from very small to total face masks, with half masks for Grusha and Simon, a rather sweet, simple couple. The good people had smaller masks than the bad ones. In the Delaware production the mask forced the actress playing Grusha to communicate the woman's character, her simplicity, her love for Simon and the child, her bitterness and suffering, her ferocity in fighting for the child—in short, a whole range of emotions—solely with her voice and body language. The only person who did not wear a mask in this production was the child. The child presumably symbolizes innocence and the future. The other characters had all been deformed in varying degrees by society.

The masks worn by the nobles during the Easter procession at the beginning of the first scene were modeled on those of the Shrovetide celebration in Basel,

Switzerland. They were intended to remind the audience of the "Prager Glockenspiel," of the French "Grand Guignol," and especially of the May Day parades in Communist countries—with Party officials elevated on grandstands, exaggerating their size, their chests covered with medals, as viewed from the critical perspective of the people. In the form of "Fastnacht," "Karneval," or "Fasching" in the German-speaking countries, and of Mardi Gras in New Orleans, the pre-Lenten celebration gives the common people license to make fun of their leaders. It is the "Narrenfreiheit" traditionally enjoyed by court jesters. In the staging of the procession in Delaware, the concept of the "fool's freedom" applied to the new-found political freedom of the director as well.

In 1992, Azdak addressed the peasant women aided by St. Banditus as "Mother Georgia" rather than as "Mother Grusinia" as in the original text. In introducing the procession scene as well, Azdak called the setting Georgia. The use of the Russian term for Grusinia related the setting more closely to the present day and emphasized the geographical connection between the saga of the chalk circle and the crisis in the slowly crumbling Soviet empire.

According to Haus, action on stage should copy concrete action in society, action should poeticize societal truth. The scenic collages of Brecht's epic theater convey a sense of reality. The audience was made to reflect: What is human nature? Can it be changed? In an interview with the authors after the Delaware performance, Haus claimed that reform is not achieved through revolution but in spurts and starts, and that capitalist society is a "natural" society which cannot be developed in a communist system. For him, only in a democracy is an alterable society possible. All of these issues affected the Delaware production, but the central question remained: "Where is the child better off?"

In the new production Haus stressed the most universal elements in Brecht's play such as justice, love, charity, loyalty and hope. He presented real, timeless human beings with sufferings and problems and forced the audience to think of present-day conditions. This production had a cinematic flow with the figure of the child who opens and closes the play as the focal point. The frame was perfect for this message. The audience saw a fantastic spectacle and enjoyed it as a representation of great human drama dressed in poetic, dramatic garb with universal appeal.

In the conversation with Haus after the Delaware performance, he stressed the importance of the prologue in this production. In the parable a utopian reality is evoked and set against the Soviet reality. The Solomon parable is given as a blueprint for a viable society. Communist society has always produced contradictory images, due to the fact that the social experiences of audiences were often different from the utopian dream. The audience was supposed to measure Soviet society against Brecht's utopian one. If today the prologue is played to

a skeptical audience, it causes resistance to the very reality which it is supposed to enhance. The parable fails to serve as an enhancement for actual communist practice. Further, the propagandistic prologue makes the audience turn away and rebel. The prologue rejects the socialist solution and serves as an excuse for the failure of the socialist experiment. It was in fact omitted in most early productions of the play in the United States and Western Europe. Haus' solution in Delaware was to rewrite the prologue in terms of present-day reality, to retain the utopian element and at the same time to question it.

Obviously the *success* of the 1992 production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* was not determined entirely by political theories, either utopian or communist. It is also evident that the play was appreciated not because it made people think hard about disquieting global social issues. It must be, therefore, that it contained some universal problems which are meaningful even to the most sophisticated spectator, and that they were cast in a form which had universal appeal.

Thus the paradox of a committed artist becomes apparent. Committed writers or directors think that they have a responsibility towards their time and society and deal with the actual human, social conditions around them. Haus' staging and Brecht's play contain messages of reflection, offerings of compassion and consolation. Haus is committed to a certain philosophy of life and to a specific democratic view. Sitting in the audience watching the play, however, it is not the commitment which appeals to us, but rather the poetic spectacle, not the message that is important but potentially universal values of justice and compassion. The paradox is that it is not commitment to freedom that made it an excellent performance, and yet without that commitment Haus would not have achieved his theatrical spectacle.

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Notes

1. Regarding the Villanova production, see also Charles H. Helmetag, "Heinz-Uwe Haus's American *Kreidekreis*" *Gestus: A Quarterly Journal of Brechtian Studies* 1 (1985): 57-60. Laureen Nussbaum comments on the Delaware production in "Brecht's Revised Version of Genesis 1 and 2: A Subtext of the *Caucasian Chalk Circle*" *Communications from the International Brecht Society* 22:2 (1993): 41-50. For a discussion of yet another staging of the play by Haus in the United States, see Sabine Gross and Heinz-Uwe Haus, "The *Caucasian Chalk Circle* at California State University, Northridge" *Communications from the International Brecht Society* 18:1 (1989): 14-17.

2. In 1960 the inaugural production of the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., was "The Caucasian Chalk Circle." All the critics agreed that it was the best play of the season. Some New York critics even ventured to say that New York had nothing comparable to offer. This extraordinary success raises a fundamental question regarding all great Brecht plays: Is it the message or the form that make them great? And, in the message, are there perhaps elements which found their way into the play, accidentally, and yet have become its most valid part?

3. Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function* Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1978, especially 73-85, 215-24, and 237-46.



Monica Koskey in *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Photo by Periklis Kotsopriftis

Iphigenia in Tauris. Performance text by Yannis Houvardas based on the original text by Euripides and the English translation by Richard Lattimore. May 13, 1992.

Le Balcon. By Jean Genet, adapted and directed by Shigeko Suga Aguirre. May 14, 1992.

Lesbians Who Kill. By Deb Margolin. May 14, 1992. All at La Mama E.T.C., New York City.

While for a variety of reasons the spring of 1992 on Broadway has been one of the most lively in years, the economic situation of New York's much more varied and interesting world of experimental theatre remains very grim. One of the most visible, and most disturbing, signs of this has been the announcement this spring by Ellen Stewart that she was on the brink of closing La Mama, an operation that has become so much a part of the experimental scene in New York and indeed around the world that it is difficult to imagine our theatrical landscape without it.

While La Mama, like many of our most innovative theatrical venues, has probably not seen the end of its financial troubles, its friends and supporters have rallied around, and the spring season is drawing to its close with no more talk of cancellations. In the meantime, the mid-May offerings provide a dazzling example of just how important La Mama continues to be in the eclecticism and daring of its programming. In two consecutive evenings recently it was possible to see there three different productions that were astonishingly varied in approach, subject, and concept, and yet which individually and as a group represented as rich and stimulating a selection of works in terms of the power of their theatrical imagination and the richness of their theoretical implications as could be found in experimental theatre offerings anywhere.

Yannis Houvardas's version of *Iphigenia in Tauris*, a performance piece developed over the past two years, is an official gift from Greece to the United States for the Columbus Quincentennial. Just what this story of human sacrifice, shipwreck among barbarian tribes, and divine manipulation of human destiny has to say about the Columbus celebrations perhaps doesn't bear too much thinking about, but as a contemporary meditation on this disturbing classic Greek tale, it indeed makes a stunning offering. Houvardas sets his play not on the coast of Tauris, but in a modern, rather Spartan girls' dormitory (an orphanage or an

asylum, says Hourvardas), where the events of the play are developed as the collective nightmare/vision of the eight young women who sleep in the dormitory's two ranks of beds. The overall situation has interesting thematic and visual similarities to Alfred Kirchner's famous 1984 production of *Die Räuber* in Bochum, where Schiller's play was presented as an illicit after-hours activity in the dormitory of a military school like that attended by the young Schiller. In both cases a highly melodramatic text is distanced and ironized by the shift in this performative base. In both the night setting and the conflict between the exuberance of the literary text and the regimented quality of the situation suggested by the physical surroundings created powerful dynamics of subversion and danger.

Despite the similarity of their performance metaphors, the two productions pursue highly different paths, due in significant measure to the grounding of one on real, if illicit and secret, activity, and of the other on the oneiric world of a nightmarish vision (the contrast between reading *Die Räuber* as a fantasy play of a group of adolescent males and *Iphigenia* as that of a group of adolescent females is also of considerable importance, but I will return to the feminist implications of the Hourvardas work presently). The dream metaphor of *Iphigenia* allows it to be far more free in its fragmentation of the text, in its arrangement of action, and in its utilization of visual imagery. The production key is the dream that Iphigenia, in the original text, recounts in her opening monologue. As this production begins, the eight women are sleeping beneath still fans, with the shattered bodies of plastic dolls littering the floor between their beds, the entire scene bathed in an eerie blue light. Their sleep is troubled—mysterious metallic rappings are heard, sounds of thunder, of roaring machinery, of clashing armies burst upon them. They emit cries in Greek and in English, leap from their beds in fear, then return to sleep and to fresh disturbance again and again. Some of their cries are inarticulate, but others begin to recount the sufferings of Iphigenia, for all eight in fact play Iphigenia collectively, even though occasionally one serves as a kind of leader, a device that very effectively merges the role of protagonist and chorus.

Two large closets at the rear of the stage serve, as wardrobes traditionally do in oneiric literature, as entrances to other worlds. From these come the tormented figures of Orestes and Pylades to confirm and give substance to the bloody visions of the dreamers in imaginative choreographed sequences and such ritualized actions as bathing with blood one of the many doll bodies that litter the stage. From the same door later come the barbaric king Thoas and his two warriors, tangled together like a giant spider and silhouetted against a spiraling red background. even as the enter the "world" of the dormitory they remain isolated in a pool of red light. Finally from the other wardrobe comes Athena,

covered in gold and in golden light, to impose an implacable and somewhat arbitrary order upon the proceedings, and to carry off with her the model ship that represents the voyagers and the doll wrapped in a sheet that represents the kidnapped idol. But when the wardrobe door closes on this golden vision the play is not over. The sleeping girls still mutter and toss in their cots and the ominous metallic noises that disturbed their slumber at the opening return. Athena's reconciliation has been reabsorbed into the dream world from which it came, without, it seems, bringing real peace to these troubled sleepers.

A production of Jean Genet's *Le Balcon* performed in a mixture of French and English by a director trained in Japanese Butoh and utilizing stars of the Spanish flamenco in the leading roles—postmodernist multiculturalism here reaches a kind of apotheosis. Does it work? Not entirely, but the moments and sequences that do work offer an incandescent quality that easily makes up for those that do not. As in *Iphigenia* the original text is used as raw material, broken up, repeated, rearranged, and delivered in both its original form and in English translation, though in both plays the main line of the original action can still be traced. *Le Balcon* begins and ends with Madame Irma's final lines describing her establishment and instructions to the audience. Fragments of these lines and others are woven throughout the rest of the production, which is essentially composed of five dance-dominated sequences, called "illusions." The first three are brothel "illusion" scenes—the confessional with the bishop, the general and his horse/girl, and an ensemble dance of customers and brothel employees, drawn less directly from Genet's text. The fourth scene is based upon the conversation between Irma and Carmen in Genet's scene five, and the fifth includes the departure of Chantal to become the symbol of the revolution and Roger's return and castration.

In each scene the rhythm moves between slow and deliberate actions and poses and the intense bursts of highly controlled energy represented by segments of flamenco. The actors give only a few lines. More are provided over microphones by two readers scarcely seen at the rear of the stage. Perhaps not surprisingly the theatrical moments so striking in more conventional productions—the robbing of the bishop, the taming of the general's "horse," the castration of Roger are here quite overshadowed by the dance "commentary" on such actions, which is inevitably richer and more powerful. This is true not only of the stunning flamenco passages with which La Constanca (as Irma) punctuates almost every scene, but also when the "dance" is reduced to a slow and deliberate movement, trembling with controlled energy, as is seen in the stunning passage where Maria Alba, dressed in white as Chantal, crosses processionally from upstage down and out through the audience to assume her role in the revolution. As these examples may suggest, attention is clearly shifted in this production, not

only visually but in terms of the sections of text actually delivered, from the revolutionary placement of the action and the tension between the brothel and revolution, to the role of the balcony as a nexus of illusion and of the flows of physical and sexual energy implicated in its operation.

Following a performance of either *Le Balcon* or *Iphigenia in Tauris* La Mama spectators might remain to see a late evening production in the upstairs Club of the newest creation by Split Britches, *Lesbians Who Kill*. Fans of this popular feminist performance group will find many familiar elements in the new piece—the send-ups of cultural clichés, especially those related to heterosexual romance imagery, the verbal wit, the off-beat use of pop music, the wildly shifting emotional tones and surprising entrapments of audience expectations, and the richly textured human interplay of Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw, one of the great comic teams of this generation.

Despite their familiar features, each of the Split Britches creations has had a very distinctive mood, and *Lesbians Who Kill*, without sacrificing the Split Britches' comedic vision, is also one of their darkest and angriest statements. Shaw and Weaver play May and June, a lesbian couple whose house is so often struck by lightning that they spend much of their lives in their car, listening to the radio, playing word games, and acting out fantasies of murderous revenge on a society that regards them as the legitimate targets of its own cruelty and anger.

Although Deb Margolin's script actually predates *Thelma and Louise*, the imaginary adventures of May and June, whether their actual auto world ever moves or not, clearly is a product of some of the same cultural forces. It is a study, as Shaw has remarked, of what happens "when good girls have had enough." Surrounded by a violent, misogynistic world, they identify so strongly with the car radio reports of lesbian serial killings that these reports begin to merge with their active fantasy lives and their elaborate games of verbal association. Soon it becomes unclear either to them or to the audience how much of their murderous experimentation is to be taken for fantasy, how much for reality.

As usual, the production is peppered with both sung and lip-synched pop songs, all of which take on grimly hilarious new meanings in this context. The piece begins to the strains of "This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Land," and the couple's murderous fantasies reach some of their most bizarre workings out to the accompaniment of such selections as "I Shot Mr. Lee," "I Didn't Know the Gun Was Loaded," and especially "Blame it on the Bossa Nova."

Ironically, it is most often the sweetly demure femme Weaver who handles the guns, and it is also Weaver who, in the production's disturbing and effective sequence, moves out of the stage frame to confront male members of the audience directly, as accomplices in creating the circumstances that have driven

May and June to their murderous career. "Who put you in charge of death?" she challenges these representative "Bogeymen" and all the "Bogeymen" who stand behind them—the Bogeyman President and Vice-President, the Bogeyman Supreme Court and Congress, and the Bogeymen of popular culture itself, the Bogeyman of Tides, the Silence of the Bogeyman, Basic Bogeyman. In a chilling song woven from such motifs, Weaver draws the audience ineluctably into the dark heart of this grim contemporary comedy.

My first impression after two evenings experiencing these three stimulating productions was one of wonder at the diversity and variety of contemporary experimental theatre, from Greek tragedy to modern pop culture, from ritual sacrifice to the flamenco, from Butoh to Bossa Nova. As I thought further about these productions, however, I began to see interesting connections and parallels, marking them all, perhaps, as part of the particular nexus of contemporary experimentation.

The traditional literary text, although it serves as a basis for two of three productions, has been taken apart and presented as a series of fragments, not even in a single language. We have become fairly accustomed to this sort of radical reworking of classic plays, but a similar refiguring of Genet, himself considered a major contributor to the modern avant-garde, is rather more surprising. The Margolis text was created for Split Britches, and so is followed more "faithfully," but this text too is woven, even more radically than the others, of bits and pieces of cultural material found elsewhere.

Related to the destabilization of the text, and to the multiplicity of languages (even *Lesbians Who Kill* features a Spanish love song sung by Shaw and later translated by Weaver), is the destabilization of voice in all three of these plays. The separation of voice from actor has become one of the most striking devices for challenging the traditional establishment and maintenance of character and of subject-object relationships in the modern experimental theatre. The Mabou Mines, the Wooster Group, Richard Foreman and others have all driven wedges between actor and voice by redistributing, repeating, and fragmenting lines, and by the use of various mechanical devices, especially recordings and microphones.

Fragmented, repeated, dispersed, and mechanically rendered dialogue thus connects these three offerings to an important area of experimentation in contemporary avant-garde theatre. Yet it seemed to me that in these productions this dispersal of the voice could also be tied more specifically to certain important concerns in contemporary feminist theory. The German feminist playwright and theorist Gerlind Reinshagen, drawing upon Kristeva, has suggested that a male writer normally begins writing plays as cerebral constructs, and then seeks to enrich the work by distancing himself from such construction, while a woman begins with Kristeva's semiotic, "with the emotions, from the confusion, fear or

shock she has experienced or seen others experience."¹ Each of these productions seems to start from just such fear and shock; behind each lies a male-organized and dominated world of death and destruction, with women as its primary victims. Literally or figuratively, each echoes the grim insight of Cixous: "It is always necessary for a woman to die in order for the play to begin."²

And yet each of these plays offers a site of resistance to and subversion of this dominant world—in the dream-vision of *Iphigenia*, in the dance sequences of *Le Balcon*, in the creative fantasies in *Lesbians Who Kill*—and each of these sites of resistance is created by a woman or by women seizing at this site the subject position. The Iphigenia "collective" begins the purgation of Orestes and the goddess Athena regains control of at least the dream representation when the death figure of Thoas threatens to become dominant. La Constancia as Irma controls the world of *Le Balcon* both narratively and physically, a control augmented by the destabilizing and subordination of Genet's literary text and by the physical power and presence of La Constancia's "fellows," the other women in the brothel, in their dance centerings of the illusion scenes.

The multiple representation of Iphigenia most strikingly recalls Josette Féral's observation that in the feminist theatre she analyzed women were "divided, multiple beings, whose lack of oneness is expressed in the text by another theatrical device, the diversity and simultaneity of voices."³ What is literally the case in *Iphigenia* however, is figuratively the case in the other works. The bond of the flamenco unites all of the female dances in *Le Balcon* in a common expression of energy and control; as such, it replaces the controlling literary text of Genet, fragmented into a chorus of voices, some in French, some in English, some given by actors, some by narrators, some delivered directly, some through miked amplification of invisible speakers. Weaver and Shaw, as in all their productions, embody a dizzying and constantly shifting collage of character constructs, and a corresponding variety of voices: their own, those of the multiple characters they assume, those of others to which they lip-synch, and still others in other languages or via microphones. Thus the common theme of woman's response to and challenge of the male order of death and domination, which may be seen as a psychic orientation in all three of these works, is appropriately articulated through variations of a common device, precisely that "diversity and simultaneity of voices" that Féral and others have suggested as a performative strategy particularly suited to the articulation of a feminist perspective in the theatre.

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Notes

1. Gerlind Reinshagen, "Frauen Leben eher durch Phantasien," *Theater Heute* 8 (1989) 32.
2. Hélène Cixous, "Aller à la mer," trans. Barbara Kerslake, *Modern Drama* 27 (Dec., 1984) 546.
3. Josette Féral, "Writing and Displacement: Women in Theatre," *Modern Drama* 27 (Dec., 1984) 559.

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