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**Conceptual theatre in America, 1968 1990: "Rewriting" the classics**

**Green, Amy S., Ph.D.**

**City University of New York, 1991**

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CONCEPTUAL THEATRE IN AMERICA 1968-1990:  
"REWRIGHTING" THE CLASSICS

by Amy S. Green

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City  
University of New York.

1991

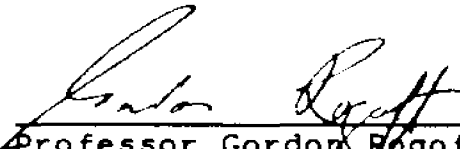
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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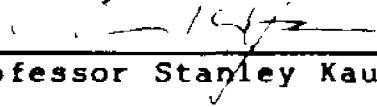
  
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## ABSTRACT

### CONCEPTUAL THEATRE IN AMERICA 1968-1990: "REWRIGHTING" THE CLASSICS

by Amy S. Green

Conceptual productions of classic plays present familiar texts in radically altered theatrical forms. Their directors start with the original scripts but set them in environments that defy expectations of how they should look, behave, and sound on stage. They bring something alien to their productions in order to make a contemporary statement about or through an old drama. Some simply change the setting. Others completely revise the style, structure, and implications of the play. They overstep traditional directorial boundaries and challenge entrenched definitions of masterpieces. They "rewright" what venerable playwrights have wrought and in the process have restored debate about classical theatre to the forefront of the American theatrical consciousness.

For use in this study, "rewright" was adapted from "playwright" to reflect the craftsmanship involved and the elevation of the director to equal status with the author of the text. Tradition presumes the author's predominance, but conceptual directors function more as dramatists' partners than servants in creating new theatre from old scripts.

The roots of director's theatre are traceable to the masterminds of twentieth-century theatricalism. Craig, Meyerhold, Brecht, and Artaud all experimented boldly with the classics. Artaud's "No More Masterpieces" provides an unofficial slogan. More recent practitioners in Europe include Grotowski, Brook, Stein, Strehler, and Mnouchkine. In America, early rewrighters include Orson Welles, Tyrone Guthrie, and Joseph Papp. The small army of conceptual directors who have come of age since the 1960s are the focus of this study.

A sample of American productions presented between 1968 and 1990 are examined in depth after an introduction to the critical landscape the movement's historical context. The main chapters are divided into productions of Greek and Roman plays, Shakespeare, Molière, and the operas of Mozart-da Ponte. Featured directors include Joanne Akalaitis, Lee Breuer, Liviu Ciulei, Lucian Pintilie, Peter Sellars, Andrei Serban, Robert Woodruff, and Garland Wright. The study acknowledges the role of conceptual theatre in revitalizing classical production in America and articulates some general critical guidelines for evaluating individual conceptual productions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The dissertation is supposed to demonstrate a candidate's ability to conduct scholarship independently, but I know now that no one can do it alone. I wish, therefore, to thank the following:

For their prodigious talents and imaginations that stirred my interest in rewrighting the classics, I thank the directors whose work is covered herein. Deep gratitude goes to Joanne Akalaitis, Gregory Mosher, Peter Sellars, and Alisa Solomon, busy professionals who generously made time to speak with me and patiently answered my myriad questions. Special appreciation goes to Andrei Serban, whose Fragments of a Trilogy was my initiation into the world of truly transcendent theatre, and who graciously welcomed me into his rehearsal studio and his confidences during preparations for The Miser.

For serving as extraordinary role models for teaching, scholarship, and criticism, and for their unceasing moral, emotional, and intellectual support and encouragement, I wish to extend warm thanks to the members of my supervisory committee: Gordon Rogoff, chair, Albert Bermel, Daniel Gerould, and Stanley Kauffmann. It has been a pleasure.

Closer to home, heartfelt thanks goes to my family and

friends who stood by me, cheered me on, and never lost  
faith:

To Maria Wendland and her delightful family, who gave me  
peace of mind;

To Meg Hertz, who helped me find peace of mind;

To my dear friends, Anna Allotta, Michael Ratomski, and  
Barbara Drum Sullivan, who kept me laughing;

To my parents, Fran and Seymour Green, who were always  
there when I needed them;

To Jean-Marc and Rebecca, who happily ate their daddy's  
cooking;

And, most of all, to my husband, Steven Gorelick, who  
pushed, prodded, petted, and put up with me, and who  
never doubted, even when I did . . .

Thank you.

I love you.

I couldn't have done it without you.

For Rebecca,  
with the dream that someday my achievements  
will pale beside yours.

In Memoriam

Jacques Chwa.  
Robert Gilleece

## PREFATORY NOTE ON "REWRIGHTING"

Clever coinages in academic subtitles are, admittedly, one of the less fortunate trends in post-modern criticism. There is good reason to suspect that which cannot be expressed in plain English. So, it is with much deliberation and caution that "rewrighting" has been invented for use in this dissertation. The fact is, there simply did not exist a simple, concise theatrical term that was comprehensive enough to represent the myriad ways individual directors re-formulate classic plays for conceptual production. The invention of a convenient catchall expression obviated a string of long and awkward paraphrases.

The new term is derived from "playwright," especially the second half of the word, which refers to a person who crafts, shapes, or makes something. Playwrights do more than write dialogue. They draw blueprints for theatrical events. As directors from Craig, Reinhardt, Meyerhold, Brecht, and Artaud through Grotowski, Brook, Stein, and their American colleagues have made their own creative and interpretative presences felt unmistakably in productions of classic plays, they, in a sense, became playwrights too. Instead of drafting new scripts, however, they expressed

their ideas through the theatre's spatial, temporal, visual, aural, and kinetic media. These directors can be said to "rewright" the classics when their stagings deal theatrically with issues, attitudes, and aesthetics that differ significantly from those in the text. Conceptual rewritings, then, are productions of classic plays that use original texts (or significant parts of them) but present the plays in substantially altered outward forms.

Rewright and rewrighting will henceforth appear throughout this text without qualifying quotation marks.

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## Chapter One

### INTRODUCTION

Conceptual productions of classic plays present familiar texts in radically altered theatrical forms. Conceptual directors start with the original scripts but set them in environments that defy expectations of how they should look, behave, and sound on stage. They bring something alien to their productions in order to make a contemporary statement about or through an old drama. Some simply change the setting. Others completely revise the style, structure, and implications of the play. They overstep traditional directorial boundaries and challenge widely accepted definitions of dramatic masterpieces. They "rewright" what venerable playwrights have wrought, and in the process they have restored debate about classical theatre to the forefront of the American theatrical consciousness.

Conceptual directing is inherently controversial and sometimes downright subversive. So precarious is the business that directors themselves are often loath to admit their own trespasses. Most deny having done anything "to" the play at all. Critics and theoreticians, on the other hand, are quick to spot directorial invention. A few conceptual productions are lauded as beacons of universal truth, affirmations of timeless dramatic statements, and

harbingers of new theatrical eras. A few others are denounced as parodies or mutilations of nearly sacred texts. More often, a single production elicits equally vehement responses from both ends of the spectrum. For better and worse, conceptual theatre has produced some startling stage versions of great dramatic texts from the past.

To begin, the expression "conceptual theatre" requires definition as it is somewhat misleading. All competent directors (or artists, for that matter) work with a production concept. It may be an image or sensibility they wish to bring to or bring out in a play (the mood at Elsinore), or it may be a specific metaphorical device (Denmark = prison). Whether realistic or anti-realistic, very close to the author's expressed vision or a reflection of a director's conscious departure from tradition, the concept is the common reference point from which the sets, costumes, lights, casting, acting, and movement are designed to express the director's interpretation of the play.

What distinguishes conceptual theatre from more traditional forms is how graphically the working concept is manifested on the stage and to what extent it is predicated on a comprehensive rethinking of the theatrical event. Conceptual art--visual, cinematic, literary, musical, or theatrical--usually hinges on an intellectual idea that links seemingly disparate elements of traditional form and the artist's novel or idiosyncratic twist.(1) Chekhov without walls as directed by Serban or Peter Brook, Peter

Sellars's marriage of Gorky's Summerfolk and Gershwin ballads to create Hang on to Me, Lee Breuer's analogical exploration of American gender and race relations through a sex-reversed, interracial production of King Lear, and Anne Bogart's production of South Pacific, in which the musical is performed by the residents of an American veteran's hospital for whom the play's idealized America provides therapeutic solace, reflect the conceptual dynamic at work.

The "conceptual" label is also vague because it is applied to such a broad range of directorial strategies. One way that directors have put their marks on classic texts is by updating or otherwise altering the historical or geographical setting. Orson Welles turned Julius Caesar into a meditation on 1930s Italian fascism. Tyrone Guthrie set Troilus and Cressida against the battles of World War I. Liviu Ciulei transplanted Molière's Don Juan to fin de siècle Paris. A second technique is to strip away all realistic trappings in favor of an abstract metaphorical milieu. Richard Schechner and Andrei Serban each did that when they attempted environmental productions of Greek and Roman drama in hopes of unleashing the plays' primal emotional powers. A popular post-modernist approach is to deconstruct received meanings by filling the stage with anachronistic details whose aggregate impact give new meaning to the old sense of classical "timelessness." Lucian Pintilie directed a time-warped Tartuffe that began in the Garden of Eden and ended at Armageddon. Peter

Sellars took a similar tack with Pericles, and Joanne Akalaitis sent the hapless heroine of Cymbeline to Milford Haven atop a Victorian velocipede.

There are almost as many methods as there are conceptual directors, idiosyncrasy being one of the hallmarks of the movement. It is impossible to categorize them as a homogeneous lot. "Any attempt to foist a generalization wide enough to cover" them all, wrote the cynical, scissor-happy Shakespeare collagist Charles Marowitz, "must produce one of those phoney definitions to which academics are so prone: a kind of new nomenclature which, once devised, is employed to bend a multitude of divergent tendencies into something like an orderly system."<sup>(2)</sup> If pressed, a crude definition might distinguish conceptual rewrighting from other kinds of adaptations of classics by the fact that in this case it is the director, not a writer or performer, who initiates and implements the revisions. Suffice it to say for now that no single conceptual model has proven consistently more effective than any other one. Individual examples of conceptual production must be judged according to whether or not the director's idea touches something deep and vital in the play and how clearly and evocatively that relationship is expressed in the production.

Robert Brustein, an ardent advocate and practitioner of the conceptual approach to directing the classics, wrestled with its critical slipperiness in a 1967 essay that urged American directors to heed Artaud's call for "No More

Masterpieces." Brustein wanted American directors of the classics to venture into territories unknown beyond grim, prim, pseudo-British monuments to highbrow culture. "Only recently has literature taken on the inviolability of scripture,"(3) he noted as he urged American directors to cast off the shackles of tradition. His only hesitation at opening this theatrical Pandora's box was that he was unable to offer any prescriptions but still felt responsible to articulate some guidelines.

Just what distinguishes a valid work of conceptual theatre is elusive. The dangers of this line of attack are obvious: everything depends upon the tact, taste, and talent of the director. If new values are not unearthed by a new approach. . . the effort is worthless, and if these new values are merely eccentric or irresponsible, then it is careerism rather than art that has been served.(4)

(Marowitz was similarly reluctant to pin the process down to a set of rules. "Describing ways in which a classic can be rethought on stage," he decided, "would be tantamount to giving lessons in original thinking."(5))

In a recent survey of developments since 1967, however, Brustein reiterated his position and put forth a rudimentary formula for distinguishing between two general categories of conceptual work, one of which he clearly prefers.(6)

"Simile" productions, he writes, are those in which directors redeposit plays wholesale into different historical or geographical contexts. He calls this approach "prosaic," and adds that "directors who are fond of similes assume that because a play's action is like something from a

later period, its environment can be changed accordingly." On the other hand, Brustein says, some directors conceptualize their productions on the basis of a "poetic metaphor." These artists "are more interested in generating provocative theatrical images . . . that are suggestive of the play rather than specific, reverberant rather than concrete." (7) The analogy is apt, especially when applied to the history of conceptual theatre in America, but caution must be taken not to succumb to it as an oversimplified formula for what is "good" or "bad."

An alternate set of analogies can be made to musical adaptations. Directors who practice Brustein's simile technique are doing something similar to musical transposition--changing the key to suit the specific time, place, and participants in the performance. Metaphorical directors do something closer to jazz takeoffs on classic musical compositions. Jazz artists improvise on or embellish themes in a particular piece, often developing their own melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic lines in relation or response to the score. Like conceptual theatre artists, they, can be subject to the wrath of purists. Reportedly, Irving Berlin was infuriated by jazz renditions that he felt showcased singers rather than his songs.

So far, the process of conceptual directing has defied more direct description. It may be accessible only by analogy. Marowitz insists it must entail a "head-on confrontation with the intellectual substructure of the

plays."(8) Jerzy Grotowski described his own work as a meeting with the text; Jan Kott, whose Shakespeare Our Contemporary gave the movement an added boost, uses a more violent metaphor.

Grotowski says that the director meets and does not realize a text. I prefer another notion--that of collision. The classics become alive when a collision takes place: the collision of a classical text with a new political and intellectual experience, as well as the collision of the classical text with new theatrical techniques.(9)

Each of these expressions is of limited value. The body of conceptual work is too varied to be encapsulated in one neat phrase. A more important issue to consider is what impact this kind of production has had on our relationship to and understanding of the classics. A survey of critic's opinions is an appropriate step toward answering that question.

### The Debate

Even as the conceptual aesthetic has grown increasingly common, the critical debate over directors' tampering with the classics continues to rage. Two distinct and often hostile camps take arms when the battleground is a time-honored script by a cherished playwright. There are those who believe that "classics" achieved their status because the playwright's conception was the ultimate expression of his universal idea, and his plays should be performed as he intended them. Who, they seem to wonder, gave directors the right to meddle with that perfection?

Richard Gilman has written that conceptual productions

reflect directors' arrogant attitude that "the classics are in need of rehabilitation, as though they were wounded, decrepit, abject victims of time."(10) In these new-fangled productions, "anachronism, discordance, idiosyncrasy reign, and a new vision, inferior in its very au courantism, is substituted for the old,"(11) says Gilman. He seems to feel directors are not qualified to do more than oversee the strict translation of a playwright's instructions to theatrical dimensions.(12) He quotes Jacques Copeau, who said, "Let us hope for a dramatist who replaces or eliminates the director . . . rather than for professional directors who pretend to be dramatists,"(13) and Louis Jouvet, who charged that "the profession of the director suffers from the disease of immodesty."(14)

Among the detractions of conceptual rewriting may be counted this report from Moira Hodgson, a critic for The Nation:

Whenever I hear that some enterprising director has jumped in the deep end with a "controversial new interpretation" of a classic, I feel, to paraphrase Mayakovsky, like reaching for my gun. . . . Does that cast a new light on the work at hand, or is the director simply granting himself the license to turn a classic upside down?(15)

In a similar vein, Gordon Rogoff dripped sarcasm when he recognized "our friend the director with a concept,"(16) and Stanley Kauffmann has complained that "modernization is often egotistical intrusion by a director who feels compelled to have a 'concept' or else is an implicit confession of inability to handle the play in period."(17)

Eric Bentley deplored "bright idea" Shakespeare and insisted that any production of his plays be at least ninety-percent Bard. (Because Shakespeare is the most commonly produced classic playwright in the English-speaking world, general references to producing his plays will be extrapolated in this discussion to apply to the broader category of classics.) With uncharacteristic fuzziness, Bentley warns that Shakespeare should be changed only when a particular play is determined "1. unacceptable; 2. incommunicable; or 3. uninteresting" to a modern audience.(18) Otherwise he expects to be shown

the meaning the play had when first written, not any subsequent increment, and certainly not any separate 'modern' meaning. The modernities I demand are not those which the director imposes on Shakespeare but those which he finds in Shakespeare. All he can impose is, at best, a modern frame to the picture, and even the modernity of the frame may often be only a more authentic historicity.(19)

Hidden between the lines of the preceding put-downs are sensible cautions for directors who dare to remake the classics. Gilman concedes that "the history of 20th century theatre is at least as much one of directorial theory and practice as of dramatic innovation,"(20) and that "between any written text and its physical realization on stage is a zone of uncertainty, incompleteness, an area where interpretation is exactly what's necessary."(21) His argument with the conceptualists pivots on the breadth of that uncertain zone. The limits of what a director can do, he insists, "are set within the text itself. . . . They have

to do with coherence, aesthetic appropriateness, plausibility, and with the imaginative and intellectual vision of a work, its tone, weight, and individuality."(22)

Gilman's reminder to stay within the orbit of a great play is well taken. Again, disagreement is over only the diameter of the magnetic field. When directorial invention ignores the stuff and substance of the masterpiece to which it is applied, Gilman is right to chide that the "star director has taken over for star performer, whose oppressive presence directing was first established to tone down."(23) In such cases, the concept, rather than revealing new relevancies, reduces the text to an excuse for a directorial stunt. "Most of the time, it's only the director who's served by director's theatre," wrote a Newsday reviewer disappointed by Richard Foreman's Don Juan. "On the strength of a few meretricious embellishments, someone of modest abilities can share credit for a playwright's genius--a kind of gilt by association."(24) Instead of a probing laser, the concept then becomes a neon arrow pointing spastically at a single thread in a rich and intricately woven tapestry.

Champions of the conceptual approach agree with the anti-conceptual crew that directors must stay in touch with core issues in a classic or else risk what Brustein has called "directorial narcissism."(25) The supporters of conceptualism are willing, however, to offer directors a longer interpretative rope. Brustein writes:

One does not have to believe that a play can support

any harebrained or lunatic interpretation in order to recognize that theatre is not absolute, not immutable, not frozen, but rather in a continual state of process and change, and therefore not subject to fixed concepts of authorial intention or "definitive" production.(26)

"The history of theatre," the critic once remarked, "is not a compilation of definitive productions, but rather a dialogue, even a debate among people of different perspectives, and among people, let us remember, of different times."(27) At their best, conceptual directors have earned Brustein's applause for "bringing an entirely original vision to hallowed works of literature, exhuming metaphors and themes that were never seen in the plays before."(28)

Voices in defense of conceptual theatrics are as vehement as those against them. "The meanings of a play, however, are not facts," wrote a reviewer of Garland Wright's Misanthrope set on the eve of the French Revolution;

they are not utterly solid, though they have distinguishable outlines; they do not remain fixed but participate in the growth of human experience, long after the play is written; and while the playwright's intentions must always be deferred to, those intentions are to be perceived not by rules, tradition as an adherence to supposed historical possibilities of meaning (for a play, like all works of the imagination, sees farther than history can), but through the creative interaction of living theater artists with the only indisputable fact the author has left us--namely the script.(29)

Ralph Berry, author of Staging Shakespeare defends the inventions of the directors included in his book by asserting that "meanings are not lexical absolutes. . . .

Meanings are generated by community and history. . . . It is, then, a complete naivete to speak of the 'meaning' of a Shakespeare play as an entity that can be defined, established, and placed on record in perpetuity."(30) Conceptual directing, Berry concludes, echoing Brustein's idea of the "directorial essay,"(31) is "an act of criticism."(32) As early as 1959, Francis Hodge had chronicled the director's ever-increasing assumption of critical duties. "In the late 19th century [the director] came into the theatre to organize and he stayed to criticize," Hodge wrote.(33)

It comes as no surprise, then, that directors have issued strong statements on their own behalf. Tyrone Guthrie is famous for brushing off his own conceptual work, mainly examples of Brustein's simile category, with the phrase that he was just "jollyng up" the classics to make them less academic and more appealing. But his writing reveals a more serious agenda. "If classics are to be fresh and not preserved in a sort of aspic of uncritical reverence," Guthrie wrote, "then there must be constant experiment with their production."(34) Otherwise, he found, actors tend "to feel that they must grope for 'style' which consists of getting into elegant attitudes, tapping snuff boxes, waving fans and lace handkerchiefs and in general carrying-on in a very fancy way,"(35) that prevents them from making deeper connections with classic texts.

Besides, Guthrie believed, not even the geniuses who

wrote the classics comprehended their infinite complexity. "Were it possible to find out, I would lay any money that Shakespeare had only the vaguest idea of what he was writing when he wrote Hamlet, that the major part of the meaning of it eluded him because it proceeded from the subconscious." (36) In the meeting of a text's hidden treasures and the director's own interests and experiences, Guthrie saw opportunities to make "personal comments" through the staging of the play. His only rule was that directors not be hampered by their own timidity.

There is a certain impertinence in relating yourself to a great master and saying, Well now, I've got to interpret you and it's going to be done my way. But Shakespeare ain't here to defend himself. . . . And I think that the conscientious artist has no alternative but to take his courage in both hands, shut his eyes, hold his nose and jump in, and do it the best he knows. (37)

After all, he reminds, "controversy is far healthier than acquiescence." (38)

Jonathan Miller recently echoed Guthrie's dismissal of classic playwrights' jurisdiction over contemporary productions. "I don't believe one has any duty or obligation to an author once he's dead," Miller says. "The play becomes a public object. One should be able to do to it exactly what one wants." (39) In fact, Miller sees directorial tampering with a classic as a form of tribute. "With the passage of time, Shakespeare's plays have quite properly assumed the status of myths, and it is the honourable fate of all great myths to suffer imaginative

distortions at the hands of those to whom they continue to give consolation and nourishment."(40) Lucian Pintilie stops short of saying the dead playwright no longer has any clout, but he claims a non-negotiable right to exercise his own interpretive muscle in the author's absence.

But what is tradition? . . . What they mean are preconceptions, lack of surprises . . . But no one knows tradition. No one has the right to say 'This is what Molière wanted.' Yes, I want to express my vision, but only after careful and deep study of the plays, after months of exploration. I want it to be unpredictable, even to myself. To do a play, I must have an obsession with a point of view about it or I can't do it.

But even when I express an ostensibly radically different point of view about a play, I believe I remain faithful to it. The worst thing is to kneel before a lot of sacrosanct prejudices. It is best when the obsessions of a modern artist collide with a great work. The miracle of great works is that they can be looked at in new ways every seven years and remain strong and new and surprising.(41)

The absence of the classic playwright is exactly what appeals to some contemporary directors. Garland Wright says he denies himself "interpretive fiat" when he directs a brand-new script. The first production should be definitive. It should set the author's intentions for posterity: "The archeology that the director leaves must be the accurate version of what the playwright meant. . . . I leave the interpretive fun for artists who come later."(42) With a classic play, "one is left with the archeological remains of some theatrical event which was specific to its times and social context, and one must reinvent it," Wright says.(43) Andrei Serban is even more blunt about why he prefers directing the classics.

If you work with a living playwright sitting next to you, there's tension. If you do nothing to his plays, he gets upset: 'Why don't you do something?' If you do something, it's always too much. What do I need it for? I prefer dead playwrights.(44)

And what if the playwright somehow showed up at a rehearsal? "Then what he said would be it."(45) But Serban and his colleagues have little cause to fear the sudden arrival and retribution of bygone dramatists. As Guthrie observed: "the authors of most of the plays that really demand the author's presence at rehearsal are unavoidably prevented from being there by a previous engagement which not even the greatest of mortals can decline."(46)

A new and enthusiastic band of support for conceptual classics has emerged from the ranks of deconstruction. The judicious friend of conceptualism returns the embrace with caution, however, murky prose and obscurantism being among the critical movement's most salient features. Still, the deconstructive challenge to textual authority has clear value for the study of contemporary theatre. Determined to cut through a thicket of verbiage that includes terms like "textuality, intertextuality, demystification, [and] hermeneutics," Gerald Rabkin has attempted to convert this latest literary vogue to theatrical uses in a series of performance essays, including "The Play of Misreading: Theatre/Text/Deconstruction."(47) Rabkin's noble effort to decode the basics of American (Yale) deconstruction is largely successful, although each quotation threatens to undermine his purpose.

He reasons within a model that equates the interpretative functions of theatre directors with those of literary critics. Deconstructive critics, he writes, surrender the authority to make final pronouncements about texts, and engage instead in open-ended dialogue with them. Derrida, Rabkin reports, sees deconstructive criticism as an act of "interrogation."

Deconstruction holds 'closure' the great enemy. For the critic to attempt to close a text by a "definitive" interpretation is foolhardy. He can only recover it by removing the layers of false accumulations, and by "demystifying" the text itself by probing it for symptoms of insufficiency and ideological blindness . . . (48)

Critics seek to track down, expose, and respond to the hidden sources, references, and assumptions that lurk behind the printed artifact that is the text. "It is one of the tenets of new critical theory that the most axiomatic of aesthetic conventions and responses reveal themselves on closer scrutiny as hardly axiomatic at all, but rather the product of buried and entangled values," Rabkin writes. (49)

The objective is not merely to "'unscramble the tangle of lines of meaning, comb its threads out so they shine clearly side by side,'" as Hillis Miller put it. Deconstruction's goal is perpetual discourse with the elusive text. The critic's function, says Rabkin, is to "unknot the tangle and set the text's elements in motion once more." Reading thus becomes a creative faculty as privileged as writing, and "the border between art and interpretation is erased." (50)

The rejection of "the qualitative separation of criticism from the art it interprets"(51) is the key to deconstruction's applicability to the study of conceptual directing. Conceptual directors can be understood to exercise interpretative strategies equivalent to those of deconstructive critics. Rather than definitive versions, their productions are opportunities to dissect and reassemble the components of classic texts. The theatrical fruits of their investigations bear the same relationship to scripts that the deconstructive critics' literary output bears to the texts on which they are based. "Since the director is the main instrument of interpretation in the theatre of our time," writes Rabkin, "the playwright holds no more privilege over the director than literature holds over criticism."(52) Deconstruction refutes the idea that there is such a thing as an original text, one which is not in fact the synthesized byproduct of earlier works. Therefore, neither the critic's reading nor the director's production should be considered second-class derivations. They are new branches on the source text's extended family tree. "So ingrained is our assumption that the critic's job is to read correctly--and the director's job to interpret the playwright correctly--that such a strategy seems willfully perverse," Rabkin concedes.(53)

Like more mainstream critics who support the director's creative autonomy, Rabkin is compelled to set some standards. Deconstruction allows Gilman's uncertain zone

almost infinite parameters.

But how, then, does one avoid excusing weak or banal productions as necessary deconstructive strategies? How does the audience, the critic, discern which directorial "manhandling" is valid, which simplistic reduction or mere caprice? Deconstruction does not assert that anything goes, that all interpretation is equal. . . . Miller insists that the reader is not "free to give the narrative any meaning he wishes, but that . . . meaning emerges from a reciprocal act in which interpreter and what is interpreted both contribute to the making or the finding of a pattern."(54)

Unfortunately, the criteria Rabkin comes up with to measure the merits of conceptual efforts are anemic. He writes:

a strong misreading must be rigorous, tied to a theoretical framework meticulously expressed. It must lead to the dissemination, not closure of the text. It must affirm play and produce pleasure in the reader/audience. Above all, it must be strong, indelible. . . . There is no formula by which strength can be measured. The audience, the critic, and time, the severest critic of all, will attest whether strength has been achieved.(55)

Despite its obvious linguistic pitfalls and frustrating, systematic refusal of definite answers, deconstruction does, as Rabkin asserts, "provide a model whereby these radical and disruptive strategies may at least be comprehended, if not justified."(56)

The debate over conceptual approaches to classic plays, as we have seen and will continue to see as this discussion proceeds, has been emphatic and impassioned. There are valid but inconclusive arguments on both sides. One indisputable fact remains, however, the best deflector of traditionalist attacks. No matter how invasive, perverse, or just plain silly the worst conceptual productions get,

the plays remain intact. Conceptual production may erase preconceived notions, but they cannot eradicate the original texts. The unscathed scripts are still available to be read, produced, and analyzed in (or close to) the form in which their authors' bequeathed them to future generations. In addition, bad productions of classics do not tarnish the reputations of the proven plays on which they are based. It is inevitably the director who takes the blame for a botched job. No classic worthy of its stature could be toppled by a single misguided production, or even a series of them.

Still, there are good reasons why directorial rewrighting of classic plays incites passionate debate. For one, the status of classical production is considered a good measure of the health of a nation's theatre, and conceptual classics, especially successful ones, upset the status quo. Inferior ones, and there are plenty of them, may not send readers scurrying back to reevaluate standard texts, but they reflect badly on the national theatrical competence.

Another possible explanation for critical intransigence is that conceptual directors emphasize the physical means of production, and critics tend to approach the theatre, especially the classics, from a literary perspective. In some cases, the two do not speak the same theatrical language. There may rage between them an unspoken proprietary battle over whose domain it is to interpret classic plays for modern times. Perhaps the single indisputable achievement of conceptual production in terms

of its effect on our appreciation of the classics as stage vehicles is that it always stimulates renewed interest in the works on which it is based. In this day and age, we should be grateful for any means of production that provokes the allocation of precious column inches to debate the status of classic drama on contemporary stages.

The heightened rhetoric that surrounds conceptual theatre reflects the fact that these productions cut to the heart of fundamental questions about the theatre in the twentieth century, namely: 1. What is the relationship between play text and performance? Or, is theatre an adjunct literary activity or an independent art form with a literary component? 2. What, then, is the role of classic plays on contemporary stages?; and 3. What kind of artists are directors, and what are their rights, responsibilities, and restrictions?

The search for answers to these theoretical questions requires a scale to weigh the sanctity of classics--and the corresponding inviolability of playwrights and playwriting--against the demands of the twentieth-century stage and its own unique artist, the director. Western drama dates back twenty-five hundred years, but the directing profession is only a little over a century old. In the ancient, medieval, and Renaissance theatres, the rudiments of directing--basically making sure the actors could be seen and heard without tripping over one another--were handled first by playwrights and later by actor-managers. The rise of the

director since Saxe-Meiningen's well-drilled ensemble emerged from its duchy in the 1870s has been no less than meteoric. Almost immediately, directors transformed themselves from traffic managers to dramatic interpreters, reinterpreters, and sometimes primary creative artists.

A couple of decades after the Meiningers demonstrated the benefits of a single, strong hand coordinating the various theatrical elements, Gordon Craig propounded his omnipotent Artist of the Theatre and threatened to throw the playwright off the stage altogether. Today, manifestations of Craig's fantasy can be found in the self-generated work of Robert Wilson, Pina Bausch, Richard Foreman, Martha Clarke, and other auteurs who practice extreme directorial autonomy. The majority of directors, however, still choose to work with texts. Those whose work is called conceptual assert their own theatrical initiative over established notions of the playwright's intent by changing the style and setting, altering the script, or casting actors of different age, race, or gender than that called for in the original. By taking such liberties with classic texts, conceptual directors force a realignment of the traditional, Aristotelian hierarchy--"thought" and "language" over "spectacle" and "song"--that disturbs the theatre's equilibrium.

Until Craig insisted that the physical theatre could stand as an independent art form without benefit of literary crutches, the playwright was held up (at least in theory) as

the supreme creative artist and the text--a stable, non-temporal, non-sensual, literary document--the bedrock of the theatrical event. When old plays warranted new productions, contemporary dramatists--from the Roman playwrights who remade Greek originals to suit Latin appetites through such Shakespeare "improvers" as William Davenant and Nahum Tate--rewrote the texts to conform to contemporary tastes, mores, and theatrical practices. The classically-inspired dramas of Cocteau, Brecht, Anouilh, Giraudoux, and Sartre also belong to that tradition. Modern conceptual directors make new theatre from old plays, too, but they circumvent the literary adapter and remodel the plays for the times primarily through elements of the physical production. Not surprising in light of Western civilization's longstanding anti-theatrical prejudice is the indignation and alarm aroused when directors usurp some measure of creative control from dramatic authors, asserting, after Meyerhold, an "authority" of their own. All of these precedents and prejudices must be kept in mind as we proceed to evaluate contemporary conceptual productions of classic plays.

#### Contemporary Conceptual Theatre in America

The overriding result of twentieth-century experiments with classical theatre, as Robert Brustein put it, has been a new perspective which holds "that classical theatre [is] a continuum of images and experiences and not simply an event frozen in the past." (57) In the hands of conceptual directors, the classics have been made to absorb and/or

confront the issues and aesthetics of America's turbulent, fragmented, and cynical century. We have revised our views of the plays and they, in turn, have reflected images of us. The following chapters will peruse selected examples of conceptual productions in America since 1968. The chosen productions represent a cross-section of the field and not an encyclopedic account of all activity. They are not necessarily the pick of the crop, nor the worst, but a selection I seen by the author live or videotape. Their diversity displays the range of conceptual possibilities and the traces the delicate directorial art of transforming ideas to theatrical forms.

Whether or not directors have a right to press their own theatrical perspectives against established texts is moot. Adapting and revising classic texts have been integral to the long history of the theatre and, more recently, the history of directing. Once the profession emerged, it was inevitable that directors should assert more and more creative authority, especially as revivifiers, eventually rivaling playwrights as a primary source of theatrical ideas. As the American theatre stumbles toward the twenty-first century, conceptual directors abound and show no sign of abating. Their directorial licenses cannot be revoked.

The crux of the matter, then, and the focus of this dissertation, is how to judge their diverse body of work. If they break with tradition, do traditional critical standards still apply? The new critic must consider such

issues as the director's boundaries and the obligations imposed by classic texts. From how far afield can directors approach the classics? What distinguishes an inspired concept from an insipid one? Do conceptual rewrightings effect the reputation of the play?

According to Goethe's formula, the critics must determine what an artist was trying to do before they judge how well it was done and whether or not it was worth doing. Because conceptual theatre is inherently idiosyncratic, it often suffers from misunderstandings at the first stage of the critical process. Therefore, the primary thrust of this study will be to explain in each case what the director was trying to do. Continual efforts will be made to portray directors' intentions in their own words, either through personal interviews or their own published remarks. In some cases, background information has been collected from a closely involved third party. Armed with a firm grasp of the directors' intent, I will then analyze the execution of the idea and its ultimate effects on stage. Critical reception will be given a prominent place in this story, partly because eyewitness accounts are essential for those productions I did not see; partly because the opinions of more experienced viewers challenge and stimulate my own; and also because the impassioned rhetoric on both sides of the debate is irresistible to quote.

The first of the following chapters will deal with the history of conceptual production. After that, each chapter

will examine in depth specific examples of experiments with plays from a particular period or by a single dramatist. Chapter 3 will cover Greek and Roman plays, Chapter 4 Shakespeare, then Molière, and finally, a detour into opera via the trilogy of Mozart-da Ponte operas directed by Peter Sellars. These are bold and often surprising productions. Paramount among the challenges in analyzing them will be to resist being hoodwinked beyond sound judgment by the directors' theatrical dazzle or persuasive rationales and yet still remain open to the potential merits of the outrageous. It is a tightrope act that requires a delicate balance of wonder and skepticism.

The most valuable conceptual rewritings reveal a play's subtext through startling theatrical metaphors. The least worthy impose irrelevant novelties that obscure rather than redefine the play. The rewrighting of classic plays remains a fraught and persistent controversy in the American theatre. This discussion will not settle what promises to be a long and bitter argument, but it should dispel some of the fog and, I hope, demonstrate the contribution of conceptual production to the continued viability of the classics in the contemporary American theatre.

## Chapter Two

### HISTORICAL CONTEXTS: EUROPE AND AMERICA

A sustained examination of the current practice of rewrighting the classics must be set against its historical context. For the purpose of this study of American theatre, that history can be traced through two parallel evolutions in Europe and in the United States.

A classic is classic not because it conforms to certain structural rules, or fits certain definitions (of which its author had quite probably never heard). It is classic because of a certain eternal and irrepressible freshness. (1)

---Ezra Pound

Pound was probably not thinking about the dialectical relationship between plays and performance when he wrote his definition of "classic," but it suits the current purpose neatly. Despite the post-modernists' insistence that all works of art are different each time they are experienced because each reader/viewer/spectator brings his or her own perceptive field to the encounter, only the performing arts demand that a work be completely remade each time it is shown. No two productions or performances of the same production replicate exactly the text or its initial production. To attain classic status, a play must be appealing and accessible to succeeding generations of artists and audiences. It must also possess a certain

elasticity and resilience in order to withstand the manipulations of subsequent theatrical eras. Charles Marowitz put it nicely when he wrote about Shakespeare:

The one trait a classic has consistently displayed over the last four centuries is its ability to change identity in accordance with the way each generation has come to view it. . . . It is the malleability of a classic that we should celebrate, not simply its age.(2)

How and/or whether to put the classics on the modern stage have concerned the seminal theatrical minds of the twentieth century, even as the theatre itself has had to justify its continuation in a increasingly crowded field of dramatic media, many of which do better what the theatre did first. Film and television can surpass the theatre at both realistic storytelling and illusionistic fantasy. Access to these electronic formats is available to wider audiences at lower prices, and the financial rewards to artists are substantially better here as well. Yet the century's most innovative theatre directors have pursued a quest for the theatre's *raison d'être*. They have often looked to the past for clues to the future, and the rewrighting of classic plays has provided opportunities both to revive the vitality of bygone eras and to demonstrate how live theatre could reassert itself in the present.

#### The Evolution of Rewriting in Europe

In the absence of the Artist of the Theatre, Gordon Craig was content to stage classics in the austere, abstract style with which he waged war against the nineteenth-century

stage to which he was born as the son of Ellen Terry.

(My mother) loves the theatre, she thinks she is serving humanity and the sacred cause of art, while in my opinion, the theatre of today is hidebound and conventional. When the curtain goes up, and, in a room with three walls and artificial light, those great geniuses, those priests of holy art, show me how people eat, drink, love, walk about, and wear their jackets . . . We need new forms. New forms are needed, and if we can't have them, then we had better have nothing at all."(3)

The words belong to Trepnev, the struggling symbolist playwright and son of a famous actress in Chekhov's The Seagull, but it is easy to imagine them in the mouth of Gordon Craig.

Craig believed staunchly that it was the director's duty to interpret the dramatist's play, but the author's stage directions "are not to be considered by him. What he must see to is that he makes his action and scene match the verse or the prose, the beauty of it, the sense of it."(4) Where the realistic stage sought verisimilitude, Craig's symbolism sought the unconscious reality of dreams and trance. Craig's interest in classic drama lie not in outward manifestations of intrigue, romance, or worldly greatness, but in the play as a source of transcendent theatrical imagery. Unlike contemporary conceptual directors who seek a separate style and idiom for each play, Craig advocated consistent use of the unit set with the specific layout and color scheme modified to the themes of the drama at hand. Still, Craig's reliance on visual imagery and a contemporary aesthetic to illuminate old texts for new audiences have

become hallmarks of the conceptual approach.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Granville Barker and Max Reinhardt advanced the conceptual agenda not through treatises but in productions that demonstrated their belief that directors have an obligation to put classic plays on stage in fresh and surprising new productions. Barker's foray into the classics amounted to six plays by Shakespeare and Euripides, the latter of which brought conceptual classics to this side of the Atlantic for the first time. The Shakespeare productions, designed by Norman Wilkinson at Savoy Theatre in London between 1912 and 1914, used William Poel's restored texts but gave each play its own fantastical look and style. The gauzy, glittery Midsummer Night's Dream included a bower of trees made of strips of gilded fabric hung from a circular rod over the stage. Barker dropped the traditional Mendelssohn score, commissioned original music by Cecil Sharp, and complemented that with folk tunes. The court scene for the storybook Twelfth Night was decorated with trees that resembled huge styrofoam cones with rings cut out of them. Barker's cosmetic makeover of these plays was widely approved, but general enthusiasm was tempered by the selection of lightweight Shakespearean comedies. The implication was that such whimsical treatments would not have stood up under the weight of a Hamlet or Macbeth.

The Greek plays, in new translations by Gilbert Murray, were first staged during Barker's tenure at the Royal Court

Theatre between 1904 and 1907. Barker found Murray's translations admirably simple. He mounted them on an adaptable unit set with painted, conventionalized set pieces to suggest a more specific atmosphere for each of the three plays in the repertory. Costumes for the first Greek production, of The Trojan Women, were plain draped robes. For Iphigenia in Tauris the actors wore more current fashions. Lillah McCarthy, Barker's leading lady, appeared in a long, pleated, white skirt with big dark polka-dots, a simple tunic blouse with wavy, vertical stripes, and a thigh-length overjacket with lines and dots, something like a flapper's toga. The work on Hippolytus focused on Barker's struggle to present the chorus in an appropriately modern manner. His solution, as with most of his work with classic plays, was a tidy, symbolic convention. Each choral passage was preceded and followed by one or two plucks of the harp. The chorus chanted their lines in unison while walking through a few simple choreographed steps.

When the Greek plays toured college stadiums across America in 1915, their first appearance was the inaugural event for Lewisohn Stadium at the City College of New York. For these huge outdoor spaces, Barker adapted the sets to include a massive, stylized Greek skene behind a full-circle orchestra, whose floor was painted with bold, geometric designs. The effect recalled the grandeur of the fifth century B.C. in a style consonant with the emerging twentieth century A.D. The make-believe quality of Barker's

stage conventions exemplifies a theatricalism common, though not exclusive, to a lot of conceptual theatre. The overt presentational style invites the audience to participate in the fiction, as if acknowledging together the imaginative leap required of all participants to bring the past to meaningful life in the present.

Max Reinhardt was a master of the gestalt theatrical concept. Wildly eclectic and a consummate showman, Reinhardt insisted that every play demanded a unique theatrical atmosphere. He understood the impact of small, larger, and massive playing spaces and selected among them for his more than six hundred productions. When a text defied even these options Reinhardt pioneered the use of "found" performance spaces. No dogmatist, Reinhardt said he took his inspiration from the "tidal waves of mental images"(5) he experienced while reading plays. "All depends on realizing the specific atmosphere of a play and on making the play live. . . How to make the play live in our time, that is decisive for us."(6)

His total theatre concepts encompassed the configuration of the playing space, sets, lighting and costume designs, acting style, and whether or not the action would extend into the audience. He staged The Merchant of Venice alongside a Venetian canal and Everyman in the streets of Salzburg. The Fauststadt, a vertical city, was carved into a mountainside for his annual forays into Goethe's masterpiece. For The Miracle, he hired designers (including

Norman Bel Geddes for the New York production) to transform the insides of theatres into Gothic cathedral interiors. Reinhardt's lavish Midsummer Night's Dream, in 1905, depicted the two contiguous worlds of the court and the forest on a revolving stage that turned in full view of the audience. His massive Oedipus Rex, first staged in Berlin's three-thousand-seat Circus Schumann, in 1910, required hundreds of extras in the chorus and hanamichi-like ramps over the audience's heads for dramatic entrances and exits. The even grander Oresteia that Reinhardt mounted in his own Grosses Schauspielhaus, in 1919, was played before a potential audience of more than thirty-three hundred at a time.

Despite the director's obvious fascination with the physical environment, Reinhardt professed his ultimate faith in the actor.

There is only one objective for the theatre: the theatre; and I believe in a theatre that belongs to the actor. No longer, as in the previous decades, literary points of view shall be decisive ones. This was the case because literary men dominated the theatre. I am an actor, I feel with the actor and for me the actor is the natural focal point of the theatre. He was that in all great epochs of theatre."(7)

That attitude is confirmed by the statements of actors whom he directed. Even chorus players remember Reinhardt's attention to their individual characterizations. It is possible to dispute whether his top priority was really scenery or acting, but the key point of the preceding quotation is that Reinhardt recognized the inherent

aesthetic value of the theatre, not as an adjunct literary activity, but as its own valid means of artistic expression.

Extensive tours of his work throughout Europe and the United States, and the original work Reinhardt did during his exile from Nazi Germany, met with pockets of predictable critical scorn, but won its share of ardent supporters as well. The young Robert Edmond Jones, fresh out of Harvard, saw several of Reinhardt's productions during a post-graduation European sabbatical with classmate Kenneth Macgowan. Continental Stagecraft, the adulatory chronicle of their tour of European theatre capitals, was published in 1922. Jones, a scenic designer, adopted the conceptual attitude in his earliest professional assignments, designs for Broadway productions of Shakespeare in the early 1920s.

The book, and Jones's Craigian unit sets kicked off the New Stagecraft movement that elevated American designers from scene painters to scenic artists, a shift that brought the designer into the core creative team. "There is something to be said in the theatre in terms of form and color and light that can be said in no other way," Jones would later write.(8) For the 1919-20 season, Jones erected a massive replica of a segment of the base of the Tower of London for Arthur Hopkins's production of Richard III, which starred John Barrymore. Projections were used for scene-to-scene alterations. Macgowan saw in the structure a metaphor for "the empty skull of Richard with the hideous drama within it." The daily critics were less impressed with this

first Jones-Hopkins-Barrymore collaboration, and their displeasure continued with the second and third.

Jones created a black-draped, multi-level environment for Macbeth and added bold, metallic set pieces for individual scenes. The play opened with three five-foot tall tragic masks hanging above three red-robed, bronze-masked witches. Harsh beams of white light poured onto the stage through the slits in the overhead masks. The scenes in Inverness were marked by golden, expressionist arches. Alexander Woollcott wasn't sure whether they looked like a "giant molar tooth pitched rakishly in space" or "the lodge room of the Ku Klux Klan, Poughkeepsie Chapter." (9) The Times critic hated Lionel Barrymore in the title role and felt that the production was overwhelmed by the scenery. "Mr. Jones as Macbeth" was the title of his review.

"Perhaps on the seventh or eighth visit . . . one may become so habituated to its new idiom that one can give undivided and even stimulated attention to the tale," he wrote. (10)

John Barrymore played the lead in the Jones-Hopkins Hamlet of 1922. This time Woollcott approved of the acting, but was again unhappy with Jones's set. "Trivial and grotesque," he called it, adding that it "encroached upon the playing space and introduced incongruities of locale quite unnecessary." To Woollcott, so heavy was the burden of the design, that it reduced the production to "a platform recitation." Jones's beautiful renderings seem to refute Woollcott's assessment, but a drawing cannot represent a

performance. A share of the production's weaknesses might be justly attributed to discrepancies in conception between designer and director. Hopkins's working rule of "complete subservience to the play"(11) seems at cross purposes to Jones's declarative settings. Another sign of the gap between them might be detected in Hopkins's strange statement of admiration for Jones's "unselfishness" in designing so that audiences would not "notice" his designs.(12)

Meanwhile, in the newly declared Soviet Union, Meyerhold marshalled the forces of the theatre "to serve the cause of the revolution."(13) He found traditional drama, with its emphasis on the psychological and emotional traumas of middle- and upper-class characters, bereft of topics or treatments that could facilitate that goal. "But," he wrote,

since all this is merely literature, let it lie undisturbed in the libraries. We shall need scenarios and we shall often utilize even the classics as a basis for our theatrical compositions. We shall tackle the task of adaptation without fear, fully confident of its necessity.(14)

Meyerhold's adaptations were achieved by rearranging texts, performing on abstract, stylized sets, and acting in the vigorous, athletic medium he called biomechanics. The "key idea" he formulated to articulate the motive and motif for each production is the forerunner of the production "concept." So unabashed was Meyerhold in his efforts to remold classics to his own purposes, that he identified himself in the program for The Inspector General, in 1926,

with the notorious label "author of the spectacle." With this tag, writes one of Meyerhold's recent biographers, he asserted the "tenet that director and actor alike have the duty and right as artists to reinterpret the classics and create contemporary drama as viable art in the theatre." (15) According to another theatre historian, "Meyerhold first of all directors operated on the playtext in the modern sense: he wrote the text anew. . . . [he] knew the text had to be reconstructed in a present." (16)

For contemporary conceptual directors, Meyerhold's revolutionary stance toward classic texts is as rich a source of inspiration as his constructivist aesthetics and biomechanical approach to acting. Critics still refer to him as they try to sort out the impact of a strong directorial hand on a classic text. More than fifty years later, Richard Gilman called Meyerhold "the man from whom true directorial megalomania might be said to have sprung." (17) Gordon Rogoff, meanwhile, tried to temper the misconception that Meyerhold advocated free-for-all directorial indulgence when he mused that "as for concept, well yes . . . but he didn't mean imposition from the outside--as many contemporary directors do--so much as he meant an incarnation of the playwright's world." (18) For Meyerhold, the classic text was a piece of the past, an historical relic, inappropriate to the urgent purpose of the Soviet stage unless transformed into something totally new and barbed.

Brecht took a similar view of the highly personal and bourgeois focus of classic drama as irrelevant to the audience he liked to call "the children of the scientific age"(19). He deplored the honorifics "universal" and "timeless" as applied to great works of art because they, along with adjectives like "natural," "fated," and "eternal," foster the perception that human and/or social conditions are somehow preordained and thus immutable. Brecht wanted to destroy existing, oppressive social and economic structures by empowering his audiences with the belief that their own actions could change the course of history. "Hunger, cold, hardship. The purpose of our investigation was to make visible the means by which those onerous conditions could be done away with," wrote the German director.(20) He said his work stemmed from "a desire to make the world controllable."(21)

Much of the confusion surrounding the Brechtian terms "epic theatre" and "alienation" subsides when they are understood in relation to his desire to "historicize" the events in drama. By showing dramatic situations to be the results of specific historical contexts, Brecht hoped to demonstrate the impact of the characters' own choices on their destinies and to imply that other alternatives might have resulted in better outcomes. The Verfremdungseffekt was his technique for making the familiar strange and the strange familiar in order to help the actors and the audience scrutinize dramatic events from a fresh,

historicized perspective, free from automatic acceptance of any circumstance as inevitable or beyond human manipulation. Toward that didactic end, and in the service of his high-spirited theatrical style, Brecht resolved "to treat old works of the old theatre as pure subject matter, to ignore their own style, to make their authors forgotten, and to stamp upon all those works made for other epochs, the style of our epoch.(22)

While Meyerhold and Brecht were content to remake old plays for their new theatres, Artaud refused the classics any place in his Theatre of Cruelty. Artaud's theatre was supposed to purge the individual and the community of its festering spiritual sores by shocking the senses into new awareness. Such metaphysical upheaval could brook no polite museum relics on its stages. In his 1936 essay, "No More Masterpieces," Artaud articulated his revulsion toward the boulevard obeisance paid to cherished old plays. Ironically, it has since acquired classic status of its own as an early manifesto for the conceptual approach to the classics in Europe and the United States.

"Masterpieces of the past are good for the past," Artaud argues, "they are not good for us."(23) He concedes that a few of the great dramas (e.g. Oedipus Rex) deal with the primal passions he sought to treat, but "in a manner and language that have lost all touch with the rude and epileptic rhythm of our time. . . . through adulterated trappings and speech that belongs to extinct eras.(24)

Shakespeare, too, is inadequate, Artaud charges, because he "leaves the public intact." (25)

The idolatry of fixed masterpieces is one of the aspects of bourgeois conformism . . . We must get rid of our superstitious valuation of texts and written poetry. Written poetry is worth reading once, and then should be destroyed. Let the dead poets make way for others. Then we might even come to see that it is our veneration for what has already been created, however beautiful and valid it may be, that petrifies us, deadens our responses, and prevents us from making contact with that underlying power, . . . Beneath the poetry of the texts there is the actual poetry, without form and without text. (26)

For Artaud, literature is "fixed" and therefore "dead" because it is offered as a finished product. The theatre, on the other hand, communicates via the senses in the form of immediate, temporal impulses. Literature, especially those examples of it that reeked of respect and middle-class culture, simply did not belong in Artaud's theatre.

Instead of continuing to rely upon texts considered definitive and sacred, it is essential to put an end to the subjugation of the theater to the text, and to recover the notion of a kind of unique language half-way between gesture and thought. (27)

Like Craig, Artaud proposed a theatre without any text at all, created by a single theatre artist. "The old duality between author and director will be dissolved, replaced by a sort of unique Creator upon whom will devolve the double responsibility of the spectacle and the plot," he imagined in the first "Theatre of Cruelty" manifesto. (28) "Thus we shall renounce the theatrical superstition of the text and the dictatorship of the writer." (29)

Following Artaud's anti-literary lead, classical

directors who have been inspired by him since The Theatre and its Double was translated in the late 1950s have drawn primarily from the spirit rather than the letter of Artaud's writings. Peter Brooks 1964 Theatre of Cruelty workshop is a notable exception. For the most part, it is Artaud's disdain for stultifying reverence that has inspired later directors to remake classic plays with healthy abandon.

Before he left the theatre to pursue "paratheatrical" activities, Jerzy Grotowski liked to use classic texts as vehicles for his holy actors. Like Artaud, he believed that the theatre's true power lay in its ability to reach past logical thought into the deepest recesses of the mind and spirit. Images of the great dramas, Grotowski felt, were already deeply embedded in the collective unconscious, where their plots and characters had independent symbolic lives of their own. Live performance could activate and play upon those preconceptions.

Grotowski insisted that the survival of the modern theatre depended on its ability to be not just a representation of life, which could be accomplished in cooler dramatic media, but life itself as it unfolds in the live encounter between text, actor, and audience. Thus, for this Polish director, the operative word for producing classic texts is "confrontation." "The audience," he says, "can watch the process of confrontation--the story and its motives meeting the stories and motives in our lives." (30) There is no point to recreating the past through a faithful

depiction of a dead author's ideas. "The actor must not illustrate Hamlet," according to Grotowski, "he must meet Hamlet."(31)

Grotowski demanded that the holy actor sacrifice himself to a scathing internal search for the primal connections between himself and the role and then to an equally grueling physical quest to translate those discoveries into vocal and facial expressions and gestures. "The problem is always the same:" he says, "stop the cheating. Find the authentic impulses. The goal is to find a meeting between the actor and the text."(32)

Grotowski's method was to "take the principal elements of the text as context for the creativity of the actor."(33) His radical rewritings succeeded because he subjected his company and himself to unrelenting standards of discipline and structure. Although he approved of improvisation as a rehearsal technique, and celebrated the role of spontaneity in performance, Grotowski demanded precision in every aspect of the finished production. A good example of the director's theories in practice is the Polish Laboratory Theatre's production of Akropolis. In Wyspiański's text, the setting is the Polish royal palace, and the characters are figures from a hanging tapestry who come to life to act out biblical allegories related to incidents in Polish history.

Grotowski and his collaborator Józef Szayna interpreted the palace, and the ancien regime it once housed as dead relics of the past. He sought a contemporary equivalent

setting that would embody a tragic national cemetery. He chose the Auschwitz concentration camp as the locale and recast the characters as inmates, whose task over the course of the performance was to build a crematorium from odd lengths of pipe, the only props or scenery on the stage. The playing area was an alley between the divided audience. Grotowski had already abandoned the direct spectator participation he used in Faust for a less contrived arrangement that cast audience members as silent witnesses to the action. In Akropolis, they were considered the dead among whom the characters would soon be numbered.

We did not wish to have a stereotyped production with evil SS men and noble prisoners. We cannot play prisoners, we cannot create such images in the theatre. Any documentary film is stronger. We looked for something else. What is Auschwitz? Is it something we could organize today? A world which functions inside us. Thus there were no SS men, only prisoners who so organized the space that they must oppress each other to survive. (34)

The Lab Theatre's production had none of the text's allegorical whimsy. The revised setting and Grotowski's Poor Theatre aesthetics created a work of pristine purity and wrenching sorrow. The director cut out those parts of the text "with which we can neither agree nor disagree," opening the production to criticism for evading those sections that did not fit the new concept. Grotowski used text as a catalyst for the company's experiments. In the Auschwitz setting, the play's Christian values were inverted. "Accepted stereotypes of the sacred are violated, and conventional images of transcendence are

discredited."(35) Grotowski was satisfied with the transformations:

Within the montage one finds certain words that function vis-a-vis our own experiences. The result is that we cannot say whether it is Wyspianski's Akropolis. Yes, it is. But at the same time it is our Akropolis.(36)

In Poland, and other repressive Eastern European countries, classical production in the twentieth century became a major outlet for social and political criticism in the country. Classic texts allowed directors to make oblique references to current affairs with less of risk of censorship or reprisal. This is perhaps the greatest distinction between Eastern European and American conceptual theatre. First Amendment guarantees have made it less necessary for American artists to cloak social and political commentary as heavily as their counterparts in more repressive countries.(37) The work in America tends to be less political, and more likely to be theatrically weak when it does tackle politics.

Of all European directors, English-born Peter Brook has probably had the greatest direct impact on American rewrighters. In the late forties, Brook quickly earned a reputation as an enfant terrible who reset Shakespeare and opera in different or updated historical settings. By the end of the 1960s, he had reinvented Shakespeare for the second half of the century with a handful of highly imaginative productions at the Royal Shakespeare Company, including the Kott-inspired, existentialist King Lear (1962)

and the white-box, circus-motif A Midsummer Night's Dream in 1970. In the seventies, he traveled to Asia and Africa to study tribal rituals and experiment in cross-cultural theatrical communication.

Since his establishment of the International Centre of Theatre Research in an abandoned warehouse in Paris, he has stripped Bizet's Carmen of its orchestra and The Cherry Orchard of its walls, and trotted around the globe a nine-hour dramatization of The Mahabharata. These productions have been informed by the director's cross-cultural curiosity and penchant for simple, elemental production values (air, water, dirt, and fire were featured prominently in both Carmen and The Mahabharata) as well as the smooth, professional craftsmanship Brook fine-tuned through decades spent in mainstream theatrical outlets.

The essays in Brook's two collections, The Empty Space, published in 1968, and The Shifting Point, 1987, reflect his evolving attitudes toward the staging of classic drama. As a mature director, he denounced the detailed pre-rehearsal plans he once drew up and dictated to his (angry) casts. The empty space of the first book's title refers, of course, to the theatre, which Brook feels should be approached with a completely open mind, free of preconceptions about either the particular text or theatrical conventions in general. The "theatre always asserts itself in the present," (38) he writes, so it must be remade and reborn all the time.

Rehearsals should not be governed by a predetermined

interpretation. They are, instead, a period of exploration by peeling away dead layers of received meaning, facile first impressions, and hollow theatrical tradition to see what may lie beneath. "Rehearsals should allow the invisible substance of the play to appear fully articulated," Brook writes. (39) Instead of a "reductive," one-note "directorial conception" (40) Brook says in The Shifting Point, he starts with

a deep formless hunch, which is like a smell, a color, a shadow. . . . a formless hunch that is my relationship with the play. It's my conviction that this play must be done today, and without that conviction I can't do it. (41)

He claims not to impose his ideas on the actors, but to provide their experiments a "sense of direction" and encourage them to respond to the text in as many and as extreme ways as they can. It is out of the abundant fruits of these rehearsals that the director eventually determines what the production is about and selects the elements of the performance.

If you'd seen us three quarters of the way into the rehearsal period, you'd have thought the play was being submerged and destroyed by a surplus of what's called directorial invention. . . . All of it was for the purpose of having, out of that, such a lot of material that then, gradually, things could be shaped. To what criteria? Well, shaped to their relation to this formless hunch. (42)

Despite Brook's denial of more specific criteria, the clarity and coherence of his productions suggest that his selection process is well developed. By the end of a long series of exploratory rehearsals, he finds,

. . . the director is placed in a position to see the difference between the actor's ideas and the play itself. In these last stages, the director cuts away all that's extraneous, all that belongs just to the actor and not to the actor's intuitive connection with the play. . . .the director is in a better position to say then what belongs to the play and what belongs to that superstructure of rubbish that everybody brings with him.

What remains is an organic form. Because the form is not imposed on a play, it is the play illuminated, and the play illuminated is the form. Therefore, when the results seems organic and unified, it's not because a unified conception has been found and has been put on the play from the outset, not at all.(43)

Brook's consistent disavowal of his impact on the text is typical of many of the directors included in the body of this study. Brook's definition of the director's job is "to take the hints and the hidden strands of the play and wring the most from them, take what was embryonic perhaps, and bring it out."(44) The validity test for even the most far-flung directorial concept is whether or not it resonates from or in response to impulses in the text. But Brook's self-effacing tone betrays a false modesty. There are no acrobatics "embryonic" in Midsummer, nor ponytail whippings in Marat/Sade, nor is there a suggestion in Carmen to perform it in a dirt pit. These production devices succeeded not because Brook discovered and brought to light clues the playwrights had tucked into the texts, hoping they would someday be detected, but because the director was able to translate his own, personal responses to the original into a unique system of concrete, theatrical symbols. It is that demonstration of the director's primary creative powers

that distinguishes conceptual from straight productions of the classics. Directors who reformulate the theatrical signs through which a play is presented to the audience assume a more aggressive stance toward the text than Brook likes to admit. His own example proves that assertive directors can enrich rather than diminish a text's theatrical life. Still, it is curious that so many directors who forswear slavish fidelity to playwrights' instructions in lieu of a more egalitarian partnership, are unable or unwilling to own up to the consequences. Can they really be so naive? Or is the playwright's absolute predominance so ingrained in the collective theatrical unconscious that even those who by example disprove the construct are reluctant to admit what they do?

Conceptual directing is more widely accepted in Europe, where its practitioners include such noted directors as Peter Stein in Germany, Giorgio Strehler in Italy, Roger Planchon and Ariane Mnouchkine in France, Ingmar Bergman in Sweden, Andrzej Wajda and Tadeusz Kantor in Poland, and in the Soviet Union, Yuri Lyubimov, to name a few. Some of the most striking work seen in America has been directed by visiting or expatriate East Europeans, especially the Romanians Liviu Ciulei, Lucian Pintilie, Andrei Serban, and Andrei Belgrader. While each nation and each artist has evolved one or more generally characteristic styles, the movement today is truly international.

### The History of Rewriting in America

There are no American "classics" before the plays of Eugene O'Neill in the 1920s. Europeans, especially the Greeks, Italians, French, Spanish, Germans, British, and Scandinavians, have their own world-class dramatic literatures. But producing classical theatre in America has always meant borrowing foreign plays. This step-cousin syndrome may have engendered in the deep recesses of the American theatre an inferiority complex that helps explain why traditionalists cling to old, imported styles and standards and why upstart Americans are compelled to reshape the classics according to native sensibilities. The former group treats these dramas as foreign dignitaries to whom they bow and show respect. The latter Americanize the plays as if to prove the legitimacy of our national heritage or the competence of our theatrical talents. The necessary translation of foreign language plays is expanded to include theatrical as well as linguistic alterations. Speculative psychoanalytical explanations aside, Americans have been rewriting classic plays since Robert Edmond Jones in the 1920s. The progression from those early updatings to the multifocused, postmodern investigations of today has taken diverse paths, each with its own digressions. Large chunks of this history have been chronicled thoroughly in separate accounts of the theatres, careers, and productions involved, and do not require recapitulation here.(45) What follows is a sprint up to the late 1960s, from which point the ensuing

chapters will proceed.

As we have already seen, the earliest conceptual classics to be seen on American stages were themselves either European imports or heavily influenced by the anti-realistic theatres of that continent. Barker, Reinhardt, and Jones brought the first examples to America in the decade between 1915 and 1925. In the late twenties, while much theatrical energy was going to the development of a new American drama, the occasional classical offerings were peppered with novelties like The Taming of the Shrew in modern dress, directed by A. K. Ayliff at the Garrick Theatre in New York in 1927. Starring Basil Sydney and Mary Ellis, the play was reset in a chic Park Avenue flat and revolved around the domestication of a rebellious socialite. Radios, revolvers, a vacuum cleaner, and an automobile whose tires rotated while a panoramic curtain scrolled in the background were among the updated props. "These productions," wrote Brooks Atkinson, "are primarily exhibits of a producer's ingenuity, and it doesn't take so much ingenuity at that. Little sundries furnish momentary pictorial amusement, but are likely to arouse an expectation greater than they can fulfill." (46) W. O. Trapp, the critic for the New York World reported that "one wit guessed it was more Shubert than Shakespeare." (47) Similarly fluffy treatments of Shakespearean comedies continued intermittently through the 1930s. Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne put on a commedia dell'arte version of the Shrew in

1935.

Apostles of the New Stagecraft, meanwhile, were tending to more serious approaches to new and classic drama. Continental Stagecraft had built a case for the designer to assume the role of master shaper of the production. Artists like Sheldon Cheney, Lee Simonson, Donald Oenslager, and Norman Bel Geddes were thinking about and drawing old plays with fresh perspectives, even though many of their plans never materialized as productions. "Everywhere the classics are encrusted with traditions, and the public mind bound by preconceptions of them," Kenneth Macgowan had asserted in The Theatre of Tomorrow, in 1923. "These traditions are hard to demolish, these preconceptions are dangerous things to fight." (48) In America, it was designers who first ventured into that battle. Directors followed their lead. As Lee Simonson would later write,

the meaning of a classic can rarely be recovered or revived; it must nearly always be re-created. The supposedly universal ideas can never again have exactly the same significance. [Modern scenic designers, therefore] must contrive to imbue the present stage background with the emotional quality of those associations with which this lost audience invested the event enacted. (49)

Oenslager devised such modern abstract settings for classic plays as a cubist steel scaffolding for Aristophanes's The Birds and a chalk-white box pierced with three towering doors through whose openings would emerge wedges of blood-red light for Hamlet. Those designs that made it to the stage usually met the same fate as Jones's Shakespeare

settings. "Scenic concept" was rarely incorporated into the directing or other aspects of production, which left the scenery vulnerable to harsh criticism. The legacy of the New Stagecrafters to contemporary conceptual directors and the designers with whom they collaborate is, however, undeniable.

In one unusual case, Norman Bel Geddes got the chance to insinuate the ideas in his set design into the total production when he directed his own Hamlet at a summer theatre in Skowhegan, Maine, in 1929. His multi-level unit set with a twenty-foot thrust in front of the proscenium accommodated a cinematic scenic montage. A complex lighting plot illuminated individual scenes as they were played in rapid succession on different areas of the stage. Bel Geddes pared the text to the main action, added pantomime sequences, and had Hamlet speak the Ghost's lines. With only twelve hours of initial rehearsal, the show played to packed houses and happily surprised critics. Raymond Massey took the title role when the production went to Broadway late in 1931. Despite the enthusiastic reception that greeted the first version, it lasted only two weeks in New York. "An incoherent, flat and unprofitable narrative," chided Brooks Atkinson. John Mason Brown admired Bel Geddes's flair, but regretted that he had "smothered" the play in scenery.(50) To this day, though, Broadway critics can be the last to recognize merit in the new or offbeat. (N.B. the fate of The Gospel at Colonus, almost universally

admired in the press until its brief Broadway run. See Chapter 3.)

The beginnings of an unapologetically American approach to producing the classics arose with the WPA Federal Theatre Project, in the late 1930s. An enormous pool of artists and production opportunities, low budgets, minimal financial risk, and a mandate to serve the diverse needs and talents of its separate regional and racial units provided fertile ground for experiments with classic texts (large casts, no royalties). The Negro units in particular presented a direct challenge to tradition. Black actors, professionals who had been denied opportunities to perform major classical roles in the commercial theatre, were anxious to prove their mettle. The white heads of those units, apparently unwilling to stage the plays straight with black casts, devised production schemes to accommodate the skills and cultural backgrounds of their companies.

Orson Welles's "Voodoo" Macbeth, performed at Harlem's Lafayette Theatre, in 1936, is the most celebrated example. Welles moved the story to Haiti under the nineteenth-century, black tyrant, King Jean-Christophe, and lavished upon it all manner of tropical flora and fauna. Coincidence and the young director's prodigious imagination conspired to bring to the production a cast of one hundred thirty-seven players, including forty-three witches and a band of genuine African tribal drummers.(51) The witches took center stage in this production. It was around them that Welles wove his

retelling of the Macbeth story, and it became about a good man struggling against impinging forces of unnatural evil. Opinion is mixed as to whether or not the production's reliance on supernatural rather than internal conflict proves that Welles's revisions reduced Shakespeare's tragedy to the second-rate (supposedly) genre of melodrama. A better argument, consonant with the production's own intentions, is whether or not Welles and company recast the Scottish play in a culturally and theatrically effective new mold. Brooks Atkinson:

The witches have always worried the life out of the polite tragic stage. But ship the witches down into the rank and fever-stricken jungle of Haiti, . . . and there you have a witches' scene that is logical and stunning and a triumph of theatre art.(52)

What the voodoo Macbeth may have lost in philosophy it more than made up for in verve, color, rhythm, and excitement through its hypnotic evocation of exotic locale. The following year, having moved downtown and out of the WPA, Welles directed Julius Caesar in black shirts for his new Mercury Theatre. Detractors still complained that Welles was little more than a showoff, but the production's relatively restrained style and obvious topical relevance convinced many of Macbeth's critics that the impudent director had taken a giant step toward artistic and professional maturity. (In fact, Welles earned more credit for originality than he deserved. A less-publicized Federal Theatre unit in Delaware had staged Caesar in black shirts the year before.) Today, however, racist overtones have

been detected in the critics' condescension toward the Voodoo Macbeth, and the production is considered a more significant landmark than Julius Caesar in the emergence of an idiosyncratically American classical theatre.

The notoriety that surrounded the Voodoo Macbeth spurred other WPA Negro units around the country to attempt similar adaptations. The Chicago branch set Romey and Julie in Harlem amidst a tense rivalry between African Americans and blacks from the West Indies. In this little-known precursor of West Side Story, Friar Lawrence was a rhyming preacher, the balcony scene was played on a fire escape, and an added epilogue sent the couple, denied entry to heaven because of their suicides, directly to hell to join a rollicking party for fallen angels. The same group presented Swing Mikado in 1939. In 1937, the Los Angeles black unit transferred Macbeth to the jungles of Africa and decked its cast in bones and beads and bamboo skirts. The Seattle troupe added musical numbers to The Taming of the Shrew and relocated its action in New Orleans. Jazz novelty adaptations of classics, featuring popular black performers, proliferated in the commercial theatre in 1939 as the Federal Theatre came to its sudden and sorry halt. Louis Armstrong played Bottom "the fireman" in an 1890s New Orleans musical called Swingin' the Dream. The show included music by Benny Goodman and leading performances by "Moms" Mabley and Butterfly McQueen. Bill Robinson and Gwendolyn Reyde headlined in Mike Todd's Hot Mikado.

Race-reversal has since become a common conceptual strategy among directors seeking to Americanize classic plays. In the conservative, war-torn forties, conceptual revision went into hibernation as classical production in America reverted to more traditional forms in the hands the Theatre Guild and Broadway producers. Broadway saw occasional modern-dress productions, like Katharine Cornell's subdued Antigone in 1946, but for the most part, a cautious theatre tended to observe the classical status quo. One of the few exceptions to emerge during that decade was Carmen Jones, the 1943 black-cast adaptation of Bizet's opera that preserved his music but substituted new lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein. Its heroine worked in a war plant, manufacturing parachutes in what "use ter be a cigarette fac'ry before de war," according to the script. Her lover, Joe, contended in a boxing ring instead of a bullfighting ring. The New York Times reviewer praised the Billy Rose production as a "parallel" not a "parody" of the original and declared that its ebullience made "going to the theatre seem again one of the necessities of life." (53) Race-related musical adaptations have since become an American specialty. West Side Story (1957), the black and Puerto Rican Two Gentlemen of Verona (1972), and "Sleep No More," a black comedy based on Macbeth, produced by the Los Angeles Inner City Cultural Center (1982), are examples of the scope and diversity of these projects.

It was not until the 1960s, however, that directors

began contemplating American race relations through the classics without converting them to musicals. Simply by casting black actors in white roles, directors in the wake of the civil rights movement drew parallels between America's racial hypocrisy and the situations of oppression and prejudice depicted in classic plays. Sometimes a block of related roles was assigned to black actors. In other productions, the casting of a single part made the point. (54 ) After West Side Story, the sixties saw dozens of interracial productions of Romeo and Juliet, in professional and university theatres across the country. In 1968, Zelda Fichandler cast a black actress as the Stepdaughter in Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author. Hartford Stage offered an all-black version of Max Frisch's The Firebugs that implied disturbing parallels between Frisch's Nazi villains and white America.

The practice of cross-racial (now called nontraditional) casting has evolved in the intervening decades beyond these obvious gestures to promote racial equality. First, the movement has begun to embrace other racial and ethnic minorities in the hopes of generating opportunities for a pool of actors that represent the changing demographics of this country. Second, productions that feature minority actors no longer necessarily invoke issues of race, so that the web of issues within the plays themselves is explored more fully. In fact, interracial or cross-racial casting may not even qualify a production as "conceptual" any more,

although it may reveal new facets of a familiar text. In the fall of 1989 at Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., Ruby Dee (who in the 1960s "passed" for white as Cordelia and Kate the shrew in American Shakespeare Festival productions) played Amanda Wingfield in an all-black cast that won accolades in the national press for their unusually poignant, humorous, and affectionate portrayal of Tennessee Williams's Glass Menagerie. Except for the color of the actors' skin, though, and whatever cultural associations attach to that, there was no reworking or reorienting of the play. Finally, nontraditional casting at its most progressive aims to assign roles to the best-qualified performers regardless of race or ethnicity. Colorblind casting reflects the diversity of the American population--the spectrum of peoples one might see walking down the street in any city--and discounts race as an actor's key identifying feature.

Back to our brief chronology. Although there was little conceptual theatre in the 1940s, the fifties saw a surge of activity. In the first months of the decade, Broadway welcomed Joshua Logan's Wisteria Trees, a Deep South adaptation of Cherry Orchard, starring Helen Hayes. "He who tampers with a classic," Logan anticipated, "is apt to infuriate the self-elected authorities of the world." (55) Logan's new script was far enough removed from Chekhov, however, to generate little controversy. Genuine, script-intact rewrighting would reemerge over the next few years

under the influence of more classically minded directors like Tyrone Guthrie, John Houseman, and Joseph Papp. With men like these at the heads of new Shakespeare festival theatres in Stratford (Canada), Stratford (Connecticut), and New York City, with post-war European drama making its way to the States, and the articulation of the auteur theory in cinema providing a model for an all-controlling directorial presence, classical production in America took a decidedly conceptual turn.

During Guthrie's long tenure at the Canadian festival and regular visits to Broadway, he had revived Orson Welles's impulse to transpose the classics to more accessible milieus. Like Welles, Guthrie was a consummate showman whose theatricality at times masked a hollowness at the core of his productions. Looking back at his career, a recent historian described "The Guthrie Style" thus: "lavish detail, many extras, muted color-schemes, excellent acting, and a curious vacuum at the directorial center."<sup>(56)</sup> The Guthrie style, then, had its merits, foremost among them a zest for classical productions and a capacity to make them fresh and immediate to the modern audience. Its obvious downside, like that of Welles and Reinhardt before him, is that in many cases vast amounts of energy spent on theatrics seemed to leave too little for deep meditation on the play.

In Guthrie's own terminology, not all the classic plays he staged warranted "jollyng up." Of his many productions, the 1956 Tamburlaine, based on a 1951 production at London's

Old Vic, is a typical example. Guthrie lavished opulent scenic effects, a cast of more than sixty doing primitive chants and barbaric dances, and a balletically choreographed battle sequence on a severely abridged text of Marlowe's sprawling plays, frequently considered unstageable. The effect was spectacular, but critics complained it never added up to more than that. "Guthrie applies effects to the text, wrote Harold Clurman, ". . . but theatrical effects must come out of the text, they must seem to be a part of it." (57) Richard Hayes, reviewing for Commonweal, called the main character as depicted here "a great beast pawing in lust in the diminished world," but regretted that the director had supplied "only a montage of images of barbarism, no imposition anywhere of an attitude, merely the exploitation of sensation." (58) Eric Bentley would later sum up his impressions of Guthrie as "the most expert sheepdog that ever came out of Ireland . . . blase, apolitical, and trivial." (59)

Guthrie's influence on the American scene would, of course, intensify in the early sixties with the opening of his own theatre in Minneapolis. Guthrie opened his new theatre, in 1963, with the vaguely anachronistic Hamlet, starring George Grizzard and with Jessica Tandy as Gertrude. With its potpourri of nineteenth and twentieth-century elements, including Ophelia's tennis racket and Hamlet's blue satin smoking jacket, the four-hour-long production was almost unanimously considered overwrought, although few

could resist admiring its grandeur. Richard Gilman called it "a boon to traditionalists, an exceedingly unpleasant production, gimmicky, heterogeneous, inconsistent, and without any style that derived from sources other than a vulgar, obvious theatricality."<sup>(60)</sup> Walter Kerr, on the other hand, found it flawed but appealing. "To see a Hamlet captured by a posse carrying flashlights suggests that he has been misbehaving in a movie theatre and has been rounded up by the ushers,"<sup>(61)</sup> Kerr sneered, but ultimately enjoyed what he called the director's "free invention" on that most famous play. The effect, he wrote, was like "looking at the entire play naked, of watching its bones dance on the graveside, or hearing what it is saying without remembering that it is old."<sup>(62)</sup> Kenneth Tynan dismissed any of the production's serious intentions and announced that the only reason Guthrie could get away with it was because Shakespeare was dead and had no agent to protect him. In the almost three decades since the Minneapolis center opened, it has played host to a long line of innovative directors (including almost every one featured in the body of this dissertation).

The American Shakespeare Festival Theatre and Academy in Stratford, Connecticut, was established in 1954 to compete with Guthrie's Canadian venture, but it did not find its own voice until John Houseman, Orson Welles's partner at the WPA and Mercury Theatres in the late thirties, took the artistic reins in 1956. "Shakespeare must be saved from culture" if

he is to compete successfully with Broadway," warned John Gassner in a preview of the first season.(63) The management of the ill-fated 1955 season did not come to that rescue. When Houseman, by now a Hollywood producer who understood the demands of the box office, was hired to revamp the project, he told the press his "only hope for this hazardous second season lay in the bold, imaginative production of unfamiliar, contrasting plays."(64) Houseman quickly established the tone of the festival with simile transpositions that brought Shakespeare's plays into American settings with high spirits and big stars in the leading roles.

The 1957 season presented Katharine Hepburn in The Merchant of Venice with Morris Carnovsky as Shylock and in a nineteenth-century Texan Much Ado About Nothing co-starring Alfred Drake. The Southwest theme had been suggested by Hepburn and proved a hit with audiences and critics alike. Brooks Atkinson said it was "not only shrewd but fresh and joyous and admirably suited to the personality of our leading lady."(65) Gassner was delighted with the "lively mingling of Spanish grandees, Mexican peons, American cowboys, and Western sheriffs,"(66) and with Virgil Thompson's pop-Hispanic score. "Where but in the United States," he mused, "would a theatrical organization stake out a claim to being our more or less official Shakespearean theatre with a Southwestern Much Ado? . . . [whose purpose was] not to instruct, not to preserve Shakespeare, but,

without a doubt, solely to make 'theatre' with Shakespeare."(67) Gassner qualified his enthusiasm only by pointing out that it had been applied to one of the "lesser" comedies. He was less confident that similar "modern and American coaxing" would work with Shakespeare's tragedies or high comedies. Still, the production, and the prestige it lent to the Festival Theatre, raised serious questions in Gassner's mind about Shakespeare on the American stage.

Are we going to "Americanize" Shakespeare in institutionalizing him? How far can modernization go and still be Shakespeare? . . . There is also a danger in succumbing to the seduction of a conceit or 'production idea' in being strenuous when there is little to be strenuous about, in relying on 'Amerikanski tempo' at the expense of language, and in wanting a bright new look in everything just for the novelty of the impression.(68)

Still, a year later, Gassner succumbed to his own delight:

I'm afraid I must parade myself as a veritable lowbrow in academic circles in praising . . . Messrs. Houseman and Landau for the playfulness with which they stage Shakespeare's non-tragic plays. . . . We are surely not preposterous in maintaining that Americans have a perfect right to try to make Shakespeare their own by staging the plays in their own way--provided they don't butcher the script, something that was perpetrated for centuries, not by irreverent modern Americans, but by those reverent Britons, the Shakespearean actor-managers from Betterton to Irving.(69)

Stratford became the American capital for simile concepts. Its numerous directors, including over the years Jack Landau, Michael Kahn, Gerald Freedman, and others, came up with scores of conceits with which to inject novelty into their Shakespearean fare. The 1958-59 season included A Winter's Tale in a tarot-cart motif and an All's Well that Ends Well dressed up like a "Medieval soap opera"(70).

Hepburn returned in 1960 to do an Edwardian Twelfth Night set on the beach at Brighton. In 1961, Jack Landau directed Carrie Nye in a Civil War Troilus and Cressida with toy cannons and mock battle scenes. By 1965, a Spanish-accented The Taming of the Shrew prompted the once-supportive Gassner to lament that "apparently Shakespearean productions in the United States continue to invite tours de force regardless of rhyme or reason." (71) Michael Kahn, who took over as artistic director in 1969, has at least paid lip service to the limitations of the Festival's standard approach, although his own early productions, including a "hippie" Love's Labors Lost in 1968, a "mod" Henry V in 1969, and Romeo and Juliet set in the Italian Risorgimento (1974), followed the transposition model. Looking back, he draws a critical distinction between "concepts," which "mark close and striking affinities with the realities of the text," and "decor," which is no deeper than a cosmetic makeover. (72) Then, in the eighties, Kahn says he realized that his own "messages and ideas were not more interesting than Shakespeare's," and that he might do better

to stop imposing so much. . . . That desperate need to be different which we had gone through in the sixties was ending. The consumption of ideas had been so rabid that it burnt us out in a way. We didn't want to have to come up with something new again. (73)

Relieved from that pressure, Kahn discovered "that Shakespeare is infinitely more interesting than I am!" (74) Other directors, including Peter Brook, have come to similar conversions at some point in their artistic maturity; having

already proved themselves, they are no longer compelled to assert themselves so blatantly. In Kahn's case, the turnabout involved a simultaneous realization that, while occasionally fruitful, the simile technique is more often a director's defense against boredom, repetition, or the daunting task of confronting a classic head on.

If Robert Edmond Jones and Orson Welles can be considered part of the first wave of conceptual theatre artists in this country, the simile makers of the fifties are the second generation. The third phase, more variegated and so harder to define, had its origins in the early 1960s. Joseph Papp, who founded the New York Shakespeare Festival in the late fifties and has since sponsored scores of controversial rewritings, both fifties-style similes and messier postmodern (for lack of a better umbrella word) efforts, is a bridge between the immediate past and current conceptual eras. Stanley Kauffmann has characterized the objective of Papp's early career as "matchmaking between Shakespeare and the ghettos." (75) Papp seems to have come to the theatre with a clear civic mandate to make mainstream American culture relevant and accessible to those who had traditionally been locked out of it. In 1961, Papp told Theatre Arts Magazine that his free Shakespeare audience consisted mainly of people who watched a lot of movies and TV, and that he molded his theatrical offerings to their contemporary, realistic tastes. (76) Another time, he stated that "whenever you do a classic, you recreate life in the

terms that now exist, both politically and socially. . . .  
 You have to draw from what exists."(77)

Papp hired many of the same directors who worked at the American Festival Theatre, but encouraged a broader, more urban sweep of styles and production concepts. In 1960 Gerald Freedman directed a Shrew in the farce idiom of silent movies, borrowing schtick from the Marx Brothers and the Keystone Kops. Robert Brustein especially enjoyed "the splendid lazzi, including pratfalls, beatings, tumblings, and brawls."(78) Papp, Brustein declared, "has created a uniquely American Shakespeare style which is both fresh and faithful to the text. . . . volatile, ripsnorting, rough and ready."(79) Michael Kahn's 1966 Measure for Measure, set in contemporary Vienna, was marred, in Stanley Kauffmann's estimation, by "Peter Brooklets" the director had appropriated, but its racially mixed cast and serious exploration of the play's "moral-metaphysical dilemmas"(80) brought the text and its updating setting into satisfying register. In 1972, A.J. Antoon set Much Ado About Nothing in Teddy Roosevelt's America complete with brass band and straw hats. Since then, the Shakespeare Festival has presented more interesting metaphorical treatments of Shakespeare and a few Greek plays, as well as a number of musical adaptations, including the 1972 Two Gentlemen of Verona, but it continues to welcome straight simile transpositions as well.

In the summer of 1990, Papp rehired Antoon to direct The

Taming of the Shrew for the Festival's thirty-six-play marathon. The director transplanted the play to the American West, put a holster on Kate (played by TV comedienne Tracey Ullman, who is white) and a horse under Petruchio (the black film star Morgan Freeman). The director defended his arbitrary transposition to the New York Times by explaining that "in the Old West women were a prize because there weren't that many of them on the frontier." He also said his primary directorial motive was "to allow an American audience to find it more accessible. I want the children, the teenagers, to totally understand it." (81) Antoon's simplistic production scheme turned out a slick but shallow performance constricted by the one-time joke of drawling accents and a Kate in blue jeans and spurs. Fortunately, the Festival has also sponsored directors with more pressing conceptual ideas. Other marathon entries have included Joanne Akalaitis's post-modernist, pseudo-Victorian Cymbeline, Steven Berkoff's monochromatic, ahistorical, and unsympathetic Coriolanus, and A Midsummer Night's Dream mysteriously transplanted to the Brazilian jungle.

In the years between Papp's first free Shakespeare in Riverside Park and the hip, kaleidoscopic Hamlet with which in 1967 he set off a new era in American Shakespeare (see Chapter 4), a series of movements in the American avant-garde changed the course of conceptual classical production. Action painting, Beat poetry, Happenings, rock music, and new kinds of dance contributed to the development of an

aesthetic that valued spontaneity and juxtaposition over method and unity. Many of these experiments were hybrids that blurred the lines between previously distinct forms, precursors of performance art and strong influences on the impending theatrical revolution of the 1960s. In the broader American culture, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, women's liberation, youth culture, drugs, and the sexual revolution burst the seams of tradition and propriety in the arts. America's staunch realism gave way to abstraction and overt presentation as former taboos in both form and content were systematically broken down.

In theatrical circles, the rise and uprisings of the Living Theatre led an emerging counterculture and began a performance style that came to be called the New Theatre. The Becks' work on such modern classics as Brecht's Antigone and Pirandello's Tonight We Improvise, which the Living played as a rehearsal by some arty little Village theatre group, incorporated such hallmarks of the Living Theatre's revolutionary aesthetic as performing in real time, hyperrealism, audience participation, life as art, amateurism, and theatre as protest.

The experimental boom that filled shabby Greenwich Village storefronts with performance spaces like Caffé Cino and La Mama Experimental Theatre Club focused most of its energy on new plays and new styles of performing, but its innovations were soon applied to classic scripts, too. Joseph Chaikin's Open Theatre, specializing in

improvisational acting and collaborative creation, adapted the Book of Genesis into The Serpent and later tackled Beckett's Endgame. At the Performing Garage on Wooster Street, Richard Schechner's young group transformed Euripides's The Bacchae into Dionysus in '69, a participatory, environmental rewriting that invited spectators to have sex with the actors. Mabou Mines, Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysterical Theatre, and The Wooster Group were part of a second wave of experimental theatres with scaled-down political ambitions and a greater interest in the uses of various electronic media. Most of Mabou Mines's work was based on original scripts or scenarios, or texts by Samuel Beckett, and Foreman wrote most of his own plays, but the performance styles and techniques that evolved from those productions found their way onto the classical stage when these directors, or others reared on their work, later turned their attention to classic plays.

While the experimental scene in New York had slight ripple effect across the country, mostly in the university theatres springing up then, another, separate theatrical revolution was taking place in cities like Dallas, Minneapolis, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco. The proliferation of regional theatres after 1959, when the Ford Foundation handed out its first major round of grants for new theatres, increased exponentially the opportunities to produce classic plays in this country. Financially

lackluster, the classics had less and less appeal to Broadway producers and their musical-happy customers. Regional theatres, with more serious repertory intentions, subscription audiences, lower overhead expenses, and less income to pay for big-name royalties, could include at least one classic play in every season. By the 1980s, practically every major city in America had at least one professional theatre and enough support to withstand the risks of hiring daring directors with strong personal visions of the theatre. In the early years, visionary artistic directors included Zelda Fichandler at the Arena Stage, Tyrone Guthrie in Minneapolis, William Ball at the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, and Robert Brustein at the Yale Repertory Theater. In the 1980s, heads of major regional theatres included Liviu Ciulei and later Garland Wright at the Guthrie, Brustein at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Mark Lamos at the Hartford Stage Company, Adrian Hall at Trinity Rep and the Dallas Theatre Center, and Anne Bogart who led Trinity's 1989-90 season. As artistic directors, they directed their own rewritings of classics and, equally important, invited such freelance directors as Andrei Serban, Peter Sellars, Lucian Pintilié, Joanne Akalaitis, and Lee Breuer to invent their own versions of classic plays as well. Productions directed by this most recent wave of innovators will be the focus of the next four chapters.

### Chapter Three

#### GREEK AND ROMAN PLAYS

Conceptual directors burrow into Greek and Roman plays as tunnels to primal emotion in the theatre. They mine the seminal Western dramas for intensity, community, and catharsis, attributes diluted on subsequent stages and in the cooler dramatic media of film and television. To restimulate dormant theatrical powers, some revised productions of classical tragedies have traded stony masks and formal recitation for scaled-down speech and gestures and have emphasized non-verbal means of expression. Contemplation gives way to visceral response as directors try to reincarnate the piercing, sensuous theatrical experience Artaud had in mind when he reminded us that "it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds."(1)

A paradox awaits conceptual directors who undertake new productions of classical plays. Grandeur, symmetry, rhetoric, poetry, narrow focus, and tight construction are among the outstanding features of Greek and Roman drama. Their rigors seem at odds with the search for a spiritually liberating theatrical experience. But the persistent appeal of these plays lies in the tension between their formal structure and heightened emotional content. Savage passions

seem barely contained within the text. A sense of imminent danger, of the protective barrier bursting, is part of their lure. Conceptual productions necessarily stray from traditional tragic formality, but they can succeed only when an equivalent structural core is established in its place. Just as an ingenious architect must master sound principles of physics and engineering to keep his soaring, asymmetrical towers from crashing to rubble, so the conceptual director must craft a rigorous and disciplined performance format to withstand the forces these plays exert on the stage, both as monumental works of art and as cultural monuments.

Despite Artaud's injunction against "masterpieces" and the stultifying effects of bowing in awe to established texts, the history of conceptual approaches to Greek and Roman drama suggests that a mixture of respect and irreverence is essential. Rewriting a classic is always a delicate balance, but the risks are especially high in the case of the ancients. Successful concepts can originate far from traditional styles, settings, or interpretations, but the new production aesthetic and its execution must meet the standards of clarity and coherence set by the scripts. Stagings that do not recognize the structural integrity and elegant simplicity of these texts and the powerful myths they depict run the risk of seeming sloppy, trivial, and ultimately unworthy of the plays on which they are based. Directors undermine their own intentions when they try to unleash primal passions by stewing the contents of

Pandora's box willy-nilly over the stage. Free-for-all improvisations may be useful in rehearsal (although here, too, clear structure and intention are always more theatrically rewarding), but they are not an effective means to communicate with an audience. The directorial essay on a classical text needs its own tough, inner logic and coherent stage aesthetic. It is the director's job to select, scrutinize, and refine particular elements into a comprehensive intellectual and theatrical response to the text. Intermittent retorts are inadequate when facing the challenge of a distilled and intricately crafted Greek or Roman play. The text will prevail every time.

Historical examples that demonstrate this principle can be traced to the striking modernism that Granville-Barker brought to Gilbert Murray's translations of Euripides, or the mass environmental spectacle Max Reinhardt orchestrated for Oedipus Rex at the Circus Schumann. Brecht, of course, took a more pointed political stance when he adapted Antigone in Switzerland in 1948. As usual, his interpretation was based in contemporary politics and Marxist theory. Brecht's Kreon was a Hitler, an ambitious tyrant murdering his way to power. Antigone's defiance showed how the individual could resist totalitarianism. The stage, designed by Caspar Neher, was almost bare. The actors, wearing plain black robes, entered at the opening and remained on stage, seated on benches in a semi-circle at the back of the stage. Four tall poles topped with horses'

skulls defined the square playing area. A rack of masks, used to represent the Theban Elders, stood at one side. A huge gong hung opposite.(2) The production, perhaps Brecht's most elegant, created the Verfremdungseffekt through a formal minimalism in which nothing was included that was not essential to the actors' telling of the story. Nothing that was not on stage at the beginning was added later; nothing was removed. The stage was sealed into a self-contained and self-sufficient universe. "The spectator is not supposed to share an experience but to come to grips with it," Brecht wrote.(3) He wanted the theatre to view history and social life with the objectivity of the scientist. Here was Greek simplicity drawn with the clinical precision of an anatomical rendering.

In the 1960s, amidst Happenings, the Vietnam War, and experiments in the New Theatre, Greek and Roman dramas were infused with topical allusions to American politics, especially the war in Vietnam, sexual liberation, and the evolving counterculture. When the Living Theatre revived Brecht's Antigone, in 1967, it became a play about civil disobedience and an indictment of its passive but not assertively pacifist audience. The same cast that stared down the spectators at the beginning of the performance, finally retreated from them in terror after they had watched in silence as Kreon (Julian Beck) tyrannized and tormented the righteous heroine (Judith Malina). Malina, who also translated the text from German, stated her objective

clearly and simply: "How can I make it clear that civil disobedience is an old and very good idea?" But the Living's anti-art aesthetics generated the usual divided critical response. Gordon Rogoff wrote that "The Living Theatre is now the most beautiful acting company in the world. . . . they are beautiful, I suppose, because they do not look like actors."(4) Margaret Croyden, on the other hand, declared the acting insipid and the whole effort garbled into "amateurish mishmash"(5)

The final years of the 1960s proved prolific for the adaptation of Greek plays into the experimental-theatre vernacular. In 1968, Tyrone Guthrie staged The House of Atreus in Minneapolis and brought it to New York. The lavish production relied on such heavy-handed theatre-historical artifacts as masks, robes, formal declamation, and an all-male cast to revive the spirit of the ancient amphitheatre. Richard Schechner, reviewing the production in the Educational Theatre Journal, called its trappings "tinsel" and renounced its effect as "operatic in the worst Wagnerian way."(6) The same year, Jan Kott "confronted" Euripides's Orestes in a New Theatre experiment at the University of California, Berkeley, that transferred references to the Peloponnesian War to the more immediate and volatile situation in Vietnam. Two productions at Yale in the late sixties (when Brustein headed the Drama School) also made significant contributions to rejuvenating the ancients for the modern stage.

In 1967 Jonathan Miller directed Prometheus Bound, adapted by Robert Lowell, in an abstract setting based on the idea of a seventeenth-century chamber used in the Spanish Inquisition. "Classics are simply residues," Miller told his cast, "maps left over from earlier cultures; they invite you to make some sort of imaginative movement." (7) The director saw the seventeenth century as an historical hinge between the ancient and modern worlds because our knowledge of classical antiquity is largely based on the inheritance of Renaissance discoveries. The setting was meant to conjure up images of tyrants from Zeus to Cromwell to Hitler and "perhaps even Lyndon Johnson," wrote an observer. (8) "I wanted to escape from that deadening limbo of metaphysics," Miller told an interviewer, referring to the white robes and chanting choruses of traditional Greek productions. "It has less and less resonance for us. . . . We thought it would be far more exciting if we could set it in some institution that represents tyranny." (9) His production scheme reduced the gods to fallible human form, and the characters, dwarfed by the imposing set, were prisoners who acted out the story to pass the time.

In 1969, Andre Gregory directed a "hippie" version of The Bacchae that bombarded its audiences with sensory stimuli. The set, a skeletal steel scaffold, was meant to represent both the palace and the skull of Pentheus. Electronic music by Richard Peaslee, burning incense, and contrasting scenes in dark and bright light enhanced the

feeling of sharing the hero's stormy internal experience.

The most notorious Greek-play adaptation of the period, however, was Dionysus in '69, conceived and directed by Richard Schechner. A practical demonstration of Schechner's "Six Axioms for Environmental Theatre," the production filled a huge, converted garage on Wooster Street with scaffolding, spectators, and sexual activity. It struck familiar revolutionary chords and attracted a lot of attention for its daring use of nudity and environmental staging, but little of it had much to do with The Bacchae, its classical source. It may be unfair to criticize this work for neglecting Euripides. The production's title suggests that the piece was really about contemporary counterculture.(10) In fact the words "theatre," "actor," and "audience" are conspicuously absent from the whole enterprise and Schechner's writings about it. "The Performance Group" played to "spectators" in "The Performing Garage," in what can only be taken as a rejection of traditional notions and standards of what theatre and art are supposed to be. It does seem fair to ask, then, why use a Greek text at all? The Open Theatre had produced a collective performance essay on biblical mythology a few years before. The Serpent evolved its unique and finely crafted idiom through extensive group improvisations on the Book of Genesis that culminated in the drafting of a performance script by Jean-Claude van Itallie. The transformation to the dramatic mode allowed them to take

liberties with their biblical source, and so they were able to create an original vision of the primary Judeo-Christian mythology. Dionysus in '69 leaned on the text of The Bacchae as an excuse for not coming up with another performance text. Actual sexual intercourse between members of the cast and, on some nights, with members of the audience, substituted for intellectual or emotional intercourse with the text, leading some critics to view the whole enterprise as one of theatrical masturbation. Even some willing participants later felt they had been violated. "What was missing in Schechner's frenetic production was any sense of (Kott's) 'collision' with Euripides's text," according to a later assessment.(11) Schechner's method might more appropriately be called elision.

More thorough analysis of American attempts to resuscitate pity, terror, and ecstasy in Western theatre through innovative productions of Greek and Roman plays will require fuller examination of a few instructive examples. The search for a representative sample brings to mind three very different productions: Andrei Serban's Fragments of a Trilogy (1972-74), Richard Schechner's staging of Seneca's Oedipus (1977), and The Gospel at Colonus, adapted by Lee Breuer with music composed by Bob Telson (1983). Comparison and contrast of this unrelated triplet of directorial essays should reveal some general guidelines for rewrighting classical drama.

Serban's Fragments of a Trilogy is one of the finest

works of conceptual theatre on record. Derived from similar impulses and sources as Dionysus in '69 and the other late-sixties productions, the Fragments achieved a beauty and clarity that far exceeded all earlier--and most subsequent--attempts. In 1970, Ellen Stewart used a Ford Foundation grant to rescue Andrei Serban, then in his late twenties, from the brutal censors in his native Romania. Serban's mentor, Liviu Ciulei had managed to get out a few years earlier.(12) Serban's first project at LaMama, in 1972, was the first part of the trilogy. Medea immediately established his western reputation as a major emerging talent. The other two Fragments evolved over the next two years, during which Serban traveled to Bali and Japan and returned, like Meyerhold, Brecht, and Artaud before him, intrigued by the highly distilled and ritualized forms of Oriental theatre. By 1974 the full cycle was in place, including the throbbing, environmental Trojan Women and an Electra infused with the still, studied intensity of Japanese Noh. Although it continued to evolve over a long international tour and subsequent revivals, the contours had been sharply enough defined in the earliest versions to have renewed the Greeks for the second half of the century as Granville-Barker's had for the first.

So much has been written about this definitive rewrighting that a cursory description should suffice here. These productions established a rigorous theatrical aesthetic that was at once alien to and in harmony with

impulses in the text. With LaMama as midwife and Artaud, Grotowski and Brook as their guardian angels, Serban and the Great Jones Repertory Company underwent a long, painstaking period of gestation as they tried to "scrape down to the psychic-tribal essences that made these legends material for tragedy in the first place." (13) From Artaud's total theatre and Schechner's environmentalism, they adopted the use of speech as pure sound and the animation of the entire performance hall to create a "language in space." (14) The final texts combined passages in ancient Greek and Latin, and interpolated verses in African tribal languages. No one in the audience and few of the performers understood exactly what they were saying, but literal meaning was beside the point. The goal was to retrieve and release the phonetic force of those ancient tongues. Serban believed the Greek dramatists chose specific words for their impact as vibrations in the huge Athenian amphitheatre. "The sounds of ancient Greek contain the potential for a special energy to be rediscovered after two thousand years, to be unlocked and acted out," said the director. (15) He wanted his actors and audiences to "see images in the sounds," and feel their "untranslatable" meanings. (16) The cast projected raw emotions through shrieks, moans, growls, wails, and vibrato incantation.

By abandoning comprehensible words, the performance was relieved of its duty to deliver a logical narrative and offered instead carefully modulated visual, aural, and

emotional waves. The style seemed to harken back, past the fifth-century, to a more primitive, pre-Athenian civilization. The actors, clad in simple robes of rough cloth, became Artaud's "affective athletes" revealing "elemental" emotions through sound, gesture, movement, and facial expression. The acting recalls Grotowski's Poor Theatre aesthetic, in which the holy actor's voice and body are the primary raw materials of theatrical production. Serban had spent 1971 with Peter Brook, whom he credits with having reinforced for him Grotowski's insistence on stripping the performance down to essentials, the one indispensable component being the actor. Brook taught Serban that all the powers of the performance must be in the actor's control. As Serban synthesized the teachings of Artaud, Grotowski, and Brook, the company created a technique so secure that the actor, in "a completely disciplined state of rebellion," could submit to the moment as he would to falling in love or succumbing to a voodoo spell.(17)

Acting purged of extraneous movement, business, or narrative value carved indelible, emblematic images of human emotion into the space. Moments in The Trojan Women exuded feelings as pure as the ping of lead crystal: Cassandra (Valois Mickens) writhing in agitated anguish as she literally spit out her horrified visions; the Trojan women hissing and clucking with lashing tongues as they torment a cowering Helen; Andromache (Priscilla Smith) trilling a

high-pitched, vibrato plaint as she anointed Astyanax before surrendering him to slaughter. The intensity Smith brought to the simple gesture of cupping water in her hands and letting it trickle onto the child's skin, and the bittersweet tinkle of the drops in the otherwise silent hall, cut a deep, raw wound of maternal anguish. The scene took on the aura of the Pietá and similar archetypical icons of suffering mothers. The drowning of Cassandra was another astonishing feat of a simple, controlled gesture transformed into something profound. The guards dropped her onto a wooden ramp down which she slowly slid, head first, hair fanning out toward the floor. Her body gave in to gravity in such tiny increments that she appeared to float and then sink. It looked like underwater film. At the end of the play, the enslaved women were led up another ramp to a raised platform. There, they knelt on the floor between tall, curved wooden beams held perpendicular to the floor by their captors. As everyone on stage swayed in unison, their "ship" began its rocking voyage away from Troy. Precision, simplicity, and hypnotic concentration joined in a disciplined technique that grounded the performers so securely to physical tasks that they were free to release an almost frightening, primordial emotional energy.

The production's carefully selected and tightly knit elements were further augmented by music. Elizabeth Swados's score, inspired in part by Oriental and African tribal music, punctuated and underscored the action,

swelling and supporting the rise, crest, and fall of the emotional line. Pipes, bells, and drums created a haunting aura that alternated between pain, poignancy, and exhilaration. Swados has said that she took most of her cues from the phonetics of the text. She saw her job as helping the actors perform a "ballet for the mouth." (18)

Audience arrangement was altered in each of the three plays to invoke a particular atmosphere and level of spectator involvement. Artaud had written of a total theatrical environment in which all four corners of the room and the audience in between would be enveloped in the playing area. Again drawing inspiration from Artaud and Grotowski, who found the ideal role for the audience in the silent witness, Serban and set designer Jun Maeda carved alleys down the center of the room, with bleacher seating against the side walls for Medea and Electra. Medea and Jason stood on platforms at opposite ends of the long rectangle in the middle of the room, casting their harsh words across the abyss of empty space between them. The audience turned their heads from side to side to watch them, as they would a ping pong tournament. Electra was played in the open area between the bleachers. Each slow, studied step or gesture could be seen in three dimensions, and the audience was aware of its other half sitting across the room. The Trojan Women, subtitled "An Epic Opera," swirled around and through its roving audience as its episodes unfolded in sequence at various stations around the dark

room. Actor-guards bearing wooden poles and flaming torches accomplished a miracle of crowd control that never broke the spell of the action. Their gentle prods directed the focus and formation of the assembled who were thus drawn into the performance as voyeur-citizens of the troubled city-state.

Serban did not have a profound intellectual agenda beyond reawakening the contemporary audience's receptivity to purely theatrical stimuli. "We were not searching for Euripides's ideas about the society of his time, but for an energy which produced those ideas," he said.(19) The Trilogy was about theatrical energy. An experience shared among the performers and the audience was both the means and the end. "Serban doesn't play around with new literary interpretations," a reporter later observed. "He simply presents the material in highly unexpected, unconventional ways. His genius seems to be in . . . bringing to life the spirit, magic, and theatrical essence of a work."(20) While that assessment may not hold true for all of Serban's directing since, it captures his interests and intentions for the Fragments.

The understanding of directorial risks and responsibilities that Serban brought to rewrighting Greek tragedy in the wake of Artaud is evident in his criticism of other directors' attempts. The point, he said, is "to do violence to oneself only in the sense of trying to challenge oneself. All the other stuff--actors on stage performing acts of sado-masochism and homosexual delights in the name

of investigating Artaud--all that is rubbish."(21) The 1960s New Theatres and their gurus craved intense, participatory rituals in the theatre to replace those that had become defunct with the presumption that "God is dead". But true rituals are evolved from the lives of communities, not manufactured by well-meaning artists on the fringe. In 1980 Jan Kott wisely denounced "all attempts at the rebirth of the 'ritual'" as flops.(22) The Living Theatre and The Performance Group left gaps in their productions for audience members to jump into the fray, but the ultimate participatory effect had been a sham. The audience's role was as play-acted as the rest of the performance and rarely as interesting.

Aware that "ritual" and "ceremonial" are dangerous terms to bandy about the rehearsal hall, Serban built the Fragments from the most tangible elements of theatre, hoping that thoughtfully honed and selected bits would coalesce into something bigger, richer, and more resonant.

Theater is a medium which opens through the breathing of the actors, the movement of one arm and the sound that accompanies it, the way an audience in a room listens, receives and transmits. Somehow a circle is formed with the audience; and when this circle starts functioning, a new quality comes into being.(23)

It was not necessary for audience members to carry spears or to voice reactions. Here Serban followed Grotowski's example and was able to evoke a sense of ritual, or religious service, by assigning the spectator the active role of passive witness. Like guests at Faustus's dinner

table, or the living dead in the Auschwitz cemetery, members of the roving, gaping Trojan mob assumed a part in the performance that paralleled their status as members of the audience. This metaphorical approach to audience participation provides a heightened sense of involvement for the spectator while maintaining the integrity of the performance.

The "equivalent structural core" identified earlier as the critical factor in appraising a conceptual production of a classical tragedy manifested itself in the Fragments through the completeness of Serban's vision and the minute detail of its realization. From the time the audience was led down a narrow, candle-lit corridor to the finale of Electra, in which the cast trotted around the central playing space gently clanging hand-forged bells, the production hit no sour notes. Everything fit. Serban met the Greeks on the plane of raw human passion. Tenderness, frailty, rage, vengeance, pride, fear, and sexuality were conjured with a bodily hieroglyphics that Artaud and Meyerhold would have admired and a palette of elemental means--water, fire, mud, smoke, and human flesh--that Serban's mentor Brook has never surpassed. The strong guiding hand of a rigorous and genuinely theatrical intelligence could be felt from moment to moment. Without the story to hold the audience's attention, Serban built a plot whose suspense depended on varying the mood, pace, duration, and location of sequential elements. A plaintive

scene was followed by one of rage, as calls answered calls or drums beckoned across the darkened room. Guards led Helen by rope through the crowd as torches suddenly flared up behind or to one side. The audience automatically reconfigured to adjust its focus. Perhaps the highest achievement of the production was that the adjustments were so finely tuned as to seem natural and inevitable within the production framework, never forced, intrusive, or foreign. The aesthetic Serban imposed on the original texts became intrinsic to the production as an independent work of art.

So solid was the conceptual foundation that the company was able to take some big risks. The Trojan women clucked and spat as they smeared Helen's naked body with mud. She was then locked in a cage and raped by a bear. Clytemnestra entered Electra with a snake wound around her neck. Such moments can easily teeter into gimmickry or cliché. Here, they blended seamlessly into the overall imaginative texture of the plays. As Stanley Kauffmann noted in a rave review, "Serban's [work] would be arty if it were not art." (24)

Schechner's 1977 staging of Seneca's Oedipus shared some of the Trilogy's holy-theatre trappings. It, too, dealt in tangibles--earth, flesh, and water--and aimed to conjure mythic images through simple human gestures. But Seneca's gory play did not offer the rueful poignancy or hopeful resolutions of the Greek plays. The Performance Group's challenge was to pierce the thick skin of an audience benumbed by carnage on the news and graphic violence in

movies to make them feel the stings and arrows of the graphic text. They chose to do so by acting out interpersonal violence in close proximity to the spectators, in an environmental set designed to enclose actors and audience in a claustrophobic circle.

Peter Brook staged the first production of Ted Hughes's poetic translation/adaptation in London in 1968. Martin Esslin noted then that the Latin original is clumsy, coarse, sadistic, and bloody, and that is "precisely . . . why, in the age of pop art, the Happening, the so-called Theatre of Cruelty, Seneca should have come to seem more immediately relevant." (25) Brook's starkly horrifying production starred John Gielgud and Irene Worth and proved that this "unstageable" play was no such thing. In characteristic style, Brook dealt symbolically with the graphic violence and hideous imagery in Hughes's script, and adaptation based on the translation by David Anthony Turner. Brook's own set design consisted of a blackened stage with a huge, gold cube, tilted and revolving on one corner. All the actors wore brown slacks or skirts and black turtlenecks. What little movement there was occurred before and after speeches; the style was more like a concert recital or staged reading. Yet it managed to shock its audience. According to a cast member, the St. John's Ambulance Brigade stood outside the National Theatre and was required almost nightly to revive swooning audience members. (26)

In rehearsal, Brook led his cast through ten weeks of

exercises derived from martial arts, yoga, non-verbal storytelling, and extensive exploration of the intersections between the horrors in the text and the actors' own, personal "horrific experiences." (27) Their technique, heavily influenced by Asian theatre disciplines, involved breathing exercises, chanting, and symbolic gestures. The acting style reflected the influences of Brecht and the Japanese theatre that he admired. It was cool, measured, and deliberate, and all the more gut-wrenching for its pristine dispassion. Oedipus blinded himself with a twist of the wrist, then put black patches over his eyes. Jocasta, in perhaps the most famous scene of the production, committed suicide by lowering herself onto a sword, impaling the tainted womb that bore her husband/son and his sibling/offspring. Chorus members were dispersed through the auditorium, aurally enveloping the spectators in a communal circle whose purpose was to explore the ugly, violent side of human nature. Martin Esslin noted a "perfect fusion" of Brecht's distance and Artaud's phantasmagoria. (28) The controversial evening closed with a raucous bacchanal satirizing the whole event. The chorus, toting a giant phallus as a Maypole, danced up and down the aisles, satirizing gory scenes from the play and singing "Yes We Have No Bananas."

Schechner's "down and dirty" production scheme seems almost a revolt against Brook's rarefied approach. As with Dionysus in '69, Schechner brought an environmental concept

and a naive acting technique to The Performance Group's work on Ted Hughes's text. They followed the script to a far greater extent than they had for Dionysus, and Oedipus thereby achieved a greater coherence. Jay Clayburgh designed a seven-tiered circular pit and filled the center with twenty-seven tons of dirt. The audience sat on benches built into the seven levels. The stunning environment suggested various sporting and theatrical arenas, including the bloody Roman Colosseum and brutal Elizabethan cockpits, as well as Elizabethan playhouses, contemporary theatres-in-the round, surgical theatres, and the dirt circle used for a ceremonial performance Schechner attended in India in 1976. Seated on one of the the higher levels, a critic was reminded of the vantage point he was provided while peering down over the railing from the gallery around Grotowski's Constant Prince.(29) In the effort to create a sense of communality, Brook had surrounded the audience with performers. Schechner and Clayburgh surrounded the performers with a small but close-range audience of one-hundred-fifty. Actors' entrances into and exits from this closed space were mediated by muscle-bound, bare-chested guards at the various vomitoria. Everything was set at slightly off angles, inducing a sense of "vertigo" in one sensitive observer.(30) Palpable earth, a tribal circle, and a poetically-rendered tale of primal human taboos could have resulted in a truly gritty encounter.

Unfortunately, both play and concept were undermined by

a lack of directorial editing and deeply penetrating performances. Imprecise speech and movement and an excess of highly theatrical displays that did little to illuminate the play left the set, in effect, to become the production. "Mr. Schechner is indeed an ingenious fellow," wrote Edith Oliver in the New Yorker, "though not quite ingenious enough to conceal his own directorial hand." (31) One potentially fertile image, for example, was repeated so often that it lost any metaphorical punch. Every time a line mentioned "digging into the past" or "burrowing in that darkness" the characters literally dug holes in the dirt floor.

Schechner, whose writing reveals a far more penetrating theatrical intelligence than his productions, was seduced by his own clever ideas. Again, as in Dionysus in '69, he avoided a meaningful collision with the source text that might have generated an equivalent structural core for the production.

Some wonderfully theatrical ideas were, in fact, tossed into the dirt-filled ring along the way. At the opening, two female chorus members filled stone masks with dirt dug up with bare hands, then pressed the masks into the perimeter of the floor and then lifted them away, leaving a ring of bas-relief, dirt faces. Art, like man and his civilization, they seemed to suggest, is created from the clay of the earth. Lofty ideas are rooted in the plain, physical facts of our mortal condition. Later, Oedipus blinded himself by tossing handfuls of dirt into the air and

letting it fall into his eyes. When Joan MacIntosh's pregnant Jocasta impaled her womb through the abdomen, a river of amniotic fluid soaked the dirt floor into bloody mud.

Such moments require delicate handling if they are to add up to more than a series of clever flashes. Except for Joan MacIntosh who received appreciative notices, The Performance Group's untutored actors proved technically and emotionally underprepared. Amateur performers have been among the most committed, innovative, and influential in the history of the avant-garde. Antoine, Poel, Stanislavski all worked at times with non-professionals. But they set high standards of craft and labored as painstakingly at technique as at inspired histrionics. Schechner's cast lacked the fundamentals. Their delivery of Hughes's poetry confirmed the doubts of those who believe American actors inept at speaking verse. The critics complained unanimously of slurred, urban articulation by Stephen Borst as Oedipus. Caroline Ducrocq brought an unexplained gender switch and an impenetrable French accent to her portrayal of Tiresias, and a stuttering Ron Guttman as Creon left audiences equally baffled. "If verbal distortion is part of an esthetic strategy, it must never appear arbitrary or insignificant," wrote Gerald Rabkin.(32) The New York Times reviewer said the language suffered in "sound and sense."(33) Having chosen a poetic text, Schechner incongruously directed a production that devalued its virtues. The project seems to

have been inspired less by the theatrical potential of Hughes's adaptation than by cross-Atlantic directorial competition.

The Performance Group's blue-jeans and bare-chests aesthetic was not new. The Living Theatre had established the intensely committed but unpolished performer in the early 1960s. At least the Living Theatre had an overt, if not always clearly articulated, theatrical and political agenda. Schechner responded to the blood and guts in Seneca's Oedipus with vulnerable flesh in a perilously close and messy environment. A valid conceptual production lurks somewhere in that heap of ideas, but, despite the restraint and support of Clayburgh's cockpit environment, the performance was overladen and underdeveloped. "Vigor," observed Clive Barnes, was "better sustained than vision." (34)

Vigor is inseparable from Lee Breuer's vision of The Gospel at Colonus, first produced at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's inaugural Next Wave Festival, in 1983. "It's always been my interest to find a way toward a classic theatre that doesn't imitate a European model," says the director. (35) The American language, the rhythms of life in this country, especially urban life, our immigrant culture, he believes, deserve a crack at the classics on their own terms. In the pounding urgency of the black church Breuer detected the seeds of a contemporary and authentically American equivalent of tragic catharsis. And in Sophocles's Oedipus

at Colonus, he saw an opportunity to reflect the internal exile of American blacks.

I wanted to make a statement that a white man can work not just with a bunch of black intellectuals who have gone to Yale, but with the real performers--that I could respect their art and they could respect mine and that we would not rip each other off, thus disproving the idea that never the twain shall meet. In other words that I could make an integration statement in terms of this country by making it happen on stage.(36)

The director was not overly concerned by discrepancies between the Greek philosophy espoused by Sophocles and the contemporary situation to which he meant to draw references. "I try to mount the work as a political statement," says Breuer, "not that says the political statement." (37) The Gospel revived catharsis in uniquely American terms by weaving Sophocles's Oedipus at Colonus into a parable recounted at an evangelical service.

Breuer's earlier direction of The Tempest and Wedekind's Lulu also grew out of his desire to find uniquely American responses to classic texts.(38) He peopled The Tempest with impersonations of contemporary pop stars and celebrities in whose images he saw the echoes of Shakespeare's characters. Disney tunes, a helicopter instead of a ship in the storm scene, a samba band in the masque scene, and other references to the icons of our mass culture transformed Shakespeare, according to Robert Brustein's gentle review of this 1981 New York Shakespeare Festival flop, into "an idiomatic glossary of our time." (39) Lulu, adapted by Michael Feingold and produced at the American Repertory

Theatre earlier in 1981, transformed Wedekind's Berlin to Hollywood in the 1970s. As in The Tempest, Breuer represented the characters as film stars. Lulu was a punk-rock queen; other characters appeared as Randolph Hearst and Marion Davies, Douglas Fairbanks, Carmen Miranda, and Esther Williams. The music ranged from rock to reggae and samba. The story unfolded in a post-synch studio during a dubbing session for a new film. Filmed scenes from the play, often shot in extreme closeup, were projected upstage while the live actors behaved in sync with or in contrast to the looming background images. "Real people," wrote the production dramaturg, "[became] insignificant compared to their fantasies." (40) Neither Breuer nor the critics were happy with either of these productions. The director's clever ideas never coalesced, but, with the wisdom of hindsight, they can be seen as valuable warmups for The Gospel.

In both previous attempts at classics, in Breuer's continuing experimental work with Mabou Mines, and in The Gospel at Colonus, popular culture and electronic media served as liaisons between difficult or remote plays and contemporary audiences. Tempest actors wore microphones until the final scene, when Raul Julia, as Prospero, removed his, relinquishing the final implement of his magic powers. The use of film in Lulu lent Brechtian distance to the performance. Breuer's Beckett productions relied heavily on electronic devices to dissect, interpret, and concretize

abstract images. When composer Bob Telson invited Breuer to a concert by gospel stars Clarence Fountain and The Five Blind Boys from Alabama, the director recognized a live vein of ecstatic ritual into which he could plug an electronically mediated, aggressively contemporary staging of a classic play. The group's blindness immediately brought Oedipus to mind. Affinities between the passion of Christ and the final days of the doomed Theban king led him to select Sophocles's Oedipus at Colonus as the source text.

"As the experimental theatre world was interested in a kind of conceptual coolness," Breuer says, "I became more interested in cathartic theatre. I really feel that if you go one step further with cathartic theatre you might find pity and terror turning into joy and ecstasy."(41) Artaud, Grotowski, Brook, and Schachner had travelled to the remotest corners of the third world in search of tribal rituals on which to model Western theatrical events. As if taking his cue from Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, Breuer needed to look no further than his own back yard. To find the key to tragic catharsis, he discovered, there was really no place like home. "What we found in Colonus was that we had a wonderful new key to classical narrative--a didactic and oratorical device--by using the preaching rhythm inherent in the Baptist and Pentecostal churches."(42) He was convinced that gospel music and its secular offspring, rhythm-and-blues and rock-and-roll, had the power to excite genuine catharsis in a contemporary American audience, and

that the music could push the tragic tale through pity and terror into joy. With Telson as composer, Breuer transformed Robert Fitzgerald's translation of Oedipus at Colonus into a gospel opera disguised as a star-studded revival meeting. The story of Oedipus's death was narrated and acted-out as a parable told within the service.

Breuer read Sophocles's text, written just before the poet's death at age ninety, as a "sermon on a happy death." (43) In The Gospel the sermon is delivered by a guest preacher, played in the lilting cadences of the black pulpit by Morgan Freeman. The Preacher opened the service with the line, "I take for my text this evening The Book of Oedipus," and referred to page numbers in "your text" as the service progressed. Breuer had just spent ten weeks in Japan when he began work on The Gospel script, and he designed Freeman's role according to the narrative tradition used in Kabuki and Noh. The Preacher recounted most of the story in the third person, functioning in at least four roles: as choregoi, narrator, cleric, and sometimes speaking Oedipus's lines. The other characters, who appeared at key points in the narrative, were sung by soloists backed by four well-established gospel choirs. Oedipus was portrayed mainly by Clarence Fountain and the Five Blind Boys From Alabama. Ismene was sung by Jevette Steele of the J.D. Steele Singers. Members of the Original Soul Stirrers and the forty-member Brooklyn Institutional Radio Choir also came forward to portray characters.

Isabell Monk played Antigone. Self-conscious acting, another influence from Brecht, enabled them to suggest two layers of characterization: like the Preacher, they presented themselves as church functionaries contributing to the worship service by acting out parts in the sermon. Similarly, the audience was assigned the role of congregation, a passive witness function that fits Grotowski's ideal, and goes it one better without the 1960s excess. Breuer remembered having read that "some scholars now feel that the tragedies were close to rock concerts, that there were responses from the audience like choral or choir responses in the church." (44) Audience members responded with "amens" and "hallelujahs," and the final song was a sing-along.

As Brecht and Meyerhold had done in adapting other classical texts, Breuer interpolated passages from other texts to support his revision. Speeches taken from Oedipus Rex and Antigone reinforced loose parallels with such Judeo-Christian themes as the role of fate in human destiny and the need to make peace with self, family, community, and heaven before dying. Telson's gospel melodies, which a reviewer called "one of the best white-man's capturings of the essence of black music since Gershwin's Porgy and Bess," (45) easily bridged the gap between the Greek story and the Christian setting. Chronologically, according to the narrative, Oedipus at Colonus is sandwiched between Oedipus Rex and Antigone. Breuer's script begins by picking

up themes from the end of the first play in the trilogy. "Then may you be blessed, and may heaven be kinder to you than it has been to me!" says the freshly blinded King in Oedipus Rex. "But all I can do now is bid you pray that you may live wherever you are let live, and that your life be happier than your father's."(46) Breuer simplified the phrasing. The Gospel lyrics read: "Live where you can/Be happy as you can/Happier than God has made your father." The chorus speaks the final lines of Oedipus Rex: "Call no man fortunate that is not dead./The dead are free from pain."(47) Antigone's opening lines in The Gospel are "Let no man presume on his fortune until he find life, at his death, without pain."

The second act of The Gospel opens after the intermission with a song taken as is from the first choral ode to Sophocles's Antigone: "Numberless are the world's wonders, but none/More wonderful than man." The passage is about man's omnipotence in the face of all but his own mortality, and it blends nicely into Oedipus's final hours. It ends: "From every wind he has made himself secure/From all but one . . . all but one/In the late wind of death he cannot stand."(48) Inclusion of this passage also helped suggest affinities to Christian teaching. The church urges its faithful to reconcile themselves to the inevitability of death and to resolve earthly conflicts in preparation for entry to heaven. The Gospel shows Oedipus doing much the same thing as he seeks "eternal sleep" in a peaceful

"resting place." The significance of the theme was further underscored by set designer Alison Yerxa's baroque, painted backdrop. The huge mural showed dark figures jumping skyward from a ragged cliff. They aimed up, but an abyss of rough water lay waiting below for those who did not make the grade.

Parallels between Christian theology and Greek mythology were not stressed, however, and those critics who looked for profundity in this aspect of the production were inevitably disappointed. Interestingly, few of those who wrote about the original BAM production fell into that trap. Most of the 1983 Next Wave Festival critics were enthusiastic. Newsweek ran a flattering column called "Oedipus Jones." The title, referring to Carmen Jones, is a reminder that The Gospel has precedents not only in the early 1970s religious rock operas Jesus Christ Superstar, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, and Godspell, but also in Orson Welles's 1936 voodoo Macbeth, Oscar Hammerstein's II's 1943 adaptation of Bizet's Carmen, and other conceptual attempts to explore classics in the context of black American culture.

Michael Feingold, writing for the Voice, said "the validation of Breuer's daring comes from the striking ease with which all the elements of story and performance blend together." Feingold called The Gospel "quite conceivably a turning point for the theatre as a whole." (49) A followup feature in the Voice, by Elinor Fuchs, praised The Gospel at

Colonus for having returned religious ecstasy to the "ironic and analytical" post-modern theatre. Not since Reinhardt's The Miracle, she recalled, had New York audiences been given an opportunity to "embrace the religious mysteries" in the theatre. "An entire branch of theatre is risen again," she exclaimed. (50)

It was not until 1988, when The Gospel had a limited run on Broadway, that more traditional critics were given a chance to fault its ideological weaknesses. "However much of Sophocles can be shoehorned into a church service," Frank Rich complained in the New York Times, "the matching up of Christian theology with Greek mythology remains a marriage of glib intellectual convenience that distorts and dilutes both." (51) The New York Newsday reviewer called The Gospel "philosophical gibberish . . . as irrational as one of those late-night brainstormers that should have been told 'nahhh' in the morning." (52) Because The Gospel, like the best conceptual theatre, rewrites the theatre as well as the particular play, the degree of theological agreement between Sophocles's text and the black evangelical tradition is not crucial here. More important is the way Breuer and Telson revitalized the Greek story and revealed something about contemporary American society at the same time.

Not surprisingly, Gerald Rabkin put Breuer's work on The Gospel in a deconstructionist context with that of other directors "who have destabilized traditional categories of language and meaning by arguing that every literary text is

both equivocal and intertextual, that is, it reveals no obvious or single meaning." In a program essay by Rabkin, Breuer is depicted as the "recuperator" of the text, one who fills in the resonant spaces suggested by the text with theatrical gestures that concretize ambiguous or abstract impulses in the original. The theatrical gestures need not adhere to surface or traditional interpretations of what the play is about. Rabkin quotes Roland Barthes, who approves of "manhandling the text" to arrive at a deliberate "misreading," one that "rejects the false illusion of absolute and unequivocal meaning." (53) In Kott's metaphor, the play changes meaning in conceptual productions according to the times, styles, and ideas with which it is brought into collision. The Gospel bounces the Greek play off the church, and each is enriched by resonances of the other.

In another context, Charles Marowitz has described the complex symbiosis of text and production in much simpler terms that are worth reiterating here. Marowitz detects a reciprocal relationship between classic texts and reconceived productions, a dialogue that reverberates with the clash of past and present. "A connection develops between a contemporary allusion and the material that has given birth to it," he writes, referring to his own "highly subjective, quirky . . . and occasionally perverse" responses to the plays of Shakespeare. (54) But as long as the director's ideas are anchored to impulses in the text, he is confident that script and performance will cast

reflections back and forth, each augmenting and clarifying the other. Holly Hill, reviewing the Brooklyn production of The Gospel at Colonus for the London Observer, said it left her anxious to reread Sophocles and to attend a black church.

In fact, Oedipus's story hit home with unusual poignance and intensity. His outrage at Polyneices, the tenderness between him and Antigone, the pity of the decrepit former patriarch pleading with strangers for simple shelter, the daughters' heartbreak at their father's passing rang true in images that were at once familiar and timeless. The confluence of the 1960s civil rights movement and the increasing omnipresence of television in American homes had brought the cadences of black preaching into our living rooms on the evening news. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speeches popularized and legitimized the idiom for mainstream American audiences. Morgan Freeman's distinct but underplayed depiction of the preacher capitalized on that foundation and underscored the poetry in the Fitzgerald translation.

The genius of Breuer's transformation was to be found in how the production reflected life in black America. Richard Corliss, writing for Time magazine, struck the key to The Gospel when he compared Sophocles's theme, "man's acceptance of inevitable death," to Breuer's theme, blacks' acceptance of a "hard life in these United States."<sup>(55)</sup> Alienated, emasculated, poor, persecuted, and powerless, Clarence

Fountain's Oedipus reiterated the status of blacks in this country from slavery to legal segregation to the urban ghetto. The plaintive, angry, tenacious strains of Telson's score, theatricalized and a step removed from its usual context, bared the roots of gospel music and what it must mean to a people determined to survive in the face of hate, repression, rejection, frustration, and fear. The lyrics to the finale, "Now, let the weeping cease," were taken directly from the final lines of the Fitzgerald text, but they broadcast a strictly American message. When Carolyn Johnson-White's solo rang out from the ranks of the full Brooklyn Institutional Radio Choir, the song swelled to an affirmation of strength, persistence, and faith. At that moment, it was possible to imagine a band of Negro slaves gathering for Sunday prayer and singing out to release their pent-up rage, soothe their battered psyches, and find the spiritual nourishment to get through the week. Oppressed but spiritually irrepressible are those who sang and sing the gospel. Artaud expected the theatre to purge the community of festering impulses. In its search for an uniquely American cathartic release, The Gospel tapped a native, musical steam valve. The performance aroused and relieved its audience as the Oedipus story, the sermon, and the music came to parallel resolutions.

The conceptual aesthetic for rewriting classical tragedy may be borrowed wholesale, as was the black church service for the Gospel, or developed specifically for the

production, as was the unmediated but sharply honed style of the Trilogy. Part of the pleasure of The Gospel was in recognizing familiar conventions. Even if we were not black churchgoers, we enjoyed watching how the director restructured the play according to the protocol of the service. In Fragments of a Trilogy we enjoyed a vision of the world as we might never have imagined it. In both productions, the goal was less to elucidate original themes than to revive the spirit and energy of Greek theatre in images easily accessible to the contemporary audience. What distinguished these two exceptional productions is the extent to which they were able to realize potent, alien stage idioms and still keep in continuous contact with impulses, ideas, and situations in the text. The concepts seemed to have been held to the same standard of clarity and coherence as the scripts. Schechner's productions, on the other hand, never pushed themselves hard or far enough to achieve an equivalent aesthetic. Hodgepodes of Poor Theatre effects and topical allusions, punctuated by flashes of good ideas, ultimately dissipated their own energies.

A few other notable rewritings of classical plays, both in the United States and abroad, demonstrate further the range and effectiveness of various directorial approaches. Serban returned to the Greeks with a production of Agamemnon at Lincoln Center in 1977. His method was similar to that for the Fragments. Rehearsals centered on vocal work with the ancient Greek and modern English text

that Serban had pieced together. Elizabeth Swados again scored the piece with music from Persia, Africa and the Middle East, creating what she called a "sound structure" for the lines.(56) Serban double cast three principal actors in the six main roles and maintained a chorus of twenty six. The chorus dominated the production as it does Aeschylus's text. The director imagined the chorus as a "bridge between us and higher possibilities," and sought in rehearsals to help the performers get past their individual psychological responses to the text to find and release a "shared collective emotion."(57) The ultimate effect was of a "long oratorio."(58) The New York Times critic noted that an arena seating arrangement, accomplished with moveable bleachers that put audience members all around the stage area, created a round orchestra for choral dance that was reminiscent of ancient playing spaces. The production seemed to go the Fragments one step further in recreating not just the mood of ancient tragedy, but the actual theatrical environment as well. The Times critic credited Serban and company with having revived "Greek tragedy as live theatre rather than poetics in a dead language."(59)

In Germany, Peter Stein and the Schaubühne applied their "subjectivist" technique to The Oresteia. Before rehearsals began, the company prepared a four-hundred-page protocol on fifth-century Athens, its theatre, Aeschylus, and an historical survey of critical responses to the text. Thus informed, they proceeded to stage the play in "the German

tradition of playing the classical text not as it is, but as what its adaptors understand it to mean."(60) Like Serban's, the Schaubühne production aimed to connect the world of the ancient play with the immediate context of its current performance. Stein prepared the working text with his dramaturg, Marleen Stoessel. They compiled and used a redaction of five translations and the original Greek. The designer Karl-Ernst Hermann stripped the theatre down to its classical essentials--a semi-circular area of bare floor space for the audience to sit on, a platform stage, and an orchestral circle for choral dance. The arrangement of the space highlighted the connections between the immediate theatrical event and its ancient roots. The presentation of the characters and the text echoed that theme. During certain odes, the chorus sat at tables set with library lamps. Their readings of those passages brought the group's preparatory study for the production into the performance, making palpable to the audience both the subjectivity and historicity of the presentation.

In 1980, British director John Barton culled from ten different Greek plays the full legend of the House of Atreus to create a spare, driving, Brechtian epic which he called The Greeks. The most obvious effect of the compilation of accounts by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides was to convert the telling of the story from the terse, unified format of Aristotelian tragedy to episodic structure. To a contemporary audience less familiar with the whole story,

Barton's account filled in important informational gaps and put each of the episodes into a larger perspective. The entire program took three evenings to perform. Each section, like The Oresteia, had its own title and covered a major phase of the overall thematic development. Part one, "The War," dealt with sin, two, "The Murders," punishment, and the third section, "The Gods," was about redemption. Richard Beacham admired what he called Barton's "middleground" approach to remodeling the ancient works compared the method to a "paraphrase."<sup>(61)</sup> Although he faulted the production's insistence on naturalistic acting, even during passages of heightened rhetoric, and felt that the serial structure blurred details from the source works, the overall impression was of respect and appreciation for the originals on which The Greeks was based.

Auteur director Robert Wilson staged expectedly idiosyncratic adaptations of Medea, in 1981, and Alcestis, in 1986. Although in the context of the current discussion, his rewritings are among the most personal, radical, and distanced from the original plays, these productions marked a shift in Wilson's willingness to create theatre from scripted dramatic texts. The Medea script, adapted with Minos Volonakis, included passages in ancient and modern Greek and in English. In addition to Euripides's plot, which, typically, opens near the climax of Medea's story, Wilson tacked on an extended prologue depicting Medea's bloody exodus from Colchis and her wedding to Jason. In

these preliminary scenes and throughout much of the production, the director used his hallmark slow-motion tempo. Unlike most tempestuous Medeas, Wilson's heroine moved through the events of her extraordinary life with the dignified, almost placid demeanor of one in a trance. Wilson also added a final, silent scene in which Jason watched his house burn down. Visually stunning in its processional style, and adequate in its presentation of Euripides's plot, Wilson's embellished Medea was ultimately more like his other, self-generated spectacles than a revised rendering of Euripides's play.

The history of Wilson's Alcestis, which strayed even farther from its source, suggests that the contract with an ancient playwright is simply untenable to the maverick director. This time, Wilson worked with severely abridged version of the Fitts and Fitzgerald translation of Euripides, prepared by Robert Brustein. When Heiner Müller, whose text for the CIVIL warS in 1985 had marked the beginning of significant collaborative relationship, suggested that Wilson again add a prologue and epilogue to his production, Wilson asked Müller to prepare new texts. The prologue turned out to be "Description of a Painting/ Explosion of a Memory," a single sentence that goes on for nine pages, describing an imaginary, surrealistic landscape. Coincidentally, images from the playlet echoed several of the ones Wilson had begun to establish in the staging of the main play. They included a giant Cycladic statue and a

human mummy who stood on the statue's crossed arms and recited the text "in a pure androgynous voice while other, electronic voices coming from various speakers located throughout the house" repeated sections. For the epilogue, Müller declined to write new material, recommending instead that Wilson stage "The Birdcatcher in Hell," a Kyogen farce very much in the spirit of the ancient Greek satyr plays.

Wilson had been unhappy with Medea and sought in this production to find a more satisfactory relationship to his text. "I didn't like the question-answer situation," he said of that production's adherence to the dialogue. "I felt I had to make it more my own.(62) So, around the text Wilson created a striking, visual landscape crammed with the artifacts of ancient, modern, Eastern and Western cultures. The set, designed by Tom Kamm and inspired by the vistas Wilson had seen during a 1985 visit to Delphi, focused on a mountainside in which were embedded the prow of a Viking ship and three Chinese funerary statues. The other major elements were a sunken river and three cypress trees. The least prominent element of the production was the story of a young wife's willingness to sacrifice her life at her husband's asking. Instead, Wilson created a multicultural, multisensory theatrical environment in which the unfolding of that story took on universal implications, demonstrating the director's contention that myths belong not just to their own culture but "to all people of all times."(63)

Wilson's statement is probably not specific enough to

substantiate the kind of production that truly illuminates an old play for a new stage, but it does cut to the prime motivation for conceptual work on classical drama.

Directors who take on the challenge of redefining these plays are looking to resuscitate the gale force of mythic drama. These several additional examples reiterate the idea that there are many ways to achieve that goal. But, as Richard Beacham has pointed out, the least adroit are those conceptual approaches that treat the classical script as merely a "found object" that gets put in the theatre mill and processed. (64) The most effective formulas for rewriting these formidable plays seem to derive strength from their directors' paradoxical mix of awe and audacity in confronting the archetypical dramas of Western civilization.

Chapter Four

## THE PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE

Decades before Jan Kott declared Shakespeare our contemporary, visionary directors and designers had boldly ushered his plays into the twentieth century. Gordon Craig, Granville-Barker, Robert Edmond Jones, and Orson Welles are a few of the key theatre artists whose Shakespearean productions struck at the nineteenth-century cobwebs that clung to the plays well into the 1900s.(1) Given that "Shakespeare" is nearly synonymous with "classics" in the English-speaking theatre, it is no surprise that at some stage of their careers, American directors of ample ambition are likely to test their mettle against one or more of his plays. Beside the poetic, intellectual, and theatrical merits of any individual work, the Shakespeare plays as a phenomenon are the Mount Everest of western theatre. Producers, directors, designers, and actors want to do them simply because they are there. To conceptual directors, Shakespeare offers complexity, ambiguity, and theatricality enough to fire their imaginations and established traditions against which to rebel.

Twentieth-century American theatre history is chock-a-block with "nontraditional" Shakespeare. Chapter 2 of this study chronicles the early phases: abstract design, modern-

dress, and historical transposition were the main strategies in both "serious" productions and novelty attempts to "jolly up" Shakespeare, as Tyrone Guthrie put it. Many of these productions fall into Brustein's simile category. Up until the late 1960s, neither of the two dominant strains of American Shakespeare production had made much progress toward a cogent native approach. "Straight" versions could be heavy, over-intellectualized costume pieces in which American actors mouthed the verse in pseudo-British accents. "Jolly" romps through the comedies and sleek updates of the tragedies, though popular, were often superficial entertainments, anti-intellectual antidotes to the obligatory Shakespeare considered good for you. Both of these kinds of productions are still seen today, but this chapter will examine some multifocused, eccentric stagings of Shakespeare that exploit the plays' inherent visual and kinetic theatricality rather than their celebrated language.

In the social, political, and artistic turmoil of the 1960s, experimental approaches to Shakespeare took a decidedly countercultural turn. Anger, skepticism, alienation, and absurdity, integral elements of both European post-war drama and the anti-establishment youth culture in America, were either discovered in or inflicted on Shakespeare's plays. For better and worse, Shakespeare fell into the hands of the American avant-garde, and it is there, amid echoes of Artaud, Brecht, Ionesco, Beckett, Grotowski, and blurring distinctions between high and pop

culture, that a new Shakespeare style emerged--aggressive, highly visual, often irreverent, and, despite its obvious debts to European influences, idiosyncratically American.

These productions answered the constant plaint that Americans can't speak verse by supplanting poetry as the primary attribute of Shakespeare's plays with the nonliterary theatrical values that such groups as the Living Theatre were then exploring through Artaud. On university campuses and in the pocket theatres of Greenwich Village, physical action, music, scenic conceptualization, and pop iconography were marshalled to the service of classically inspired Happenings. Texts were dismantled and reassembled as collages and otherwise reworked. Their adaptors borrowed the fast-paced, rhythmic, and visual sensibilities of film, television, and rock-and-roll. The results, often mixed, succeeded in establishing an alternative to both highbrow snob Shakespeare and the pandering anti-intellectual approach. This new, anti-literary American Shakespeare style received its first widespread public hearing in Joseph Papp's 1967-68 Hamlet, a "happening" production that aroused anger, scorn, and admiration and begot a motley breed of dazzling and disappointing Shakespearean rewritings.

Ironically, new voices in literary and drama criticism provided support for the anti-literary Shakespeare movement. Jan Kott published his collection of Shakespeare essays in 1964. His absurdist readings of the plays and recurrent insistence that contemporary Shakespeare productions reflect

the issues, outlook, and theatrical practices of the modern world unleashed a new era of Shakespeare production. Peter Brook's 1962 King Lear, tragicomic and absurdist, openly acknowledged Kott's "Lear and Endgame" as its inspiration. Brook's white-box, circus-motif Midsummer Night's Dream in 1970 was also prompted by Kott's interpretation. That Kott's astonishing rereadings were so well supported by the texts lent further credence to the directorial license he advocated. The 1960s, Kott wrote, provided fertile ground for a revolution in Shakespeare production because they forced the plays into collision with "mass extermination, terror, and civil wars, and at the same time, with . . . Brecht's theatre and the Theatre of the Absurd." (2) Kott's essay "Hamlet of the Mid-century" was one of the sources (some might say excuses) for Papp's "naked" Hamlet.

Another, less direct source of justification for the development of an anti-literary American Shakespeare movement in the mid-1960s was the early postmodern literary theory that anticipated deconstructionism. It is harder to draw connecting lines between the general critical climate and specific theatrical productions than it is between Kott's essays and those directors who boasted his imprimatur, but in all periods of theatrical innovation, directors pick up currents in the cultural breeze. One example is the indirect influence of Susan Sontag who, in 1965 declared herself "against interpretation." "Interpretation," she wrote "is the revenge of the intellect

upon art. Even more. It is the revenge of intellect upon the world."(3) Sontag accused legions of "leech"-like interpreters of wedging themselves intrusively between works of art and those who wished to experience them.

Interpreters who destructively "excavate" art for "meaning" work under the false assumption that there is a distinction between form and content and that the true value of the work lies in decoding some hidden "subtextual" message. The misguided search for pure content, Sontag argued, effectively dilutes the impact of art by reducing its sensory and emotional powers to intellectual ideas. At the same time that Jerzy Grotowski and his international disciples were seeking the live theatre's *raison d'être* amid a numbing electronically mediated environment, Sontag complained that "interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there. This cannot be taken for granted, now."(4)

But what are the implications of Sontag's anti-interpretative stance for the theatre, where the text can never stand alone? She does not address the inevitable interpretative role of directors in staging drama. If every directorial choice implies something about how the director understands, or wants the audience to understand the play, can directors avoid interpretation? At first glance, Sontag seems to denounce any but the most reverential approaches to text. The forecast gets worse for directors of classics, and worse yet for those of the conceptual school:

Interpretation is a radical strategy for conserving an old text, which is thought too precious to repudiate, by revamping it. The interpreter, without actually erasing or rewriting the text, is altering it. But he can't admit to doing this. He claims to be only making it intelligible, by disclosing its true meaning. However far the interpreters alter the text . . . , they must claim to be reading off a sense that is already there.(5)

The point is well taken if Sontag's remarks are understood to disparage critics or directors who make rigid decisions about the meaning of texts and then mangle the works till they conform (or refuse to conform) to their readings or production schemes. But there is a less obvious, more encouraging implication for classic-play directors in her anti-interpretative position. Her laissez-faire attitude toward texts liberates directors from having to delineate productions according to the contours of fixed interpretations. Because directors cannot present pure text on stage, she implies, the next-best anti-interpretative strategy is to use old theatrical texts as springboards for completely new theatrical events with their own organic integrity. Various performance experiments in the 1960s-- happenings, collective creations, collages--had already begun to explore a renewed artistic viability for nonliterary theatrical spectacle. Sontag extended literary credentials to directors to leave interpretation of dramatic texts to the enemies of art and to create instead complex, even chaotic sensory spectacles that explored those texts in uniquely theatrical ways.

Not surprisingly, these productions stick in the craw of

a Shakespeare purist. Those who rate performances of Shakespeare's plays by the relative beauty of the spoken verse probably don't like much American Shakespeare, anyway. Anti-literary rewrightings have dealt with the language in different ways, some radical, others awkwardly traditional, but few would stand on the virtues of their oral interpretation. The subordination of language to other, equally "Shakespearean" achievements is simply a given in these productions. Further discussion must take account of how language was handled or mishandled in these productions, but comparing them to a traditional poetic standard is pointless. Valid critiques of these productions must accept the re-ranking of Shakespearean elements (action, plot, character, stage pictures) and, to borrow Sontag's phrase, "proceed from there."

Joseph Papp had been in the Shakespeare business for more than two decades by the winter of 1967-68. The rise of his nobly intended New York Shakespeare Festival empire is well known. Papp was driven by the desire to bring the theatre to underprivileged and culturally excluded segments of the city's changing population and to reflect those subcultures from his stages. Toward those ends, he had produced plays by new playwrights and both straight and simile stagings of Shakespeare, some of which he directed himself. Other notable Festival Shakespeares included Gerald Freedman's 1960 Taming of the Shrew as a Marx Brothers farce and Michael Kahn's 1966 Viennese Measure for

Measure. Papp had also presented dozens of new plays by emerging American and European playwrights. The record of productions at the Delacorte Theatre in Central Park and at various other mobile and temporary venues around the city was prodigious but uneven. Papp's own work as a director was considered only mediocre. The Hamlet he directed in the park in 1964 was beset by casting troubles that overshadowed the director's handiwork in the press notices. Alfred Ryder's voice gave out after the first performance, but Julie Harris won raves for her portrayal of Ophelia. His real talents lie in stimulating and supporting others, as many and as frequently as his energy, connections, and ego could generate underwriters.

Papp's big accomplishments in the 1967-68 season began with the opening of the Public Theatre complex in the converted Astor Library on Lafayette Street, in the eastern half of Greenwich Village. Never timid and with a keen nose for publicity, Papp chose Hair as the inaugural production. The landmark rock-and-roll musical captured the lifestyle of the "hippie" generation with references to hallucinogenic drugs, sexual liberation, racial harmony, and resistance to the Vietnam War. Hair's enormous popularity at the Public and later, on Broadway, indicated that audiences were ready for overt presentations of nudity, obscenity, and other manifestations of radical culture. Papp's next production tested their readiness to accept these developments in a Shakespeare play.

The recent death of Papp's father galvanized the work on Hamlet. The bereaved impresario of the underdog recalls that he

needed to throw myself into something. So, I just started tearing Hamlet apart, threw the pieces into the air, and waited to see where they would land."(6)

Papp's program notes and his introduction to the text he later published as a "handbook" for those who might want to emulate his production, reflect his focus on the notorious Oedipal issues in the play.

Is the death of a father one of the most shattering experiences a son could have? Is the loss of the key make link with the past an irreparable one? Is there fear in the hidden realization that the boy has become the father? Hamlet is 'too much i'the sun' and the son is too much in him. So much so that he wants to remain the son in defiance of the reality that, at the death of his father, the boy becomes the man--and has the man's responsibility to fulfill his purpose in nature: to father his own offspring. But Hamlet chooses to remain the eternal son, to hold back the process of nature and live outside the pale of humankind. He will not be reconciled, and chooses his own death rather than fall in line with the common theme--the death of fathers. He dies a son. . . . This challengeable psychological premise is the rationale upon which we base Hamlet's erratic mode of existence."(7)

Psychoanalyzing an artist's motivations is a precarious business, but it is evident that Papp's inner conflicts influenced his work on the play and that he spent considerable energy thinking about the text even though his final version plays fast and free with cherished scenes and speeches.

The Hamlet pastiche that emerged under these several influences to open on December 27, 1967 roused the New York theatre community to take arms en masse against the sea of

troubles that follows in the wake of directorial prerogative with Shakespeare's treasured texts. Dismissed by the majority of daily critics as another of Papp's follies, the production attracted capacity audiences and vocal scholarly supporters too. Guthrie's 1963 modern-dress version, which opened the Minneapolis theatre that bears the director's name, was not universally applauded, but it had assured America that Hamlet could withstand some updating. In 1964, Broadway lavished praise on Richard Burton as Hamlet in rehearsal clothes, as directed by John Gielgud. But those innocuous datings had not prepared the way for something as radical as Papp's rending of the text.

Charles Marowitz had disassembled Hamlet a few years before, in London, in an experiment that derived from conversations between Marowitz and Peter Brook during their Theatre of Cruelty workshops. The directors wondered whether or not it would be possible to communicate the Hamlet story "without reliance on narrative."<sup>(8)</sup> Could a production "convey the multitude of nuances and insights which are to be found in Hamlet through a kind of cut-up of the work which thoroughly abandoned its progressive story line?"<sup>(9)</sup> Marowitz selected segments of the text and rearranged them into a high-speed eighty-minute collage in which familiar dialogue, characters, and ideas were forced into new light. The director's underlying purpose was to expose serious flaws in the leading character and the implicit values on which Shakespeare based his play.

Contrary to romantic notions of Hamlet as an agonized idealist, Marowitz saw him as "the supreme prototype of the conscience-stricken but paralyzed liberal: one of the most lethal and obnoxious characters in modern times." (10) The play's "misdirected moral concerns, intellectual analysis as action substitute, etc.," Marowitz found antithetical to the contemporary world, and argued that such antiquated values "derived much of their respectability and approval from traditional works such as Shakespeare's Hamlet." (11) By "fragmenting" components of the familiar work and depicting Hamlet as a clown-faced buffoon, he hoped to intercept the automatic reverence that prevents modern audiences from reevaluating the obsolete assumptions on which the work is based. The director would later acknowledge that his audience's ability to perceive his indictment of the text was derailed by the fast pace and novelty theatrics of the performance.

I derive some small consolation from the fact that any artifact which is immediately reducible to its theoretical components must be facile and unworthy, but I am simultaneously chastened by the knowledge that many artists imagine they are communicating clear-cut intentions when, in fact they are conveying something entirely ambiguous. (12)

Years later, in Prospero's Staff, Marowitz denounced Papp's Hamlet for its apparent lack of similar thematic thrust.

Without pretending that Papp and company produced a definitive contemporary Hamlet, a completely original Hamlet, or a Hamlet of piercing insight, it is worth resurrecting his production here as the progenitor of a

loosely-connected line of American Shakespeare productions that emphasize contemporary theatrical imagery and technology over traditional linguistic and thematic content.

Like Marowitz's version, Papp's ninety-minute Hamlet was, in current critical lingo, a deconstruction. Papp took his first cues from Jan Kott's essay:

"Hamlet cannot be performed in its entirety because the performance would last nearly six hours. One has to select, curtail and cut. One can perform only one of several Hamlets potentially existing in this arch-play. It will always be a poorer Hamlet than Shakespeare's Hamlet is; but it may also be a Hamlet enriched by being of our time."(13)

The director cut extensively, rearranged scenes, reassigned lines, interpolated contemporary slang and allusions ("Don't give me any of that Shakespeare crap!" Hamlet answered his elders.), and otherwise manhandled the text with a vigor that might have delighted Meyerhold. The composer of Hair, Galt MacDermott, contributed a blaring rock score. Papp's was "a play of shattered focus--ambiguous, elusive, contradictory, enigmatic, inconsistent and paradoxical," he wrote in his program notes. It took a "view from underneath, through the side, through cracks in the sentences, through great chinks in the wall of tradition."(14) Clearly anxious to demonstrate his own Artaudian intolerance for masterpieces in the shadow of nuclear disaster, Papp reached for new heights of hyperbole. His defense of the production culminated in the following bit of inflated prose: "This production aims radioactive ididium 192 at the nineteenth century Hamlet statue and by

gamma ray shadowgraphing seeks to discover the veins of the living original, buried under accumulated layers of reverential varnish."(15)

Martin Sheen played Hamlet as a cynical, hyperactive, inner-city chameleon. "The one sure way of creating a dead fish Hamlet is to impose upon him a consistent line of behavior," insisted Papp.(16) This Hamlet did not even have a consistent line of identities. In a series of unexplained transformations (a term Papp does not use but had been recently popularized by Joseph Chaikin's Open Theatre), Hamlet appeared at different points in the production as Ramon, the Puerto Rican janitor, as a peanut vendor, tossing bags of nuts to "customers" in the audience, as one of a pair of vaudevillian comics, and as a ventriloquist's dummy. Sheen appeared at the opening of the show, dressed in floral boxer shorts, a loosened neck-tie, and handcuffs, sitting up in a coffin at the foot of Claudius and Gertrude's platform bed. His first action was a tug-of-war for his sleeping stepfather's blanket.

The prison that is Denmark was designed by David Mitchell as a scaffold-like unit set, made entirely of steel bars and consisting of a staircase, second-level playing area, and two downstage ramps inside a black-box stage. A limited number of set pieces were hauled in and out for specific scenes--the first-scene bed, chairs for the court, the garbage can in which Hamlet would later deposit Ophelia's dead body, and a wheelbarrow for her grave. The

prison metaphor was echoed again in the costuming of Horatio who wore prison stripes and, like Hamlet, was handcuffed. Unlike a literal simile transposition of the play which might have set the action inside a real prison with inmates and wardens, there was no attempt to portray characters or events in prison equivalents. The environment was simply one channel through which Hamlet's sense of captivity and submission were suggested.

One of the production's accomplishments can be measured by the extent to which, without resorting to a direct reference, this Hamlet captured the sense of entrapment and absurdity that was being expressed at the time by the nation's youth as they protested their enforced role in Vietnam. The closest allusion came in the substitution of Washington for England as the place where Hamlet is sent when Claudius finds him "mad." "Hamlet is like a sponge," Kott observed, ". . . it immediately absorbs all the problems of our time." (17)

Papp had picked up Kott's idea that the young Dane had no choice but to fulfill the "scenario" of his life. "Hamlet is a drama of imposed situations, and herein lies the key to modern interpretations of the play," wrote Kott. (18) The end, ordained on one level by the text and another by the actions of his parents' generation, fixes Hamlet's fate. He used the line "And how if I say no?" as a vain threat to resist the plot, but he also referred to a copy of the text to keep the action on course. Papp

paraphrased Kott (without citation) in his notes and hinted at a Beckett-like appreciation of Hamlet's predicament. (Many of Papp's written remarks are somewhat diluted reiterations of Kott's ideas.)

The end is always in sight . . . All that was required of the director and the company was to invent engaging and interesting devices to sugarcoat the agony of a man living out his short span of life. . . . And so we devised burlesque skits, song and dance routines, familiar vaudeville . . .(19)

The performance style was purely "presentational and [had] no use for psychology;" the various scenes were "ceremonies, games, entertainments. With the eradication of the 'why,'" reported the director, "the work process was dictated by 'what' and 'how.'"(20)

Kott's "scenario" theory also justified the productions other offbeat characterizations.

This scenario is independent of the characters, it has been devised earlier. It defines the situations, as well as the mutual relations of the characters; it dictates their words and gestures. But it does not say who the characters are. It is something external in relation to them. And that is why the scenario of Hamlet can be played by different sorts of characters.(21)

Ralph Waite's Claudius was portrayed as a Central-American-style dictator, surrounded by armed guards in camouflage fatigues, white helmets, and mirrored, aviator sunglasses. Gertrude (Anita Dangler), a "hennaed floozy"(22) in a low-cut red peignoir, munched a peanut had that lodged in her cleavage when Hamlet pelted her in the closet scene. Ophelia was a teen-age sex kitten in a micro-miniskirt and fish-net stockings who vamped her rock-and-roll soliloquy

into a hand-held microphone. The Ghost, the dead father with whom Papp was so preoccupied, showed up in long, droopy underwear and stayed with Hamlet as his sidekick throughout the show. Father and son played the gravedigger's scene as a comic vaudeville duet, and Hamlet mouthed "How all occasions do inform against me" as a dummy on his ventriloquist-father's knee. As yet another jolt to expectations, Papp renamed Hamlet's buddies "Rossencraft" and "Guilderstone."

Two scenes contained Papp's most interesting innovations. First, no players visited Elsinore in this production. Instead, "The Murder of Gonzago" was acted-out by the members of the royal family during a New Year's Eve celebration. Drunk and surrounded by streamers and confetti, Claudius himself was persuaded by Hamlet to enact the role of the murderer. Horatio's home-movie camera caught the usurper-king in the act.(23) Secondly, Shakespeare's final, cleansing blood bath was given an edge of contemporary tragicomic chaos. Here the characters encountered death via Russian roulette. After loading just five bullets into the six-shot gun and spinning the cartridge, Hamlet shot Laertes. Hit. He then passed the gun to Claudius who killed Gertrude. Hamlet took the weapon back and turned it on Claudius, who refused to fall even after two shots fired. Finally, Hamlet showed him the text of the scene, after which a petulant Ralph Waite lay down on the stage. With no one left to shoot him, Hamlet recruited

a volunteer from the audience. The chosen spectator/marksman (not a plant) always shot a blank. Hamlet then threw down the revolver, turned upstage, leapt in triumph, and tripped over the gun. The one remaining bullet went off, killing him in an freak accident. "The rest is silence" came over the loudspeakers, accompanied by a cacophonous roar. Confetti filled the stage, followed by a blackout. When the lights came up for the final image, a wreath rested against the staircase. "R. I. P. William Shakespeare" read its ribbon.

The most common critical response to this Hamlet was condescension. In reviews carried by mainstream journals, dubious protests of tolerance for a strong directorial hand were often followed by denunciations of this particular attempt. "I am not attacking this Hamlet for tampering with a holy cow," insisted Clive Barnes in a typical comment, "but for its incompetence." (24) The Women's Wear Daily critic said it was "fine" with him that the director took liberties with the play. "Do anything you like. But for God's sake, organize it. There has got to be a point--not even an intellectual point, necessarily, but an ARTISTIC point." He summed up the evening as "a mass of noise, disorganization, and lackluster invention, one foolish inspiration piling on top of another until the entire business collapses in a pile of boredom and stupidity." (25) Audience letters (which Papp included in the book version) were even angrier. One patron called Hamlet a "vulgar,

noisy, pretentious intellectual production." Others characterized it as a "guttersnipe Hamlet;" or "McLuhanism in action,; denigration of the world and sensation for immediacy's sake." One Shakespeare devotee lamented "O judgment that art fled to brutish beasts and Papp has lost his reason." (26)

The production's ragged edges and underdeveloped intellectual premise were acknowledged by its supporters, too, but this group also expressed sincere appreciation for the freshness of Papp's experiment. Letter-writers described the production as "groovy" and "a gas." (27) Richard Schechner replied to the Times' review with a letter that articulated the emerging conceptual argument: "Like Brook's Marat/Sade or the work of Jerzy Grotowski, Mr. Papp's Hamlet points toward emerging and liberating forces within the theater," he began, adding that the production "went beyond interpretation toward confrontation."

The text of Hamlet was treated as material out of which not a new but an obliquely different play was made. The result was a contemporary, ironic, farcical--almost appalling--tone and style that freed Hamlet from reverence. (28)

"Disunity" and "competing and contradictory elements" created an appropriate sense of impending chaos. For all its timeliness, the performance was also consistent with its Elizabethan heritage. Schechner concluded, "in its sense of how to live at a time when things are falling apart." (29)

Months earlier, Robert Brustein had published "No More Masterpieces," his Artaud-based essay in support of

conceptual approaches to the classics. Papp's Hamlet gave him an opportunity to put his theory to critical practice. In a review he called Papp's direction "an anarchic assault" on the play and applauded its attempt

to rescue the play from the seminar room, to withdraw it from history, to obliterate the memory of all those beautifully costumed productions that now stand like a wall between us and an immediate experience of the action. (30)

Brustein traced the performance style to the "Happening" of its subtitle. In Hamlet, as in a Happening, "everything is designed for environmental effect rather than for meaning," he explained. A Happening was "a Dadaist nightmare where language becomes an agency not of communication, but rather of ironic contradiction and comic confusion, and where the spectator becomes one of the most important characters in the play." (31) Papp was interested in the suspect nature of language in the play. "There is nothing more deceptive than language," he wrote, going on to explicate the contemporary implications of a number of crucial lines. "Speak the speech, I pray you . . ." Hamlet instructed his parent-players. "Too many speeches have been, and are being, made trippingly on the tongue" Papp suggested, referring to the federal government's Vietnam doublespeak, "and they are not to be trusted." (32) Likewise,

"what a piece of work is a man"--sprawled in the dirt of Vietnam--on the beaches of Iwo Jima--in the trenches of Verdun--on 125th Street in Harlem--on the streets of Detroit, Newark, Cleveland--in a grave in Alabama that held the remains of Andrew Goodman, civil rights worker--the death of Roosevelt, of Einstein, Marilyn Monroe, and a fourteen-year-old by in the Bedford-

Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn.(33)

As for Hamlet's Happening attempts to involve its audience, Brustein was not alone in his disappointment.

Environmentalist Schechner regretted that Papp "held back in directly involving the audience," rendering those interactions "painfully planted" when they "could have been the means by which the farce terror of this Hamlet was driven into the audience's consciousness."(34) Albert Bermel, writing for the New Leader, extended his sympathy to the actors whose faces, when forced to "mingle with the audience . . . took on a desperate, glassy-eyed expression."(35)

No one considered the production a total triumph. Kott had warned that "there are many subjects in Hamlet. . . . One can select at will. But one must know what one selects, and why."(36) Papp erred by not selecting or carrying through his impulses thoroughly or consistently. His work took more from the spirit than the letter of Kott's rereading, whereas Peter Brook's Kott-inspired productions were more fully imbued with the critic's thought. Schechner admitted that Papp's Hamlet was "sometimes sloppy."(37) Brustein decided it was ultimately "boring" due to overly amateurish acting and an "ultimate lack of coherence" in the directing. "Even absurdity must be organized toward some definable point," Brustein asserted, seeming to validate the complaints of Hamlet's detractors.(38) The critic for the Village Voice approved of it as "a hallucinatory Hamlet with

the clashing styles, jagged emotional tone and image overload of specifically the 1960s," but his enthusiasm was limited to the production's novelty. He found it "as frivolous and inexcusable as painting a mustache on the Mona Lisa but similarly liberating."(39) This comparison works much better if the mustache were to be painted on a reproduction of the painting. Neither Papp's, nor any other production of Hamlet, leaves indelible traces on the original. Bermel came up with a much better metaphor:

Now, if some intrepid museum curator chopped a Rembrandt canvas into small triangles and glued the bits to a sculpture by Reg Butler in order to establish Rembrandt's shattered focus, the damage would be irreparable.

But Hamlet remains available and hospitable in its many editions.(40)

A few months after it opened, Papp's Hamlet was scheduled to tour the city's high schools, as NYSF productions had been doing for several years. When word of Papp's radical rewrighting reached the school board, trouble ensued, transferring the critical debate from the culture pages to the main news section of the New York Times. Schools superintendent Bernard Donovan questioned whether the production was "suitable for the maturity of high school students."(41) At first, Papp defended his work with the firm but polite argument that "since the 'straight' play is ambiguous, there is no conceivable way to produce it on the stage without some special point of view."(42) A special matinee was arranged for school administrators, teachers, and students to determine whether or not the production was

appropriate for high school audiences. Papp took a more aggressive position when he led a discussion following the matinee. While nibbling peanuts left strewn on the stage, he responded to a teacher's challenge with "Don't tell me how to direct, and I won't tell you how to teach." (43) The production played the schools without incident, and another version toured city parks in the summer of 1968.

The parks company was headed by Cleavon Little in the title role, who changed the Puerto Rican overtones to African-American ones. When Polonius asked Hamlet what he was reading, Little replied "Ebony, baby." Claudius cut short the gravedigger with "Don't give me any of that Shakespeare crap." This time the Times sent a bemused Vincent Canby to review. He called Hamlet "an interracial political comedy set in what seems to be Emperor Jones territory." While he did not take umbrage on behalf of the text, he declared the whole affair to have had "as much relation to the original Shakespeare as cole slaw has to cabbage." The interracial elements, he reported, made the audience laugh "nervously, like white onlookers at a Black Panther meeting." (44)

Ultimately, Papp's production has had two lasting effects. The first is that it extended the liberty with Shakespeare's texts already claimed by European directors to American rewrighters. Again, the relative merits of those productions vary considerably from example to example. The following pages will examine a few of those efforts. The

other result is that the production raised, in loud and reverberating tones, the question of whether or not Shakespeare belongs in the hands of the American avant-garde, whose major influences--a curious blend of Artaud, television and other media, and popular culture--tend to value the image over the word. The debate, as we shall soon see, still rages, sometimes at the urging of obstinate traditionalists, sometimes in response to lame-brained or shabbily executed productions. Either way, the mating of our greatest dramas with our most experimental theatre artists is not universally accepted. The alternative is to let conservative factions in the theatre chaperone the Bard to every rendezvous with the stage. Like chastity, that option is safe, but its final result could be sterility, barrenness, and oblivion.

The bastard progeny of Papp's Hamlet can be traced down to the 1990s. Three conceptual productions that developed in the 1980s, although by no means a cohesive group, each owing debts to numerous other historical and recent influences, share sparks of humor and adventure that were ignited during that 1968 production. The Goodman Theatre's Comedy of Errors, starring the Flying Karamazov Brothers, Joanne Akalaitis's Cymbeline, a 1989 entry in Joe Papp's six-year Shakespeare Marathon, and the gender-reversed Lear directed by Lee Breuer and set in Georgia in the 1950s, provide case studies of just how far and wide the movement has ranged.

The Flying Karamazov Brothers, five unrelated men with extraordinary juggling and circus skills, came to prominence in a spontaneous revival movement that had come to be called the New Vaudeville. The Karamazovs had been playing regional theatres, colleges, and nightclubs around the country since the late 1970s. They were especially popular at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, and, by 1983, Greg Mosher, the artistic director was curious to see what would happen if they attempted a real play. "Vaudevillians don't usually do plays," he admitted,(45) so the choice of material would be crucial. The company had long been considering a production of A Midsummer Night's Dream, and the idea of the Karamazovs playing the rustics was kicked around for a while and then dropped. Noted comedians had taken those parts before, and Mosher wanted the Karamazov Shakespeare to be something new. It occurred to Mosher that the Plautine Comedy of Errors, "an incredibly dopey play whose only purpose is to make people laugh," would be the perfect vehicle. Furthermore, one of the Karamazovs never spoke on stage, which left the four main speaking roles--two Antipholuses and two Dromios--to be divided among the four talking "Brothers."

Getting this zany concept past the Goodman's board of directors was Mosher's most difficult obstacle. "For King Lear you'd hire a great tragedian, right?" he asked the skeptics. "Why not great comedians for Comedy of Errors? Nobody's funnier than the Flying Karamazovs." Mosher

prevailed. With the Karamazovs and the text in place, the next critical task was to choose the right director. "Do we hire a maniac or a disciplinarian?" Mosher wondered. He seemed to find both in Robert Woodruff, who had made his reputation with the first productions of Sam Shepard's Curse of the Starving Class, Buried Child, and True West.

Woodruff's imagination was "way out there," according to Mosher, and he had proven able to "function well in chaos."

Once the director came on board, the general contours of the production began taking shape. Unlike the director-dominated rehearsals that are the norm in conceptual production, the work on Comedy of Errors was necessarily collaborative. Bob Woodruff has said that "I don't try to control" actors in rehearsal. "I try to encourage. I have to look and then respond to what my collaborators are finding. . . . Unity is overrated. It can lead to a stifling politeness."(46) As apt as his remarks are to any rehearsal situation, the attitude they reflect was essential to the work at the Goodman.(47)

It was quickly determined that Timothy Daniel Furst, the silent Karamazov, would appear intermittently as Shakespeare himself, alternately anguished and delighted by the shenanigans wrought on his play. Karamazovs Howard Jay Patterson and Paul Magid would play the Antipholi of Ephesus and Syracuse, respectively. The Dromios were assigned to Randy Nelson (Ephesus) and Sam Williams (Syracuse). Avner "the Eccentric" Eisenberg, another new vaudevillian, was

cast to play a janitor figure and Pinch, the schoolmaster. Other, multitalented performers included Gina Leishman who played Luciana, accordion, and bass clarinet; Sophie Schwab Hayden as Adriana; and Alec Willows who doubled as Angelo and his sidekick, Walter, in a split-down-the-middle costume and also played drums, maracas, slapstick, jingle bells, and duck call. (When the production was revived in New York, in 1987, after Mosher became artistic director at Lincoln Center Theatre, cast changes brought in Ethyl Eichelberger doubling in drag as the courtesan and the abbess; Karla Burns as a Tina Turner-esque maid; and a klezmer orchestra. This account is based on the New York version.) Woodruff recalls early rehearsals:

Basically, it was whoever had the best idea at any given moment. A lot of the time it was just sitting around the table with twenty-one people and saying, "Okay, we have to have a sword fight. What are we going to use for weapons?" Somebody yells out, "Swordfish!" After a certain point I would move from referee to aesthetic arbitrator and then to dictator. (48)

Matching performing skills to lines and scenes was mostly a matter of rhythm. The company would generate "a cacophony of skills", (49) from which the director then selected and orchestrated the whirling elements. Traffic management was a major part of his job, but not the whole thing. Woodruff disagrees that the text was used merely as a pretext for showing off the various circus skills. "I felt we did the play," he says. "We tried to find the spirit in which the piece was originally created--a late-night

vaudeville. It appeared that we manipulated the text because there were so many sight gags that are not in there, but it was ninety-five percent Shakespeare."(50) The production would also, it seems, have earned the approval of Margaret Webster, who wrote in 1957 that "It is one of the few plays which may be stylized to the limit of a director's invention and with all the extended artifices of music, ballet, and comedy tricks. . . . The play is not bad vaudeville."(51) In fact, the impulse for the production can be traced to no less reliable an authority than Shakespeare himself. In Act I, scene one, Antipholus of Syracuse refers to the people of Ephesus as "nimble jugglers that deceive the eye."

About a hundred lines were cut from the text, mostly exposition from the first scene. Some topical references were interpolated (the 1987 production took swipes at Vanna White, Oliver North, and Gary Hart.) Otherwise, the lines were left intact. But language was at best a secondary means of interaction in the production. The action was set in a white box designed by David Gropman with the requisite abundance of farce doors. Brightly colored awnings and "a frazzling array of gaudy costumes"(52) by Susan Hilferty helped to create a carnival atmosphere--part Middle-Eastern bazaar, part Russian folk festival, incorporating the borrowed ethnicity of the self-named Karamazovs and making no attempt to indicate the play's Roman setting. Dressed in harem pants, turbans, sashes, and babushkas, the cast recited Shakespeare's lines while juggling balls, hatchets,

ten-pins, bowling balls, and seltzer bottles. Baton-twirling, stilt-walking, unicycling, belly-dancing, fire-eating, roller-skating, blindfolded knife-throwing, trapeze-flying, plate-spinning, and tap-dancing substituted for ordinary human behavior. Ephesus became "a land where everyone juggled, juggling became discourse . . . not as a pastiche to the action, but as its essence."(53)

The nearly chaotic, free-for-all atmosphere often upstaged the dialogue, but it absolutely captured the topsy-turvy confusion of Shakespeare's precision-crafted comic mechanism. Identity and perception are juggled in Comedy of Errors. The plot moves with increasing momentum, always threatening to spin out of control as complications pile on top of one another. The acrobatics physicalized the action, although not always in literal relation to the meaning or emotional content of the immediate lines.

Any pretense to serious intentions were dispelled for the audience before the performance began. Statues in the theatre lobby sported glasses with funny noses attached. On the title page of the program, The Three Sisters was crossed out and The Comedy of Errors hand-written in the space below. The program notes consisted of the following essential tidbits:

The Plot: The plot has something to do with twins and juggling.

Dating The Play: The play generally does not go out on dates. . . . Anyway, it's safe to assume that the play dates sometime between Plautus's The Twin Menaechmi and the first episode of "The Patty Duke Show."

**Famous Quotations From The Text:**

**Understudies:** Understudies never read the play unless a specific announcement is made at the time of the performance.

A page of photos of odd-looking or unlikely twins were captioned with such quips as "'We are the same person,' Helen Hayes says of she and twin brother Isaac (the black jazz musician). 'When he's doing something great I can feel it in my bones. And if I'm on stage having a winning night, he can feel it too. I just know it.'" The opening scene featured Avner the Eccentric as the janitor, sweeping the floor, then strewing it with litter over and over again. Once the four principals had appeared, it was obvious that they looked nothing alike. "One would have to be a fool to confuse them--and that should say something about the other characters on the stage," noted Mel Gussow of the Times. (54)

The entire event was suffused with silliness, near-anarchy, and self-referential humor, but its methods drew from legitimate theatre historical sources. It mixed circus, commedia, the Marx Brothers, and the Keystone Kops with Meyerhold and Brecht. If the verse-speaking was flat and mechanical by poetic standards (one reviewer noted two vocal dynamics: "loud and fast"(55), its mere mouthing seemed extraordinary when delivered while the speaker either ate fire or tossed sticks into the air so that they fell, miraculously, on the right notes of a xylophone to play a tune, or executed other, often dangerous, physical feats.

As with Brecht's detached actors, the performers' concentration had to be split between the world of the play and the physical realities of their various schticks. They also kept one winking eye on the audience at all times, as if to say "We know just how ridiculous this is, but it's fun, huh?" The production's tongue-in-cheek theatricalism, overt, physical, and at break-neck pace, was related to the way Meyerhold treated classics, although Comedy of Errors contained no hint of the Russian director's satirical edge. Like Brecht and Meyerhold, Woodruff enjoys tension between theatrical elements. He compares directing to recording music: "everybody has a track, each designer, each actor has his own score. . . . The work becomes more assaultive because it's denser, but it's not only the density of language." (56) The various tonalities, he says, create a "dynamic of disagreement [that] creates an unsettling edge," unique to live performing. (57)

Acknowledgement of the live audience, and collusion with them in the mayhem were essential ingredients. Lines were delivered out front. Bad puns were read by an actor holding a book entitled "How to Tell a Joke." mistakes, some planted, some real were shouted down with cries of "Wrong play! Wrong play!" Timothy Furst as Shakespeare carried a prompt book, took bows after particularly well-spoken speeches, and held up a hand-lettered sign reading "PLOT" during critical passages of exposition. Eichelberger came down from the stage in his courtesan costume to plead his

case in the audience when things on stage threatened insanity, but he was interrupted by a delivery boy who arrived with his pizza. Ever the perfect hostess, his frantic courtesan panicked at the apparent lack of enough napkins to go around. Eichelberger ran away, urging the spectators to go see The Boys from Syracuse if they wanted the whole story. The antics continued through the curtain call, a virtuoso group juggling effort that guaranteed applause.

The 1987 Comedy of Errors created strange bedfellows among the New York critics. One reason might be that the production had already earned a reputation in its two previous runs--in Chicago, in 1983, and at the Olympic Festival of the Arts in Los Angeles, in 1984--and so its novelty may have worn off before it even opened at Lincoln Center. In a surprising switch that attests to the quality of the non-acting performing skills on display, many of the critics least inclined to approve such ventures loved it, although a hint of condescension might be detected in their tolerance. They most likely would not have agreed with the director's assessment that it was "ninety-five percent Shakespeare."

John Simon answered the inevitable "Why?" do this, with "the talent of the Karamazovs is the 'Why not?'" and ended his enthusiastic review with the assertion that "if some poor souls are still benighted enough to think that Shakespeare was really Bacon, this should conclusively prove

to them that he was really ham, glorious ham."(58) Mel Gussow, more susceptible to this sort of thing than Simon but still an establishment critic, also judged the production as deserving of its classical heritage. "As Shakespearean actors the Karamazovs are not about to challenge the Royal Shakespeare Company," he assured his readers, ". . . But can Ian McKellen juggle?"(59) Edith Oliver of the New Yorker counted an "inventory of schtick all loosely (and appropriately) tied to Shakespeare."(60) Clive Barnes credited the clockwork pacing to the director and called the whole romp "a belly laugh tripping on a whoopee cushion to the sound of a kazoo." In spite of this appreciation, however, more in keeping with his anti-experimental track record, Barnes was unwilling to go with the concept. "I suppose the laudable intention was to provide Shakespeare for people who do not like Shakespeare," he sneered, "but, be warned, I doubt whether it can provide Shakespeare for people who don't like juggling."

Barnes's disapproval comes as no surprise. Harder to explain were the resistance of writers from more culturally liberal-minded journals. Michael Feingold, writing for the Village Voice, picked up on the Russian allusions and imagined that Chekhov would have liked this Comedy of Errors. He analyzed the way the production separated the two parts of Shakespeare's "merged tradition" of poetry and physical humor, the dramatist's clever simultaneous appeal to all segments of his diverse audience. Feingold correctly

noted that in this Comedy of Errors, language and character were downplayed to the advantage of what he called "pure schtick." Oddly, though, he then went on to criticize the work for neglecting those same literary elements. "We can see the Karamazovs juggle anytime, under their own names, but," he lamented, "we don't get to see Antipholus of Syracuse mooning over Luciana all that often." It is true that Comedy of Errors should be seen more often. But Feingold does not explain how or why this entertaining production should be held responsible for that lapse in the American theatre. The Variety reviewer found the evening boring and mechanical, although he had to acknowledge the performers' skill. He dismissed the whole production as frivolous: "Of course this sort of thing is easier to achieve than a faithful rendering of the play." One may wonder if he's ever written a review while swallowing a flaming sword.

What is disturbing about these persnickety reviews is not that their authors did not like the production. That is their prerogative, although in this case, the stubborn unwillingness to enter the production's playful spirit is more pitiful than annoying. The trouble with their reviews is that they refuse to judge the work on its own terms. Here was a production that announced its own lack of "seriousness" at every possible opportunity. It employed one of Shakespeare's least idolized scripts, avoided sustained social or political commentary, and spoofed itself

regularly. In addition, it got the plot right, which is no small achievement with this tightly woven farce, and although the characterizations were unorthodox, they fit the play. Greg Mosher, who put together the Comedy of Errors, believes a director's job is to "support the intentions of the playwright." (61) Asked whether or not Shakespeare would have been happy with this production, his answer was a proud yes: "I'm sure Shakespeare would have said 'U-huh, very good.'" (62) Perhaps these critics were offended by the way The Comedy of Errors refused to take itself more seriously or apologize for its own exuberance. In any case, it is sad that resistance to such harmless experiments can still be found among people who profess to understand and appreciate the theatre in its many and varied forms. It is even sadder to imagine the peevishness it must have taken to resist the appeal of this highly entertaining production.

Joanne Akalaitis confronted this kind of critical recalcitrance on a much broader and angrier scale when she staged Shakespeare's Cymbeline in New York in the late spring of 1989 as part of Joseph Papp's thirty-six play, six-year Shakespeare Marathon. Akalaitis began her career with Mabou Mines, the New York-based experimental theatre cooperative which she co-founded in 1969-70 along with her then-husband, the composer Philip Glass, and Lee Breuer, Ruth Maleczek, William Raymond, Frederick Neumann, and David Warrilow. Mabou Mines made its international reputation for emotionally truthful acting in nonrealistic,

multimedia stagings of plays by Samuel Beckett and a series of original, group-generated Animations. In the beginning, Breuer did most of the directing. Akalaitis stuck to acting in the early years although it was always the ensemble's policy to allow any member to try any job. In 1975, she tried her hand at directing, startling the avant-garde community with her theatricalization of Cascando, a radio play by Beckett. Dead End Kids, which she directed in 1980, was an original anti-nuclear collage that she later made into a film. From the start, music, often by Glass, played an essential role in setting the mood, tone, and rhythm of the plays she directed. With little formal theatre education (brief study with Joyce Aaron of the Open Theatre and a month spent with Grotowski), Akalaitis was grounded in the bold visual and physical style she helped develop at Mabou Mines. She brought that sensibility to her later work on fully-scripted dramatic texts.

She remained a member of Mabou Mines until June 1990 but in 1981 began accepting offers to direct at other theatres, first in New York, and later at such regional institutions as the Guthrie and the American Repertory Theatre. Request Concert, a 1981 production at New York's Ensemble Studio Theatre, and Through the Leaves, a Mabou Mines co-production with the Interart Theatre, presented at the Public Theatre in 1984, established her reputation as the country's foremost director of Kroetz's grueling, hyperrealistic, working-class plays. In 1984, she directed Beckett's

Endgame at A.R.T. and provoked the playwright's denunciation for setting the unlocalized text in a subway tunnel. (The ensuing lawsuits nearly closed the production. See Conclusion.) Her A.R.T. production of Genet's The Balcony (1986) also caused an uproar, this time over its setting in an unspecified Latin American dictatorship.

By the time Joseph Papp invited Akalaitis to direct Cymbeline, then, she had a history of staging controversial, obstinately idiosyncratic rewritings of modern classics. This was to be her first attempt at Shakespeare, and although it played to packed houses, it ultimately incited a mud-slinging campaign in the critical press. Elinor Fuchs and James Leverett were provided a total of eleven pages in the December 1989 issue of American Theatre for separate articles in defense of the production, including an analysis of the outmoded assumptions that prevented the critics from appreciating its considerable achievements. It is an excellent source for a review of the critics' responses. Akalaitis is grateful for their attempts to provide a more balanced appreciation of her work although she was never consulted in the preparation of either piece. Fuchs hypothesizes that the trouble can be traced to popular misunderstanding of "postmodern" theatre, an ambiguous critical expression that is to the theatrical intelligentsia what "deconstruction" is to mavens of literature. Akalaitis is a fiercely independent artist who resists any attempts to label or categorize her work. During an interview for the

current discussion, she insisted

I don't even know what postmodernism is. I don't think about postmodernism, I have never read one word of Foucault or Derrida, or any of these people. I would like to; to my shame I have not. I will some day. But I don't carry a postmodern banner, and I don't care about any of that stuff.(63)

She also recoiled from the adjective "conceptual."

Whenever you do something you conceive it, so I think it's a meaningless word, and a kind of buzzword on both sides of academics to kind of find a way to think about bodies of work and for conservative critics to put it down. I think this sort of categorization is not useful at all. I think it's very dangerous. I mean, when you do the play, you do the play.

Of course, some artists are not concerned with how their own work fits into the wider cultural movements defined by critics and scholars. Akalaitis's talent seems to be more instinctive than deliberate, and her work has the elasticity to accommodate whatever contradictions that approach necessarily entails. What follows is an account of the making of Cymbeline, informed by the director's recollections.

The director's initial reaction to the play was less than complete enthusiasm: "The first time I read it I said, what is this?" she recalls. "The second time I read it I saw a whole bunch of things and thought it was very interesting, and I thought it was a great idea on [Papp's] part." Closer scrutiny convinced Akalaitis to direct the play, but the final production retained hints of her original perplexity. Audience members were provided with a complicated two-page plot synopsis that highlighted its

melodramatic twists and turns and seemed to affirm the opinions of a host of eitheenth- and nineteenth-century critics who derogated Cymbeline as an inferior if not impossible Shakespearean product. Samuel Johnson's infamous diatribe was revived in many of the reviews of the 1989 production. Despite a few "just sentiments," "natural dialogues," and "pleasing scenes," Johnson declared the play not even worthy of denunciation.

To remark the folly of the fiction, the absurdity of the conduct, the confusion of the names, the manners of different times, and the impossibility of the events in any system of life, were to waste criticism upon unresisting imbecility, upon faults too evident for detection, and too gross for aggravation.(64)

One early theory proposed that Shakespeare lent his name and a few scenes to a script written by someone else. Another denied Shakespeare's hand in it at all. Like the majority of contemporary readers, Akalaitis, who rarely relies on criticism to guide herself through the plays she directs anyway, accepted the text as an organic whole and worked with whatever she found there.

During the rehearsal period, Akalaitis came across two essays that corroborated her instincts about the play. Granville Barker's 1946 "Preface to Cymbeline" considers the possibility that Shakespeare may not have written the whole play, but its main thrust is an attempt to rationalize the dramatist's intentions. Barker imagines a retired Shakespeare, no longer interested in heavy themes, playing with dramatic and theatrical forms and creating "art that

displays art."(65) Barker detects a "fertile carelessness" on Shakespeare's part in the text's anachronisms, improbable behavior, and other "frank artifices." The dramatist seems to be "winking at the audience" as if to say "'You see what an amusing business this playwriting is; take it, please, no more seriously than I do.'"(66) Barker envisions Shakespeare extending an invitation to his audience to conspire with him in creating the fiction. Audience members are cast in the active role of "masters of the illusion, not victims of it."(67)

The other source Akalaitis consulted was a graduate school paper on Cymbeline by Colette Brooks, who had served as dramaturg on Through the Leaves. In the essay, Brooks argues against co-authorship of the text and for Shakespeare's complete mastery of this unusual script not as a jumble of old scraps, "a failed tragic-comedy or an imperfect Romance," but as an intentional clash of real and idealized elements. Brooks categorizes Cymbeline as a successful "grotesque."(68)

Second and third readings led the director to think of the play as a Victorian novel, rich and dense with plot, character, and intrigue. A little pre-production research disclosed that Cymbeline was in fact quite popular with the Victorians, perhaps the last age to have appreciated it. "It was Tennyson's favorite play," Akalaitis says she had learned, "and Dickens loved it." Contrary to popular stereotypes of strict morals and timid ladies, "the

Victorians were a very bold, adventurous, physical people," she found. "They were real explorers." Cymbeline's strong melodramatic plot, its exotic locations, and its plucky heroine, Imogen, reflected the director's emerging concept of life in England in the nineteenth-century. She decided to set the play "in the midst of Celtic ruins--a Romantic fantasy in Victorian England," as the program would ultimately announce.

The careful wording of that program note correctly implied that the Victorian setting was not an authentic or realistic recreation of the period. Although she says her goal was to evoke the nineteenth century, Akalaitis's Cymbeline seemed to search for the Victorian past through a late-twentieth century prism. Footlights, movable scenery, thick red velvet curtains, and crisply delineated heroes and heroines were counteracted by electronic music, cinematic scene cuts, and interracial casting. Her layering of new over old theatrical elements resulted in a frankly fictional presentation of a fantastical past. The production depicted nineteenth-century, Shakespearean melodrama as only a contemporary imagination, fluent in the imagery of late twentieth-century American culture, could conceive it. Its beauty lay in its paradoxical existence in at least three simultaneous theatrical time zones. Ever-present were Elizabethan language and dramaturgy, gushingly romantic Victorian characters and situations, and an aggressively fast-paced and electronically modulated production style.

Akalaitis's remarkable vision of the play blended nostalgia for old-fashioned, emotional, Victorian melodrama with the kind of ultra-contemporary staging techniques that led Eleanor Fuchs to call the production "postmodern." The audience entered the Public's Newman theatre to the sounds of a raging thunderstorm. The stage was hidden behind a thick, red velvet curtain whose deep folds were highlighted by cones of light projected from footlights at the front of the stage. The performance opened "in one" when two male figures emerged from between the curtains, dressed in greatcoats and woolen caps and bearing large, wet, black umbrellas. Their dialogue is pure exposition, and Akalaitis blocked it like the first scene of a well-made play. The two men huddled together, as if taking shelter from the storm, exchanging information in obvious stage whispers, periodically looking over their shoulders to be sure no one on stage could hear them disclose the details of the latest court intrigues. When the curtain finally parted, the stage was filled with dry-ice smoke through which could be seen a family, pale-faced and silent, hurry across the stage and off stage left. These unidentified apparitions reappeared throughout the performance until the Act V scene in which they appeared in Posthumus's dream as the ghosts of his dead family.

When the smoke cleared, George Tsypin's ingenious set was visible for the first time. The design consisted of two revolving columns on casters, on each of whose several faces

was depicted elements of the four basic scenes: Cymbeline's court; Iachimo's bathhouse; the woods; and Imogen's bedchamber. Between the columns was a metal ramp that could be flooded to represent a stream, or left dry for interior scenes. In the upstage right corner hung a huge, papier mache bird, wings spread as if in flight. Like Posthumus's ghost family, the bird's significance was not revealed until the dream sequence. Then, it became the swing on which Jupiter, played here by an angelic boy soprano, swept in to prophesy the happy ending. In the meantime, its vaguely pregnant presence lent mystery to the atmosphere. The bird was like an element in one of Robert Wilson's symbolist theatrical tableaux.

Behind Tsypin's ornate set pieces hung a cyclorama the full width of the stage. Onto the cyc were projected background images, designed by Stephanie Rudolph. A garden, trees, decaying ruins, and other collages of landscapes worked in imprecise perspective with Tsypin's columns to create moody, suggestive locales that recalled in contemporary technological terms the scenic practices of the nineteenth century. "I'm very bored when scenery doesn't change in the theatre," says director Akalaitis. "I'm very interested in the workings of scenery." Tsypin and Rudolph's designs moved and shifted, sometimes in blackout, sometimes in full view of the audience, and always accompanied by Philip Glass's soaring, pseudo-swashbuckling electronic score that kept the rhythm and momentum of the

tightly choreographed production flowing. The production dared to deviate from the ubiquitous unit and simultaneous settings of most contemporary classics. It offered its audience the obsolete thrill of scenic transformation, and Akalaitis believes that was one of the reasons the critics were so vitriolic.

. . . it has to do with the fact that it was designed, and it was thought out, that there was scenery instead of something that looks like the National Bank of Venezuela that actors stand in front of and talk in some generic costumes. What they [critics] are used to is a kind of noble, flat [image] and they do not understand design. They don't like design. They also don't like direction. They really don't.

Like Shakespeare's underappreciated play, this production was less a meditation on faith and fidelity than an extreme flexing of its creators' theatrical muscles. Its reliance on directorial inventions, appropriate as they may have been, seems to confirm the director's hunch about critical tastes. Among the many imaginative directing/design features were a flying throne for Cymbeline, skimpy Native American costumes for the lost princes (basically loincloths and war paint, a healthy twist by this feminist director on Western art's more common female nudity), and a bike and a scooter as the transportation of choice for Imogen and Pisanio's journey to Milford Haven. The Act IV battle scene was a virtuoso display of Akalaitis's command of cinematic stage imagery. It was a slow-motion ballet with freeze-frame tableaux and synchronized strobe lighting effects. The armies looked

like toy soldiers who rode this most exciting segment of Glass's score like waves of energy. Completely anti-realistic, the scene captured the agony, suspense, and adrenaline of combat in beautiful, moving, stage pictures.

Although the critics would later attack the director for what they mistakenly took to be a cynical approach to the flaws they themselves identify in the text, Akalaitis never questioned the integrity of the text. In fact, her production exploited the most distinct--and controversial--features of the script, its improbable, artificial, roller-coaster plot, its opposition of blatantly good and evil characters, in short, its overt theatricality. Her usual stance toward a text could almost be described as reverential. She refers to "the play" she is working on in sacred tones, as the source of all her directorial inspirations. She denies having deliberately imposed her own, alien interpretation on Cymbeline and insists that the work was focused on projecting the characters, situations, and ideas she found in the play:

Shakespeare gives you everything. There's no subtext; it's all there. All you have to do is figure out how to put it out. For some actors, a lot of work entailed vocal coaching, saying these lines, putting these words out in space. Shakespeare is a great gift. It's all there, you just have to make it clear.

She remains apparently oblivious to the paradox between her statements of intention and the results of her direction. However one might appreciate the theatrical means by which she made clear that which she found in Shakespeare's text,

it is impossible to see her as a subservient conduit for his words.

Textual critics have complained of redundancies in the play, when in fact Shakespeare's method is like that of Rashomon. Incidents are seen from different perspectives. For example, we see Posthumus write to Pisanio then hear Pisanio read the letter out loud. The two men react to the same "facts" about Imogen's adultery in completely opposite ways. We may compare Posthumus's rash, jealous rage to his more deliberate servant's cooler-headed reason. The whole, long, final scene recounts these incidents again, offering the audience yet another opportunity to put the pieces of the story together, this time with all parties present. Each telling changes our perception. It is up to us to put it all together. Akalaitis's multilayered theatrical imagery added more elements to be synthesized. Shakespeare used one set of anachronisms; Akalaitis stretched them up to the present by interpolating carefully chosen references to more recent theatrical times.

The production made no attempt to harmonize or rationalize the play's incongruities. She accepted the script wholesale; there was almost no cutting, transposing or other tampering with lines or scenes. She and her designer, George Tsy-pin, believed they were creating a straightforward staging.

We thought it was very elegant, classical Shakespeare. We were not doing a take on the play. We were not doing a version of the play. We did the play. I think

I changed the order of something in it, but we thought it was even rather conservative. We never thought we were doing anything radical.

If, as she proclaims, the director stuck to the text, followed the impulses it stimulated in her imagination, and exploited its own most salient features, why did this production end up inciting such a barrage of accusations and counter-accusations among its critics?

One factor that must be examined is the degree of directorial privilege that Akalaitis, a director without a traditional, classical past, automatically assumes. She takes it as her natural right as an artist that she can set the play, juxtapose styles and periods, and cast actors without regard to race or ethnicity all based on instinctive responses to the text and a small dose of corroborating research. Her attitude is explained in part by her fiercely independent personality. An artist who resists labels, she works from a strong social consciousness. Akalaitis has said that she is always very much aware of being a woman director. "I can't stop seeing myself as a feminist," she says. "Especially because society continues to be sexist, racist, anti-Semitic, abusive of children." (69) She sees opportunities in her role as a director to redress social injustice, both in her choice of material and, especially, through colorblind casting.

In Cymbeline, four key roles were assigned to non-white actors. Black actors were cast as the Queen's son Cloten (Wendell Pierce), Imogen's kidnapped brother

Arviragus/Cadwal (Don Cheadle), and Posthumus's servant Pisanio (the excellent Peter Francis James). Jesse Borrego, who is Hispanic, played Imogen's other lost brother Guiderius/Polydore. The evil Queen was played by the white actress Joan MacIntosh; Imogen by Joan Cusack; and King Cymbeline by George Bartenieff, who is also white. A few critics were put off by the unexplained mixing of races within the royal family. A few more were insulted at being asked to believe that Imogen, awakening from a drugged sleep could mistake the headless body of Cloten for that of her husband, Posthumus, who was played by a white actor, Jeffrey Nordling. Akalaitis found such incredulity incredible. She is impatient when asked why she casts without regard to skin color:

I don't even know how to answer that question in 1990. It is simply a question of justice. I was asked that question by Time magazine on Endgame, and I can't justify it, wouldn't even answer it. We live in a multi-ethnic world, and it's also a world which is dominated by white men. So on one level, the level of art, colorblind casting works, absolutely.

The other is the personal level of social justice. Minority actors have to be given work. I think colorblind casting works, and once you make a commitment to colorblind casting, you don't have to do all kinds of talking about why this person's black, this person's white, this person's Mexican, and this person's Chinese. Once you've made that commitment, it's very liberating. If you try to find a way to make it logical, I think you get yourself in all kinds of traps, and you limit your choices.

One of the few errors in Fuchs's thorough defense of Cymbeline in American Theatre was her attempt to assign specific cultural significance to the heritage of each of the four minority actors. Akalaitis's method rests on not

having to justify each choice. "I cast these people because I liked them," she insists.

Just what she liked in some of her chosen actors was not made apparent to the audience. A number of performances were so weak as to recall a common argument against conceptual directing on the grounds that it tends to neglect acting in favor of scenic effects. Jeffrey Nordling's Posthumus lacked the strength and charisma the character needs to justify Imogen's unwavering attachment to him. Wendell Pierce's Cloten was too much a clod, too stupid to pose a threat to Imogen's chastity or her succession to the throne. Cusack's forced, throaty rasping and mush-mouthed diction made her otherwise admirable princess irritating to hear. Contrary to rumors, Cusack was not one of the Hollywood starlets Joe Papp is accused of importing to keep up the box office. Akalaitis says she cast the broad-shouldered, strong-featured actress against Papp's recommendation and against the delicate femininity of traditional concepts of the character. The director shuns "standard casting," and relies instead on "reading the play and how one sees the character."

Joan was not chosen because she was a star. I auditioned a lot of people and I chose her. She is a heroic person (and) actress. . . . I think Joan is a very Victorian looking woman. I think Imogen is a witty, brave, feisty, humorous person, all of whom are Joan.

Four outstanding performances were contributed, however, by Peter Francis James, Joan MacIntosh, Michael Cumpsty, and

Stefan Schnabel. As Pisanio, the wise and loyal servant, Peter Francis James proved to be the company's most skilled speaker of Shakespearean verse. His gentle portrait of a commoner with the courage and compassion grossly absent in his "betters" elevated the character to a central role. MacIntosh played the Queen, who will stop at nothing to see her own son usurp the throne, to the fairy-tale evil-stepmother hilt. Savagely sly and sexy, MacIntosh's Queen seemed to sail over the stage, the red talons of her outstretched fingers dancing on air in constant, devious motion. Michael Cumpsty's Iachimo became the consummate melodramatic villain, rotten to the core until his final scene of repentance. His thick eyebrows and black mustache, accentuated by Cumpsty's effective play with the glaring footlights, punctuated his every velvet-tongued manipulation. It would have come as no surprise had he suddenly proclaimed that the heroine "must pay the rent."

Stefan Schnabel exploited every comic possibility in the character of Cornelius, the physician who gives the Queen a poison placebo. His character narrates the unraveling of the knotty plot in the long final scene. Traditionally, that scene is cut drastically. Akalaitis understood the significance in the scene of each character "retelling the story in his own way," and she left every word in, orchestrating the scene down to the last raised eyebrow.

I think it's a wonderful scene and I was very intimidated by it, and I just decided to bite the bullet and do it. It was rigorously rehearsed . . . in

terms of group choreography. And I was delighted at how entertaining and funny it was. The actors hated rehearsing the scene because I dictated so much from the outside. We all hated rehearsing it, but I enjoyed its effect. A lot of that rehearsal was drill. We're going to do it over and over, and we're going to do it faster and faster. In performance is when they had fun with it.

The comical staging acknowledged the preposterous length and implausibility of the scene's sudden confessions, reformations, and restorations. The precision of its performance was typical for the production as a whole. Painstaking execution is often the key to implementing strong directorial concepts successfully. Its lack is often what invalidates rewritings based on equally interesting ideas. The play, and this staging, brought the fairy tale to its rightfully artificial happy conclusion.

There is a certain political naivete about Akalaitis's reluctance to acknowledge that her aesthetics are not yet the general cultural norm, but her personal vision of the theatre is securely founded. This director believes the contract with the theatrical audience includes its conspiracy in the fiction. Like other conceptual directors, she does not pretend to offer a photographic reproduction of life.

I don't think it is asking a little too much. I think that's what theatre does. When we go in the theatre, it's not like going in the movies. When we go in the theatre, we know we're in the human arena. We sit there, and we are much more conscious of people sitting next to us. We are not entrapped by a manipulated image. We see the actors. We see them making mistakes, flub lines. We see their skin, we see their makeup. We see the costumes, the changing of the scenery.

It is for this reason that harsh criticism of the scene in which Imogen awakens to find Cloten's body was, in the director's words, "ridiculous. She's drugged. She's taken a powerful drug, and because reason and credibility totally went out the window at that point, I just said 'great, it doesn't matter.'" But here as elsewhere, the critics relentlessly demanded realism from an unrealistic scene in a patently anti-realistic production. Akalaitis exercised her conceptual authority without violating the spirit or intentions of our greatest playwright, yet the New York critics were unwilling to relinquish any of their share of the theatrical power that more and more directors are now claiming as their own.

"It's hard to work in New York," Akalaitis admits.

It's the feeling of a lot of directors and writers that it's not possible to do anything in New York (because of the critics' economic power). And that includes the Village Voice, who . . . I call the policemen, the Guardians of Art, like people from an old regime in Europe. But I hope that I'm not an artist who rants and raves and has my life ruined by critics. You can't be stopped by critics.

Perhaps a director's best revenge is to continue working and influencing the theatre despite critical opposition.

Akalaitis won that opportunity in May 1990 when Joseph Papp announced that he was appointing her artistic associate of the New York Shakespeare Festival to work as his partner in redirecting and revitalizing one of New York's leading theatrical institutions for the coming decade.

If Cymbeline is a risky undertaking for a director

because the play itself is often undervalued, King Lear's supreme reputation is a gauntlet thrown at a director's feet. "Live up to me," it defies those who accept its challenge. That is one of several reasons that Arthur Holmberg has called the play "the postmodern performance script of choice." (70) In January 1990, Lee Breuer dared the play back, returning to Shakespeare despite the tempest that had swirled around his Hollywood-celebrity version of that play in 1981 (see Chapter 3). The project's origins reached back a decade to the time when Breuer's wife, Ruth Maleczech, one of the founding members of Mabou Mines and its downtown equivalent of a grand dame, first felt a craving to speak the lines of King Lear:

I've wanted to do Lear for ten years at least. I'm not drawn to roles usually, but I was drawn to Lear's language. And I couldn't figure out any reason why a woman couldn't say those words as a woman. (71)

Another director might have looked for reasons why the lines could not be spoken by a woman, but Breuer's willingness to accommodate his wife was motivated in part by a desire to prove her extraordinary talent to a broader audience after almost twenty years on the stage. Attempting another Shakespeare play also fit his broader directorial purpose of creating American versions of the classics, as he had done with The Tempest and The Gospel at Colonus.

Sarah Bernhardt, Judith Anderson, Diane Venora, Siobhan McKenna, and most recently Teresa Budziszcz-Krzyzanowska in Andrzej Wajda's backstage view production (72) are all

actresses who dressed in breeches to play Hamlet.

Comedienne Pat Carroll recently donned whiskers to play Falstaff at the Folger Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C. Breuer would not have such transvestism in his Lear.<sup>(73)</sup> For him, Maleczek in the title role provided a fascinating opportunity to find out what would happen to the dynamics of the play if Lear were in fact a woman. "When a man has power, we take it for granted," mused Maleczek "but when a woman has power we're forced to look at the nature of power itself."<sup>(74)</sup> For that matter, they rationalized, why stop at one character? Breuer and Maleczek ultimately decided to switch the sexual identities of all the characters. He's and she's were changed in the script; manhood became motherhood; and son was either child or daughter depending on the scansion of the particular line.

Instead of daughters, Maleczek/Lear had three sons. Regan (Ron Vawter) and Goneril (Bill Raymond) kept their names; Cordelia became Cordelion and was played by Breuer and Maleczek's son, who listed himself as Lute Ramblin' in the program. Cordelion's fate hung on the whims of Burgundy (Maya O'Reilly) and France (Clove Galilee, Breuer and Maleczek's daughter) in prom dresses. Albany (Black-Eyed Susan) and Cornwall (Honora Fergusson) were Lear's daughters-in-law. Gloucester's two daughters also underwent name changes. The bastard Edmund became Elva, a sultry seductress in tight, black-leather jeans played by Mabou Mines veteran Ellen McElduff. Edgar was changed to Edna and

played by Karen Evans-Kandel. Oswald was assigned to Kimberly Scott and renamed Wilda. The only actor cast the same sex as the character in the original was Greg Mehrten as the Fool. But he played the Fool as a drag queen in spike heels and a feather boa.

Gender reversal accommodated Maleczech in the leading role, but it did not satisfy Breuer's desire to Americanize the play. The couple would later tell the press that they chose their setting because of something they had heard on the public television series "The Story of English." The show reported a theory that due to migration patterns of early North American settlers, the extant dialect that best resembles Elizabethan English is probably that of the Southern United States. Lear was set in rural Georgia in the late 1950s. According to Alisa Solomon, the production dramaturg, the PBS rationale oversimplifies the justification for the production's "geographical and temporal" relocation of the play. Solomon is not sure why Breuer repeatedly offered that anecdotal reason, but she recalls discussions early in the three-and-a-half-year rehearsal process that suggest the Georgia setting had deeper roots. She remembers telling Breuer about Maynard Mack's postulation in King Lear in Our Time that for the Elizabethan audience, the historical setting of King Lear would have had specific resonances.

The Elizabethan audience would be familiar with the medieval world, where these codes of behavior existed, as the period right before their own "modern or

contemporary" age. This was the mythic reality of what came before their time.(75)

Mack's thesis proved to be the key to a contemporary American "analogue" for Shakespeare's setting. Solomon continues:

The South is a place we associate with chivalric codes, clans, those kinds of ways of organizing society, and the fifties is the era in our imaginations that just preceded our own.(76)

Lear became the matriarch of a working-class family whose birthday barbecue provided the occasion for her to divide her run-down acreage among her three beer-guzzling sons. Instead of pointing to a map of the property, Lear indicated how the land was to be distributed by cutting her children proportionate wedges of birthday cake. The far ends of Breuer's multiple set depicted the porches of two ramshackle wooden houses whose interiors receded beyond the wings of the wide, floor-level thrust stage of the Triplex Theatre in Manhattan. Behind the stage-right dwelling was an outhouse, and, upstage center, a green mound topped by a droll papier-mache parody of a miniature-golf course castle, painted in the bright, iridescent spectrum of period convertibles. Breuer left empty the large, unlocalized, center-stage playing area which served as backyard, battlefield, heath, and parking lot. Two specially commissioned electric cars were driven on stage and off to reconnoiter with allies, mobilize troops, and transport Lear's mangy entourage. Gloucester (the majestic Isabella Monk) and Edna were black, her illegitimate daughter white.

Instead of knights, Lear's despised retinue consisted of a pack of large, if not particularly handsome, dogs. The production was bedecked in familiar artifacts from an American subculture most of its audience knew best from other fictional renderings. Writers of review headlines capitalized on that relationship with such bons mots as "Lear's Little Acre," in the Village Voice, and "Mabou Mines Sets Lear on a Hot Tin Roof," in the Times. With characteristic, electronic eclecticism, the director refrained from imitating wholesale Tennessee Williams's gauzy realism or any Hollywood depiction of Southern life. His Georgia moved to the strains of Pauline Oliveros's synthesized score and was visited by a Kent (Lola Pashalinski) disguised as Juanita, a serape-swaddled Mexican peasant, and an Edna/Edgar who subsumed her identity in that of a dreadlocked Jamaican sorceress.

Projected onto the original play were current issues of gender, class, and race that Shakespeare never brought up. Breuer even recast the generational conflicts in the play in terms of "ageism" and "the graying of America. Some critics cited such idiosyncratic substitutions as ample reasons to dismiss the entire enterprise. "Steer Clear of this Lear" rhymed the Daily News. Solomon, the dramaturg, who also reviews theatre for the Voice, understands how tempting it is for critics to go back after the show and "beat the production over the head with the script." But such blanket condemnations missed both the point of Breuer's Lear and the

more valid reasons there were to find fault with it. Any fair assessment of this production would have to separate its admirable goals from its unrealized achievements.

The Southern setting combined with Breuer's interracial casting policy to stimulate a subtle subtheme in the production. Giving work to non-white actors is a priority for Breuer, as it is for his Mabou Mines colleague Joanne Akalaitis, but he does not practice her colorblind casting. When Breuer casts a female or minority actor in a traditionally male or white role, he uses the substitution as an opportunity to comment on the represented group's standing in society. "Most of my large work, Breuer says, "has a political intent, but I don't mount works with leftist dialogue and fist-shaking. I try to mount the work as a political statement, not that says a political statement."(77)

The press reported occasional objections to the plausibility of a close friendship between the white Lear and black Gloucester, but black-white relations in the rural South cannot be judged by the norms of Northern cities, where contact between the races is mostly limited to public accommodations. Closer quarters and a blemished but long-standing coexistence in the South more often breed good neighbors and friends. Racial hate and violence are also facts of Southern life, however, and the subordinate treatment of Gloucester by Lear's children in this production was based not on her lower aristocratic rank, as

in the original, but on her race. When Lear's white offspring invaded her home, demanding her cooperation against Lear and then plucked out her eyes, the production echoed contemporary scenes of white-on-black brutality. Elva's whiteness, despite her mother's protests of "good sport at her making," evoked memories of white men taking sexual advantage of black women as far back as slavery. Like the tenderness that infused the female Lear's maternal agonies, Breuer's race-relations point was clearly understated without further directorial gesture.

Gone from this production were the royal trappings of King Lear and with that, some wrote, its tragic dimensions. But if King Lear is indeed applicable to the universal human condition, as its classic stature suggests, its themes cannot pertain only to royalty. If that were the case, the play would have lost rather than gained popularity in the twentieth century. To say that King Lear is about royalty is like saying Hamlet is about Denmark or The Cherry Orchard is about fruit trees. If there are fundamental human truths in these great plays, they are only symbolized by the circumstantial facts of their settings. It is possible for directors to substitute approximate alternates for the details in order to gain more direct access to the subtext. Breuer was more interested in the way the play explores power, trust, and betrayal in families and friendships, and how they are affected by age, race, and gender, than in reproducing Shakespeare's obsolete social order.

Smyrna, Georgia, became a microcosm of Shakespeare's medieval state, with its own hierarchies, allegiances, and ceremonies based on an old, strict social contract. Its backwoods community was duly shattered by the events in Breuer's production. Parents were devastated by cruelly ambitious children. Unchecked sibling rivalry divided the citizenry into armed and murderous mobs. Denizens of the twentieth century cannot discount the significance of these upheavals simply because their sufferers lacked royal pedigrees. Breuer demystified the setting, lifted the aura of divine right, and made the play about plain folks. Lear thus cleared a path for new investigations more obviously relevant to its contemporary audience.

By putting women and men in each others' shoes, the production meant to disarm its audience's usual response to human violence, coldness, and cruelty. Scenes of violence in the play were intensified when acted by women. Sisters Edna and Elva tore at each other on the floor. The female Cornwall cold-bloodedly gouged out the eyes of a sweet old black woman. The on-stage lynching of the Fool (an addition) seemed even more brutal because we are less used to seeing women practice such cruel aggression. It was also true that Lear's maternal anguish tugged at the heartstrings in a particularly poignant way. It was almost unthinkable that those drunken, redneck boys could mistreat their harmless, cantakerous old mama in such shameless fashion. Likewise, it was impossible not to be reminded of the Pietá

when Maleczech came on stage bearing the limp body of her dead son. Unfortunately, however, Breuer does not seem to have discovered any difference between acts of violence committed by men and women, except that victimized women tend to elicit more sympathy from witnesses. The female characters performed their acts of horror much as men do in traditional productions. Still, Michael Feingold, reviewing for the Village Voice, felt that the sight of Lear's daughters "slug[ging] it out with sticks and broken beer bottles, knocking each other across the hood of Goneril's roadster" indicated that "something primordial appears to be taking its lunatic course." (78)

Breuer's Lear would seem to have had stronger intellectual foundations than did Akalaitis's Cymbeline. His offbeat but apt parallels between old and new instances of social and economic injustice, inhumanity, and betrayal could have resulted in an explosion of new perspectives to be opened up through Shakespeare's play. Pre-opening publicity and the company's reputation had generated excited anticipation of the production. Whereas Akalaitis had gone with an instinctive theatrical approach, Breuer seemed to be working toward cogent social commentary. In the end, though, Lear turned out to be a seriously flawed three-hours traffic. Too many ideas too sloppily executed or superficially explored ultimately drowned out serious attempts to address the issues Breuer said were key to the play--the relationships between love and power. "Can

(women) have love and power at the same time?" the director wondered publicly,(79) but the production never delved into the question in any systematic way. Bits and pieces of directorial ideas were left dangling in tangled knots, not just unresolved but never even coherently phrased. Where Akalaitis's stagecraft legitimized improbable elements and images, Breuer's laxity muddled his message.

According to Solomon, the director never articulated a thematic scheme:

There was no programmatic idea: "Let's make a feminist production." There was no intention when we started out to prove anything or to show anything. The intention was to ask, well, what if? Now, some of us had different ideas about what we expected would happen

It is all well and good for a director to begin rehearsals with "what if." Peter Brook himself would applaud Breuer's willingness to approach rehearsals with only questions in mind, but at some point those questions must be dealt with in a purposeful way if not always answered.

The production's erratic rehearsal schedule may account in part for its ultimate shoddiness. Lear evolved over a sporadic and nomadic series of residencies at five different theatres and colleges over a period of more than three years. The work began at the Theatrical Outfit in Atlanta in September 1987 and was abandoned until February 1988, when the company was invited to the George Street Playhouse in New Brunswick, New Jersey. The visiting-artists deals always included some kind of public workshop or performance

of the work in progress. Alisa Solomon remembers confused and agitated New Jersey audiences leaving in droves before the end of those sessions. The artistic staff of the George Street Playhouse was fired in toto shortly thereafter, although the management denies any connection between the two events. Six weeks that summer were spent in the bucolic splendor of Storm King, a private academy in one of Manhattan's more remote northern suburbs. Scenes in progress were shown at the Public Theatre that fall, and work resumed in the spring of 1989 at Smith College. Then, after frantic fundraising efforts finally attracted ample support from AT&T and other sources, the finished performances ran from January through March of 1990 at the Triplex. It is conceivable that the director had trouble imagining the jumbled cumulative effect of all the scenes in rapid succession. The company had only three weeks prior to performances at the Triplex, and most of that time was devoted to ironing out technical details.

In rehearsal, says Solomon, "Lee has a thousand ideas a minute. If four of them are brilliant, and the other 996 are awful," it can take some time before he sees the difference. She also reports that his approach to solving stage problems is often short-term. His first impulse can be a cheap quick fix. As dramaturg, Solomon says a large part of her responsibility--in addition to helping Breuer change gender and royal references in the text and helping the non-classically trained actors understand and speak

their lines--was to make sure the production was "telling the story all the time." During rehearsals for the scene in which Goneril expresses his anger at Lear's presence with her dogs in his home, Breuer had Bill Raymond "pacing back and forth in a farcical, almost vaudeville way." Solomon later pointed out to the director that it was clear that the character was angry, but that his movement did not indicate exactly what he was so angry about. "Yeah, you're right," Breuer agreed. He then turned to the prop master across the room and shouted, in all seriousness, "Can you get me some of that plastic dog shit for tomorrow?" The faux merde stayed through several rehearsals, but fortunately was removed before the final version.

As in the work of many maverick artists, some of Breuer's wild ideas came to rich fruition in Lear. Goneril retreated to his outhouse during an argument with his domineering wife. Breuer also materialized in a lesbian embrace the latent homosexuality between Cornwall and Elva/Edmund that explains Cornwall's immediate and intense attachment to the young dissembler. Here Solomon notes that Breuer exercised good editorial sense when he realized that the original blocking for the scene, which involved several minutes of wriggling and fondling, was overkill and cut it down to a single, passionate kiss. Inevitably, the characters' black-leather duds merely reinforced butch stereotypes. Elva's heterosexual trysts with Cornwall's husband and brother-in-law, in the back seat of one of the

convertibles, underscored the character's indiscriminate use of sex to accomplish her destructive ends.

Breuer's direction of the Fool embodied some of his best and worst ideas. Whereas literal-minded critics complained that a gawky transvestite would never have been tolerated by Lear's sons or neighbors, the presence of a sexually ambiguous provocateur helped to crystallize questions about the fundamental relationship between gender and humanity within the production's nonrealistic mise en scene. Solomon was especially pleased by the Fool's camp rendition of the 1970s pop anthem "I'm a Woman." Mehrten pranced out of the latrine, vibrator in hand as a microphone, crooning inane lyrics about how juggling household chores certifies the singer as a "wooman, W-O-O-O-O-M-A-N." In that silly moment, Solomon believes, the production posed the essential question of "what it means to be a woman, a female human. Is gender essential to our being?" she heard the performance ask, or is it another human "accommodation"? Sillier was the part of the storm scene during which the Fool intoned Shakespeare's obtuse lyrics to the tune of "Singin' in the Rain." The production team had given up trying to figure out what the lines meant, the dramaturg says in defense of the "easy yuck." Besides, they felt the melody provided the actor with a structure for speaking the verse.

Perhaps the most consistent fault with Breuer's Lear lay neither in the director's outrageous imagination nor the company's aggregate lack of classical experience. It seems

rather that the director was unwilling or unable to bend and sway with the same elasticity that he demanded of the script. He insisted on several of his favorite effects despite evidence during rehearsals and previews that they were not working out. Here, as in nearly all of his previous works, Breuer wanted amplified speech. "Lee doesn't like unamplified sound," says Solomon.

He thinks it's dead. Nobody questions anymore rock musicians plugging in their instruments to amps and singing at microphones. [So, he wonders] why shouldn't this be an option in the theatre too?

The facile answer to his query is that in the theatre, especially Shakespeare's, unmediated human contact and verbal clarity are higher priorities than at rock concerts. In all fairness, however, Breuer had good theoretical reasons for wiring each actor with a small, head-set microphone. He was looking for a way to accommodate Shakespeare's asides and soliloquies for the contemporary audience. He thought the mikes could achieve the theatrical, aural equivalent of a cinematic closeup. Instead, it was nearly impossible to tell who was speaking, and the actors, with the notable exceptions of Monk, McElduff, and Maleczek, mumbled rather than struggle with their difficult lines. Equally annoying were the black splotches in front of every face that made some audience members wonder if flies had been brought in to authenticate the Georgia backwater setting. Others were reminded of telephone operators and air traffic controllers. Solomon

agrees that Breuer may have had a valid idea, but that he should have dropped it when the technical obstacles proved insurmountable.

The Village Voice ran two opposing reviews of Lear side-by-side on the same page. Erica Munk got right to the heart of what went wrong when she observed that Maleczek's "strong, surprising, monstrously maternal, eloquent" performance was "subverted from the start" by Breuer's technocracy. "How expressive can a face be, with its human power so subordinated to electronics?" she wondered. And how affecting can an actor's nuances be when they are "half drowned by overamplified music?"(80) Breuer misused Brechtian alienation devices so that they resulted in annoyance rather than intellectual distance. On the other hand, the second Voice critic, Michael Feingold, was convinced that "cutting Lear down to a tantrum in a black-eyed-peapatch, oddly, doesn't diminish either the power of its violence or its nightmarish, despairing vision of a hierarchical order torn to pieces by willfulness and greed at the top, willing servitude and hunger below."(81)

The conflicting reactions reflected in the pages of the Voice reflect accurately Lear's mixed results. The feminization of the characters successfully softened the emotional landscape of the play and thus made its horrors that much sharper. Watching Maleczek's Lear being tossed among the elements was, at times, like watching one's grandmother being tortured. The racial undertones were a

sly reminder that the feudal mentality persists today in less obvious, more insidious forms. On the down side, the increased sensitivity of Lear's loss as a mother hinted by negative implication at something sad about our paternity in our society. How ancillary do we consider fathers that a mother's pain should seem more affecting? Women as a group lost, too, when in their quests for power they resorted to traditional male acts of violence and aggression. Finally, many of the good ideas in the production were nullified by its overall failure to gel. Lee Breuer had some wonderful ideas and impulses for Lear, but he bears the greatest burden of responsibility for its disappointments. Thematic incoherence may be the hallmark of the fragmented, deconstructed, postmodern aesthetic, but incomprehensibility and intrusive technology don't add up to much on the classical stage.(82)

An odd coincidence unites Comedy of Errors, Cymbeline, and Lear. Neither Woodruff, Akalaitis, nor Breuer initiated their work on these projects. Woodruff was called in after the basic concept had been established; Akalaitis was penciled into Papp's marathon grid; and Breuer undertook Lear to please his wife. It is interesting to speculate on the difference between directing on assignment and directing out of a compelling desire to work on a particular script. The distinction cuts to the heart of the motivation for conceptual approaches to Shakespeare. If, indeed, the Shakespeare plays are a theatrical rite of passage that

beckon simply by being there, conceptual directors who are invited to work on them may need to construct personal motivational bridges into the work. Why do them at all if the only point is to remake what has gone before? The danger, as these productions suggest, is that building the bridge can divert attention from the task of completing the journey. A glance at three recent European reworkings of Shakespeare will show how far and wide some other recent happy journeys have roamed.

Ingmar Bergman and the Royal Dramatic Theatre of Sweden put together an anachronistic Hamlet in 1988 with a powerful surprise ending. Fortinbras's army burst through the back wall in a show of high-tech brute force accompanied by a blaring heavy-metal score. The shock of their apocalyptic onslaught forced the audience to reel back in their seats. No restorer of national equilibrium, this Uzi-toting Fortinbras murdered Horatio immediately, finishing off the only character Shakespeare left to witness the restoration of peace in Denmark. The new regime, to whom Shakespeare entrusted the healing process, would be far worse than the corrupt and ineffective relatives of King Hamlet. Bergman's ending reflected the cruel history of twentieth-century totalitarianism. His Fortinbras became another in the string of false prophets in Asia, Eastern Europe, and Central and Latin America, smiling tyrants who promise liberation but betray their own people as soon as they gain control.

In 1989, Andrzej Wajda made his fourth excursion into Hamlet. He turned the play and the theatre inside out by establishing the vantage point inside the dressing room of the actress playing Hamlet. As Stoppard had done in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, but without the comic intent, Wajda pushed Shakespeare's plot off center stage. The audience sat onstage on bleachers that faced an empty auditorium. The dressing-room set faced the backstage wall. Through an aperture in the flats, the audience could catch glimpses of the play unfolding before the vacant rows of seats. So inverted, the play focused on the nature of action and the impotence of actors to have much impact on their plots, a neat metaphor for the frustrating inertia of economic and political reform in Wajda's native Poland.

Robert Wilson has worked on King Lear twice. The first time, in a Metromedia television studio in Hollywood in 1985, was a workshop in preparation for a future production. The hypnotic pace and style of Japanese Noh set the tempo for the workshop performance and the subsequent full-scale production for which it laid the groundwork. The stage area was decorated as a Japanese garden, and the actors' movements were slow, measured, and stylized like the poses used in classical Japanese theatre. After the blinding scene, Gloucester appeared in white-face with streaks of red paint running down his cheeks. Lines were intoned without emotion, and songs, puppets, and clips from silent-movie Lears were interpolated. As usual, Wilson used the text as

a catalyst for striking theatrical images rather than trying to project an interpretation of the play. The second version was performed in an empty depot in Frankfurt in the spring of 1990. Curiously, Wilson also cast a woman in the role of Lear, but eighty-year-old Marianne Hoppe played the role as a man. Character has never been a primary concern in Wilson's productions, anyway. Noh remained the overriding influence in this production. Slow, measured movement, and simple symbolic details contributed to a rarefied stillness. Costumes and choreography were designed by Japanese artists. The New York Times reported that "everything looked cool yet icily hysterical, like a frozen dream." Unfortunately, the reviewer felt too much placidity and dispassion, especially in Hoppe's performance, "sapped the play's center of desperately needed life." (83)

Fred Curchack's one-man Stuff As Dreams Are Made On, which played at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival in November 1989, was about as radical as Shakespeare rewrightings get. Yet it proved that a talented and disciplined conceptual artist can cut, paste, jumble, deconstruct, strip bare, and poke fun at a Shakespeare play and still evoke its story, themes, theatrical effects, and poetry. Subtitled "The Tempest, changed into something rich and strange," Stuff used such Poor-Theatre means as masks, dolls, puppets, mime, and a pair of disposable cigarette lighters to conjure a performance magic as wonderful as Prospero's own. Curchack is an accomplished actor,

director, and teacher, who has studied with Grotowski and Alwin Nikolais as well as at traditional schools of Kathakali, Noh, and Balinese Topeng dance. His trim, flexible, muscular body attests to his ongoing training and allowed him in this performance piece to switch instantly among the five characters he portrayed simply by adjusting his posture or altering his tone of voice. The transformations were enhanced by his wildly imaginative latex masks and his skill at shadow play against a single gauze curtain that hung at the back of the playing area.

Curchack's solo embodiment of Prospero, Ariel, and Caliban, and his ventriloquist-like vocal work for the muscle-man puppet Ferdinand and whining-brat doll Miranda cut to the play's essential questions about character, self, and identity. As portrayed by this funny, eloquent, and intense performer, who burst out of character from time to time to harangue the audience about their ignorance of the play or to reassure them that this was not some over-intellectualized, academic deconstruction, the island inhabitants were easily seen as quarrelsome aspects of a single personality. Curchack's ability to toggle back and forth among the various characterizations and his own persona echoed the thematic wonder that human beings somehow manage to reconcile the schizophrenic elements of self into a coherent sense of personal identity. He was in full command of multiple performing techniques and his transitions among contradictory styles was seamless. His

Prospero spoke blank verse like Olivier, while Caliban contorted and barked like a grotesque from the Polish Lab Theatre. And like the work of Grotowski's illustrious actors, Stuff As Dreams Are Made On provided pleasure by its histrionic virtuosity as well as its intellectual ideas.

Shakespeare will continue to be a vibrant force in the American theatre, and who knows what innovations will be brought to bear on him in ten, twenty, a hundred years? But for now vitality is unlikely to be sustained by either "straight" productions, like the Broadway Macbeth starring Glenda Jackson and Christopher Plummer, or Peter Hall's Merchant of Venice with Dustin Hoffman in the title role, or the dozens of fifties-style simile productions churned out every year. No, Shakespeare will be ushered onto the twenty-first century stage, sometimes limping, by conceptual directors who trust that his plays contain still-hidden treasures for the modern world and who are either brave or foolhardy enough to let their imaginations wander off in search of them.

Chapter Five

## THE PLAYS OF MOLIÈRE

Molière's comedy crackles with serious implication. Even the most literal interpreter cannot ignore the fierce anger seething dangerously close to the surface. The survival of La Troupe du Roi and its author/director/star depended on royal favor. Molière had to mask the sharp social criticism in his plays. He managed to expose the decadence and hypocrisy of Louis XIV's court by tempering his honesty with pragmatism. He cloaked his rage in farce and drew such exaggerated characters that an audience unwilling to recognize itself could dismiss them as inoffensive comic ploys. Of course, his barbs rarely went undetected. The targets were often stung, and Molière suffered for insulting them. Still, critical subterfuge was the impetus for Molière's comic machinations, and it remains, like buried treasure, waiting to delight those who discover the implications of his texts.

Overt sexuality, greed, deceit, jealousy, false piety, social posturing, immediate gratification, all taken to extremes, are Molière's concerns--mostly taboo topics in polite seventeenth-century discourse. The measure of his genius is that he was able to get them on the boards in the first place. "There is nothing else that theatre is but

risk," director Peter Sellars recently observed in defense of his own controversial theatrics. "The minute that Molière is no longer risking the King's displeasure, he becomes like all of the boulevard comedians of his era, and we can't even think of their names."<sup>(1)</sup> Today, however, Molière's are common themes and not only on the stage. The explicitness of current film, television, fiction, biography, and the news media suggests that we have lost our squeamishness about airing the underbelly of social life. Far from recoiling, post-Freud, post-O'Neill society revels in contemplating its own neuroses. How, then, to do justice to the dramatist's edge, nerve, and ingenuity, when his satire is as apt as ever but his sleight of hand is no longer required? Conceptual directors are addressing that problem by exploding Molière's veneer of civility and rewrighting the plays to unfetter the characters' urges, passions, compulsions, and venalities. Lust erupts in scenes of graphic lovemaking, sets reflect the physical and moral decay of blindly avaricious communities, and the mild horseplay of earlier stagings takes on the deadly overtones of brute farce.

For Molière's plays, as for the rest of the classics, American conceptual efforts followed European and Soviet attempts, although Douglas Campbell directed Hume Cronyn in a commedia version of The Miser at the Guthrie in 1963. Campbell's commedia dell'arte format was both historically relevant and theatrically exuberant, but the result was more

skin to the way the Lunts popularized The Taming of the Shrew in the thirties with their own commedia stylization than a fresh or penetrating new response to the material. In Molière's own country, Roger Planchon, who claims never to have read the classics in school, says he approached Tartuffe as if it were a new play. His 1962 production, at his Théâtre National Populaire, in Villeurbanne, broke away from tradition and can be seen as having cleared the way for subsequent iconoclastic directors of Molière. French New Criticism and the early stirrings of deconstructionist theory seem to have influenced both the way Planchon understood his role as a director and the way the critics reviewed his work. Planchon's ground-breaking version of Brecht's Schweyk, in 1961, prompted the magazine Théâtre Populaire to observe that

Planchon is no longer seeking to situate and explain historically a certain dramaturgical practice; he is substituting one form of writing for another. He is replacing a play, that is a narrative and a meaning, by a symbolic system with multiple meanings.(2)

In Planchon's Tartuffe, scenery and gesture conveyed a topical political subtext distinct from Molière's own. "I've become Molière's co-author,"(3) he said at the time, only partly tongue-in-cheek, claiming his directorial right and responsibility to stage the classic text according to the issues and images of his own cultural and personal context. "Everything is and remains open. There can be no other orthodoxy."(4)

A Marxist, Planchon wanted to show the turmoil of a

society in transition from one form of totalitarianism to another. Orgon became "un grand bourgeois"(5) whose substantial house was being renovated "from Renaissance fortress to showy Louis XIV mansion."(6) Rene Allio's setting, in which one wall flew up and disappeared at the conclusion of each of the first four acts, suggested the dismantling of the old order. Paintings laden with almost gruesome Catholic iconography took up most of the wall space, echoing Tartuffe's grotesque fervor.(7) By the end of the play the stage was empty, the theatre's back walls exposed. The violent invasion of the Sun King's forces in the final scene evoked images of Stalin's "all-pervading tentacles" that reach into the parlors of its citizens' homes. Tartuffe is gagged and taken away, but the stark environment and the cruelty of those who delivered justice replaced Molière's neatly-tied resolution with lingering doubt about what could be expected in the new regime.

The interpolation of his own political agenda within the seventeenth-century text can be attributed to the dual influences of Marx and Brecht; but Planchon's other major alteration was more subtle, more Freudian, and perhaps even more significant a precedent for future directorial reworkings of Molière. Latent homosexual attraction was suggested as the motivation for Orgon's attachment to the pseudo-monk. Tartuffe became less a schemer than the passive beneficiary of Orgon's ever-intensifying advances. The reversal of perpetrator and victim, or the equal

distribution of power, blame, and responsibility for absurd behavior forces the audience to grapple with characters who are not easily, dismissibly ridiculous. They are more complex, more real, more compelling, and more demanding of serious contemplation.

Planchon imbued Tartuffe with contemporary politics, philosophy, and psychology by responding to impulses in the text with images that reflect his contemporary associations. By 1986, Planchon had fully adopted the language of the literary theorists whose influence pushed him past "copying" Brecht into developing his own style and methods. If, he postulated in a preface to The Miser, "each new period 'reads' the works of the past differently and reveals itself through its 'reading,' . . . the director must . . . call attention to the process of reading and to the manner in which it is constructed." (8) Planchon "read" Tartuffe in a philosophical context that had not been formulated in Molière's day, although parallels can easily be discerned between the circumstances of then and now. His "reading," therefore demonstrated those associations through which a twentieth-century mind may be stimulated by the original text. In that same preface, however, Planchon is careful to caution against the "fashion for 'rediscovering' classic authors in a new light." Planchon's stagings of Molière do not so much subvert the original as exploit the various plastic theatrical media to amplify contemporary themes he discovers embedded in the text. A recent evaluation

concluded that "often critics have been too misled by Planchon's bold redefinition of a play's visual field to see that the text itself was perfectly respected." (9)

The next French director to have a major impact on the staging of Molière was Antoine Vitez, who consolidated four of the major plays into a four-evening, twenty-act cycle, in 1978-79. Similar in conception to Orson Welles's Five Kings and John Barton and Peter Hall's Wars of the Roses, the Molière Cycle was first performed in the courtyard of the Carmelite cloisters at Avignon and later brought indoors against the backdrop of an Italianate trompe l'oeil set. Vitez's telescoping of School for Wives, Tartuffe, Don Juan, and The Misanthrope explores the four plays and their four central male characters, all of whom Vitez believes to be projections of Molière himself, as variations on a single theme. The central figure, besieged by the other characters, especially the women, cries throughout for "absolute passion in a rigidly repressive world." (10) His frustrations embody the "sexual and metaphysical impotence of the exceptional man." (11) Using deconstructionist technique akin to Planchon's, Vitez signalled allusions and associations among the four parts of the piece with an "ensemble of signs," (12) comprised of repeated gestures, costume elements, and six props that were recycled through the four sections. A walking stick, a table, two chairs, and two candelabra reappeared at calculated intervals, "each accruing meaning and thus retrospectively assigning meaning

to previous performances."(13) Silent pauses, halting or mumbled speech, and exaggerated gestures were also repeated by the successive incarnations of the Molière figure. Vitez's focus was psychological rather than political, but his emphasis on the darker tones in the texts lent the event a Beckettian feeling, an uniquely "modern tragic" sensibility.(14)

In Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, recent productions of Molière's plays grew out of Meyerhold's tradition of caustic, implicative farce. Living in a society as repressive as Molière's own, these directors exploited the plays' capacities to deliver pointed satire by insinuation. Yuri Lyubimov's production of Tartuffe at the Taganka Theatre in 1969 packed a powerful political punch under the camouflage of historical references and a clever conceptual framework. That the performance received the requisite official sanction prompted one observer to marvel that the director "seem[ed] to have shown a blind spot in the censors."(15)

Lyubimov framed the production in the ruse of a staged reading presented to the authorities for approval. On either side of the stage hung a huge portrait, one of Louis XIV, the other of the Archbishop of Paris. Lining the back of the stage stood framed, life-size portraits of the characters. These were actually free-standing screens slit vertically down the middle, through which the actors could pop their heads or step out to play their scenes. Everyone

hid behind a fixed, official mask/facade. The crucial scene between Tartuffe and Elmire was played for high stakes. The table under which Orgon hid while Tartuffe seduced his wife was really his own screen propped on a four-legged stanchion. He did not emerge until Tartuffe had dragged Elmire off the central playing area and behind his own screen, where, it was implied, he raped her. When Orgon finally moved, he stood up through the split in the screen, like a beauty who pops out of a cake to find the party over. Typically, the humor caught in the throat and left a queasy feeling in the pit of the stomach. The post-intermission opening, a grand-guignol speed-through of the entire first half of the play reinforced the harsh, mechanistic edge of pointed farce.

Lyubimov focused the central relationship not on sexual bonds, but on the whereabouts of a strongbox filled with secret documents that Orgon entrusted to Tartuffe. This reference to domestic espionage and official peril was echoed in subtle implications that the Jesuits, Tartuffe's order, were in fact agents of the K.G.B. "I strain to make the far-off echo yield a cue to the events that may come in my day,"(16) said Lyubimov, quoting Pasternak, in an interview about Tartuffe. Orgon's household became, in effect, "a parable of Soviet life."(17) The end of the production underscored the contemporary allusions. Jazz accompanied Orgon's pardon, an aural "wink" to the audience about the lack of true justice in the U.S.S.R. For the

first curtain call the actors waved smilingly over and around their screens, but for the second one, they stood solemnly at the edge of the stage, their stares a silent plea to the audience not to miss the point, to connect the fiction to the sorry state of Soviet affairs and to think about it all. So, despite the highly conventionalized framing motif, the elements of antic farce, and the substitution of internal espionage for religious hypocrisy, Lyubimov's staging reflected both the angst in the play's subtext and the anguish of his own country's predicament.

American rewrightings of Molière tend to be less political in their comparisons between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. In that way, they are more faithful to Molière's own preoccupation with contemporary mores. However, the stylistic influence of the French and Eastern European models, which embroider the text with a rich theatrical vocabulary of sets, props, and gestures, can easily be traced in the more adventurous American essays. And almost all of the American stagings let Molière's steamier impulses surge into the open.

Andrei Serban's staging of The Miser, at the American Repertory Theatre in May and June 1989, provides a representative case study of how a conceptual director first responds to a classic text and then translates his response into theatrical signs.(18) Serban's is a dark vision of the play that casts an unrelenting glare on Harpagon, his family, his household, the society that tolerates him, and

the contemporary audience who might dare dismiss him as an innocuous aberration from a bygone era. Thus Harpagon was not the only miser in this production, whose visual references span the more than three centuries between the play's first production, in 1668, and the current one. His obsessive greed seemed here to have been infectious.

From the first glimpse of his children in the opening scene, the audience learned that these apples hadn't fallen very far from the tree. Despite the silent, anguished presence of their deceased mother--a life-size cardboard cutout facing upstage, fists raised in futile frustration--Cleante and Elise were every bit their father's offspring. Elise, played by Cherry Jones and clad in skimpy black negligee, was far from a virtuous maiden aflutter with fear lest her father learn she had pledged to marry good Valère. She passionately embraced her lover, biting his self-proclaimed "golden tongue." The "promise" she had relinquished was clearly not one of maidenhood but maidenhead. She stroked her belly frequently and rebuffed anything that threatened to come in contact with it. Her fears were not merely those of a dutiful daughter who had dared to verbally overstep the bounds of unreasonable paternal control. She was single, pregnant, and at the mercy of a swaggering opportunist who tried to reassure her by bragging about what a good liar he is. Cleante (Steven Zahn) appeared mid-scene in tight black bikini underwear. As Elise divulged part of her secret to him, his valet

dressed him in layers of voluptuous, eighteenth-century finery. As they bemoaned their father's tight-fisted cruelty, it became obvious that they wanted him to ease his grip so they could grab and squander its contents.

As the play continued (Serban followed the original scene progression, occasionally interpolating pantomime sections to reinforce his dark rewrighting), the servants, the neighbors, the local businessmen with whom Harpagon has dealings, everyone was depicted as a hoarding, thieving variation on the avaricious protagonist. In the original, Molière's "typically neoclassical balance sets up an arrangement of doubles, echoes, and dramatic interweaving. The main plot and subplots fertilize one another, and thus the play, far from being a mere showpiece for the male lead (as it is often performed), consists of an interplay between all the characters, who depend dramatically upon one another." (19) Serban's conceptualization recognizes the mutual importance of all the characters but turns Molière's neat neoclassical structure inside out. Traditional analysis finds the Miser a lone manifestation of evil in an otherwise good and moderate world. In Serban's version, the play lost its symmetry but honed its edge. Harpagon was not so much a freak as simply the most extreme example of unrepentant miserliness on a leech-filled stage. The satire Molière so neatly tucked into his script was unleashed as a full-blown indictment of a world that trades material goods as moral currency.

Serban's original impulse was rooted in the notion that The Miser takes place in "a world without God, everything is greed, sex, money. Nobody goes to church in this play, at least not with any feeling." (20) With this premise, the production might logically have taken religious imagery as its motif. But there is no mention of religion in the text, Molière having dealt with that branch of hypocrisy in Tartuffe. Following suit, Serban did not load the show with obvious religious images, but asserted his initial impulse by negative implication. In fact, there was only one direct religious reference in Serban's production. At one point, Cleante and Elise genuflected briefly beside their cardboard "mother." That quick gesture served at least two purposes: first, it confirmed the identity of the figure; and, second, it emphasized the symbolic significance of her absence. If only she hadn't died and taken faith and devotion with her. She left no model to counteract Harpagon's nasty influence. For this Elise and Cleante, being without their mother meant being without god. The absence of god was also suggested through multiple images of sin. The characters' vices--sloth, adultery, incest, robbery, usury--read like a list of "Thou shalt nots." The pervasive ambiance was one of selfishness, in which immediate individual urges determined everyone's behavior. Rather than a failure to implement his initial response, then, Serban's indirect method of injecting his own vision into the staging of The Miser demonstrates his respect for and willing obedience to

Molière's text.

In fact, the answer to those who criticize Serban for trampling classic texts in his rush to be at center stage is that the director took most of his cues from an adamantly faithful reading of the script. When the company felt compelled to tamper with Albert Bermel's cleverly colloquial translation, they consulted either a literal translation by Bermel or the French original as their root source. In the original, Maître Jacques informs Harpagon that his neighbors call him "les noms d'avare, de ladre, de vilain, et de fesse-mathieu." (21) Serban was not satisfied with Bermel's "Sometimes they call you the vampire and sometimes the leech." (22) As the team tried to come up with a list they liked better, Serban insisted they retain the syllabic rhythm of the French. "Because it is in French four, it has to be four. It's a rhythm." They ultimately agreed on "miser, vulture, crook, leech."

Literal interpretations of the lines were also responsible for what seemed to be some of Serban's most unusual decisions. In the first scene of Act Four, Marianne begs Cleante to be her advocate at home. "Please, don't ask me to break the [engagement] contract. I must obey my mother," she says. Serban interpreted her remarks to mean that everything she had done so far must have been with her mother's consent, that her mother sent her off to entice the old man and get his money. Thus she was played, by Pamela Gien, as a wily, skirt-lifting, flirtatious opportunist for

whom Cleante was merely a more attractive package in which to receive the Miser's fortune. Similarly, Frosine the "matchmaker" says she is in the business of "finding love" for people. "I love all the world," she says. In the context of this amoral universe, where Serban believed "there is no love," what she procures can only be sex. Frosine will arrange Harpagon's marriage for a price, but her true calling is to the oldest of professions. As embodied by the very funny and resourceful Mary Lou Rosato, Frosine fortified her machinations from a flask and stroked the Miser's cane with less than subtle innuendo.

As Lionel Gossman has written of Molière's dramatic universe, "In a world in which fathers brutalize their children, mothers are jealous of their sons, guardians stultify their wards, no one who participates can be innocent." (23) Because there were no innocents in The Miser to provide respite from the craziness, no character with whom the audience could identify and thereby differentiate itself from the pack of wolves, and because the farce was fast-paced and engaging, and because at least twice Harpagon turned and accused them directly, once going so far as to run into the first few rows to search purses for his own loot, the audience was forced to catch a glimpse of itself in Serban's unflattering mirror.

"I love that guy, Harpagon," Serban confessed to Bermel during early script sessions. "He's the only one in the play who isn't full of it." In the context of Serban's

visions of the other characters, the Miser's bizarre behavior must indeed be reassessed. It's easy to turn Harpagon into a ridiculous figure the audience can laugh at and feel morally superior to," the director told the cast at the first reading.

But I don't want the audience to walk out of the theatre feeling complacent. . . I want to show there is a part of Harpagon in all of us. I hope to dramatize that we are all implicated in Harpagon's neurosis. . . . Rather than laughing at Harpagon from a safe distance, I hope the audience will recognize the delusion that inner peace comes from financial security.

The director's scheme fostered a complex relationship between Harpagon and the audience. When the owner of a fortune is surrounded by thieves and sycophants, it seems perfectly reasonable that he keep a close eye on his treasure. Not that the production diluted the Miser's obsessive hoarding. It was, in fact, elevated to full paranoid psychosis.

One of the most interesting aspects of the play for me as a director is Harpagon's paranoia. The atmosphere of the play reminds me of Kafka and Beckett, authors who, like Molière, are comic but make you laugh in the face of tragedy. . . . One should laugh at Harpagon but also identify with the state of terror he lives in. Like many Americans, he can't relax no matter how much money he has.

Serban's key objective was to get the audience to experience the consequences of Harpagon's financial fixation.

Derek McLane's black-and-white set, a semi-circular arrangement of six, tall, square columns, depicted a palais decaying from neglect. Torn patches of wallpaper revealed old layers underneath. What remained of the topmost layer

bore scattered, enlarged images from dollar bills, a reminder that American consummation was Serban's real target. Weeds grew through cracks in the floor and walls. Near one of the columns had accumulated a boulder-sized mound of dirt. The only furniture was a worn wooden table with one side chair and an equally tattered stool. This Harpagon was so attached to his ducats that he could not even part with them to protect his own investment. Doors of various shapes and sizes were cut into every column surface, evoking farce tradition, and Serban exploited this old theatrical device to chilling effect. Members of the household eavesdropped on Harpagon all the time. They appeared slowly or suddenly, sneaking an eye or ear into view or bursting onto the stage when Harpagon, thinking he was alone, spoke of his stash. Tiny, free-form doors were neatly hidden in the flats too. At several points, they were opened by black-gloved hands that poked through to grope hungrily at the air as the stage lights dimmed and flashed disconcertingly. These walls had eyes and arms as well as ears. Harpagon's agonizing fantasies were thus projected on stage as plastic theatrical realities. The audience was not exactly asked to pity Harpagon or forgive him, but they were forced to take him--and his moral disease--seriously.

Making palpable the subtext motivated all of Serban's directorial decisions for The Miser. Serban at work is intelligent, intense, and, occasionally, impatient. He presided over The Miser rehearsals like a master chef or

corporate executive, attended by at least two flanks of assistants who can be grouped roughly as the stimulators and facilitators of his creativity. The stimulators included a personal assistant, Hafiz Karmali, off whom the director bounced most of his ideas, a corps of dramaturgs and A.R.T. interns, a movement coach, and the leading actors. The facilitators included the stage manager and her assistants, still more interns, and those student actors assigned to non-speaking roles. Individual actors, students, and interns functioned alternately in either capacity and sometimes both at the same time. Once the initial readings and discussions were over, each rehearsal began with a brief introduction to the director's ideas and goals for the scene at hand. Then he put the actors on their feet. At this point there was little talk of character nuance or motivation with anyone but Alvin Epstein, who played Harpagon. It was clear that the director already had strong physical and visual images in mind. He did not so much need to explore the text with the cast as see how his abstract ideas could be worked out in the flesh. He welcomed and often used suggestions from actors and others.

The focus of the work was kinetic and pictorial. Much like Brecht, who insisted the audience be able to understand the story without hearing a word of the dialogue, and Meyerhold, who strove for a hieroglyphics of the actor's body, Serban sculpted living stage pictures that told the story of the subtext. The director had already settled on

the fundamental issues, tensions, and objectives of each beat. Just how those impulses would become manifest in theatrical dimensions was worked out through brisk, improvisational trial and error. Foremost was the director's need to explore the rhythm, visual composition, timing, and tempo of each potential piece of business. If the full cast was not present, various facilitators stood in for absent actors, often having to master difficult or intricate movements that would later be transferred to the designated actor. Surrogate costume elements and props were also swiftly supplied. In one session, Maitre Jacques had not been given a rehearsal apron, so one of the interns literally gave him the white T-shirt off his back to tie around his waist.

Serban thought fast and trusted his instincts. If something amused him, he worked with it. Anything "boring" was quickly dropped. To his credit, he was also willing to drop favorite bits if they did not work in the larger rhythmic, stylistic, or conceptual context. Miser rehearsals proceeded at a vigorous pace with new things proposed, attempted, abandoned, and replaced in rapid succession. Missing props, uncomprehending actors, or Equity coffee breaks were obstacles the director tolerated graciously. The rush of Serban's imagination kept everyone stimulated, involved, and alert. There were, however, a few tense moments when actors were confused or frustrated if they did not immediately grasp what they were being asked to

do. The hurry of those early rehearsals came back to haunt the production when, after the first preview, it became clear that the first half of the show was too frenetic and a number of performances still seemed force-fed. The opening sequence was toned down to add more rhythmic variety and give the actors needed breathing space. The characterizations of Cleante, and Valère, played by Derek Smith, benefited considerably.

Movement coach Thom Molinaro was one of the most influential of the stimulators. A veteran choreographer and dance historian, Molinaro transformed Serban's impulses into gestures. In an earlier collaboration on Brecht's The Good Person of Setzuan, also at A.R.T., Molinaro had helped Serban achieve the kind of stylized, narrative gesture associated with Asian theatres. For The Miser, the director wanted highly stylized and animated acting, but not according to any single period or tradition. Eclectic best describes the production sensibility. Costumes, by Judith Ann Dolan, included everything from powdered wigs and a pirate's eye patch to leather pants and platform heels. Serban wanted the movement to be similarly anachronistic to emphasize the timeless relevance of the text. "The movement, what would you call it classical? modern? It is neither. Sometimes it's modern, and sometimes they make a flourish."

"Where are you, Thom? He can't just stand there and say the line!" became Serban's rehearsal refrain. Counting each movement in measured time, Molinaro sprinkled the production

with physical quotes from classical dance, romantic acting, silent movies, burlesque, vaudeville, Italian cinema, and musical comedy. His ideas were always clever and often hilarious. Harpagon instructs a member of the staff to be careful when washing stemware for his engagement party. Molinaro declared that the one who handles the glassware must be the most nervous, so he devised a clumsy, fumbling, near-pratfall to serve as the servant's acknowledgement of his orders. In another scene, Harpagon inspects La Fleche's hands and then demands, in one of Molière's funniest lines, to see his "other ones." Actor Thomas Derrah and Molinaro worked out a bit in which Derrah removed his jacket, put it on backwards and showed his hands behind his back. When the Miser went on to check La Fleche's pockets, Derrah pulled his pants down around his ankles and Epstein stuck his head between Derrah's legs.

Clearly, Serban's method in The Miser, was not subtle. Except for a focus on the actor's body as the primary theatrical signifier, and the final ritual image, the director of the Fragments of a Trilogy can barely be detected here. Where the Fragments explored minute gradations of feeling and drew its audience into its rarefied aura, The Miser was drawn in bold, often shocking strokes. "Oedipal rivalry is ferocious in this play," Serban told the cast.(24) When Cleante and his father finally had it out, an enraged Harpagon insisted that Marianne was "my territory" and grabbed his unyielding son's

testicles to prove who was boss. Cleante retaliated in kind until they were both red-faced and winded. The fusion of Bermel's wordplay and Serban's overt physicalization of psychic and emotional states climaxed here in an outrageous but undeniably apt theatrical moment.

The staging tended to be similarly graphic throughout, although it worked best when a piece of business commented upon rather than illustrated a point overtly stated in the text. In response to Molière's implications, the director wove his own commentary into the performance, adding layers of contemporary meaning and roughing up the smooth neoclassical texture of the play. Ironic counterpoint between words, intonation, and gesture was stressed: "Lines that seem sincere should be genuinely full of shit," Serban encouraged when the actors did not reach for broad stylization. "The audience shouldn't see that you're hiding something. You should be the most naturalistic when you are most full of shit." When the acting lacked a sharp farcical edge, he rejected it as "schtick." The work had to be "interesting" as well as funny. "It must be very funny," Serban insisted, "but in the right way." When the action contradicted the obvious meaning of a given line, Serban's method spotlighted sticky issues that Molière had merely hinted at. The testicles sequence is a good example. Frosine's phallic fondling of Harpagon's cane is another. The propriety of such scenes may be judged according to a particular viewer's sense of decorum, but their theatrical

potency and relevance to Molière's original cannot be disputed. At times it seemed as if Serban were finally releasing Molière's pent-up fury.

Yet, despite Serban's vigilance, there were moments in the production that simply replicated a verbal image in three dimensions. For example, Harpagon walked his fingers across the table on the word "spider". Similarly, the tenuous status of Marianne's virtue had been well established by the final scene. It was unnecessary to add an aside in which Valère, having just discovered his Neapolitan heritage, calls her a "prostituzione." (25) In such instances, words and gesture become redundant, and the result cartoonish. These and a few similar lapses provided some critics valid, if fleeting, opportunities to accuse the director of either not trusting the text as a legitimate theatrical element or trying to eclipse it.

To further understand the process through which Serban asserted his own concept, it is valuable to trace the evolution of two mimed sequences which he inserted to materialize Harpagon's delusions. Serban wanted to end the first half of the show with a pantomime that would bring one of the Miser's nightmares to life. A brief discussion with Epstein determined that Harpagon is most afraid of thieves stealing his money, guests eating his food, and his son prevailing with Marianne. Thom Molinaro was asked to "do a workshop" on those ideas. From ten minutes of improvisation with the cast emerged a movement series that involved

dancing with a cashbox, savoring grapes, and various suggestive embraces between Marianne and Cleante. Serban edited and blocked the movements into a three-minute sequence. By opening night, the scene had been distilled to less than a minute, and the actors appeared in long black gloves, capes, and hoods. The Harpagonettes, as the company came to call them, were grotesque figures, insatiable and unrelenting. They were like free-ranging ids, fulfilling every urge without conscience or restraint, a fitting symbol of the all-consuming American quest to have it all and right away.

The director also wanted to end the play with an interpolation. Molière ties up loose ends with a *deus ex machina* in the person of Anselme, the wealthy Neapolitan nobleman who turns out to be the father of Valère and Marianne. He provides the cash to settle all conflicts, and the Miser is relieved of further fiscal liability for his children. Serban saw the arrival of Anselme as the proverbial ship coming in for everyone. Anselme appeared suddenly through a door concealed high in one of the columns, and a huge, gilded, cutout of a boat descended from the flies. Valère automatically assumed an Italian accent, and money rained from above as all joined in a happy jig. In a program note, however, translator Bermel points out that Molière did not really resolve all in his happy ending: the Miser goes unpunished. Equilibrium is restored, but the scales of justice remain unbalanced. Serban agreed but

insisted that Harpagon, not having learned anything, does suffer a severe punishment in the perpetuation of his internal turmoil. So chronic is Harpagon's moral and emotional disease, according to Serban's reading, that "the end of the play should be linked with a mythological image that devours, suffocates, takes away life."

The "mythological image" turned out to be a pantomimed epilogue. Several times throughout the performance, a dog was heard howling outside Harpagon's house. Afraid that the howling signalled the dog's discovery of the cashbox buried in the garden, the Miser had bolted offstage every time he heard it. After the final line everyone but Harpagon exited to bear glad tidings to Marianne's newly unwidowed mother. Harpagon was left alone on stage, contentedly nuzzling and cooing to his cashbox. Then the barking sounded again. The stage went dark as Harpagon's ecstasy quickly turned, via Pavlovian response, to terror, despite the fact that he held his treasure in his own hands. Epstein's body crumpled as he sank to the floor, hugging the box. He crept upstage and, clawing with his fingernails, began to dig a new trench to hide it. The pace of his movements gradually slowed as he repeatedly poured dirt over the box from between his wiggling fingers. In the final image, Harpagon knelt alone in a cone of harsh white light while the masked faces of the other characters peered silently through the various doors. "The more you are insured and assured, the more insecure you are," said Serban. "You have that much more to lose."

Haunting, ceremonial, solemn, and sad, Serban's coda underscored his pessimistic interpretation of the play.

"Serban drives Molière's point home," wrote the Boston Globe critic Kevin Kelly in a typically mixed review.(26) "Whatever our distance from Harpagon's obsessive greed, we're really just as interested in money as he is, if, perhaps, less maniacally." There was no mistaking the contemporary relevance Serban took pains to underscore: "When he sits in the audience next to you [searching through bags for his 50,000 ducats], he's first cousin to the Helmsleys, the Marcoses, the Trumps." Nor were the director's more somber warnings overlooked. The final image, Kelly reported, "has the power of the final scene in The Treasure of the Sierra Madre, gold dust blowing away in the wind."

Of course, the warning to beware the worship of money was not something Serban discovered or grafted on to the original. Molière had much the same intention in 1668. Serban's innovations, and what made his production controversial (and conceptual), were his serious overtones and raucous stylization. The stage imagery through which the director expressed his response to Molière's play can be seen to have projected a simultaneous system of theatrical signs (sounds, gestures, intonations, etc.) that bounced off the text to amplify and intensify its darker tones. Serban's direction did less to update or transplant the play from one historical period to another, in what Brustein

would call a simile production, than to shake it loose from the social and artistic strictures of the period in which it was written so that it might speak more emphatically to its audience in 1989.

Kelly and other reviewers objected, however, to what they felt to be an overload of contemporary license. "In italicizing the play's essential crassitude with explicit sexuality, Serban has staged a 'Miser' that more often seems sex-obsessed than money-grubbing," wrote Kelly, parenthetically and incorrectly postulating that the production "may be the most erotic Molière ever."<sup>(27)</sup> He objected to the amount of blatant theatricalization of Harpagon's nightmares and described the lascivious depiction of Marianne as evidence of the director being "smirkingly vulgar." He did, however, praise Serban's sense of adventure, Bermel's "breezily apt translation," and most of the performances, especially that of Alvin Epstein, who was almost unanimously well-reviewed. Negative criticism of the production was leveled mostly at the extent of directorial outrageousness. Serban's basic intent was too obviously connected to Molière's to have elicited objections.

While Serban violated Molière's seventeenth-century etiquette and inverted Molière's structural balance by painting all the characters in various shades of Harpagon's hue, the aims of his production were clearly in sync with the original. Serban's rewrighting extended the Miser's obsessive greed, paranoia, insensitivity, and insincerity to

the whole community in a way that resonates easily with life in these United States, both thematically and in its audacious performance aesthetic. The audience could not dismiss Harpagon as a freak but were forced to accept him as an extreme manifestation of a still-potent and painful communal neurosis. The appearance of the Harpagonettes reinforced the idea, as did the complicity of the audience members who clung to their purses when the Miser swooped into the aisles. Just as the Globe reviewer was reminded of contemporary paragons of avarice, the audience was reminded of the ways we revere-revile their ingenious knavery. It was through such recognition that Molière's and Serban's farcical punches connected, both with each other and with the A.R.T. audience.

As might be expected, Serban is not alone among his directorial colleagues in underscoring the darker aspects of Molière's plays. Despite their renegade reputation, conceptual directors tend to take their texts very seriously, even when their productions turn out irreverent or satirical. Other recent directorial attempts at Molière present a surprising concurrence of themes and strategies in what would at first appear to be quite different conceptualizations. Productions by Liviu Ciulei, Garland Wright, Richard Foreman, and Lucian Pintilie have shared the transposition or manipulation of place and period; the full venting of extreme sexual and religious passions; the tendency to see the world--and not just the main character--

as mad; the paranoid sense of being watched or spied upon by malevolent forces; and an overall emphasis on the scarier aspects of Molière's farce. While there is great stylistic variety in the ways these directors theatricalized the various motifs, their repetition suggests that they tap into live veins running through both Molière's plays and the contemporary world.

Garland Wright has directed two solid productions of plays by Molière, neither of which took exceptional textual or conceptual risks, but both of which sounded striking political echoes that seemed to resonate from deep within Molière's own voice. His production of The Misanthrope opened his tenure as Artistic Director of the Guthrie Theatre, in 1987. Wright updated the setting to the summer of 1792, five months before the execution of Louis XVI to reflect his understanding that the play is "about the myopic people who caused the French Revolution." Alceste, in this conception of the play is "not a nonconformist outcast, but an unrecognized hero of the revolution." (28) By attributing to Molière almost mystical powers of foresight, Wright was able to articulate the "I told you so" Molière did not live to utter. At the same time, and without direct contemporary references, the director sounded a clear warning to those self-absorbed strivers who choose to ignore the ever-widening gap between America's poor and super-rich. Such inequities now threaten to erupt from pandemic street crime to a full-fledged revolution as bloody as the September

Massacre with which he ended the production.

As the play progressed, with the actors taking advantage of a glossy, colonnaded set by Joel Fontaine, voluptuously decorated costumes by Jack Edwards, and Richard Wilbur's highly polished verse translation to depict an over-refined, cynically sterile aristocracy, the sounds of revolution intensified. It began with vocal protests, soldiers singing the Marseillaise, and proceeded to gunfire, and finally cannon blasts shattered the windows through which could be seen Paris ablaze.

The setting was Célimène's bedroom, which underscored her depiction as a sexually mature woman whose inability to extricate herself from the superficial rituals of social discourse seemed more sad than infuriating. Caroline Lagerfelt received unanimously enthusiastic reviews for her portrayal, which exposed the dangerously conventional and vulnerable woman beneath the powdered wigs and petticoats and painted face. Alone with Alceste, stripped down to her dressing gown and her own short, matted hair, Lagerfelt's Célimène expressed a genuine longing for him as they slid to the floor in the early stages of passionate love-making. (The sexiness of this scene surpassed the hot-lipped groping in Serban's The Miser because Célimène and Alceste were played with real emotions at stake.) That she jumped out from under him as soon as other callers were announced made her seem like an automaton, so steeped in the foolish ways of the world that she could barely control her own behavior,

even when faced with a more meaningful alternative. At least Alceste had the insight to suffer over the irreconcilable facts of his hatred of hypocrisy and his undying love for its walking epitome.

The apocalyptic end of the production found Célimène alone, having "virtually commit[ted] suicide by refusing to leave Paris with the still-loyal Alceste." (29) As her window panes shattered, she tried in vain to shut out the chaos by drawing the curtains. Dressed in a deep-red gown, she then gathered roses strewn across the floor and curtsied. This awkward and futile gesture, carried out with blank expression, underscored her terror and desperation. By then, it was too late to repent or undo the abuse the petty Célimènes had wreaked on so many miserables. "Most of my productions have a parallel theatrical imagery going on," Wright has commented about his staging of Célimène's exit. In her final humiliation, he says, "she realizes that her ultimate destiny is to be the butt of a joke in a Molière play." Her eery, inept curtain call signalled her vague realization too late that she was in some way responsible for her own fate.

Célimène thus became the real target of Wright's criticism. Molière shows Alceste the loser who must forgo the comfort of companionship because he refuses to reconcile himself to the little white lies that smooth over the bumps in human relationships. While it is clear that the dramatist cloaked his own distaste in the main character's

choler, Wright explodes the myth that such "niceties" do not exact a heavy price. Alceste may be an obstinate pain in the neck, but his truth is far less of a threat to the general peace than the self-imposed blindness with which the others allowed a violent revolution to sneak up and destroy them.

Wright's earlier staging of Don Juan for the Denver Center Theatre Company in 1984, addressed the politics of class and gender through the presence of a gallery of over-painted aristocrats stationed on a retractable upper level parallel to the front of the stage. Revealed intermittently, the gallery watched Don Juan's escapades with frozen, bored expressions. They appeared at once menacing and remote, disapproving and yet unwilling to intervene as Don Juan assaulted each subsequent social and sexual contract.

The Don's insatiable appetite for women was here portrayed as a pure and unquenchable thirst for defiance. The country lasses, usually fresh-faced, unblemished fruits begging a first bite, were dirty, bawdy farmhands plucking the feathers out of real chickens.(30) Don Juan's indiscriminate pursuit of these two proved him not so much an incorrigible lover of women and pleasure, but a fanatic flaunter of social rules. And the women he abused collected like a silent chorus in the final confrontation scenes. They stood behind him in the face of Don Carlos's accusations and the statue's ultimate revenge, a shockingly

benign specter of his wrongdoings. They even bowed to the statue of Don Juan that reemerged from the fiery pit of hell into whose depths he had just descended after plopping himself down in the Commander's stony lap.

Was their ambiguous presence meant to suggest something transcendent about female powers of forgiveness? Or, having demonstrated Don Juan's loathing for those who willingly make themselves vulnerable to his own hypocrisy, was the director blaming the victims too? Unfortunately, the production never quite found its own voice, in spite of some compelling visual imagery, strong acting, and at least the impression of tight theatrical coherence. Rather than the abuse of directorial license, then, perhaps what blunted this production's point(s) was a certain conceptual timidity. Wright's ideas were struggling to break free but stayed trapped within the secure confines of a stiff and ambiguous staging.

Liviu Ciulei's Don Juan (Arena Stage, 1979), on the other hand, was one of those misguided attempts to refresh a classic by changing its time and locale that have given conceptual directing a bad name. This "simile" production transposed the setting to Paris in La Belle Epoque, a period renowned for sensuality and loose morals. Program notes strained to justify the implicit comparison of the seventeenth, late-nineteenth, and twentieth centuries with well-pedigreed quotations from Pascal to Aleksandr Solzhenitzyn. But setting dramatic literature's most

flagrant abuser of conventional morality in such an hospitable environment backfired. Ciulei effectively wiped out any dramatic tension between Don Juan's actions and the society against which Molière intended him to rebel. It is possible that Ciulei was aiming for a more Houdini-esque Don Juan, a hypnotic rather than swashbuckling seducer, but the effect was over-intellectualized. Critics complained that the play seemed to have had the life drained out of it.(31)

Ironically, Ciulei's weak directorial concept inspired Ming Cho Lee to design an absolutely spectacular set (although the opponents of the conceptual approach might argue that overemphasis on design is exactly its shortcoming). That Ciulei himself trained as an architect seems significant to the glistening, lavishly appointed, two-tiered gazebo they erected with its second story a few inches above the usual stage floor and its lower level a full flight below. The upper level stood for Don Juan's salon and the beach (where the maidens he seduces were portrayed as a couple of female fishmongers, whose presence inadvertently lent the evening a Pirandellian twist. They looked as if they had wandered in off a set for Act I of Pygmalion). The lower level was used as the entry hall for the Don's flat and as the Commander's tomb. One reviewer called it "a set so ingenious and riveting that one has to keep reminding oneself to stop gazing at it and pay attention to what the actors are saying."(32) A double-bottomed fishbowl through which the audience can see

simultaneous action has enormous potential as a setting for this play about duplicity and the contrast between social and religious norms and personal desires. Ciulei apparently wasted the opportunity. Many of those who forced themselves to listen were disappointed. Ciulei's gimmicks "ought to be punishable by a Molière Defense Society," scolded Judith Martin in the Washington Post. (33) Even Julius Novick of the Village Voice who asserted that "Mr. Ciulei's inventions are never vulgar, or dismissive of the play;" and that "Mr. Ciulei has found a way for American actors to bring this refractory classic to life," (34) conceded that the production was marred by "a vast sea of by-play" that pushed the evening past three hours long. "Someone," Novick suggested, "should buy this director a watch."

Some of the blame for Wright's and Ciulei's difficulties has been placed on Molière's hastily written and somewhat sprawling text. Don Juan lacks the tight coherence of Molière's more popular scripts, but the "problems" with the play suggest an open field for the more diffuse, post-modern style of a director like Richard Foreman. Foreman first directed Don Juan at the Guthrie in fall 1981 and was invited by Joseph Papp to revive it for the New York Shakespeare Festival the following summer. Foreman applied the techniques he had developed for his own Ontological-Hysteric theatre pieces in the 1970s: curtains that suddenly reveal or conceal tableaux, blinding quartz lights, mirrors, strings that represent "lines of force" bisecting

the stage, bursts of disorienting sound and music. In a gesture similar to Wright's gallery of onlookers, Foreman also added a chorus of ghastly white-faced "aristocrats" who stalked the main character and commented on his every line and action. When Sganarelle tells his master "you talk like a book," the chorus wheeled out a lectern. At the mention of heaven, there was the pounding of an organ. Don Juan insisted the only thing he believed is that "two and two make four" and a blackboard with sums appeared beside him. Foreman used this Brechtian device and other seemingly gratuitous strategies to focus the audience's attention on the slipperiness of language in the text and the way theatrical production can dismantle the obvious to show its true and richer ambiguity.

Here again, Gerald Rabkin provides valuable critical insight. Rabkin writes that in his first staging of a classic text, Foreman worked from the premise that

Language is still treacherous--indeed even more so when it is encrusted with the sedimentation of history. . . . With Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, et al., [Foreman] rejects the realist or authoritarian heresy that the critic (or director) can make definitive contact with some ultimate, residual meaning when, in reality, he is simply transcribing a code--or a series of interlocking codes which can be deciphered but never fully recovered. (35)

From this viewpoint, the text is seen as a series of clues, all useful but not all pointing to the same solution. The director's task, then, is to follow those leads wherever they may take him, even if they take him in several directions at once. It is as if the text were a series of

Rorschachs and the production a showing of the director's associations. The imagery may be hard to decipher, but it follows the internal, sometimes bizarre, logic of the subconscious. If we have agreed that conceptual directors "rewright" classic plays by changing their shape, style, emphasis, or even genre, Foreman's work is better depicted as "rewriting" in Derrida's sense of the critic (substitute director) who in the act of reading inevitably writes his own text by fulfilling the author's indications with his own referents. Foreman responded idiosyncratically to Molière's cues and expressed his response in the plastic language of theatrical media, allowing aural and visual signs to echo, corroborate, or defy the spoken word. Rabkin again:

For Foreman, the attraction of the play lies in its historical displacement: it harkens back to Tirso de Molina's *Enemy of God* and beckons forward toward the rationalist Enlightenment . . . his production aims not at a univocal reading of the play or the myth, but at a synthesis of opposed values: 'a series of articulated echoes and reflections as the characters mimic both each others' and their own language and gestures' (Guthrie notes). Affirming Derrida's deconstructionism, he aims to show the text to be woven from different strands which can never result in a synthesis, but continually displace one another.(36)

While Foreman's style received accolades when applied to his own highly personal and experimental texts, critics bristled at his work on the Don Juan. "This sort of thing turns the audience into a group of dull-witted students in need of visual reinforcement," reported Allan Wallach of Newsday.(37) John Seitz's highly choreographed performance of the title role, modeled on the conventions of Baroque

opera in a subtle historical allusion to Molière's own theatrical epoch, was decried as "a scowling, unattractive gnome who walked like a crab." (38) The chorus were "an avenging mob of crucifix-bearing, chalk-faced grotesques who might have popped out of Peter Brook's Marat/Sade." (39) Those who sought coherence in the staging agreed that the ultimate problem "with Mr. Foreman's idiosyncratic visual embodiment of the play's themes was that it sent him into a cul-de-sac when he had to deal with the letter of the text. . . . He settled instead for proving that he could give a four-century-old classic the Foreman stamp, no matter what," wrote Frank Rich in the Times. An angry Julius Novick declared that "Mr. Foreman is not inept; he is perverse. . . . [he] celebrates himself in a vainglorious demonstration of the destructive power that a live director can wield over a dead playwright. I suspect, however, that when Mr. Foreman is just as dead as Molière, Molière will prove to be a great deal more alive than Mr. Foreman." (40) Even Rabkin had to concede that "in accepting the textual immutability of the play, [Foreman's] revisionary strategies must all be embodied in his mise en scène and hence risk the dangers of imposition and redundancy, dangers plaguing all such experimental versions of 'fixed' classics." (41)

In contrast, Lucian Pintilie's 1984-85 Tartuffe demonstrated how an outlandish production concept can give a classic new stage life. "This is not, one must emphasize, the Tartuffe, but a Tartuffe," wrote Mel Gussow in the

Times, "one 20th-century directorial vision of a 17th-century masterpiece." (42) No production can be the Tartuffe. Even the ill-fated staging Molière supervised himself was subject to the vicissitudes and variables of an art form that depends on frail and stubborn human beings to realize an author's vision. If, as Sellars claims, theatre is risky, it is also volatile, temporal, and impossible to replicate exactly from one performance to another. Given the inherent inconstancy of theatrical performance, which of the original few performances that were allowed before Tartuffe was stifled should be considered the most "authentic" one? What Pintilié did in his acclaimed Tartuffe, not unlike the method Serban used with The Miser, was to corporealize textual metaphors as theatrical motifs using a progression of anachronistic references to drive home the play's ominous contemporary relevance. Ironically, Pintilié's Tartuffe, first produced at the Guthrie in the summer of 1984 and restaged for Arena Stage in April 1985, was so well-received that it has come to be recognized, paradoxically, as a definitive reinterpretation. (43)

Proceeding from a literal reading of Mme. Pernelle's lines in the first scene, Pintilié and his long-time design collaborators, Radu (sets) and Miruna (costumes) Boruzescu, designed Orgon's home as "a madhouse with the keeper gone." The walls and floor of the Arena auditorium were covered with white institutional tile. Tartuffe's metaphorical references to self-flagellation and the wearing of a hair

shirt were translated to physical realities. Tartuffe first emerged from a trap below the stage, red welts on his back visible beneath his coarse tunic. His passage was dark and smoky. Thunder and organ music accompanied him to the stage. He squinted at the light. Antic rushing about and brisk slapstick routines spilled over into the audience. Frenzy--religious, nervous, and sexual--permeated the space. A number of reviewers drew parallels with leaders of the then-flourishing Moral Majority.

A simple theatrical gesture in the opening scene introduced Pintilié's various thematic threads. The scene was played as a picnic at which a basket of apples was overturned. The red fruits that rolled across the floor conjuring images of the Garden of Eden later "turn[ed] up in the darndest places . . . as Tartuffe's calling cards--symbols of carnal temptation and manipulative passion."(44) Beginning here in Genesis, the production's visual references then moved through the ages, past Molière, into the present, and on to Armageddon. As the scenes progressed, costumes were shorn of Baroque ornamentation, wigs were removed, and props became more and more familiar. At the denouement, Orgon clutched a ham-on-rye and an oversize VISA card to sustain him in his flight from ruin. Working clocks on all four walls of the Arena auditorium kept real time until the production hit the twentieth century when the hands twirled round and round in a mad rush to the end of the world. Like Planchon and Serban, who

emphasized a present need to understand Molière's darker insinuations, Pintilié ended Tartuffe with a stunningly theatrical contemporary equivalent for Molière's more genteel deus ex machina. The final show-stopping scene featured the landing of a real helicopter on the Arena stage (at the Guthrie, a 1936 Deussenberg crashed through the back wall). Its turbulence literally shook the tiles off the walls, and its landing broke a crucifix-shaped cavern in the floor. The machine-gun-toting thugs who emerged from the helicopter were led by Laurent, a silent figure added by the director, who acted as Tartuffe's servant until the end, when he was exposed to have been an agent of the state all along. Pintilié's ending "converts the monarch from a protector to a tyrant who will let his citizens suffer to increase their awe and dependence," wrote William Henry in Time Magazine. "Perhaps it takes an East European, schooled in the ways of the surveillance state, to grasp the political implications of that conventional element of farce."(45)

If dramatic classics are distinguished by their capacity to seem continually relevant across time and distance, conceptual directors have given Molière's plays a leg up in the American theatre. Time and again, critics of these productions lamented the scarcity of opportunities to see Molière on stage. By shaking off the reputation of mannered posing and tepid, if witty, chatter, conceptual directors have led audiences to grapple with the genuinely outraged

and outrageous Molière. His plays have been proven mine fields set to explode our most deeply held illusions about the organizations and institutions that govern social life. It is thus no great surprise that directors who enjoy exposing "givens" as fallacies have been attracted to Molière. The influence of deconstruction and other strains of post-modern criticism is appropriate. As the literary world dismantles received interpretations of the great books, so, it is time for the theatre, if it is to keep its masterpieces on the stage, to dissect, rediscover, and rewrite its own past. The trick, as Julius Novick reminds us, is "to dance with Molière, not to trample him underfoot." (46)

## Chapter Six

### PETER SELLARS'S MOZART-DA PONTE TRILOGY

In the past, opera, more than any other theatrical form, adhered to a deeply entrenched performance tradition. A limited active repertory, extraordinary technical demands, and an elitist reputation conspired to keep the ranks of performers and audiences relatively low. Historically rarefied and exclusionary, opera remained in the hands of a chosen few. Within that coterie, singing techniques and production styles, lovingly handed down through generations, were preserved substantially intact until the first decades of the twentieth century. Remnants of those traditions can still be seen and heard in opera houses throughout the world. Sets and costumes in these productions may look much the same as they did when the operas were first produced one, two, or even three hundred years ago. The bulk of the audience, not unlike those who bring copies of the plays to performances of Shakespeare, knows the works and takes pleasure in comparing subtle nuances of vocal technique or variations in small bits of business.

Opera's insularity has been augmented by the infrequency with which new operas enter the performing repertory. Company managers, daunted by the economics of mounting even a modest production, tend to schedule box-office reliables

again and again. In the theatre, where new plays (of admittedly uneven merit) are spawned like guppies, an intermittent trickle of new scripts feeds into the mainstream. For both artistic and financial reasons, serious theatre companies balance their classical offerings with new work. Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival, for example, is as committed to producing new plays as to the canon of its namesake. The dedicated closed circle of opera mavens may be credited with preservation of a noble tradition, but it can also be blamed for having fossilized the operatic repertoire and prevented opportunities to rediscover the works in light of contemporary sensibilities.

It is neither necessary nor possible here to cover the history of opera in the twentieth century. The immediate purpose is to consider conceptual approaches to opera as part of a wider theatrical trend.<sup>(1)</sup> It is interesting to remember, however, that it was in response to encrusted artificiality in the opera that Wagner, and Appia in his service, envisioned a synthetic performance genre including music and drama that could do justice to both without slighting either one. Their ideas inspired superficial changes in design, but their spirit of radical reform has had a long-delayed and hotly contested effect on the performance of the classic repertory. What could be further from the synthetic ideal than a common practice that provides for a small, international pool of superstar singers to flit from city to city all over the world to sing

the leading roles in productions that are rehearsed entirely without them until days or hours before the performance?(2) This system imposes severe restrictions on creative and interpretative leeway; received meanings and methods necessarily prevail. Early opera history includes few visionaries like Otto Klemperer, whose Kroll Opera in the late 1920s merged the talents of performers from the Berlin theatre and designers from the Bauhaus with the great classic operas. Much of what has been considered revolutionary in this otherwise homogenous global opera world has consisted in abstract design or "simile" transpositions of sets and costumes.(3) Only since the 1940s have such directors as Tyrone Guthrie, Peter Brook, Giorgio Strehler, Andrei Serban, Jonathan Miller, and Peter Sellars breathed new life into old operas. Their renegade efforts thus seem a welcome breeze to those who have tired of or felt left out of the tradition and a foul wind to those who cherish its insularity.

Edward Said's post-structuralist critique of operatic tradition links issues in music performance to those that have already been discussed in theatre. Revival according to historical precedent, he explains, is really a search for

some lost or forgotten original. The vogue for early music played on original instruments, the revival of bel canto repertoire and style, the return to Mahler: All these have embodied not just the idea of recuperation, but a usually unstated ideology of authenticity. But it is not generally noted that even so apparently harmless and "correct" a notion as faithfulness to an original is itself already an interpretation, in which a slew of unverifiable

entities . . . are set up and bowed to as if they were facts of nature.(4)

Among those "unverifiable entities" must be included both performance conventions and the underlying social structures and assumptions upon which the originals were tacitly (or sometimes consciously) based. Thomas Disch cleverly observed that "stage directors stand in loco auctoris to the creator."(5) As surrogate authors, or rewrighters, of texts in performance, directors have the dual benefits of historical distance from the original and first-hand experience of the cultural context of the current production. Historical distance allows today's directors to see yesterday's facts of nature as artifacts of a specific culture. The morals and etiquette that governed social intercourse two hundred years ago are now perceived as relics of the past, and it is up to directors whether their productions observe the inherent codes or replace them with more contemporary ones.

What makes this business so tricky is the fact that contemporary life is based on equally transient assumptions. In the future, our own concepts of who we are, how we should live, and our place in the universe will seem as quaint as crinolines and curtsies seem to us. Conceptual directors who avail themselves of this perspective apply insights about the past to a frank analysis of the present by substituting contemporary equivalents in order to subject them to the same scrutiny. Productions that refer back and

forth from the original period of a play or opera's creation to the present performance context can give palpable evidence of how the original reverberates in our own culture. Interpretation, Said continues, "has become inventive, a form of deliberate misreading, supplying all sorts of frankly conjectural possibilities as a way of rendering the work's historical distance, the author's silence, the critic's [here director's] manifest power over the work."(6)

A set of assumptions with which to begin exploring the conceptual approach to opera is just exactly what "opera" is. The New York Times's Donal Henahan offers this parochial definition: Opera is "drama as expressed in lyrical manipulation of the vocal cords."(7) He summarily condemns acting, scenery, or lighting that does more than provide a simple backdrop to the voice. While his rancor over theatrical effects that overtake, obscure, or otherwise detract from musical qualities is probably justified in ample cases of incompetent directorial excess, he is unfair and snobbish when he attaches the label "sophisticated sleaze" to any and all adventurous attempts by "directors from the legitimate theater"(8) to rewrite traditional stagings. Henahan demonstrates the most virulent kind of anti-theatrical prejudice and denies opera its full dimensions. The inadequacy of his perspective becomes glaringly obvious when, for example, he berates musicologists for mentioning the staging and philosophical

themes in productions of Wagner.(9) "It is a legitimate role of the opera director to rethink conventions and give us the clichés of the future," Henahan speciously concludes: "What is not his legitimate function is to stand opera on its head." No self-respecting artist wants to create clichés of any kind. It is a director's duty to abandon the empty platitudes of stage cliché and forge a fresh and engaged response to the work. Why not turn an art form on its head? You never know what gems will fall out of its pockets.

Into this hotbed of professional Oedipal rage, in which the guardians of tradition cling to the past despite the forceful and inevitable encroachments of the avant-garde, burst Peter Sellars, fresh from Harvard, in 1980. His first assignment out of college was to direct Mozart-da Ponte's Don Giovanni for the Boston Opera. Irrepressible, young (he turned thirty in 1987) and energetic, Sellars is tenacious in his belief that the classics can be fully realized on contemporary stages only through productions that unfold in the present tense. He has since mounted such controversial dramatic and operatic productions as Sophocles's Ajax set at the Pentagon with deaf-mute Howie Seago in the title role; Shakespeare's Pericles outfitted with an array of anachronistic references spanning the centuries from the Roman Empire to American urban blight; Handel's Giulio Cesare around the swimming pool of a Middle Eastern luxury hotel; and a "long, serious, sad musical"(10) that evolved

when the director added seventeen Gershwin show tunes to Gorky's Summerfolk (the director was only twenty-five when Liviu Ciulei invited him to the Guthrie Theater to do Hang on to Me). He received a five-year MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant in 1983 and was quickly dubbed the latest enfant terrible in the proprietary battle over classic texts in performance.

"Whatever you do on stage must = the public at the time that you stage it," Sellars once told an interviewer. (11) He denies imposing an alien "concept" on his productions, but insists that in the theatre "the basic level of honesty is that everybody is alive at the moment and in the same room. . . . That's what's different from movies or television." Live actors and audiences share common experiences and assumptions about the world, some of which might be very different from those of actors and audiences who experienced the classics when they were new works. In the theatre, actors and audiences also share space and air, and Sellars likes to keep everyone aware of each other's presence. He likes to keep the house lights up and play with fourth-wall illusion by combining diverse theatrical modes within a performance. Stylized gesture and movement are performed by actors clad in outfits off the racks of Macy's and The GAP. Performers break out of scenes to address the audience. Blatantly fake scenic elements are added to hyperrealistic sets. Vakhtangov would have appreciated Sellars's theatricalism; "fantastic realism"

suits the young director's blend of Stanislavskian sincerity and Meyerhold's graphic physical action. The dual sensibilities involve the audience in Sellars's theatrical process, reminding them that they are seeing the old work through new eyes and encouraging them to shift focus between the simultaneous worlds of the author and the director. Deconstructionist critics might say Sellars thus demystifies the theatrical event and brings his audience into more active participation.

Dressing the characters in up-to-date fashions, Sellars believes, cuts through the stylistic barriers that separate a late twentieth-century spectator from the meatier substance of a classic text. He concedes that gifted actors costumed in "period" might be able to show how their characters' predicaments relate to the audience's own. "But what a pity," he says, "to waste all that talent just to make that statement when that statement could be made so much faster and relieve the performer to concentrate on other things." Like so many other conceptual directors who come under attack for circumventing the time-honored patina of the classics, Sellars is impatient to get at the core perplexities that make classics intriguing again and again. Unfortunately, his means can be deceptively glib. A man of no modest ambition--Sellars told a reporter for the New York Times "My goal is to create in my lifetime a 20th-century performance tradition of opera"(12)--the director is in fact quite serious about his work. He is thoughtful, well-

informed, knows his theatre history, and understands exactly how the smallest gesture will read from the stage (On whether or not some of his more jarring juxtapositions were meant to produce an alienation effect: "It is Brecht, it's Shakespeare, it's medieval." And it is.) He has a rationale for every carefully planned and orchestrated moment and discusses his productions with seductive conviction. He can out-talk any objection. (On the often-noted problems with Act I of Don Giovanni: "Everyone will be happier when they see it on video; the camera is able to give you real focus.") His supporters enjoy his startling anachronisms and recognize his involvement in the murkier, less-discussed regions of familiar texts; his detractors take his shorthand as shortcuts around serious material and denounce his work as parody. The truth lies somewhere in between.

The pros, cons, and paradoxes of Sellars's approach emerge in a close examination of his Mozart-da Ponte trilogy, the full cycle of operas created by the composer and librettist between 1781 and 1790, including Le Nozze di Figaro, Don Giovanni, and Così fan Tutte. The director, his collaborator/conductor Craig Smith, and a corps of singers have been working together on these productions for more than ten years. Initial rehearsals for each piece were divided into two periods. Although Sellars claims he knows "nothing" at the outset about how his productions will evolve, he and the design team went into the first, three- to four-week rehearsal period, with some sense of direction.

Those early weeks were spent exploring the material, testing and revising original ideas, and allowing the singers a first crack at the score. "Some ideas are simply not valid and you don't know until you try them," he says. After the first period, the production team finalized their plans, integrating the discoveries made during early rehearsals. Sets and costumes also were constructed during that hiatus. The second phase of rehearsals, usually a three-week period leading into opening night, was conducted in the set, allowing an unusually long period of adjustment to the physical environment. The performances were never considered finalized, however. Sellars is well-known for tinkering with large and small details night by night during the run of a show. Multiple revivals of the Mozart operas have generated hundreds of major and minor revisions. It is too early to predict whether the results of the company's persistent re-workings will ultimately add up to a new "performance tradition," but they do amount to a novel, updated approach to the works that is at once vibrant, daring, subtle, obvious, haunting, intense, frivolous, and a host of other conflicting adjectives.

Sellars has said he believes there have been only three great periods of theatre history: the Greeks, the Elizabethans, and the American musical.(13) The sensibilities of the latter and an openly declared love of "show business"(14) shaped much of Sellars's response to these three operas. Like musicals, the productions featured

semi-realistic acting, choreographed production numbers, and recognizably American characters. Within those trappings, however, were sincere attempts to come to grips with three of the most challenging and enigmatic staples of the operatic repertoire. Summerfare, the Pepsico-sponsored festival at the State University of New York at Purchase, played host to the three evolving productions, culminating in a presentation of the complete trilogy in the festival's tenth and final season in July and August 1989. The following analysis is based on the summer 1989 versions, although the productions continue to be modified and sung in Europe and the United States, and were recorded on videotape in Vienna in October 1989.

The Mozart-da Ponte collaboration is widely considered to have been a pinnacle of classic operatic creation, crossing generic boundaries between opera seria and opera buffa to produce a tragicomic form that is feisty and witty one moment, and darkly ambiguous the next. Mozart's scores often move into more somber, even ominous, tones than da Ponte's charming libretti. "One of the great attributes of Mozart's music," writes Will Crutchfield, "is the way dark, mysterious or foreboding strains will swell up within jocose movements--sometimes appearing in response to a specific verbal stimulus, but often appearing without explaining themselves, leaving the memory of a shadow behind to tint what else we hear."(15) Like Molière and most social satirists, Mozart and da Ponte had to couch their serious

intentions in levity. Sellars identifies with their methods. "The only way to get people in a basically trivial society to pay attention is to assure them that what you are doing is fun," he wrote in the introduction to his extensive program notes for the 1989 Summerfare marathon.(16) He complains that too many modern revivals neglect the underside of these operas and gloss over their more subtle and serious implications. "The implied disclaimer of larger ambitions is maddening . . . because they did mean it, they're not kidding," he writes. Between buffa and seria, he insists, "we are in a new world where the labels must be checked, re-checked, and finally mistrusted, and we enter a zone of pure possibility." His directorial style was a glitzy marriage of high- and pop-cult, opera and show-biz, which implied that ours, too, is a "trivial society" that must have its bitter pills dipped in sugar. Sellars himself emerged as the prototypical product of his superficial environment, except that he tried to lure us into those uncharted regions of the psyche, "the twilight landscape . . . (in which) Mozart and Chekhov meet."(17)

The junctures between comic and serious elements in these operas and the rich interpretative potential of the friction between them were what most interested this director. "I have seen very few productions that take these pieces at their word," he writes,

even to the extent . . . of performing a complete edition, or . . . just getting the plot right. . . . We know these pieces through the eyes of the generation

that chose to revive them in the early part of our century, and dreadful clichés of this period persist in the most cultured productions. I suppose this is why I was so anxious to begin with settings that removed all traces of faux rococo, and just start over.(18)

To Sellars, starting over meant using unabridged texts and scores (nothing was cut but a "Vado, ma dove," a vocal passage Mozart wrote for the original Dorabella to sing in another composer's opera was interpolated into Così to add complexity to the character, and the Adagio from Mozart's E Flat Serenade, K375, was added as an interlude between Acts I and II of Figaro). The works were sung in the original Italian with no titles. The lack of translation, like so many of the director's choices, functioned as both a subterfuge and an interesting wrinkle in the overall fabric of the productions. The inability of most audience members to comprehend the dialogue conveniently masked discrepancies between what the characters said and what the audience saw them doing. On the other hand, the foreign sounds added another source of friction that worked to Sellars's advantage. He explains:

I don't know who to ask to come up with American versions that are as dark and as quick, as vibrant, and as deceptively simple, as da Ponte's originals. And, I must admit I enjoy the sensation of being surrounded by the detritus of New York in the 1980s and being constantly reminded and astonished that the text, like the music, represents the 1780s. I also enjoy the fact that for once most of the audience in this verbally-dominated culture is forced to take in information through other pores, be sensitive to other indicators, and ends up projecting its own text into the evening. It is the multiple levels that give pleasure in opera.(19)

The director's heady justifications create an almost

Pirandellian critical atmosphere. Questions about his motivations are met with seemingly irrefutable answers. Sellars's confident pronouncements on how friction and dissonance function in his productions make sense, yet the inquirer is left feeling duped by sleight-of-tongue. It is impossible to overlook the merits of Sellars's idiosyncratic juxtapositions, especially when his explanations are so compelling. Smooth, pre-digested versions of the operas were not his goal. As the director insists, "art should be chewy." (20) But as self-contradictory as were the productions, the responses they evoked were often equally ambivalent. Sometimes the odd mix of elements was surprisingly evocative, but it was impossible to stifle the occasional groan at sophomoric jokes and adolescent sexual innuendoes. The critic must resort to the "yes, but . . ." figure time and again.

Sellars's use of anachronism is itself paradoxical. While he dresses his shows in the accoutrements of contemporary life, his objectives go way beyond drawing parallels between past and present. The initial shock of the familiar setting, he hopes, will prove transparent. He seems to think it has the same effect as driving out of a tunnel--after a few seconds the glare fades back to useful illumination. Once the audience is drawn into the present-tense convention, Sellars expects the outward particulars of our world to be neutralized. The audience's attention can then shift to the deeper currents running beneath the

surface. Startling topicalities are strategically placed throughout the production to repeat the process. The director uses style in order to transcend it. "To me the argument over modernizing is totally a red herring. We don't know what people thought when these operas were first performed, and we have a better chance of being honest if we stop pretending we do. My point is to eliminate the sense of distance so that people can get right to the subject matter." (21) When directing an old opera, Sellars believes, the subject matter has to include the text, the music, and the context of the time in which it was written, as well as the present situation and the performance history in between. "All that has to be taken into account and find its place somewhere in the production." Updating that merely change the locale and put on modern clothes but don't shuffle back and forth between the sources and the present "embarrass" him. "It feels cheap and tacky and has no resonance. Like stuffing a square peg in a round hole. I try to let my productions have a lot more air than that and a lot more layers."

There is no doubt that Sellars's rewritings endowed the Mozart-da Ponte operas with a compelling immediacy that has appealed to segments of the traditional opera audience as well as experimental theatre patrons who followed the director from the theatre to the opera. And, although the familiar debate continues about whether the director was true to the creators' intentions or just showing off, few

critics deny that these productions struck deep chords within the three pieces and resonated with their overtones. What remains open for discussion is less the impudence of mixing extreme emotional states with silly topical jokes, than how the productions ultimately managed to rouse the operas' metaphysical rumblings from beneath the productions' patent superficialities.

The company began their work on this material with a revival of the Boston Opera Don Giovanni at the Monadnock Music Festival in New Hampshire in 1980. Edward Gorey's sets and costumes were carried over from the Boston production but were replaced by new designs by George Tsypin in 1987 when the company completely restaged the production at Summerfare. Tsypin's wide, shallow set depicted a ghetto street scene, whose elements were inspired by sites within a five-block radius of the designer's home in Queens. In this Don Giovanni, the main character was not a Spaniard who prevailed in his debaucheries by virtue of his noble birth, but a coarse, small-time drug dealer who terrorized the denizens of his Lower East Side neighborhood with a coercive combination of generosity and violence. Tsypin's set included the awning and window of a cramped basement bodega, an open sewer excavation complete with Con Ed stanchions and flashing yellow lights, and the fluorescent-lit entry hall of a dilapidated tenement. The front-door glass was broken and looked like a spider-web, a neat metaphor for the Don's hold over the rest of the characters. The action took place

in the course of one night. James Ingalls, who did the lights for all three operas, shrouded the stage in varying degrees of darkness rudely interrupted by the flash of a neon cross from a church across the street. Set, lighting, and costumes (by Dunya Ramicova, who designed costumes for all three Mozart-da Ponte productions) captured seedy street life in a way that was both realistic and intensely theatrical.

Costumes and behavior in Don Giovanni were strictly late-1980s. Leporello in a black leather motorcycle jacket break-danced to the overture; Donna Elvira wore leopard-patterned tights with spike heels and a mini skirt; and Donna Anna required an intravenous fix before her exhausting second-act aria. The Don feasted on MacDonald's hamburgers and snorted cocaine with his sidekick. Music for the party scene was provided by a suitcase-size portable radio. The characters, now denizens of the inner city were racially mixed: Massetto (Elmore James) was black; Zerlina (Ai Lan Zhu) Chinese; Don Giovanni and Leporello were played by a pair of black identical twins, Eugene and Herbert Perry respectively. Even the production's rage at Don Giovanni's brutalization of women seemed more feminist than moralistic. These women did not succumb easily to the Don's advances. They fought back hard and with dignity; their inevitable falls took on greater tragic proportions. Even the musicians in the well-lit orchestra pit abandoned the usual formal wear for black T-shirts and jeans.

"The oppressive class structure that Mozart depicted is alive and well 200 years later in The United States of America [sic]," Sellars writes in defense of his choices, "even if the money is from drugs. Addiction is, after all, the theme of this opera." (22) Addiction to power is what Sellars means, especially sexual power. He believes that sexual politics is the real issue in Don Giovanni and the other two works in the trilogy. "Mozart concerned himself very shockingly with sexual politics and made the larger point that the various political corruptions of his period were linked to sexual politics," he says. (23) In the interactions of the various initial and re-configured couples in all three works, Sellars finds Mozart and da Ponte exploring the dynamics of cultural dominance and subordination. Trust/mistrust, honesty/deception, devotion/duplicity are all played out within and among the symmetrical pairs of lovers, but the implications reach beyond the domestic situations. "It is the quality of personal interaction, how people really treat each other, that determines the health of a nation and becomes the story of an epoch," writes the director. "It is on this level of fine detail that Mozart and da Ponte have erected these enduring edifices." (24) Not that Mozart and da Ponte were the first to use this metaphor, Sellars adds, "but Mozart does it with such astonishing sensual information, the music . . . reaches one in such strange recesses of sensuality." (25)

Even though Don Giovanni was of the same socio-economic class as the rest of the characters in Sellars's version (the casting of the Perry twins underscored the irony), his drug-lord status gave him the power to oppress. As in the original, Don Giovanni's abusive seductions were more than mere sexual conquests. They were the means through which he acquired increasing control over his turf. Both the women and their boyfriends/fiancés/husbands were subjugated to the Don's sexual whims. He was an emasculator as well as a rapist, and each sexual triumph earned him more leverage on the whole community. Drug addiction was another hook he used to maintain their dependence on and subordination to him.

Besides the obvious ways in which the ghetto setting of Don Giovanni de-emphasized the libretto, Sellars's staging, here as in the rest of the trilogy, was based primarily on his responses to Mozart's score. He explains:

In an opera by Mozart, the music really takes precedence just because of the way the sheer process of writing an opera works. The words come first and then the music. And so literally, the music is the last word. And so you have Mozart using the text in many different ways, sometimes ironically, sometimes taking it perfectly literally, and sometimes contradicting it utterly to produce a strange, conflicted feeling.

The director followed Mozart's lead whenever the music delves into things less rational, less polite, less easily put into words. He seemed to follow Wagner's prescription for opera, that it show the "deeds of music made visible." (26)

In all three Sellars productions, choreographed body movement physicalized patterns in the music. In Don Giovanni, the choreography extended past the party-dance sequences, played here with snapping fingers and pelvic gyrations, to formalized placement of the characters in quartets and duets, and revealing gestures and poses during solo arias. The latter were unusually complicated and strenuous, giving powerful physical expression to the interior life of the music and the characters. Lorraine Hunt, as Donna Elvira, crouched and writhed on the floor as she sang out her agonies. As Donna Anna, Dominique Labelle had to sing while her body convulsed in the aftermath of an intravenous injection. Così and Figaro contained more scenes in which relationships between the singers were echoed in movement patterns. A lot of the action of Così reinforced coupling, uncoupling, and recoupling in and among the three pairs of lovers. Neat symmetrical arrangements of girls and boys in the early scenes gave way to increasingly mixed up patterns later on.

Sellars also played on doubles as a movement motif in Figaro. Susanna and the Countess rolled on the floor in mirror image as they sang the duet that prepares them to switch identities to snare the Count. The only segment in the trilogy arranged by a professional choreographer was the ACT III fandango in Figaro, by Mark Morris. At times, the obvious formality of the movement and the long pauses that Sellars inserted, supposedly to force the audience to think

about what they were seeing on stage, "reek[ed] of acting-class exercises."(27) They were in many instances oversimplified expressions of complex human emotions, but in the context of the intricate music and the untranslated text, they offered a useful diagram (or map) of the subtext. John Rockwell of the New York Times' described the choreography as "ritualized synchronization."(28) Andrew Porter wrote that the movement "gave convincing physical shape to the phrases of Mozart's score."(29) Edward Said concluded that the key to Sellars's success was his ability to bring out "what is most eccentric and opaque about Mozart: the obsessive patternings."(30)

It is not easy for singers to execute complicated physical movements and hit the notes in Mozart's demanding vocal score at the same time. Meeting that challenge was part of the experience for both the director and his cast. The technical difficulty of the performance, he believes,

gives it a kind of extra-moral edge of authority. Because you see a human being challenging himself, not just complacently sitting there lecturing you on how you should improve your life, but somebody who's actually subjecting their life to tremendous discipline, and who's willing to encounter genuine rigor in the aim of purifying themselves and what they're doing. These moments of tremendous purity are arrived at through the most intense (exertion), literally facing danger. You don't know if a singer is going to be able to hit that note; it's very hard, and I just try and make it harder. I make it so daunting for the singers, but it really is an astounding accomplishment when they're able to do it, and the audience senses that and that's one more level at which you're gripped by the performance.

Sellars's non-traditional expectations were well-served by

the youth, vigor, and dedication of his singers, many of whom had been a part of these productions for ten years. Mainly in their thirties, the lean and limber cast broke barriers with young audiences simply by looking and behaving like the active young characters they were written to be. Typically, though, Sellars occasionally left in too much of a good thing. There were moments, especially in the most serious sections, where the acting felt forced, more play-acted than felt, more maudlin than cataclysmic. Overall, however, the singers were able to handle Sellars's unpredictable mix of stylization and subtlety. The cast sustained complex, psychologically realistic characterizations that redefined expectations of operatic acting.

Over the years, mixed critical reception of Don Giovanni reflected the production's daring, its conceptual flaws, and its musical merits. Opera News reviewer C. J. Lutten called the production's multilayered ambiguity "well beyond what one normally encounters," but thought some of the directors's effects "exaggerated and irrelevant."<sup>(31)</sup> "The most radical recension of an opera that I've ever seen," wrote Thomas Disch in The Nation. In the shift to an urban setting Don Giovanni exposed the legendary main character as a brute who rules not by virtue of his exalted birthright, but "because he is reddest in tooth and claw, the top of the food chain."<sup>(32)</sup> Edward Said was bothered by the production's "unflattering portrayals of women" and "a

claustrophobic dissonance throughout" that can probably be attributed to the oppressive darkness and a sense that the director had to force his concept a little too hard. (33) Andrew Porter recognized in Sellars's work "something different from the cosmetic refreshment of old operas effected by shifting them from one period setting to another." He appreciated the way the production avoided "big, dull, greasy platitudes," replacing clichés with "the fruit of specific circumstances." Often the most outspoken champion of Sellars's transpositions, Porter felt that "amid so many [opera] conventions, it is easy to accept another: that an eighteenth-century text is being sung, in Italian to eighteenth-century music, in a modern New York setting." (34)

The exploration of domination and intimidation within an urban sub-class made Don Giovanni new and relevant and important to a modern American audience. The production seemed to discover new facets of the music as well. But there were many times when the pieces simply did not fit together. The visual details meshed with each other, but often clashed with the text and score. Instead of the black/Hispanic/narcotics argot of New York's inner city, the lyrical cadence of Italian was heard. Instead of disco or rock or samba, the party guests swung their hips to what even a willing American audience could only identify as "classical music." Mozart's hits sounded not just odd but wrong emanating from a ghetto blaster. Cries of "Viva la liberta!" were accompanied by the cast stripping down to

their underwear. Sexual liberation may relate to the work's theme of sexual subordination, but such an overt and unbelievable gesture trivialized an important issue and seemed condescending to the characters. Perhaps because the subculture in which Sellars chose to relocate the action has its own indelible linguistic and musical image, the conflict of rhythms on stage and in the orchestra pit tended to grate, especially in the first act. Later, when the opera itself slows and darkens, the staging and the music settled into more provocative register.

The ensemble's Così fan Tutte was first staged in 1984, under the auspices of the Castle Hill Music Festival in Ipswich, Massachusetts. Two years later Christopher Hunt, who took over the artistic directorship of Summerfare in 1986, invited the troupe to the festival to resume its work on Così. SUNY Purchase's 560-seat Theater B proved a receptive space for the intimate, chamber atmosphere the company insisted was integral to their rebellion against operatic bombast. The combination of Hunt's enthusiasm, the college facilities, and the festival's proximity to New York audiences proved fertile ground for Sellars's work. As already noted, Don Giovanni joined the Summerfare repertory in 1987, and Sellars finally attempted Figaro there in 1988.

The Italian libretto for Così sets the first scene in a "bodega di caffè." Sellars's set, designed by Adrienne Lobel, put the action in Despina's Diner, an archetypical suburban eatery complete with fluorescent-lit refrigerator

case displaying cheesecakes, pies, and pastries behind sliding glass doors. Despina (Sue Ellen Kuzma) waited tables in the formica-topped, chrome-tiled, restaurant. Her boyfriend Alfonso (Sanford Sylvan), a disgruntled Vietnam veteran, stood guard at the cash register. The metal-shelled diner looked as if it had been revealed with a can opener. Its back wall, lunch counter, and a bank of brightly vinyl-wrapped booths ran parallel to edge of the stage, confronting the audience full-face with its playful topicality. Doors on either end of the back wall bore black silhouette cutouts of a man and a woman with ornate eighteenth-century hair styles. These restroom-door markers added hints of humor and planted sly reminders of the opera's roots. The paradox of Sellars's work is that such rich details, simultaneously accurate and symbolic, were undercut by distracting inconsistencies. For example, a character who exited through the upstage--right bathroom door did not reappear until several scenes, supposedly several hours, later. This and similar small glitches disturbed the continuity but, in yet another layer of contradiction, they also reinforced the theatrical context of the performance. The dissonance kept the updated setting from slipping into simple transposition. The world on stage may have looked like the world we live in, but it was out of kilter, strange, unsettling, and mystifying, too.

"That a system of contemporary references is an essential ingredient to the functioning of these pieces

seems relatively obvious,"(35) Sellars contends, although not all directors who resist sprinkling their productions with pop icons fail to make the operas sing. It is as foolhardy to denounce all "period" productions as to hail Sellars's kind of updating as the only way. In fact, Mozart and da Ponte did include numerous topical references on which to hang their larger themes. Sellars did the same thing, but he interpolated contemporary references he knew his audience would understand. It was on the basis of those substitutions that Sellars was accused in some circles of taking cheap shots at the opera. Of the three productions at hand, Così contained some of the boldest and baldest visual puns. The notary arrived with a cellular phone and laptop computer. The "Albanian" disguises look more like costumes for Saturday Night Live's "wild-and-crazy guys." Guglielmo's Act II aria, "Donne mie," which asks rhetorically why women mistreat men, was handled like an episode of "Donahue." Sellars had the character grab a cordless microphone and run into the audience, shoving the appliance in people's faces as if inviting them to air opinions on this ancient and unanswerable query. Obviously, Mozart did not compose for Phil Donahue, but bringing the talk-show host onto the scene underscored the popularity of the issue and the impossibility of any answer being better than woefully insufficient. Typically, the audience laughed in recognition but quickly grew quiet. Once the giggly shock of recognition settled down, deeper implications sank

in.

Sellars's work is marked by brilliance jutting up against banality. Facile jokes precede painfully frank confrontations with human anguish, but, as in the Guglielmo-Phil Donahue bit, there is usually a more serious intention. The spectator has to look for connections. Sellars believes the friction between silly and sublime generates energy in the theatre:

You don't know something's profound unless you've just come from something that isn't profound. We're capable of being in a really profound state and doing something really silly. . . .

You know Mozart does that very deliberately, as does Shakespeare or Chekhov or Hitchcock. It's a very specific strategy. It's time for Cleopatra's death scene, we need some asps, lets have a clown come out and tell snake jokes. In fact, that's how you can tell you're at the moment of deepest intensity, the crisis moment of the piece, because the silliest, goofiest things happen just before it.

The appearance of Despina disguised as Shirley Maclaine at the end of Act I of Così demonstrates how Sellars layered meaning into a seemingly banal incident. According to the text, the disguised Guglielmo and Ferrando pretend to be so devastated by the girls' rejection that they drink poison. In Sellars's production, the lads emptied squeeze-bottles of ketchup and mustard down their gullets. Mozart and da Ponte then bring Despina on stage, disguised as "Dr. Fatalis," a parody of F. A. Mesmer, the famous doctor who based his practice of hypnosis on theories of animal magnetism. Mesmer was a friend of the Mozart family. The reference alluded to the possible connections between the couples'

sexual attraction and Mesmer's hypotheses. Sellars explains the satirical evocation of a controversial, contemporary celebrity as Mozart and da Ponte's lighthearted way of dealing with a larger issue with which that individual was popularly associated. Mozart, as Sellars understands, establishes

the idea that people have other lives than their material lives, and that we don't even begin to understand the limits of the human psyche, by using the figure of Mesmer as a huge joke. So the audience laughs, and then they stop laughing because we're in a zone that truly is interplanetary, is cross-generational, that does go between lives people have lived, and where we do wonder what we did before we arrived on the earth, and how we learned what we learned here. How much do we really know ourselves and do we really understand any human response?

Of course, Mesmer was no longer a popular celebrity when Sellars directed Cosi, and the director's here-and-now philosophy demanded a more immediately recognizable personality. Not that the interjection of current celebrities into the casts of classic plays is Sellars's invention. Among many examples, Lee Breuer did it in his Hollywood Tempest; Joseph Papp did it in his 1968 Hamlet. Sellars's initial choice to substitute for Mesmer and to heal the languishing lovers was media sex-therapist Dr. Ruth Westheimer, who was aped in the 1986 version. By 1989, however, Dr. Ruth was passé. Shirley Maclaine had become the reigning queen of home-video spiritual healing, and Sellars thought her cosmic aura fit Mesmer's image even better. So, out came Despina in short auburn wig and flowing magenta caftan, an unmistakable Maclaine clone that

was both funny and surprisingly resonant. It called up images of cosmic wonder but poked fun at them at the same time. As Sellars paraphrases Mozart's own ambivalence: "Was Mesmer a quack, or are all living things connected across time in a mysterious interaction of fluids and electricity?"(36) The production substituted Maclaine for Mesmer and left the question open for audience members to mull over on their own.

There is something refreshing about the way Sellars tosses issues into the ring and leaves them unresolved. One interpretation is that he expects a lot from his (usually upper-class, highly educated) audience. Other directorial gestures imply, however, that his faith is less than complete. Sellars had Alfonso hold up a hand-lettered sign inscribed "S-H-I-R-L-E-Y M-A-C-L-A-I-N-E" and point to her with his finger. The audience could have gotten the obvious joke without such explicit explanation. Small judgment calls are pivotal in executing risky conceptual productions. They can alienate sympathetic spectators who are willing to ride the adventure so long as they are treated with respect.

To borrow the post-structuralist notion of active readers, audience members create their own performance texts by synthesizing the various theatrical stimuli with their own personal perceptions and experiences. Especially when text, design, interpretation, and directorial interjections do not adhere to a unified or consistent style, it is up to audience members to connect the many simultaneous dots

projected from the stage. The highly visual and idiosyncratic imageries of Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman are good examples. They drop hints and let their audiences try to solve their riddles. They imply a partnership with the audience that enrages some baffled spectators who mistakenly feel left out, believing that others are "in," but provides a satisfying interactive experience to those who are willing to meet them half way. If experimental theatre/opera audiences wanted their theatre predigested, they would stay home and watch TV. Directorial overkill reads as condescension.

Sellars was aware that the sign was a potential problem, but decided to use it for several reasons, including valid theatrical precedents.

We debated the sign so much. It is Brecht, it's Shakespeare, it's medieval. It's very didactic and very obvious, but it also does two things. One, it completely objectifies what's going on and makes it presentational. It's not just Despina dressing up as Shirley Maclaine to please the girls within a diner frame; it steps out of the diner frame in a deliberate device that we're using to address the audience. It breaks the fourth wall and reiterates that what we're seeing is a construction and that we are at any moment capable of scraping away the veneer.

There were also practical, "show business" reasons why the sign stayed in. Problems with the wig and costume had apparently prevented early audiences from identifying Maclaine right away. The company felt insecure and the sign made them more comfortable. The director also liked the way the sign worked rhythmically.

The other thing [the sign] does is concentrate the

laugh. People are laughing at different times as she's coming around; then the sign is produced, and there's one big, strong laugh, and then we move into the [rest of the] scene. As show biz tactics, it's how to start the scene on a very strong laugh when the whole audience acknowledges to themselves--together--that they already know this. It allows the audience to hear itself. It unifies the whole audience to say this is a joke, and then we move on. But there were huge debates about that sign.

Just how precarious is the distinction between directorial excess and the successful, satirical use of repetition can be seen in a third Maclaine reference in Così. "Dr. Fatalis" appears just before the Act I finale, which has what Sellars calls a "shocking B-flat minor section that musically lets you know that the piece is about to move into extremely strange, private, and undiscussable regions." The Act ends on that mysterious note, and Sellars's intermission followed. Video monitors in the lobby were playing one of Maclaine's meditation tapes. Instead of reiterating the same joke, this time the Maclaine reference added a layer of irony and healthy, self-deprecating humor to the heaviness of what had just been sung. It seemed to mock the arrogance of our asking the same unfathomable questions, confident that somehow our generation will successfully unravel the eternal mysteries.

Minor plot alterations magnified the moral ambiguity of Sellars's modernized Così. For example, a nod to twentieth-century feminism could be detected in the portrayal of the sisters Dorabella and Fiordiligi. Doublemint twins in floral slacks and brightly-colored T-shirts, these girls

were not the innocent dupes of da Ponte's libretto. They were aware of their fiancés' deception from the beginning, and their willing participation in the scheme made their eventual disillusion that much more painful. They shared equal responsibility for the harm done to their idyllic, naive relationships. Thus, all could not be resolved neatly at the end with male regret and female forgiveness. No one could deny or forget the frightening sexual stirrings they felt when they had swapped partners. Sellars left those disturbing memories hanging in the air at the end. The couples' reunions were tentative, haunted, and fragile. The brides and grooms played musical chairs, confusion on their faces, as they sat down to sign their marriage contracts. No easy happily-ever-afters here. John Rockwell, in the New York Times, described the ending as "brilliantly ambiguous . . . all six characters crisscrossing hysterically, winding up with everyone apart, flapping like broken dolls."(37)

The critics identified Sellars's Così with a trend toward more serious interpretation of this opera, but several complained that too much of the lighthearted spirit of the original had been eclipsed. Rockwell lauded Sellars's "attempt to rescue it from its still-prevalent reputation as a silly farce," but cautioned that the director seemed to be "thinking so hard that he clutters up his emotional effects with cleverness."(38) In a similar vein, the Times' Will Crutchfield, who liked the production, complained that "art in our century has been ready to see

beauty as false and ugliness as truth, and in this Mr. Sellars is an authentic spokesman for his time, but he is shouting our message at Mozart so loudly that we cannot hear part of Mozart's to us." He also felt that long passages of "toneless, numb-sounding recitative" did not necessarily illuminate obscure knots in the opera, but were "only a more sophisticated dodge of the genuine than the more usual empty histrionics." (39) On the positive side, Peter G. Davis of New York magazine found that "every response, no matter how extravagant, arises directly from Mozart's sublimely ambiguous but deeply human musical interpretation of da Ponte's witty libretto." (40) Moira Hodgson called the production "a deep response to Mozart's ambiguous text." (41) And fan Andrew Porter appreciated the way Sellars had "directed the score rather than the libretto. He brought onto the stage--'underlined is perhaps not too strong--all the marvels that he found there; left nothing unexplained; tweaked and twisted the plain sense of the words when it didn't match his perceptions of the music." Porter's final sentence lends credibility to some of his more adulatory remarks and is one of the most candid of all comments on conceptual theatre: "I can understand resistance to this Così as easily as my surrender to it." (42)

As bold as were Sellars's rewritings of Così and Don Giovanni, the director had never intended to conquer the full Mozart-da Ponte trilogy. He felt intimidated by the musical mysteries of Figaro, and it wasn't until 1988 that

conductor Craig Smith and Summerfare's Christopher Hunt convinced him to undertake this piece. Perhaps because it was the third in the series and Sellars's technique had matured, or because the concept established clearer parallels with the situation in the libretto, or because the elegant designs were so pleasing to look at, Figaro was the most seamless and satisfying of the trilogy. Again working with set designer Adrienne Lobel, Sellars set Figaro in a chic apartment on the fifty-somethingth floor of New York City's Trump Tower. Count Almaviva (James Maddelena) and his elegantly-coiffed blonde Countess (Jayne West), who bore a striking resemblance to Ivanna Trump, lived in luxurious splendor with the aid of their maid and butler, Susanna (Jeanne Ommerlé) and Figaro (Sanford Sylvan). The action, as in da Ponte's libretto, took place on the day of Susanna and Figaro's wedding, but the quarters the Count had bestowed upon them consisted of a cramped laundry room with a temperamental sofa-bed. Lobel's sets for Acts II and III portrayed the apartment's sleek master bedroom suite and a sweeping, duplex living room decorated in ultra-modern monochrome beige, centering on a large, swirling abstract canvas by Frank Stella. Act IV was played on the living room terrace, a narrow strip in front of a glass curtain through which the continuous action of the wedding reception in the living room could be dimly detected. The clean lines and sweeping spaces in the Count's apartment confirmed his status as a peer of the American capitalist ruling class,

enjoying material splendor at the underpaid physical and emotional expense of their servants.(43)

With Figaro, the director resumed his political arguments about sexual and economic exploitation. Whereas Don Giovanni struggled to discern the pattern of sub-class oppression within the lower ranks of American society, Figaro's beautiful-people setting established clear parallels between the opera's landed aristocracy and America's corporate plutocrats. In the program notes, Sellars evokes the image of another, less sympathetic, female tycoon. Court testimony by Leona Helmsley's employees remind him of the

mutual fear and dependency of servants and masters that is so crisply delineated in The Marriage of Figaro. And the notion that a certain class of people is above the law (Leona's "only the little people pay taxes" remark is apropos) or see to it that the law exists in order to protect their own prerogatives, privileges, and power options, with the extravagances, waste and indignities of the rich laid directly on the backs of the poor these ideas seem in no danger of becoming isolated historical phenomena.(44)

Sellars hears an alarm in the opera's elucidation of entrenched systematic oppression. In contemporary America, as in Mozart's Europe, he notes, "the historical moment is passing from our hands into the hands of others who have been waiting for a long time."(45) When Mozart and da Ponte wrote Figaro, it was already too late for the frivolous aristocrats who lost their heads in the French Revolution. Just months after the final Summerfare season, Eastern Europe learned how to and how not to relinquish power to

those who have been denied. Sellars seemed to be warning us that America's class struggle may be more subtle, but it is just as dangerous. "All men are created equal," he insists, still applies only to some men and fewer women. And those who are not included may be more clever, more resilient, and more willing to risk what they have for what they want. Figaro and Susanna are clearly their betters' betters in overcoming obstacles and making the best of their lives.

The opera itself is revolutionary in its frank depictions of complex sexual psychology. Like Don Giovanni's, the Count's dalliances with women from the lower class combine sexual attraction to them with degradation of them. Almaviva affirms his virility through his socio-economic as well as sexual prowess. Contrary to his professions, love is not the great equalizer between him and Susanna (or Barbarina, or whomever else he has intimidated into performing sexual favors), but another manifestation of a wealthy man's tyranny over other people. Unlike Giovanni, who never repents, Almaviva is tortured by his obsessive need to have other men's women. He is equally tormented by jealousy toward his wife, for whom he appears to have little other feeling. Sellars's production emphasized the Count's and Countess's loneliness, isolation, and despair. They wandered aimlessly through the large spaces in their apartment, whose cool, minimalist decor offered no comforts, no cozy corners to curl up in, nothing soft or fuzzy or warm. They seemed lost in their own home. Conversely,

Susanna and Figaro's tiny room, barely furnished at all, teemed with activity and people and life. Almaviva was more pitiful than menacing as he pursued Susanna. Sellars reworked funny moments in the libretto to make the Count even more foolish. In the original, the Count discovers Cherubino underneath a tablecloth in Susanna's room. Here he found him under the skirt of Susanna's wedding gown. Enraged, he pounced over the open sofa to attack the boy, but the mattress collapsed, trapping him in its steel-framed embrace. Maddelena played the Count as a fumbling, self-absorbed, immature lout, an accurate modern anti-hero for this subversive operatic text.

Sanford Sylvan's Figaro, on the other hand, translated easily to a contemporary figure. He was a passionate and determined fiancé, interested only in securing his happiness with Susanna and genuinely heartbroken any time his faith in her was threatened. Sylvan's vocal performance received unanimously excellent reviews, and his handling of Sellars's direction was equally impressive. Maddened by evidence of the Count's advances toward his bride-to-be, Figaro pitched an egg across the room. Its smashed contents dripped down a pristine, cream-colored wall. An outlandish gesture became a potent symbol: the egg was the opening volley in the battle between the Count and his servant. Figaro thus declared revolutionary war against the smug appearance of propriety in his master's domain. Sylvan's Figaro had all the spunk and resourcefulness of traditional interpretations

of the role. He played along with Susanna's schemes, catching on to the latest lies just in time to save the day, and always thrilled to rediscover her constancy after having impetuously doubted her.

Contrasts between Almaviva and Figaro were echoed in the depictions of the Countess and Susanna. The lovely Countess, like her maudlin husband, stewed in her misery. She feared her brutish husband yet pined for his affections. Act II found her in her mirrored bedroom, complete with vertical blinds and thick down quilt, barely able to get out of bed until Figaro and Susanna helped her devise a plan to catch the miscreant in flagrante. Jayne West sang the Countess's long, dark arias about the agonies of a still-loving but rejected wife, slowly and with deep emotion. Sellars staged her Act III aria on the living-room balcony. Dressed in formal pink gown, her hair swept up, jewels around her neck, the Countess stood regally on the balcony, clutching its railing for support. Meanwhile, a majestic Central Park sunset progressed almost imperceptibly beyond the living-room windows, bathing the stage in dark hues of pink and yellow and blue. The scene looked too beautiful to be true, and in fact it was. Sellars did not want simply a pretty, realistic sunset. It had to be a theatrical sunset. Lighting designer James F. Ingalls created the spectacular effect by simulating the sunset from two directions at the same time. Most audience members probably never noticed that the image was unnatural but surrendered to its stunning

beauty and the way it enveloped the opera's most serious musical passage.

Like the Countess, Susanna also confronts big problems. There is a rival claim on her fiancé, and she must deflect the Count's unwanted attentions without risking her and Figaro's future. Unlike the Countess, but like Figaro, Susanna takes action. Sellars's production presented the plans and schemes of Figaro and Susanna like episodes of "I Love Lucy." The Susanna-Cherubino switch in the closet, the exchange of dresses between Susanna and the Countess in Act IV, and the way Susanna let her new husband squirm under the mistaken impression that she was betraying him on their wedding night, all rested on a lighthearted, everything-will-work-out-in-the-end, sit-com optimism. The role of Susanna, the practical, capable, level-headed, take-charge woman probably made the easiest transition to the updated setting.

The portrait of a secondary character, Cherubino (sung by Susan Larson), is another good example of how well this Figaro transposed original elements into the updated setting. In the libretto, Cherubino is a page in the Count's mansion. No contemporary equivalent exists, but the character's exploding adolescent passion is a significant foil for the main characters' overwrought romantic plots. In Sellars's production, Cherubino became the quintessential adolescent male, dressed in jeans and a hockey jersey, swilling orange juice from a cardboard carton and swooning

at his own love letters. Larson's performance made the most of the irony Mozart built into this reverse briches role. Lolling on the sofa in the first act, day-dreaming about his beloved Countess, Larson's Cherubino lay on his back, pumping his pelvis in anticipation. In the second act, Cherubino jumps out the Countess's bedroom window, supposedly the second floor of the Count's house. An upper story of Trump Tower is a considerably more perilous place from which to take the plunge, and the cognoscenti in the audience appreciated the plot twist. Cherubino landed on the terrace of the apartment below. The building superintendent, rather than da Ponte's gardener, arrived in the next scene to complain about the destruction of a potted poinsettia. After Almaviva banished the youth and ordered him off to military service, he turned up disguised as one of Susanna's bridesmaids and flirted with his own rival.

The wedding itself contained the greatest number of topical jokes. Figaro initiated the wedding procession by turning on a portable CD player. The ceremony was recorded by a man toting a videocamera on his shoulder. Household staff bearing wedding gifts included the doorman, a utilities worker, maids, cops, and a chef. The ceremony was held in the grand living room, with the Count and Countess seated on the only two chairs, like throned nobility. The reception took place in mime behind the huge picture window that dropped down to separate the edge of the stage into the Act IV terrace, where the final trap was laid for the Count.

Here, again, a few bad directorial choices marred an otherwise beautiful revisioning. The blonde Countess and dark-haired Susanna switched gowns, then pulled on ugly, knitted ski hats to aid their disguises. When the Count finally got his hands on Susanna (actually his wife in a bridal gown), he groped her like a schoolboy. Sellars probably meant to make him overeager, but no practiced seducer would be so crude. Throughout the trilogy, Sellars's giddy sexuality disappointed. At times, the high quality of the singing made the silly business look even worse.

Unlike the ambiguous endings of Don Giovanni and Così, Figaro finished on the high and happy note of Mozart and da Ponte's original. The Countess forgave the repentant Count. Marcellina, who in Sellars's version sought Figaro's hand only to make Bartolo jealous, married Bartolo, and Figaro and Susanna learned their lessons about faith and trust. The finale was danced in a conga line. The cast shimmied and waved to the audience in ritual celebration.

Opera News critic C. J. Luten found the Peter Sellars who directed Figaro to be "immensely talented, yet undisciplined, he seems unable to confine himself to the best of his ideas." (46) The New York Times' Will Crutchfield described the over-interpretation to be the director "jumping in front of the music, frantically gesticulating to tell us that because he has heard it already we need not listen." (47) The critics have a point,

yet one is reluctant to suggest that Sellars train himself to be a good editor. His excess may get him into trouble, but his proliferation of clever ideas is also what makes his transpositions transcend themselves. Self-constraint might domesticate his imagination but not refine his final products. There are many hidden layers for alert audience members to mine, but the director is not troubled by the fact that some segments of his audience will miss the deeper meanings. "Art is like anything else in life," he says. "The more you know about it the more you get. If you don't know anything, you can probably get something, If you know more, you'll get more. All the possibilities should be present."

Sellars's productions of the Mozart-da Ponte trilogy realized many new possibilities. They refreshed the images of all three operas by bringing them to life in contemporary frameworks. They furthered the development of operatic acting, and they introduced the works to new opera audiences. These achievements were predicated on the director's irreverence, egotism, and profligate imagination, as well as his genuine appreciation for the beauty and complexity of the three operas. Occasionally, those same qualities also led the productions astray. It is easy to fault obvious instances of self-indulgence when the director seemed to usurp authorial privilege; it is trickier to detect the interpretative timidity beneath the director's lofty talk of the interplanetary and unknowable. The enfant

terrible may in fact have erred on the side of too much awe and left some things more vague than was necessary.

In the final analysis, however, Sellars's work with these pieces was original, vital, and moving. His forceful rewritings were meant to shake up the operatic status quo, and so they upset those who see themselves as keepers of the traditional watch. "There is a school of thought," writes chief sentry Donal Henahan, "that pretends to reject the whole concept of durable art, contending that art is ephemeral and progressive by nature and never should reach a point where it can be preserved, like a butterfly under glass." Peter Sellars is a graduate of that school. His productions reflect a sure-footed understanding of the fleeting and temporal nature of the performing arts. The image of a beautiful creature pinned down, dead, inside a hermetically sealed case, as a metaphor for live performance would probably, and rightly, make him cringe. Like living things, Sellars's productions of the Mozart-da Ponte trilogy had warts and blemishes, but, both musically and dramatically, they also had depth, humor, complexity, and vibrant enthusiasm.

## Chapter Seven

### CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion shows how the conceptual approach to directing the classics has forged a link between that which is old and proven and cherished in our theatre and that which is new, risky, and controversial. For breaking down barriers between the establishment and the avant-garde conceptual directors deserve credit for helping to resuscitate an American theatre that was nearly proclaimed dead in the 1960s. It was a fear that boredom and timidity in classical production signaled dire times in the American theatre that prompted Brustein's 1967 challenge to American directors. Not every example presented here lived up to his highest expectations, but the sheer volume of activity described, the liveliness of its reception, and its occasional heights of achievement attest conceptual theatre's contribution to a surge in the status of classical production in this country from 1968 to 1990.

When directors have dared to press old plays into new molds, their successes have revealed and redefined the numbingly familiar in startling and satisfying ways. The record shows that even their failures have helped invigorate the field. Debate over conceptual production has pushed classical theatre to the forefront of the nation's critical

agenda. It has given the classics in America a much needed shot of adrenaline. In the hands of such creative artists as Andrei Serban, Joanne Akalaitis, Lucian Pintilie, and Peter Sellars, it has restored to old works the powers to jar, to surprise, to unsettle, and to speak for themselves to the contemporary world in a completely contemporary voice.

The brief history presented in Chapter 2 showed how experiments in Europe and America in the early part of the twentieth century, from Craig and Artaud's wild theoretical projections to the dozens of simplistic simile productions of the 1950s, gradually tore down an intimidating armature of classical stage tradition. By the late 1960s, when the small experimental troupes of that decade had matured to the point where they were ready to approach classic texts, they inherited the idea that these scripts were pliable, elastic, and adaptable to the latest theatrical times. Succeeding generations of avant-garde troupes like Mabou Mines, immigrant European directors like Andrei Serban, and the latest flock of native-born theatre artists borrowed and built on the discoveries of the sixties. They established a new classical tradition in America that favored reaching forward to connect with our dramatic past.

Recognition of conceptual theatre's enormous contribution to the revitalization of classical theatre in America is not, however, tantamount to a blanket approval of every production. Chapter 1 of this study described a

reluctance by key pro-conceptual critics to articulate firm standards for evaluating conceptual rewrightings. Rightly, they did not presume to circumscribe the parameters of an endeavor predicated on stretching limits. It is possible, however, to derive from the foregoing analysis of a dozen or so productions a few reliable tools to separate wheat from chaff.

The first rule that can be applied to all manner of conceptual efforts is that success is determined less by the brilliance or outrageousness of the director's initial idea than by the extent to which it holds up in a rehearsal process that keeps the original play in the foreground. Great dramas are complex and idiosyncratic. They are neither simplistic nor easy to pin down. They take funny detours. They contradict themselves. They require intense scrutiny by those who attempt to put them on stage. A director's conceptual scheme cannot, therefore, be sloshed over a play's intricate contours like an opaque coat of paint. If the idea is valid, it will be able to be massaged deeply into the flesh of the play and the production. The director and his company will find ways to mesh the two together in an organic way so that the final production becomes a piece of new whole cloth.

Andrei Serban met that criterion in both Fragments of a Trilogy and The Miser. Long, painstaking investigation of Greek texts as vehicles for pure aural and visceral emotional stimulation led to the creation of a wholly

original and clearly delineated new aesthetic that swept audiences into ancient myths with an almost religious awe. Serban's plan for the Molière play inverted its internal neoclassical structure by painting all the characters in shades of Harpagon's avarice, but the director justified all his choices and settled disputes among the production team by deferring to the letter of the text. So seamlessly did the new characterizations fit the play that the director's black vision seemed to liberate an impulse the playwright himself was constrained to release.

Joanne Akalaitis's Cymbeline also achieved an organic aesthetic that melded together diverse production elements and Shakespeare's sprawling tale. Hers was a mottled synthesis, an harmonic jumble of Elizabethan, Victorian, and post-modern images and sensibilities. The great irony of this production is that the director was criticized for neglecting to force the disparate tendencies in the play to conform to some arbitrary iron-clad directorial unity. In fact, her great achievement was in highlighting the play's wonderful lumps and bumps stick out. If colorblind casting further disrupted the kind of surface realism some critics misguidedly sought in this production of an obvious fantasy play, it worked within the piecemeal, dream-like logic of the overall production scheme.

A second yardstick for measuring the quality of a conceptual rewrighting is the quality of the acting. Director's theatre has earned a bad reputation for turning

actors into puppets. The presence or absence of that mistake is a good key to the rigor with which the production ideas were tested. Cymbeline was flawed by weak performances in a couple of the leading roles. There were moments in The Miser when the performers took on an unintentionally glassy stare. Schechner's Oedipus and Papp's Hamlet seem to have accepted play-acting in lieu of the real thing. On the other hand, despite Peter Sellars's elaborate explanations for the way his self-conscious, updated settings allowed audiences easier access to the three period operas, most of the credit for the appeal of those productions belongs to the performers. Where the contemporary costumes and settings really benefited the productions was in liberating the singers to incorporate richly detailed, psychologically and emotionally realistic acting into their sung portrayals. For some members of the audience, the new environments were amusing novelties and convenient shorthands for establishing class relations among the characters, but the productions soared above that flimsy simile standard because of the depth, beauty, and complexity of the performances in three of the world's most enigmatic operas.

The opposite results of the two rewritings by Lee Breuer that were covered here provide an excellent lesson in the third distinguishing factor. In its marriage of Greek tragedy and the evangelical service, Lee Breuer's The Gospel at Colonus retained the symmetry, clarity, and momentum of

its Greek inspiration, and added the pulsing urgency of black church music. The two sensibilities met and interlocked in Telson's score, Breuer's careful reconstruction of the text, his precision casting and blocking, and the outstanding performances by singers and actors alike.

That profound fusion of old and new elements was woefully lacking, however, in Breuer's gender-bent Lear. Lear was a fascinating concept that might have taken a remarkable look through King Lear's lens at sexual power politics in and out of families and among generations. But the opportunity was wasted. The director's hell-bent determination to create his chosen cultural and geographical milieu and insistence on extraneous and cumbersome technical details sidetracked his attention from the dynamics--and poetry--of the play and from his most basic responsibilities as a stage director. The rehearsal history suggests that when the play and the concept conflicted, Breuer kept pouring more concept over the play. He smothered both. Pesty headset microphones, mumbling, lax blocking and sophomoric business plagued the poorly paced production. It paid a heavy toll in loss of focus and interest and dissipated a potentially rich idea.

The third critical criterion to be extracted from this example is that in remaking the theatrical idiom of an old play, directors cannot ignore their primary logistical and narrative tasks, or they will defeat their own purposes.

Directors who allow their interpretative interests to distract them from the demands of basic stagecraft end up with a mess not a message. Even in radically conceived productions, the actors should be able to be seen and heard, lines--especially verse--should be enunciated intelligibly, and stage pictures should be focussed. A director should test the audience's imagination not try its patience.

The fourth and final tenet is that concepts must be roads into the plays and not avenues to avoid grappling in a determined way with the sense and substance of the text. The simile productions directed by Liviu Ciulei were well polished but essentially dead ends. Surface without substance is as worthless in this theatrical endeavor as in any other. These dress-up versions lack one of the things conceptual productions demonstrate best--a compelling reason to do the play, not just because it is a classic that deserves to be seen, but because it can speak to us, right now, in urgent and original ways.

This study was limited to a small sample of American directors working on plays written before the nineteenth century. There remain several interesting and important issues related to conceptual production of the classics still to be examined. One area that is ripe for study is conceptual production from the perspective of the designer, a crucial collaborator of the director's who in some cases probably deserves equal credit for the evolution and implementation of the conceptual idea. Another open door is

the story of conceptual productions of modern classics, plays by Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Pirandello, and Brecht. Surprisingly little has been attempted with the appropriately grand, archetypical dramas of Eugene O'Neill, but it seems likely that conceptual directors will soon discover him, too.

Conceptual rewrighting of plays by living playwrights presents a whole other set of interpersonal and legal ramifications to be given more thorough scholarly consideration. When Joanne Akalaitis set Endgame in an abandoned subway tunnel, Beckett's American agent caused an international brouhaha. Barney Rosset, representing Beckett, ordered the production at Brustein's American Repertory Theatre, to cease and desist and threatened to sue. A fortunate out-of-court settlement prevented cancellation of the production, an otherwise straightforward interpretation of the script, under the condition that the following statement by the author be reprinted in the program:

Any production of Endgame which ignores my stage directions is completely unacceptable to me. My play requires an empty room and two small windows. The American Repertory Theater (sic) Production which dismisses my directions is a complete parody of the play as conceived by me. Anybody who cares for the work couldn't fail to be disgusted by this."

As would be expected Brustein countered with the rebuttal that

To threaten any deviations from a purist rendering of this or any other play--to insist on strict adherence to each parenthesis of the published text--not only

robs collaborating artists of their interpretive freedom but threatens to turn the theatre into a waxworks.

Productions of works by dead playwrights can also be regulated, it seems, by living translators. Richard Wilbur's standard contract includes a clause that obliges the producing organization not to "make any changes, additions or deletions (including but not limited to dialogue, music, lyrics, characters, characterizations, locales, and period) without prior written consent."

Were careers and large sums of precious backer's money not at stake, the prospect of such a case going to trial would conjure up hilarious comic possibilities, a new genre of real-life courtroom drama. Too bad Molière is not around to write a satire about two grown-up artists and their lawyers arguing in powdered wigs and inflated verse the injuries done to each party when two collaborative artists (as are all who work in the theatre) disagree over the other's rights to express themselves. Perhaps, in Molière's absence, a contemporary Absurdist playwright could do the scenario justice. A script is not the the same kind of property as a wristwatch whose fate can fairly be decided by judicial arbitration. By what criteria are judges qualified to decide aesthetic questions upon which the leading theatrical minds still cannot agree? Answers to such important aesthetic questions should not be left to legal experts alone.

Apparently not all playwrights object to directorial

manipulation of their work. Franz Xaver Kroetz endorses Joanne Akalaitis's Americanization of his plays. It enables him to reach a large audience in the United States that would otherwise find his down-trodden, working-class German characters impossibly remote.

So, how does the future of conceptual theatre look from here? Has the movement played itself out? Will conceptual fatigue soon set in, or have conceptual techniques become mainstream? Is the theatrical pendulum swinging back, and what kinds of performances will the backlash produce? The current climate suggests several possible outcomes.

It is clearly too early to toll a death knell for conceptual classics. Anne Bogart did not last long at Trinity Rep, but it is not clear whether the brevity of her tenure can be blamed on her aesthetics or her personal and financial conflicts with the Board of Directors. In the meantime, Garland Wright remains Artistic Director of the Guthrie, Robert Brustein still presides over the American Repertory Theatre, Peter Sellars has started his own biennial festival in Los Angeles, and Joanne Akalaitis is presumably being groomed to take over for Joseph Papp at the new York Shakespeare Festival. It is unlikely that these partisans of conceptualism will suddenly reverse themselves.

If the only constant in life and art is change, it is safe to assume that the conceptual approach to the classics will eventually pass. Hopefully the next generation of classical production will return more focus to the actor,

although the impact of various high technologies might produce an unexpected theatrical windfall. In the meantime, current movements in American culture in general and the American theatre in particular, bode well for the survival of the conceptual approach to staging the classics. The director is still at the apex of the theatrical hierarchy, and the goals of cultural pluralism and diversification should lead more women and minority directors to prominence where they, too, will tackle large-scale productions of the classics. Their conceptual inheritance strongly suggests that they, too, will feel free to use the plays to their own thematic and theatrical ends.

For centuries, the theatre and its drama have proven their resilience by changing in response to changing times. Made possible if not inevitable by the rise of the director in the twentieth century, conceptual rewrighting is only the most recent manifestation of theatrical adaptation. Its most salient feature, that which distinguishes it from earlier approaches to classical revival, is that it does not seek to recreate a phantom authenticity from the past, but aims to create a new one each time. The process of putting together a straight or traditional production of a classic is like assembling a jigsaw puzzle. The traditional director figures out how to fit the separate elements together to achieve a predetermined final image. In contrast, conceptual directors reconfigure the overall pattern into which the various pieces are fitted. They

design a new shape, a new picture, a new work of art.

In the final analysis, conceptual rewrighting is a risky business, guaranteed to produce some debacles. Its open-ended, open-minded approach to making new theatre from old plays, however, has generated some remarkably fresh, urgent, and moving classical productions, and it has restored the classics to a prominent place in the contemporary American repertoire.

## NOTES

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. The catalog for a 1985 retrospective of conceptual art at the Grey Art Gallery in New York City credits Sol LeWitt with coining the term in the 1960s. Among the works in the exhibit were a pair of nails that lay like corpses on a dark velvet cloth inside a Lucite box, relics of a 1974 presentation by the artist, Chris Burden, who had staged his own crucifixion on the back of a Volkswagen; and a telegram from On Kawara asserting that he was "still alive" at the time of the exhibition. The overriding dependence of these works of art on a puzzle or riddle at their source led a New York Times reviewer to conclude that "a work in this mode may be no more than a statement to the effect that an idea for art has occurred to an artist." (Vivien Raynor, "The Conceptualists," The New York Times, July 12, 1985.) Another critic suggested that "conceptual art's ideal medium is telepathy."

2. Charles Marowitz, The Marowitz Shakespeare (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1978), p. 11.

3. Robert Brustein, "No More Masterpieces," The Third Theatre (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), pp. 21-2.

4. Ibid., p. 33.

5. Charles Marowitz, Prospero's Staff: Acting and Directing in the Contemporary Theatre (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 37.

6. Robert Brustein, "Reworking the Classics: Homage or Ego Trip?" The New York Times, November 6, 1988, pp. H5, 16.

7. Ibid., p. 5.

8. Marowitz Shakespeare, p. 24.

9. Jan Kott, "I Can't Get No Satisfaction," The Drama Review 41 (Fall 1968): 145-6.

10. Richard Gilman, "Directors vs. Playwrights," The Saturday Review, April 1982, p. 35.

11. Ibid.

12. Marvin Carlson has identified four different views of

the relationship between a dramatic text and its theatrical performance. ("Theatrical Performance: Illustration, Translation, Fulfillment, or Supplement," Theatre Journal 37 [March 1985]: 5-11.) The most conservative views he reports perceive production as no more than an "illustration" of the text or perhaps its "translation" to three dimensions. A more theatrically oriented theory is that the production is a "fulfillment" of the script's theatrical potential. The most liberal model describes the production as a viable work of art in its own right, which functions as a "supplement" to the text, existing beside it in the ideal marriage of two mature, autonomous entities whose union results in something richer than the sum of its separate parts. Each production of a play thus implies "a potentially infinite series of future performances" that might never have been possible without the injection of a second creative vision. Only the fourth paradigm can accommodate the work of conceptual directors, who align themselves theoretically next to playwrights, as their peers rather than their servants. They may encroach on the playwright's dominant position, but they can also enrich the scope of the dramatist's work by demonstrating its broader potential.

13. Richard Gilman, "Directors vs. Playwrights," p. 35.

14. Ibid.

15. Moira Hodgson, review of Così fan Tutte directed by Peter Sellars, The Nation, August 30, 1986, p. 153.

16. Gordon Rogoff, "Liviu Ciulei: Murder by Concept," review of Hamlet directed by Liviu Ciulei, Theatre is Not Safe (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1987), p. 153.

17. Stanley Kauffmann, Persons of the Drama, (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 131.

18. Eric Bentley, "Maiming the Bard," in The Dramatic Event (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956), p. 34.

19. Ibid., p. 35.

20. Gilman, p. 33.

21. Ibid, p. 34.

22. Ibid., p. 35.

23. Ibid., p. 34. That irony was not lost on Orson Welles, one of America's earliest star directors. Just three years after his 1936 "Voodoo" Macbeth, Welles wrote "at about the same time in the history of the theatre that the director

came in, the old-time star went out. The horrible truth is that nobody has read the last chapter of that detective story and discovered that the old-time star did not go out. He merely sits in the fifth row now and is the director." (Quoted in John Russell Taylor, Orson Welles: A Celebration of a Life (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1986)p. 24.

24. Allan Wallach, review of Don Juan, Newsday, July 25, 1982.

25. Robert Brustein, "America and the Classics," Theatre Profiles 7 (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986), p. 38.

26. Robert Brustein, review of Uncle Vanya directed by Andrei Serban, The New Republic, October 24, 1983, p. 23.

27. Robert Brustein, review of The Tempest directed by Lee Breuer, The New Republic, August 22, 1981, p. 25.

28. Brustein, Theatre Profiles, p. 38.

29. Jonathan Saville, review of The Misanthrope directed by Garland Wright, San Diego Reader, June 25, 1987.

30. Ralph Berry, On Directing Shakespeare (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1977), p. 17.

31. Brustein, Vanya review, p. 34.

32. Berry, p. 22.

33. Francis Hodge, "The Director as Critic," Educational Theatre Journal 11 (October 1959): 284.

34. Tyrone Guthrie, A New Theatre (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), p. 104.

35. Ibid., p. 103.

36. Tyrone Guthrie in Directors on Directing, ed. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy (New York: Bobbs Merrill Company, 1963), p. 246.

37. Tyrone Guthrie, "Directing a Play," in The Director in a Changing Theatre, ed. J. Robert Wills (Palo Alto: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1976), p. 96.

38. Ibid.

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40. Jonathan Miller in Ralph Berry, p. 57.
41. Lucian Pintilie quoted by Mike Steele, "The Romanian Connection," American Theatre (July/August 1985): 11.
42. Garland Wright, interview by Mark Bly, Theater 15 (Spring 1984): 69.
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44. Andrei Serban, interview with the author, March 15, 1989.
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46. Tyrone Guthrie, In Various Directions (1965; reprint ed. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979), p. 177.
47. Gerald Rabkin, "The Play of Misreading: Theatre/Text/Deconstruction," Performing Arts Journal 19 (1983): 44-60.
48. Ibid., p. 50.
49. Ibid, p. 47.
50. Ibid., p. 56.
51. Ibid., p. 51.
52. Ibid., p. 58.
53. Ibid., pp. 51-2.
54. Ibid., p. 59.
55. Ibid., pp. 59-60.
56. Ibid., p. 59.
57. Brustein, Theatre Profiles, p. 35.

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trans. Ann Dunnigan (New York and Toronto: Signet Classics, 1964), p. 109.

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9. Alexander Woolcott, review of Macbeth directed by Arthur Hopkins, reprinted in On Stage: Reviews from The New York Times, 1920-1970 (New York: Arno Press, 1973), p. 19.

10. Ibid.

11. Arthur Hopkins, "Capturing the Audience," in Directors on Directing, p. 207.

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17. Richard Gilman, "Directors vs. Playwrights," The Saturday Review, April 1982, p. 34.

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21. Serban/Brooks-Schechter interview, p. 26.
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50. Elinor Fuchs, "Is There Life After Irony?" Village Voice, January 3, 1984, p. 77.
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63. Robert Wilson, quoted in David J. Derose, review of Alcestis directed by Robert Wilson, Theatre Journal 39 (March 1987): 90.
64. Beacham, p. 37.

#### Chapter 4: The Plays of Shakespeare

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7. Joseph Papp with Ted Cornell, William Shakespeare's "Naked" Hamlet (New York: Macmillan, 1969), p. 20-1.
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29. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
30. Robert Brustein, review of Hamlet directed by Joseph Papp, Plays and Players (March 1968), p. 47.
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41. Sam Zolotow, "School Aids Object to Papp's Mod Hamlet," New York Times, January 22, 1968.
42. Ibid.
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45. Gregory Mosher, interview with the author, April 30, 1990. Further unattributed quotes also derive from this telephone conversation.
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47. Comedy of Errors was slightly altered when it was revived at the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival in Los Angeles and again at the Lincoln Center Theatre in New York in 1987.
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1990. Subsequent unattributed quotes also derive from this conversation.

64. Quoted by Colette Brooks, "'The folly of the fiction': Cymbeline Reconsidered," (Graduate School Paper, Yale University School of Drama, c.1977), p. 1.

65. Harley Granville Barker, Prefaces to Shakespeare: Volume II, (1946; reprinted, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 84.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

68. Brooks, p. 3.

69. Joanne Akalaitis, Interview by Arthur Bartow, The Director's Voice, p. 4.

70. Arthur Holmberg, "The Liberation of Lear," American Theatre 5 (July/August 1988): 12.

71. Ruth Maleczek quoted by Ross Wetzsteon, "Queen Lear: Ruth Maleczek Gender Bends Shakespeare," Village Voice, January 30, 1990, p. 40.

72. Seen in New York at Pepsico Summerfare in the summer of 1989.

73. The shortening of Shakespeare's title seemed to appease the "at least don't call it \_\_\_\_\_" faction of textual defenders. Reader's of Lear reviews were spared that weak and worn out anti-conceptual complaint.

74. Ruth Maleczek, quoted in Wetzsteon, p. 40.

75. Alisa Solomon, interview with the author, June 19, 1990. Subsequent unattributed quotations from Solomon also derive from this conversation. (Lee Breuer did not respond to repeated invitations to be interviewed.) In fact, Solomon's recollection of Mack's point was not completely accurate. Mack's reference was not to the historical period in which King Lear is set, but to Shakespeare's allegorical depiction of certain characters, in which the critic traces remnants of the medieval morality play: "Lear himself, as Professor Harbage among others has pointed out--flanked in that opening scene by 'vices or flatterers on the one hand, virtues or truth-speakers on the other'--stirs memories of a far more ancient dramatic hero, variously called Mankind, Everyman . . . Somewhere in the deep background of the causes that call him to this trial may still lurk the notion of the Summons o' Death, which sometimes precipitates the

psychomachia in the early Morality plays--now lingering on only in the hint Lear gives that he has divided his kingdom, in order that he may 'unburthen'd crawl toward death. . . .

"Though the complexity of the play as a whole sets it worlds apart from this tradition, one cannot but be struck by the number of details in King Lear that seem to derive from it." (Maynard Mack, King Lear in Our Time [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965], pp. 57-8.)

76. Ibid.

77. Lee Breuer quoted in William Harris, "Mabou Mines Sets Lear on a Hot Tin Roof," The New York Times, January 21, 1990, p. H5.

78. Michael Feingold, "A Mythic Immediacy," review of Lear, Village Voice, February 6, 1990, p. 98.

79. Breuer in Harris, p. H5.

80. Erika Munk, "Subversion by Concept," review of Lear, Village Voice, February 6, 1990, p. 95.

81. Feingold, pp. 98 and 95.

82. A comparison of The Gospel at Colonus and Lear suggests that Breuer's success with the first may have depended to a considerable extent on the working structures provided by Sophocles's text, the Pentacostal service, and Telson's score.

83. John Rockwell, "Robert Wilson Wins a Faithful Following, But It's in Europe," New York Times, June 20, 1990, p. C11.

#### Chapter 5: The Plays of Molière

1. Peter Sellars, interview by Arthur Bartow, The Director's Voice (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1988), p. 285. See Chapter 6.

2. Quoted in David Bradby and David Williams, Director's Theatre (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1987), p. 69. Planchon has called Schweyk the production with which he stopped "copying" Brecht. From here on, he says he merely incorporated into his work Brecht's Historisierung, the historical double focus that allows us to view the present through the guise of the past.

3. Roger Planchon, "I Am a Museum Guard," interview by

Rosette Lamont, Performing Arts Journal 16 (1981): 100.

4. Planchon in Bradby and Williams, p. 70.

5. Planchon/Lamont interview, p. 104.

6. Bradby and Williams, p. 65.

7. Planchon's 1973 re-staging was designed by Henri Monloup. Monloup retained Allio's basic format and his paintings, but pushed the renovation further along to emphasize the sense of destruction. In homage to the first designer, Planchon incorporated poses and gestures from Allio's murals into the acting.

8. Bradby and Williams, pp. 81-2.

9. Ibid., p. 83.

10. Judith Graves Miller, "Vitez's Molière," Theater 11 (Summer 1980): 74.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., p. 79.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., p. 76.

15. Rosette Lamont, "Lyubimov's Tartuffe," Theater 11 (Summer 1980): 84.

16. Yuri Lyubimov, interview by Margaret Croyden; quoted by Lamont, Theater 11, p. 84.

17. Ibid., p. 88.

18. I was able to observe some rehearsals and managerial discussions for this production. Unless otherwise attributed, quotes from Serban are taken from remarks noted by me in rehearsal or made in private conversations with me in April and May 1989.

19. Albert Bermel, "Today's Miser," American Repertory Theatre News, April 1989, p. 2.

20. Andrei Serban, "Andrei Serban Introduces The Miser," American Repertory Theatre News, April 1989, p. 3.

21. Molière, Theatre 1668-1669, Edited by René Bray (Paris: Société des Belles Lettres, 1947), p. 140.

22. Molière, The Miser and George Dandin, trans. by Albert Bermel (New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1987), p. 78.
23. Lionel Gossman, Men and Masks: A Study of Molière, 1963, quoted in The Miser program.
24. ART News, p. 3.
25. During previews, translator Albert Bermel convinced Serban to cut the line.
26. Kevin Kelly, review of The Miser directed by Andrei Serban, The Boston Globe, May 19, 1989.
27. Kelly was wrong. See descriptions of Wright's Misanthrope and Pintilié's Tartuffe, below.
28. Randall Findlay, review of The Misanthrope directed by Garland Wright, Minnesota Daily, June 19, 1987.
29. David Hawley, review of The Misanthrope directed by Garland Wright, St. Paul Pioneer Press and Dispatch, June 12, 1987.
30. One could almost smell them from the audience in a hyper-realistic scene that conjured simultaneous images of David Belasco and the butcher shop in Kroetz's Through the Leaves.
31. It is interesting to consider that Shaw rewrote and set the Don Juan legend at during the period in which Ciulei set his Don Juan, but Man and Superman does not suffer the same lack of vitality. Perhaps it was less the period that fell short than the director.
32. Everett Jones, review of Don Juan directed by Liviu Ciulei, Potomac News, April 16, 1979.
33. Judith Martin, review of Don Juan directed by Liviu Ciulei, Washington Post, April 6, 1979.
34. Novick went so far as to print a disclaimer in the issue of the Voice following the one that ran his review to correct the wrong impression created by the omission of this, his original final sentence, and the addition of the headline "Don Wan". (Review May 7, 1979; disclaimer May 14, 1979).
35. Gerald Rabkin, "Styles in Production: Don Juan, directed by Richard Foreman," Performing Arts Journal 18 (1982): 67.

36. Ibid., p. 69.
37. Allan Wallach, review of Don Juan directed by Richard Foreman, Newsday, July 25, 1982.
38. Frank Rich, review of Don Juan directed by Richard Foreman, New York Times, July 25, 1982.
39. Ibid.
40. Novick, "Don Wan," review of Don Juan directed by Richard Foreman, Village Voice, July 13, 1982.
41. Rabkin, p. 70.
42. Mel Gussow, review of Tartuffe directed by Lucian Pintilié, New York Times, April 2, 1985.
43. This discussion refers to the Arena version.
44. Hap Erstein, review of Tartuffe directed by Lucian Pintilié, The Washington Times, March 15, 1985.
45. William Henry, III, review of Tartuffe directed by Lucian Pintilié, Time Magazine, August 24, 1984, p. 65.
46. Novick, Village Voice, May 7, 1979.

#### Chapter 6: Peter Sellars's Mozart-da Ponte Trilogy

1. I do not pretend to be a music critic and so will limit my comments on the musical merits of these performances to those of an interested layman. My discussion of Peter Sellars' Mozart-da Ponte trilogy will focus on the same theatrical issues I have discussed in the other chapters, namely how well the director's conceptual framework reflected and illuminated the original. Without exception, the singing seemed to me more than adequate and often quite extraordinary, but I will accept the general consensus of music critics that the voices ranged from mediocre to quite good, with few raves for any but Sanford Sylvan (Figaro and Alfonso) and James Maddalena (Guglielmo and Count Almaviva).

Craig Smith's conducting evoked widely disparate responses from nondescript and aimless to competent and lively. Andrew Porter, the music critic for the New Yorker and a staunch supporter of Sellars's innovations, accused Smith of dragging the orchestra through the tragic sections. In The Nation, Edward Said consistently complained his tempi were much too fast, as if he were trying to avoid the intricacies of the score by rushing over them. Opera News

praised Smith's work with the music for "clarity, grace and bouyancy" (C. J. Lutten, November 1987, p. 53).

I leave the musicological tasks to a more appropriately qualified writer and analyze these productions in their full dimensions as theatrical events. As Andrew Porter put it, "the performance was exceptional--electrifying--not for the singing but for the way that everything about it conspired" (New Yorker, August 10, 1987, pp. 66-9). And Edward Said wrote in The Nation, "Sellars treats the work as a full-scale intellectual social, and aesthetic project and not mainly a musical one. (September 26, 1987, p. 318).

2. The desperate travails of the director of the Cincinnati cultural society whose visiting virtuoso collapses before the big event in Ken Ludwig's Lead Me a Tenor played farcical havoc with this precarious circumstance.

3. See Daniel Quinn, "Re-visioning Opera," Performing Arts Journal 13 (1980): 87-95.

4. Edward Said, Review of Don Giovanni, The Nation, September 26, 1987, p. 318.

5. Thomas Disch, Review of The Marriage of Figaro, The Nation, August 27, 1988, p. 177.

6. Said, September 26, 1987, p. 318.

7. Donal Henahan, "Wanted: Singing Not Acting," New York Times, June 27, 1987, p. H21

8. Donal Henahan, "Music View," New York Times, September 7, 1986, p. H29. Henahan barely manages to repress his sneer at the word "legitimate," as if he might have preferred, like Edmund in King Lear, to have used a less polite synonym for "illegitimate."

9. Ibid.

10. Peter Sellars, interview with the author, November 5, 1989. Subsequent unattributed quotations also derive from this conversation.

11. Peter Sellars, quoted in Arthur Bartow, The Director's Voice (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), p. 279.

12. Peter Sellars, quoted by Will Crutchfield, "Modern Twists Spice a Mozart Opera," New York Times, July 13, 1986, p. H1.

13. Peter Sellars, interview by Ron Jenkins, Theater 15

(Fall 1984): 48.

14. He told me: "As you can see, I really do believe in show business. I love show business and spend a lot of my time trying to get it right, and I think, God knows, the Mozart Act I finales are just dazzling from a sheer show biz point of view."

15. Will Crutchfield, "Mozart in the Style of Sellars or Vice Versa," New York Times, July 25, 1989, p. C13.

16. The director's program notes will be considered here because Sellars expected his audiences, like those in the 18th-century, to read them during the performance. They serve dual functions in his overall concept. "Usually I keep the house lights on during the show," he explained, because in the 18th century, "the house lights were on and people did have books. You picked them up a couple of days before the performance, and you did read beforehand." His use of such slang expressions as "got down with his bad self" to describe the Count dancing at Figaro's wedding, and "snacking between meals" to describe his extramarital philandering reveal dangerous tendencies in Sellars writing that underscore the wisdom of his decision not to attempt original translations of the libretti.

17. Introduction to Sellars' program notes, p. 3.

18. Ibid., p. 2.

19. Ibid.

20. Peter Sellars, interview by Arthur Bartow, The Director's Voice (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1988), p. 277.

21. Peter Sellars, quoted in Michael Kimmelman, "Summerfare Offers a Home for the Leading Edge," New York Times, June 21, 1987, p. H21.

22. Peter Sellars, program notes to Don Giovanni.

23. Scandals involving Jim Bakker, Gary Hart, Bess Meyerson, and the unseating of a Japanese prime minister confirm the persistence of that situation today.

24. Introduction to program notes, p. 2.

25. Sellars/Green interview.

26. Richard Wagner, quoted by Andrew Porter, review of Così fan Tutte directed by Peter Sellars, New Yorker, August 11, 1986, pp. 81-2.

27. Crutchfield, July 25, 1989, p. C13.
28. John Rockwell, review of Così fan Tutte directed by Peter Sellars, New York Times, July 18, 1986, p. C26.
29. Porter, August 11, 1986, pp. 81-2.
30. Said, September 26, 1987, p. 289.
31. C. J. Luten, review of Don Giovanni directed by Peter Sellars, Opera News, November 1987, pp. 52-3.
32. Thomas Disch, review of Don Giovanni directed by Peter Sellars, The Nation, September 4, 1989, p. 254.
33. Edward Said, review of Così fan Tutte directed by Peter Sellars, The Nation, September 18, 1989, p. 289.
34. Andrew Porter, review of Don Giovanni directed by Peter Sellars, New Yorker, August 10, 1987, p. 66.
35. Introduction to program notes, p. 2.
36. Ibid.
37. Rockwell, July 18, 1986, p. C26.
38. Ibid.
39. Crutchfield, July 25, 1989, p. C17.
40. Peter Davis, review of Così fan Tutte directed by Peter Sellars, New York Magazine, August 4, 1986, pp. 64-5.
41. Moira Hodgson, review of Così fan Tutte directed by Peter Sellars, The Nation, August 30, 1986, p. 153.
42. Porter, August 11, 1986, p. 82.
43. Another explanation for my preference is that I saw Figaro last and had learned to decipher Sellars' codes. Either way, the critics tended to agree with me.
44. Introduction to program notes, p. 2.
45. Ibid.
46. C.J. Luten, review of La Nozze di Figaro directed by Peter Sellars, Opera News, December 10, 1988, p. 50.
47. Crutchfield, July 25, 1989, p. C13.

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Production program, October 1990  
1990 Next Wave Journal

For Stuff As Dreams Are Made On by Fred Curchak, November 1989.

Production program, November 1989  
1989 Next Wave Journal  
Press Clippings

For Hamlet directed by Ingmar Bergman, March 1988.

Production program

For The Gospel at Colonus, directed by Lee Breuer, 1980.

Souvenir program including essay by Gerald Rabkin and interview with Lee Breuer. (Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Center at Lincoln Center.)

Materials from the Goodman Theatre, Chicago

For The Comedy of Errors directed by Robert Woodruff, 1983.

Souvenir program (Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Center at Lincoln Center.)

Materials from the Lincoln Center Theatre, New York

For The Comedy of Errors directed by Robert Woodruff, 1987

Playbill (New York: Playbill Incorporated), June 1987.

Materials from Mabou Mines, New York

For Lear (Triplex Theatre, New York), January-March 1990.

Production program

Materials from the New York Shakespeare Festival

For Cymbeline directed by Joanne Akalaitis, May-June 1989

Playbill (New York: Playbill Incorporated), June 1989.  
Press Clippings

For Don Juan directed by Richard Foreman, 1982

Press Clippings

For Hamlet directed by Joseph Papp, December 1967

Souvenir program (Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Center at Lincoln Center)

Materials from Pepsico Summerfare, Purchase, New York

For "The Mozart - da Ponte Operas," directed by Peter Sellars, Summer 1989.

Director's program notes  
1989 Summerfare Journal: The Grand Finale

Materials from the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis

For The Misanthrope directed by Garland Wright, 1987

Production program  
Press Clippings

For The House of Atreus directed by Tyrone Guthrie, 1968

Souvenir program including play guide

For Hamlet directed by Tyrone Guthrie, 1963.

Souvenir program