

Alfred Cismaru

The Rebirth of French Theater

“Dieu merci, il y a toujours le théâtre,” the French used to say in the early 1940’s, during the dreary days of the German occupation. Those who could afford it flocked to the theater, and those who could not cut expenses elsewhere and still sought the consolation of live stage performances. Since then, the French theater has gone through some very good and some very bad periods. Right after the war, in a rebirth of national pride, succeeding French governments supported the theater with an avalanche of funds. In the 1950’s, the 1960’s and the early 1970’s support varied and became more strictly tied to France’s other domestic expenditure needs. It was only during Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s era that the government withdrew most of its financial backing. The institution that is the French theater began to suffer through some very tough, very lean years, under the parsimonious leadership of Giscard d’Estaing. Of course, he did not single out the theater only; all cultural and social programs had to manage with a great deal less.

Franc-starved theaters, deprived of their government subsidies, floundered. Audiences, as the saying goes, stayed away in droves — and this in a country where empty theaters are considered a disaster on the scale of a blight in the vineyards. Producers, directors and actors, tired of blaming the government and not getting anywhere doing so, sought other reasons for their demise: the advent of television; the general affordability of the personal automobile and of the plane ticket, which meant that much more money was now being spent on vacations than on domestic cultural outlets; a developing tendency of the public everywhere to be less concerned with forms of entertainment traditionally elitist in form and content.

Since François Mitterand and his Socialist-Communist coalition came to power, however, the situation has been reversed, the coffers have been flung open, and the francs have been widely distributed. Such big spending — the Socialists nearly tripled theater subsidies alone in their first year in power, and now for the second year more

than six hundred million francs are budgeted — has made international bankers nervous, put the French business community on the verge of revolution, and set the tax-paying bourgeoisie to grumbling into its *vin rouge*. But no one in French theater is complaining, and those associated with it are beginning to realize that assigning blame to other than simple monetary sources was an academic pursuit. The fact is that, once money became available to purchase once more the sumptuous splendor of the French theater, bold productions of old and new plays became possible, and the spectators responded with unexpected enthusiasm.

The concensus of drama reviewers of Parisian newspapers is that, throughout 1982, audiences have come streaming back to the theaters, bringing with them an intense interest and excitement unequalled since the 1930's. They point out that Mitterand's government has fuelled a theatrical renaissance that is restoring Paris to its rightful place alongside New York and London as one of the great theater centers in the world. And in the midst of this, a nucleus of talented young directors has responded with work that is often shocking, often brilliant. Among the best of the new directors are three who have attracted international attention: Patrice Chéreau, Antoine Vitez and Ariane Mnouchkine. Some of their more recent work will be examined below.

Pierre Chéreau was only thirty years old when he became widely known for his German staging of Wagner's Ring cycle, a production that is still talked about today, some seven years later. Chereau kicked off this past Parisian season with a mammoth creation of Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, which took two successive evenings of seven-hour performances to complete. The length, the fantastic props, its naturalism, and other aspects of the production were reminiscent of many of the features of the Miracle plays staged during the Middle Ages in France, outside churches, attracting thousands, night after night, for uninterrupted play. For the Ibsen drama, Chéreau and his personal set designer, Richard Peduzzi, used the same kind of giant-scale operatic staging as in Wagner's Ring. An exploding yacht, three-story Egyptian monuments sliding on and off stage, and even a magnificent white stallion were part of the visual fantasy. Combined with this was a striking naturalism which included two bloody suicides and a chilling insane asylum scene. *Peer Gynt* is the longest - and wildest - of Ibsen's plays, and is often considered unstagable; but not a line was left out in Chéreau's production, and he kept the always demanding Parisian audience on the edge of its seat. Word quickly got around that something rare was happening on the stage of the elegant Théâtre de la Ville, and at the end of the three-months run tickets were still being scalped. *Peer Gynt* could have been shown for a much longer period of time,

were it not for the fact that it had to make room for a play previously scheduled. Chéreau's debut in Paris benefited, of course, from the great generosity of the government of Mitterrand, but Mitterrand himself is reputed not to have been able to obtain a ticket for the evening of his choice and having to settle for a matinée.

Last season was also the first for Antoine Vitez, the controversial new director of the prestigious Théâtre National de Paris at Chaillot. A long-time compatriot of the young Socialist Minister of Culture, Jack Lang (no stranger to controversy himself), as well as a former director of the National Conservatory of Dramatic Art, Vitez finds himself not only in the spotlight on one of the country's toughest stages, but also as a favorite target of conservative and anti-Socialist critics everywhere, who relentlessly ferret out the politics, real or imaginary, in every scene. Some directors might have chosen to play it safe, at least for the first few months. But Vitez plunged in headlong, starting with a four-hour *Faust* that was a staggering array of nudity, hot-air balloons, trap doors, and gunshots fired at God. One of the play's themes is the excess of science, but Paris critics complained that the excess was all Vitez's.

When his next play opened, the disturbing anti-war production of *Tomb for 500,000 Soldiers* (based on Pierre Guyotat's novel about France's war in Algeria), the complaints became cries and shouts. To show how war infects on an individual level, Vitez focused on the soldiers' personal lives. He created a stage *decorated* with urinals for a procession of masturbation, violent homosexuality, prostitution, castration, and more.

There is method, though, in Vitez's madness. In daring to put on the national stage what no one has attempted, Vitez is creating the controversy he believes is essential to the renaissance of the theater. He does not believe it enough that audiences come, watch, applaud and go home. They must be moved, shocked if necessary. And they have been — so much so that the conservative critics notwithstanding, the play was shown to packed houses, night after night, and, surprisingly, even most of the matinée performances were sold out. Not quite in tune with changing Parisian taste, and with its obvious current penchant for liberal causes and ideals, more than one such critic, annoyed and astounded by Vitez's success, in subsequent reviews altered their tone and deigned to acknowledge some merit in the absorbing naturalism and thought-provoking sequences of his productions.

On the other side of town, in a converted munitions factory, secluded by the Bois de Vincennes, a young, Oxford-educated woman of Franco-Russian parentage is emerging as one of Europe's most brilliant directors. Ariane Mnouchkine is now in the midst of a two-year

project of presenting six Shakespeare plays that she herself has translated into French. But no one has ever presented the Bard like this. This past season, Mnouchkine's production of *Richard II* had English kings, queens, and courtiers wearing masks or wildly painted faces and dressed in flowing oriental silks, all inspired by the traditional Kabuki Japanese drama. Her actors came tearing on and off stage, sprinting down long runways as if this were some kind of Samurai 100-yard dash. They declaimed rather than spoke, they strutted and stomped rather than moved about, and their every gesture became a warrior's bellicose threat.

Mnouchkine's use of props is superb. A strip of leather in hand becomes a whip or rein as Mowbray, Bolingbroke and their soldiers prance in cavalcade, becoming their own horses. Richard's famous ramparts scene is delivered from a simple geometric set of bars that he climbs as a child's gymnastics set. Turned on its side, his *castle* later becomes his prison. All this is played to a fabulous array of Oriental percussion. The visual display is so dazzling that the play, which runs more than five hours, seems not a moment too long.

After her *Richard II* triumph, Mnouchkine unveiled her first Shakespeare comedy, *Twelfth Night*. It was the event of the 1982 summer's big drama festival in Avignon, and later has been packing in audiences at Vincennes, fall and winter of the same year. Again the visual element is foremost. The setting of the play is still Oriental, but more Hindu than Japanese. The costumes and décor are still sumptuous, but the mood is softened, as befits a comedy. Mnouchkine's latest discovery, the clown Phillippe Hottier (as Sir Toby Belch), defies both gravity and description. He is something like a cross between Charlie Chaplin and an Olympic gymnast, and his performance is at the center of the play.

Precision and professionalism are the bywords for Mnouchkine's troupe of more than fifty actors and technicians. They work the theater cooperatively, everyone sharing in the most mundane of tasks. There is no star system - the actor playing King Richard is paid the same as an extra with a walk-on part who doubles as a stage hand - and Mnouchkine demands a great deal from her actors. Members train like athletes, with two long exercise sessions daily, under the guidance of a full-time athletic director. Rehearsals are both scheduled and unscheduled, members of the troupe meeting often in their apartments or at cafés and declaiming their lines to each other privately or in public. The spirit of informality is only apparent, however, for seriousness and gravity mark the approach to all working sessions, inside and outside the theater itself. As is evident to those who have seen Mnouchkine's productions, the goings-on on stage require much more than is usually expected from performers of Shakespeare. Because the setting is

Oriental, actors and actresses have to learn to move differently, to intone differently, and to project facial expressions through much heavier makeup or through masks. Western theater in general, and the French in particular, have very little of the experience required by Mnouchkine, and it is to her credit that she has been able to extract from her troupe the high degree of excellence that proved so pleasing to audiences and many critics alike.

With such young, talented and innovative directors as Chéreau, Vitez and Mnouchkine, and with funds of considerable magnitude now available, French theater has come alive again. In fact, Paris now attracts foreign directors of repute, but because it has so many of its own this is much less important than the fact that it can now import theater technicians from all over the world: Otmar Krejka, for example, Giorgio Strehler, Shuji Terayama, and others. These technicians bring a host of new ideas, a different legacy, a richness and an energy that the French theater appropriates unabashedly. The popular enthusiasm with which all this is received by the public relegates to the past the gloomy, less productive days under Giscard d'Estaing. Whatever other shortcomings it may have, it must be conceded that the Mitterrand government revived, for the French theater, those qualities that had seemed quite irretrievably lost as recently as the year 1981. There is a special new brilliance now in the City of Lights, one which combines a flair for the visual with a very solid intellectual approach in which the Classics are given startling new treatments that the purists find very hard to swallow.

This brings to mind, of course, the continuing battle between *les anciens et les modernes*. This battle, which in France one can trace back to the sixteenth century, and even before it, is one dear to the French intelligentsia and, it may be safely assumed, one that delights the adversaries who engage in it with all the passion at the disposal of their metabolism. One recalls, for example, the celebrated battle of *Hernani* (Victor Hugo's famous play) in 1830, when the partisans of the Classics clashed with the followers of the Romantics, using fists, swords and guns. In more recent times, the struggle took place in the 1950's when Ionesco and Beckett revolutionized the French stage with their Theater of the Absurd. The magnitude of the fight (revealing, then, the deep love the French have for their theater) can be immediately grasped in the recollection of a 1966 event which did not make the headlines in this country but had caused a lasting scandal in Paris.

By 1966, of course, Ionesco had been widely accepted on national and international stages; but he did not yet have a play at the Comédie Française. His *Hunger and Thirst*, however, attracted the Comédie's acceptance committee. The play had just had a very enthusiastic

reception in Dusseldorf, and it looked like a certain money-maker. Moreover, Robert Hirsch, for a long time the bravura star of the Comédie, was particularly anxious to tackle the challenging role of Jean, the main character. But the Comédie Française, in 1966, was still known for its theatrical orthodoxy and for its policy of hardly ever opening its doors to a living playwright. On the night of the première, then, the majority of the public made up of the regular Tuesday-night season-ticket subscribers and dressed up in the evening clothes which are *de rigueur* for such occasions, was markedly irked by the incongruous proceedings on the stage and began shouting: "Quel scandale!" The performance was interrupted many times, and some spectators were thrown out of the theater and were subsequently arrested. Nevertheless, at the end of the play, with a characteristic open disregard for consistency, the audience gave a standing ovation to Robert Hirsch for his performance of a most difficult role. The next day, threatening bomb calls were received by the Administration of the Comédie, and a decision had to be made to secure the aid of the police, and ultimately of the National Guard, for most of the future presentations. The remainder of *Hunger and Thirst's* run saw the theater surrounded by soldiers night after night, and suspicious spectators were frisked and pocketbooks were opened before admission was granted. But the show went on, as the saying goes, in spite of the proliferation of anonymous letters and bomb calls; and the public, intrigued, had to purchase tickets from scalpers, a practice that was unknown and unnecessary until that time.

Since then it has become commonplace to see innovations on the stage of the Comédie, innovations which include many nonconformist renditions of the Classics, and contemporary plays that incorporate violence, sexuality and lewd language. The purists are still upset and vent their grief often and with eloquence. But this past season, faced as they were with the support for, and the enthusiastic reception of, the new directors, almost as often and almost as eloquently the conservative critics were forced to revise their judgements and to grant that *les modernes* deserve, at least in part, to have their way. Each time they retracted, the purists admitted that the tradition of the avant-garde, that of shocking the bourgeoisie, is the very lifeblood of French art.