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978-0-521-02892-9 - The Revisionist Stage: American Directors Reinvent the Classics
Amy S. Green

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The Revisionist Stage salutes the achievements of a revolutionary group of American directors who have galvanized the standard dramatic repertoire by reworking classic theatre into new forms for the contemporary stage. First setting out comprehensive theoretical and practical overviews of the field, Green goes on to present a critical history that features bold directorial ventures by JoAnne Akalaitis, Lee Breuer, Liviu Ciulei, Richard Foreman, Joseph Papp, Lucian Pintilié, Richard Schechner, Peter Sellars, Andrei Serban, Robert Woodruff, and Garland Wright. Green's critique ranges from works grounded in one historical period (Greek and Roman plays) to those authored by one playwright (Shakespeare, Molière, and the operas of Mozart and da Ponte). Specifically discussed are such theatrical events as Serban's *Fragments of a Trilogy*, Breuer's *The Gospel at Colonus* and *Lear*, and Peter Sellars's operatic trilogy.

With singular versatility and insight, Green thus leads the way to a more informed reading of the business of theatrical revision, challenging its claims, celebrating its ingenuities, and conducting a full-scale investigation of a genre remarkable both for its richness and for its ability to arouse spirited public debate.

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City University of New York



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PREFACE



The Revisionist Stage: American Directors Reinvent the Classics salutes the vision and talents of a group of artists who, depending on one's perspective, have either revitalized or disfigured canonical dramas by adapting them for the contemporary American stage. The directors' strategies range from the austere to the audacious, and my attempt to cast a net wide enough to encompass their remarkably diverse body of work may be as foolhardy as turning a classic text on its ear. In fact, no verb exists in the standard theatrical vocabulary to represent what revisionist directors do to, or with, classic plays in production. It occurs to me that a convenient catchall term will obviate a string of long and awkward paraphrases of that idea. So, with full awareness that clever neologisms are the bane of postmodern criticism, I propose to use "rewright" and "rewrighting" in this discussion. Derived from "playwright," the new coinage distinguishes a director's revision from a new author's "rewriting" of an old play (as Brecht, Anouilh, Stoppard). Its spelling also underscores the idea that these directors craft or shape old scripts into new theatrical events.

The study begins with a theoretical overview of the practice in the United States since 1968. That is followed by a summary of historical precedents in Europe and America. Each of the subsequent four chapters focuses, for purpose of comparison, on productions of plays from a single period or by a single dramatist. Chapter 3 covers Greek and Roman plays; Chapter 4, Shakespeare; Chapter 5, Molière; and Chapter 6 takes a detour into opera, specifically the trilogy of Mozart-da Ponte operas directed by Peter Sellars in the 1980s. The chosen productions represent a cross-section of the field rather than an encyclopedic account of all activity. The concluding essay, Chapter 7, takes a final look at rewrighting in the context of postmodernism.

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I like Goethe's tripartite formula for analyzing works of art. He advises critics to determine what the artist was trying to do before judging how well it was done and whether or not it was worth doing. The routine seems particularly useful here because this directorial approach is inherently idiosyncratic. Interpretive misunderstandings often occur at the first, crucial step. Wherever possible, I allow the directors to articulate their thoughts about their work, either through published statements or personal interviews. In a few cases, a closely involved third party provides the inside story. On the other hand, first-person accounts must be balanced by those of outside observers. Thus, critical reception is also given a prominent hearing. So heated is the rhetoric on all sides of this debate that I often find it irresistible to quote at length.

Mine has been an invigorating journey through these bold and surprising productions. Paramount among the challenges in writing about them has been to avoid being hoodwinked beyond sound judgment by either the directors' theatrical dazzle and persuasive rationales, or by critical explanations that are more engaging than the works they seek to elucidate. At the same time, I have tried to remain open to the possibility that the seemingly outrageous may have unexpected merits. Like the precarious business of reinventing classic plays for the stage, it is a tightrope act that requires a delicate balance of wonder and skepticism.

At various stops along the way, I have been inspired and assisted by the wisdom, insight, and generosity of the following people, whom I would like to thank: JoAnne Akalaitis, Gregory Mosher, Joseph Papp, Richard Schechner, Peter Sellars, Andrei Serban, and Alisa Solomon for personal interviews; Professors Albert Bermel, Marvin Carlson, Daniel Gerould, Stanley Kauffmann, and Gordon Rogoff of the City University of New York Graduate School, for encouragement and guidance; my colleagues at Kingsborough Community College, CUNY; Julius Novick and Gerald Rabkin; the press staffs of the American Repertory Theatre, Arena Stage, the Goodman Theatre, the Guthrie Theatre, La MaMa ETC, Mabou Mines, and the New York Shakespeare Festival for research support; Don B. Wilmeth, for shepherding the manuscript revision with warmth and tact; T. Susan Chang, Michael Gnat, Julie Greenblatt, and Janet Polata at Cambridge University Press; David Berreby, Meg Hertz, Michael Ratomski, and Barbara Drum Sullivan for their friendship; and my loving and supportive family, Frances and Seymour Green, and Steven, Jean-Marc, and Rebecca Ann Gorelick, without whom I'd be lost.