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978-0-521-02892-9 - The Revisionist Stage: American Directors Reinvent the Classics

Amy S. Green

Excerpt

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REINVENTING CLASSIC THEATRE



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.

EZRA POUND¹

It is the malleability of a classic that we should celebrate, not simply its age.

CHARLES MAROWITZ²

Whatever you do on stage must = the public at the time you stage it.

PETER SELLARS³

CLASSICAL REVIVAL has always meant revision. Ever since the Romans adapted Greek dramas to their own rougher tastes and times, dramatic works from previous eras have undergone inevitable metamorphoses in subsequent centuries. During the Renaissance ancient scripts were reformulated to conform to neoclassical ideals. Davenant and Tate regularized Shakespeare for Restoration and eighteenth-century audiences. The actor-managers trimmed the great plays to intensify the focus on the starring role. Photographs of William Poel's turn-of-the-century "Elizabethan" reconstructions look unmistakably Edwardian to us today.⁴ Every theatrical age remakes the classics in its own image, and with the wisdom of hindsight these "improvements" tell us much about the *zeitgeist* of the times in which they were made.

So what of a theatrical moment that remakes *Oedipus at Colonus* as a gospel opera? Relocates a redneck female Lear to rural Georgia? Characterizes Harpagon's children as near-clones of their miserly father? Sets *Così fan Tutte* in a diner on Long Island? American directors since the late 1960s have reinvented cherished plays and operas from the past in maverick stagings that

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defy traditional bounds of directorial license and assert the validity of the American experience. Lee Breuer, Andrei Serban, Peter Sellars, JoAnne Akalaitis, and others have knocked playscripts off their Victorian pedestals into an egalitarian stew of theatrical signs and gestures that may alter, clarify, contradict, criticize, demystify, dislocate, update, or otherwise reimagine the subject text on stage. By abandoning the modernist quest for historical authenticity and the definitive production, these directors have, for better and worse, opened up a seemingly infinite range of theatrical possibilities for classic scripts.

Their work has provoked enough vehement response from both ends of the critical spectrum over the past twenty-five years to have restored the classics (and debate about their production) to the forefront of the American theatrical consciousness. On one hand, there is nothing historically unusual about the way the classics have been treated on American stages since the countercultural revolution of the 1960s: In centuries-old tradition, plays whose central themes resonate with contemporary concerns are adapted to make them more accessible and appealing to contemporary audiences. On the other hand, because contemporary revisionist productions of the classics maintain original texts in radically altered theatrical presentations, they are distinctly different from the literary adaptations that came before. It is this essential contradiction between a familiar, well-established text and its all-new theatrical idiom that marks contemporary classical revival as the unique product of our specific theatrical, cultural, and historical milieu.

DIRECTORS' PERSPECTIVES

While the most radical reinventions have come in the wake of the sixties' countercultural revolution, Americans have been tampering with the classics since the nineteenth century. Many, from the self-centering actor-managers to Augustin Daly and David Belasco, adapted Shakespeare's plays to feature leading actors and cater to popular tastes. With the emergence of the modern American director in the 1920s and 1930s, the staging of classics took a decidedly conceptual turn. Some directors put their marks on established texts 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, more abstract, 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

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Greek and Roman drama in hopes of unleashing the plays' primal emotional powers.

A popular postmodernist approach is to deconstruct the formidable edifice of received meaning by interjecting a spate of anachronistic references. Lucian Pintilié 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 was skewered in the press for hastening the hapless heroine of *Cymbeline* to Milford Haven atop a Victorian velocipede. The aggregate impact of such jumbled images gives new meaning to the old sense of classical "timelessness."

In the 1950s, Guthrie liked to fend off his critics by claiming that he was just "jollyng up" the classics to make them less academic and more appealing, but his 1964 memoirs reveal a more serious directorial agenda. "If classics are to be fresh and not preserved in a sort of aspic of uncritical reverence," he wrote, "then there must be constant experiment with their production." 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," that prevents them from making deeper connections with classic texts.⁵

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."⁶ In the meeting of a text's hidden treasures and a director's insights, Guthrie saw the opportunity 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.

After all, Guthrie insisted, "controversy is far healthier than acquiescence."⁷

By the 1980s, the whole concept of "great masters" had been widely debunked. Literary and performance theorists had affirmed the inability of authors to have more than "the vaguest idea" of what they had written. Poststructuralist criticism had shifted the focus of analysis from internal, sub-

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conscious impulses to the external, social and historical forces that impinge on the creation of any cultural “product.” “Texts” were being “deconstructed,” and Barthes had declared the author dead. In the theatre, Artaud-inspired experiments as far back as the 1960s had challenged not only the primacy but the necessity of the playscript in creating performances.

Revisionist directors working in the climate created by critic-theorists like Derrida and Barthes have, if not actually read about deconstruction, absorbed its general outlines through cultural osmosis. They sense that texts are “unstable” and “interactive,” and that authors are less reliable sources of meaning (and stage directions) than we once believed. Where once it was assumed that playwrights’ intentions could be discerned and “realized” by productions that “served” the play, playwrights’ authority, like that of authors in general, is no longer universally considered absolute. Now it is the classic play that serves the production as catalyst, reference point, or fertile ground from which directors and their collaborators may cultivate new theatrical works. In our age of interpretation, directors of progressive and experimental bent take for granted their liberty to remake, rework, “rewrite” what venerable playwrights have wrought.

By the early 1990s revisionist productions were in fact the norm. Audiences for the classics are now very much interested in what the director “does to” the play. Productions are advertised and remembered by the director’s appellation. We speak of Breuer’s *Lear*, Serban’s *Miser*, Sellars’s *Marriage of Figaro*. Given that circumstance, one could expect to find an environment receptive to such productions, but directors are still frequently forced to defend their rights to exercise interpretive muscle in a dead playwright’s absence. In a 1985 interview, Pintilié bristled against those who attacked his work on the basis of violating tradition. “But what is tradition?” the director asked rhetorically:

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 play, after months of exploration. I want it to be unpredictable, even to myself. . . . 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.⁸

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Jonathan Miller claimed even broader directorial license: “I don’t believe one has any duty or obligation to an author once he’s dead. The play becomes a public object. One should be able to do to it exactly what one wants.”⁹ In fact, he defines 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.”¹⁰

Not surprisingly, the absence of the classic playwright is exactly what appeals to adventurous, classically oriented 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.” The challenge and the fun of directing a classic play, on the other hand, is that “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*.”¹¹

Andrei Serban is quite 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, its always too much. What do I need it for? I prefer dead playwrights!” And what if the playwright somehow showed up at a rehearsal? “Then what he said would be it.”¹² But Serban and his colleagues have little cause to fear the sudden arrival and retribution of bygone dramatists. As Guthrie once 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.”¹³

CRITICAL RESISTANCE

So who, if anyone, is looking out for the interests of dead playwrights? There are, of course, critics who simply cringe at this kind of theatre and are adamant about limiting the margins of directorial play. This is the contingent to whom Herbert Blau refers when he cautions that “Now, when you experiment with the classics, you have to be careful. You risk the chastening assault of a Sunday column in the *New York Times*. Academic scholarship – which was always discomfited by Shakespeare Our Contemporary – feels

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doubly fortified.”¹⁴ Opposing critics often sound like self-appointed guardians of the canon.

Back in the 1950s, Eric Bentley deplored “bright idea” Shakespeare and insisted that any production of the plays be at least 90 percent Bard. With uncharacteristic fuzziness, Bentley warned that Shakespeare should be changed only when a particular play is determined “1. unacceptable; 2. incommunicable; or 3. uninteresting” to a modern audience. Otherwise, he said, 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.¹⁵

In a similar vein, 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.”¹⁶ Likewise, Gordon Rogoff drips sarcasm when he recognizes “our friend the director with a *concept*.”¹⁷ Moira Hodgson says she recoils whenever she hears 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?¹⁸

Allan Wallach tosses in this little salvo: “Most of the time, it’s only the director who’s served by director’s theatre. 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.”¹⁹

In a 1987 *Saturday Review* article entitled “Directors vs. Playwrights,” Richard Gilman argues 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.” In these new-fangled productions, “anachronism, discordance, idiosyncrasy reign, and a new vision, inferior in its very *au courantism*, is substituted for the old,”²⁰ Gilman writes, hinting that directors should restrain themselves from doing more than oversee the strict translation of a playwright’s instructions to theatrical

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dimensions. 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,"²¹ and Louis Jouvet, who charged that "the profession of the director suffers from the disease of immodesty."²²

Of course, Gilman's hypothetical portrait of the servile director is a mirage. He himself concedes 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."²³ His argument, then, 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."²⁴ But, as we shall see, some of the most revelatory and imaginative productions of these plays in the past twenty-five years soared on daring directorial inventions that deliberately contradict and/or subvert previous notions of the text's "individuality."

The great fallacy of such critical exhortations is the underlying notion that the plays require defending. No matter how seriously we take the deconstructionist challenge to the viability of texts, plays remain intact after the most inspired, invasive, perverse, or just plain silly directorial rewritings are over. Revisionist productions may erase preconceived notions, but they cannot eradicate the text. Unscathed scripts remain available to be read, analyzed, interpreted, and produced in (or close to) the form in which their authors bequeathed them to future generations. Bad productions reflect badly on the producers, not the proven play. In these types of stagings, 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, so dangerous a business is the contemporary approach to directing canonical dramatic texts that some directors are loath to admit the extent of their own invention. Many deny having done anything "to" the plays at all. Some insist that their versions are what the playwright would have written were he (they're all dead white males in this category) alive today. Some degree of self-imposed naïveté may be at work here, but it would be equally naive to discount the disclaimers as coy excuses by guilt-ridden manhandlers of dramatic masterpieces. A more satisfying explanation is that this style of work is a natural, perhaps even inevitable, phase in the evolution of the art of directing. It does not seem aberrant to its practitioners (or its fans) because it flows so smoothly from its various historical antecedents.

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HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

Three major twentieth-century developments in the theatre and in the broader cultural community converge in the story of classical revival in America since the late 1960s. First is the evolution of directing. Second is the general discrediting of authors, authority, and language as bearers of meaning or truth. Third is the emergence over the course of the American century of our popular culture to a position of global dominance. Each of these has helped pave the way for American directors to approach classic scripts with an almost audacious confidence and sense of autonomy.

The Rise of the Director

The rise of the professional director to theatrical power and prominence has been nothing less than meteoric in the little more than a hundred years since the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen took command of a troupe of amateur players. At the end of the nineteenth century, directors were welcomed into the theatre as reformers whose purpose was to correct sloppy scenic excess by unifying the elements of production in the service of the playwright's text. In *Theatre Under Deconstruction?*, Stratos Constantinidis describes the mission of the first directors as "logocentric." They perceived themselves as diviners of the author's meaning and facilitators of that message to the audience via the theatrical media of gesture, scenery, lighting, costumes, and, most important, the speaking of the words. In this model of the director's function, "the play-text and the playwright" are understood to be "the origin from which meanings flow to the rest of the theatre artists," and from them to the audience. Playwrights enjoy the "privilege of origin," at the top of a strict hierarchical power structure that positions directors a distant second in command.²⁵

If in the early days playwrights maintained theoretical dominion over the play-production system, directors quickly assumed artistic control in the real world of rehearsal and production. Rivalry for ownership and authority over the staged play seems inherent to the process. Collaborations between playwrights and directors have been tempestuous affairs from the beginning. It was not long before ambitious directors sought alternative working arrangements. Within a generation a new strain of initiator-directors, spearheaded by Gordon Craig, asserted their creative autonomy from the playwright. Ironically, notes Constantinidis, Craig's directorial model did not actually break down the hierarchical system of play production. Instead, the "playwright-god" was merely supplanted in his throne by the new "director-guru."²⁶

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Craig's influential descendents in the director's theatre include the likes of Meyerhold, Brecht, Artaud, Grotowski, and Brook, as well as such self-generating director-dramatists as Robert Wilson, Pina Bausch, Richard Foreman, and Martha Clarke. Although the directors of concern to our study of classical reinvention opt to work with established texts, they too belong in this theatrical line. (See Chapter 2 for a more complete history.)

Deconstruction, Performance Theory, and Directing

The theatre's antiliterary prejudice is itself part of the second major cultural influence on contemporary classical production, namely, the late-twentieth-century trend toward the suspicion of text. Unfortunately, much of the prose dedicated to this critical stance is painfully convoluted and obscure, which inadvertently provides good cause for readers to suspect the value of these particular texts. Extracting sense from deconstructionist writing requires patience and determination. Fortunately, a few performance theorists have managed to cull and translate into plain speech some principles and perspectives applicable to the current discourse.

In the most simplistic terms, we can trace the death of the word as near-sacred conveyor of essential truths and reliable meanings to two historical phenomena. The first is Freud's revelation of the unconscious influences over human speech and behavior. His discoveries revolutionized the concept of what a word, phrase, or action "means." Since Freud, everything is open to interpretation. The second factor is the proliferation of distortion, euphemism, and lying in much of the technologically distributed mass communication that has served the century's worst perpetrators of totalitarianism, mass destruction, and economic oppression. Over time, an increasingly literate public grew to distrust authorities and their utterances, and, eventually, language itself. The chain of poststructuralist theory that reflects this skepticism goes back at least to the 1910s, when Saussure showed us that words were mere signifiers, meaningless except by reference to the signified objects, ideas, or actions they represent.

Derrida went further, asserting that words have no fixed referents, only other words in a slippery chain of meaning that never rests on terra firma because our only way of knowing the world is through the words we assign to our sensory experience. Even such elusive meaning changes with context and circumstance. Thus, Derrida posits, all meanings and all texts are unstable and can have no fixed or correct interpretation. Reading becomes an act of *creating with* rather than *receiving* meaning *from* a text. It is in this context

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that Barthes declared the death of the author as that logocentric being in whom meaning originates and from whom it flows to passive receivers.

Directors who reinvent classic texts on stage are theatrical cousins to those critic-theorists whose “readings” of literature are considered literary works in their own right. Although few of these directors confess to having read much literary criticism, they approach plays as what Barthes calls “methodological fields” for theatrical exploration. 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.”²⁷

As we shall see, the degree of directorial “misreading” or violence toward established texts varies widely. Compare the simplistic transfer of historical setting by which a New York Shakespeare Festival production dropped *The Taming of the Shrew* into the pioneer days of the American West, to the Wooster Group’s media-drenched performance pieces. The Group incorporates into its collage-style productions bits and pieces of modern classics, from Chekhov to *Death of a Salesman*, in order to expose their underlying self-contradictions. The *Shrew*’s method, which Robert Brustein calls the “simile” approach (see p. 13), depends primarily on design rather than a profound rereading or critique of the text. The Wooster Group assaults its scripts, their performance and reception histories, and performers’ and spectators’ familiar, complacent ideas about the plays.²⁸

In *Staging Shakespeare*, Ralph Berry 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 naïveté to speak of the ‘meaning’ of a Shakespeare play as an entity that can be defined, established, and placed on record in perpetuity.”²⁹ He rightly labels contemporary directing “an act of criticism.”³⁰ Likewise, Brustein has referred to the “directorial essay.”³¹

In his 1983 article for the *Performing Arts Journal*, “The Play of Misreading: Theatre/Text/Deconstruction,” Gerald Rabkin cuts through the jargon that encumbers much deconstructionist writing to apply the perspective to just this kind of theatrical production. Deconstructive critics, he explains, surrender the authority to make final pronouncements about texts, and engage instead in open-ended dialogue with them. 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, as we have seen, becomes a creative faculty as privileged as writing, and “the border between art and interpretation is erased.”³²