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AN ACTOR OF GREATNESS

OF ALL CREATIVE ENDEAVOURS, the art of acting is the most transient. This fact came painfully home to me this summer as I strove to write about the life and career of Élisabeth Rachel Félix, known to her worshippers on two continents simply as "Mlle. Rachel." A daughter of Jewish peddlers who grew up busking in the streets, Rachel defied poverty and rampant anti-Semitism to become the most celebrated *tragédienne* of the nineteenth century. The legend goes that as she lay dying in 1858, at the age of 37, she mourned above all the passing of her own theatrical genius, since she knew that the embodied brilliance that had made her "Rachel" would vanish with her, leaving not a rack behind. As a theatre historian writing two centuries after her birth, I can only glimpse the shadow of Rachel's greatness in the astonished encomia penned during her lifetime by writers such as Charlotte Brontë, Alexander Herzen, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Because I cannot grasp Rachel for myself, I seek out the echo of her effect on others. In the absence of her voice, that echo is precious.

Every so often in a theatregoing life, a spectator has the chance to see in the flesh one of those actors who inspire, as Rachel did for her contemporaries, the urge to set down some record of their profound, fleeting effect. I had such a chance this summer, as I was lucky enough to see—in the midst of writing about Rachel—one of the greatest actors I have ever encountered: Hans Kesting.

Kesting is a member of the Toneelgroep Amsterdam, the greatest theatre company that I have ever seen live onstage. I first saw him perform in artistic director Ivo van Hove's production of *Roman Tragedies* at Montreal's Festival TransAmériques in 2010. This epic six-hour adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, played without intermission, took place in a setting that recalled a gigantic political gathering. The stage was set with sofas, tables, and news desks, all circled constantly by ambulant video cameras and their operators. As the

actors moved about the space, the audience could watch either their living bodies or the live-feed video close-ups of their faces projected on huge monitors above the stage. If they wished, spectators could even migrate to sit amongst the performers onstage like delegates at an unusually dangerous leadership convention. The members of the company, habitués of this celebrated work that had already played on multiple continents, stayed cool in the face of such unpredictable scrutiny. Clad in contemporary dress and speaking a very modern Dutch translation of Shakespeare's text, they performed with astonishing intensity and directness, though their characters—soldiers, senators, dictators, and queens—never lost the politician's readiness to pose for the looming photo-op.

Kesting, who played Mark Antony, did not appear onstage until the halfway mark of this marathon. Thanks to van Hove's cuts to Shakespeare's text, he had scarcely entered for the first time before he had to pronounce Antony's iconic eulogy for the dead Caesar, "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears." A tall, dishevelled, and rather nondescript-looking middle-aged man in a blue suit and tie, he began by delivering a standard political stump speech. Then he went radically off book. Wrenching the microphone out of its stand, he proceeded to plunk himself down on the ground, addressing the audience with colloquial frankness. Later, as if playing Mary to Caesar's Christ, he cradled the murdered dictator's body in his arms in a political pieta. Macho, mercurial, and sentimental, Kesting's Antony could turn on a dime from rage to vulnerability and from searing honesty to a lazy, self-parodic charm. When, near the end of *Antony and Cleopatra*, he bade his lover farewell with a string of drunkenly tender military salutes to the strains of Bob Dylan's "Not Dark Yet," I was surprised to find myself weeping. In a whole company of powerful actors attuned to one another and to the production by years of repertory practise, he compelled the eye—and the heart—like no one else.

I had a similar experience this summer while watching the Toneelgroep's version of Shakespeare's "Wars of the Roses" plays, *Kings of War*, in which Kesting played Richard III—a character who resembles Antony only in his capacity for violence. Kesting's Antony was all forthright virility, wrenching his tie open with one hand as he railed against Caesar's killers. In contrast, his Richard was a hulking, overgrown schoolboy, shambling about the stage in a blazer two sizes too small for him as his relatives giggled at "Uncle Gloucester's" social *faux pas*. As Antony, Kesting's long face with

its large nose and wide, thin-lipped mouth appeared mobile, witty, melancholic, even handsome. As Richard, it looked like the visage of a sulky baby, splashed with a mottled purple birthmark as if with the mark of Cain. Kesting's Antony was vain but outward-looking; his eyes sought out the faces of spectators, his fellow politicians, and (especially in his final moments) Chris Nietvelt's Cleopatra with affection, anger, and curiosity. Kesting's Richard hardly seemed to register other people's existence, even when—as in his courtship scene with Lady Anne (played by Hélène Devos) and his many moments of solo intimacy with the audience—he was engaged in seducing them. His one real relationship was with himself. Left alone, he gazed fixedly in a full-length mirror, looking to his own reflection for an affirmation that never quite arrived. Yet even when he turned his eyes from the audience, we could never take our eyes from him.

At this point in my chronicle, the fundamental question posed by Rachel on her deathbed rears its ugly head. What *was* it about Kesting that produced this effect on me not once but twice, and how can I possibly record it for those who may never have the privilege of seeing him in person? In part, I would argue, it was his flawless incarnation of the spirit of the production—his fearless, incisive approach to his role, which echoed van Hove's fearless, incisive approach to *Henry V*, *Henry VI*, and *Richard III*. As he had done in *Roman Tragedies*, so too in *Kings of War* did the director play confidently with Shakespeare's texts, uncowed by their canonicity and immune to the po-faced reverence with which they are so often treated in the theatre. He cut them as ruthlessly as Kesting's Richard massacred his enemies, selecting out only those passages that served his chosen themes: power, war, politics, performance, and the human cruelties and insecurities that render these forces so lethal. Deeds that could not be acknowledged on news broadcasts were glimpsed via cameras that allowed us to peek into whitewashed corridors just offstage. In these secret, sterile halls the French aristocracy danced to techno and sniffed cocaine; the victims of political skulduggery were strapped to hospital beds and assassinated by lethal injection; and, in one particularly memorable sequence, a flock of bewildered sheep wandered amidst their own dung while Henry VI (played by Eelco Smits) fantasized about the bucolic joys of shepherding. At the very heart of the production lay an awareness of the brutal, self-serving instincts that haunt even the most elegant rhetoric and the most public-spirited motives when power is at stake. Kesting's Richard, who had no sooner piously ac-

cepted the throne than he threw a rug over his shoulders and danced manically around the room like a little boy playing king, was the embodiment of this conception. When he continued his celebration by making chummy calls to world leaders—"Vladimir Vladimirovitch? Is that you?"—his chilling resemblance to real-life political kingpins came into painfully sharp focus. Hence, one way of describing Kesting's greatness might be to say that his performance was a perfect fit—not only for the director's vision, but for the zeitgeist as well.

As Cleopatra says, however, "that's not it"—or, at least, that's not all. Other actors—including, no doubt, many of Kesting's brilliant castmates—could surely have executed van Hove's conception and thrown a few expert Trump impressions into the bargain. Whether they could have done it with such breathtaking, quicksilver technical proficiency is another matter. In *Kings of War*, as in *Roman Tragedies*, Kesting's performance was a compendium of uncanny hairpin turns. In his earliest scenes as Richard, he hovered on the edge of the action with an expression of stolidity and even stupidity, only to jerk his head toward his prey with a sudden glint of wolfish cunning. His vicious craftiness dissolved into pathos when, abandoned by the royal entourage, he looked to the mirror for company like a lonely child with his imaginary friend. At times, as in the scene with Lady Anne, Kesting espoused a performance style so restrained and naturalistic that he might have been playing for the cameras in an American TV drama. At others, as in his exuberant celebration of his own ill-gotten gains, he launched into a full-on clown turn of the grotesque *bouffon* school. The audience never quite knew what he would pull next. Watching him was thrilling, like watching an Olympic figure skater land a quadruple Lutz.

Yet this explanation, too, falls short, failing to pluck out the heart of Kesting's mystery or to articulate my own emotional response to it. As a last-ditch effort to reach that goal, I find myself turning to one of the most famous of all tributes to Rachel, penned by the English critic George Henry Lewes. In an essay published in *On Actors and the Art of Acting* (1875), Lewes wrote of the actress that "[s]he was so graceful and so powerful that her air of dignity was incomparable, but somehow you always felt in her presence an indefinable suggestion of latent wickedness." In its moralizing vision of her genius as vaguely tinged with evil, Lewes' description may seem a dated product of Victorian critical culture. But in his perception that part of Rachel's power came from a sense of contradiction—between the

elegance and the horror of her acting as well as between her dignity and her willingness to plumb degradation—he offers an insight that applies to Kesting as well. He was utterly and fearlessly repulsive as Richard III, yet his grace and power rendered the character just as magnetically fascinating as his Antony had been in 2010. He exposed the "latent wickedness" of both Shakespeare's great hero/villain and our own chilling political moment, yet he did so with such precision, insight, and bravery that he also granted us a glimpse of real beauty. Even when embodying the character's moments of greatest despair and damnation, he exuded the joy of an artist who knew that he was working at the height of his craft to convey something complicated, troubling, and truthful about his own age.

Despair and joy came together in the final moments of *Kings of War*, when, alone on an empty stage, Kesting's Richard stared up at the huge monitors above him, watching in horror as the live-feed video of his face was replaced by shots of his victims. As the lighting around him dwindled to a single fluorescent bulb, he screamed out, offering his "kingdom for a horse," and began to gallop wildly around the space. Was he, at the last, a madman, an animal, or a little boy at play? Were we witnessing his death agony, a final burst of the malignant energy by which he had enslaved the kingdom, or a strange moment of escape into freedom and release? Kesting offered us no answer. Instead, he simply disappeared from the stage, leaving behind only the questions his labour had raised and the memory of his evanescent, indelible art.