

*Le Cid* by Pierre Corneille. Les Bouffes du Nord. First presented at the Festival d'Amagro (Spain) 3 July 1998 then in Avignon, France 11 – 22 July 1998, 20 March 1999

In this lively and modern staging of the Corneille classic, the spectator is struck by the duel not between Rodrigue (William Nadylam) and Don Gomès (Philippe Blancher), but between the Infante de Castille (Sandrine Attard) and Chimène (Sarah Karbasnikoff). Their battle over Rodrigue and Chimène's internal struggle to live up to honor and duty come to the fore in a way such that the play could be appropriately renamed "*la brune contre la blonde*." In fact, throughout the play the traditional importance of the conflict between men has been consistently displaced to emphasize the female roles.

Declan Donnellan's production of *Le Cid* seemed quite at home in Les Bouffes du Nord which, under Peter Brook's direction since 1971, has seen many modern stagings of internationally renowned classics. In this soft, round theater with only traces left of what was an Italianate showpiece in a state of mild disrepair the set design consists of a simple wooden square lying flush with the floor and audience at ground level. The two sides and rear of the stage are boxed in by ceiling-high (four levels, twelve meters in length) wood slats positioned at an angle to let strong, vertical rays of light penetrate the main performance space. The contrast between a modern set with its hard, rectilinear space and equally harsh offstage lighting and the soft, almost organic space, allows for an effective condensation of time that minimizes the 350 odd years that separate text and audience. This effect is echoed by the 20<sup>th</sup> century costumes which, according to one French journalist, hearken to Franco's 1930 Spain and according to another, were evocative of the nearly nascent 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A cast of attractive and stylish actors gave a gracious rendition of Corneille's most often-performed drama. Like Peter Brook, Donnellan does not believe in "racial" casting; therefore a black Rodrigue is son to a white Don Diègue (Bruno Sermonne and in Avignon, Michel Baumann), both the subjects of a black Don Fernand (Patrick Rameau). The effect of this non-racial casting is to further remove Corneille from his specific cultural context and situate the drama in a more abstract, indeed symbolic signification.

As for the female leads, Attard, as a strikingly chic and sexy, cigarette-smoking Infante, gives the role a contemporary twist by projecting a brazen, self-confident woman who knows what she wants and how to get it. Her blond rival, the equally attractive Karbasnikoff, produces a more vulnerable, subdued Chimène who nevertheless suffers the struggle between paternal dicta and an intense, albeit constrained, physical desire. The contrast is perfectly balanced in the two characters' numerous encounters and the resulting tension is quite effective. U

their role as confidantes, the Channel-clad, graying, stately women that play Léonor (Lucia Bensasson) and Elvire (Joséphine Derenne) provide an overarching matriarchal element that is further reinforced by the strong stage presence and motherly affect that both actresses bring to their characters.

Two additional factors illustrate Donnellan's emphasis on feminine strength and centrality. This staging of the tragedy introduces a strong dose of sensuality to traditionally cold, masculine, Cornelian hero dynamics. While both sexes appear bare-chested, the female body, in particular Chimène's, produces a rich corporeal presence whereas the uniform-bearing male characters are reduced to the status of objects. Indeed, their svelte, muscular bodies engaged in highly choreographed sword fights inscribe the men in a pervasive and easily-recognizable image in contemporary culture: the 17<sup>th</sup> century rugged hero is replaced by today's boyish man featured in underwear advertisements and popular European "boy" bands.

Second, Rodrigue's duels against Don Gomès and Don Sanche (Yaneck Rousselet) are played out simultaneously as the two female leads brandish their own weaponry in order to win without being disgraced by the object of their desire (Act II, scenes iii and iv; Act V, scene iv). As the male-object opponents mime the duels from opposite edges of the stage, the importance is again placed on the women located and fighting stage center. In this way, the would-be valiant heroes are treated as mere accessory stage props next to Chimène's overwhelming emotional torment and the Infante's increasing jealousy. In addition to some of the negative criticism of this modern staging, the French press also had diverse reactions to Nadylam's soft-spoken, sensitive-male portrayal of Rodrigue. However, this seems consistent with the director's desire to emphasize the females' roles much as a storyteller would alter the retelling of a tale to feature another character's point of view.

This non-traditional staging conveys a transparency in the relationship that the actors have to each other, the text and the roles they are playing. The result is a certain consciousness of doing theater that at once renders more accessible to the audience the general human truths expressed in *Le Cid* and also points to theatrical space as a privileged arena for addressing pertinent social and political issues to contemporary spectators. First of all, in addition to simultaneous scenes being played out, actors remain on stage even when they are not in role. The presence of the deceased Don Gomès till the play's end only serves to heighten Chimène's filial duty. This is particularly true in an eerie interlude when the dead father dresses the partially nude daughter as she prepares to present her case before the king. Next, there is an emphasis on the written word not only to provide a code of official conduct but also as a palpable material presence; when Don Fernand must decide on a course of action to punish Rodrigue, his advisors carry out an ostentatious presentation of the book as the ultimate law of the land. At the same



The attendants of Don Fernand, *The King of Castile* (Patrick Rameau, standing center), present the laws which will help him decide Rodrigue's fate, including the eventual duel with Don Sanche (Yaneek Rousselet standing stage right). From *Le Cid* by Pierre Corneille, directed by Declan Donnellan at Les Bouffes du Nord, Avignon, France 11-22 July, 1988, and March 20, 1999. (Photo courtesy of Loren Ringer.)

time, the lines are delivered in a strikingly contemporary way so as to produce a knowing nod to the audience with regards to Brussels-style, European bureaucracy. Finally, when the King addresses the Castilian state near the end of the play, the house lights go up briefly and thus implicate the audience as a witness at once to the moral rectitude of the play's content as well as the theatrical production.

While French audiences do not always take kindly to the modern staging of canonical theater pieces (and, indeed many French critics panned this one), Donnellan's production, by rethinking the traditional stage/audience relationship and emphasizing the women's desire, found the way to touch a modern sensibility. While a contemporary Western audience might not relate to "duty", "honor" or "paternal dicta" such as it is presented in 17<sup>th</sup> century French drama, he or she will most certainly be moved by Chimène's effort to conceal her overwhelming desire or the Infante's calculating strategy to win over her heart's passion.

*Loren Ringer*  
*Council on International Educational Exchange*  
*Rennes, France*