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978-0-521-12911-4 - Roger Planchon: Director and playwright

Yvette Daoust

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The birth and life of the Théâtre de la Cité de Villeurbanne

IN March 1972, the French government announced that it was taking the unprecedented step of moving its first subsidised popular theatre, the Théâtre National Populaire (TNP), from the Palais de Chaillot in Paris to a municipal theatre in the working-class suburb of Villeurbanne, near Lyons. Roger Planchon, its new director, was already a leading figure in the popular theatre movement. After taking over the Théâtre de la Cité de Villeurbanne in 1957, he had painstakingly built up a local public around a nucleus of cultural activity there. He refused to leave Villeurbanne for Paris. Because they wished to have Planchon and his recently-appointed co-director, Patrice Chéreau, at the head of the Théâtre National Populaire, the government gave the Théâtre de la Cité de Villeurbanne the status, subsidy, and responsibilities of the Théâtre National Populaire. What was, and is, the TNP? And why, since 1972, has it been firmly established in the provinces?

The TNP was originally founded by Firmin Gernier in 1920, but it was only under Jean Vilar, who was appointed its director in 1951, that it became a stable and creative theatre. Its official purpose had always been to attract a working-class public to the theatre; Vilar was the first to make practical changes in order to fulfil that purpose. The TNP had previously given reduced-price showings of other theatres' productions; Vilar created a permanent company at the TNP, and put on original productions there of a high artistic standard. He made the theatre more accessible to working people in general: he abolished tipping, started performances earlier, and provided a reasonably-priced restaurant in the theatre. He started *Festivals de banlieue*, yearly tours of the Parisian suburbs. Following the example of Jean Dasté, who directed theatres in Grenoble and St-Étienne in the 1940s, Vilar built up a network of contacts in trade union and other organisations. Using these contacts, Vilar was able to offer

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reduced-price bookings for groups, and to establish weekend theatre seminars at the TNP, inviting groups of working-class people to take part in two days of playgoing, discussions, and talks by actors and technicians, all at a moderate price.

Jean Vilar's work at the TNP was contemporaneous with that of many provincial companies, but it became better known, partly because of Vilar's status as a director, and partly, also, because of the pre-eminence of Parisian theatres in France. Jean Dasté's *Comédie de St-Étienne*, Maurice Sarrazin's *Grenier de Toulouse*, Roland Piétri's *Comédie Dramatique de l'Est* (Strasbourg), Gaston Baty's *Comédie de Provence* (Aix-en-Provence) – all these had been set up in the 1940s, and many more provincial theatres with a purportedly 'popular' aim were founded in the 1950s and the 1960s. Roger Planchon's theatre was one of these.

Born in the Ardèche in 1931, Planchon grew up in Lyons and was educated at a Catholic school there. He left school very young, working first in his father's café and then as a bank clerk. Still in his teens, he began giving readings of Michaux and Apollinaire in a Lyons cabaret in the evenings. He decided to spend a year in Paris, where he organised his own crash course of museum and art-gallery visiting, reading, and theatre-going. On his return to Lyons, Planchon enrolled in some drama courses, which included periods of work/study in the *centres dramatiques* (drama centres) of the time. He worked with Hubert Gignoux, later to become director of the Centre Dramatique de l'Ouest.

Eventually, Planchon formed a drama group of his own with a few friends, some of whom are still with him (Robert Gilbert, Jean Bouise, Claude Lochy, Isabelle Sadoyan). The group began by working in the daytime at ordinary jobs and rehearsing plays in the evenings. They put them on in whatever parish hall was available. They produced a farce set in 1900, *Bottines et collets montés* (*Ankle-boots and Starched Collars*), they put on *Twelfth Night*, and they rehearsed a great number of other plays which they couldn't afford to put on. In 1949, after winning first prize in an amateur theatre competition with their *Bottines et collets montés* (financed from Planchon's savings), they decided to turn professional.

The group produced their farce again in the only venue they could find, a church youth club on the banks of the Saône. The parish priest objected, however, to Planchon's

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atheism and leftist sympathies, and the company had to find a new home. In 1952, they found an old disused printer's shop in the rue des Maronniers, and at their own expense, hiring themselves out as labourers to the contractor, they converted it into a hundred-seat theatre which they named Théâtre de la Comédie. The actors had to begin by building up a permanent audience. They started, astutely, with a number of farces, which were good draws and which, because they demanded versatility, were also good training.

One of these farces was based on the life of the eighteenth-century French bandit, *Cartouche*. It was put on a hundred times, the first time a play had had such a long run in Lyons. With its slapstick fun, its self-mockery, and its satirical allusions to local figures and to contemporary events, *Cartouche* was clearly a precursor of the musical comedies of Planchon's later career. At one point, the frail heroine, dragged

Cartouche, at the Théâtre de la Comédie, 1954



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into the bandits' lair, cries piteously, 'You aren't going to kill me, are you?' This is a comedy, isn't it?' 'No, my lovely,' roars Cartouche's fearsome female lieutenant, 'this isn't a comedy, it's a melodrama!' The dialogue lampooned, in passing, well-known people and institutions in Lyons: Cartouche's enemy plans to torture him by making him read *Le Progrès*, a leading daily in the city (whose drama critic, Jean-Jacques Lerrant, was one of the first to appreciate and publicise Planchon's work).

The company of the Théâtre de la Comédie was already seeking to draw a non-élitist public. Criticised for never producing the French classics, Planchon retorted that like seventeenth-century directors, he preferred to put on plays written by contemporary dramatists. Gradually the troupe built up a following of students and young people with productions of Kleist, Synge, Lenz, Büchner, Brecht, Vitrac, Calderón, Ionesco, Vinaver, Adamov, and Shakespeare.

In 1956, the company instituted 'mardis', Tuesday evening debates; the production on these evenings was preceded by an introduction to the play, its author, and its context, and was followed by a discussion between audience and actors. In one of these early interchanges, some spectators suggested a way in which the blocking (the characters' positioning on stage) might be improved at a specific point, a suggestion which was tried out in later productions. The actors of the Théâtre de la Comédie set themselves high standards. By their encouragement of, and openness to, direct criticism, they were deliberately turning their followers into increasingly demanding theatre-goers.

Many of the ideas which were to influence Planchon's later work were already apparent in these first years at the Théâtre de la Comédie, including his admiration for Brecht, and his belief that the techniques of the cinema could be used on stage to attract a new public. He was convinced even then that the most effective way of bringing people in a provincial city to the theatre was by creating a permanent resident theatre company on the spot. He was to look back later on this first stage in his career:

The story of the Théâtre de la Comédie is that we laid a wager that we would play every evening . . . It is something to which I believe I was one of the first in France to devote myself: to create a permanent theatre, so that things went on in a simple, regular way.

What the centres dramatiques were doing at that time [1952]

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consisted of playing in a city for two days . . . We said, at the time, very loudly, 'Decentralisation which consists in going from town to town is not good because you reach only, in fact, a superficial clientele. They are the two thousand people who would, in any case, go to the theatre . . . And what we were trying to do, what I personally was trying to do, was to impose the idea that the public must be extended, but starting in depth.'²

In 1957, the municipality of Villeurbanne (a working-class sister city to Lyons) offered Planchon and his company the use of their large local theatre, the Théâtre de la Cité de Villeurbanne. Here Planchon established his company and began the task of attracting a genuinely 'popular' audience, an audience in which there would be a representative number of working-class people. 'Theatre', claimed an editorial in the theatre's magazine, 'is a privilege to be shared in order that there be no more privileges.'³ As Jean Vilar had done at the old TNP in Paris, Planchon started by making his theatre more attractive, putting up displays on playwrights or on various aspects of theatre in the foyer. He reduced prices, arranged group bookings, invited groups to 'journées', day-long theatre seminars modelled on the TNP weekends. He set out to find his audience, not by organising tours, since he was in the heart of a working-class area, but by sending out members of the troupe to give lunch-hour talks on theatre in factory canteens, by putting up posters in the factories, and by addressing people through loudhailers as they left work. Planchon collaborated closely with trade unions, youth groups and schools, and kept in touch with the views of his public through discussions and surveys. 'We are not working for the public,' he said, 'we are working with it.'⁴ Like Vilar, like many young directors, he was committed to making working-class people aware that culture was not someone else's privilege, but their own right. In his theatre, settled in the midst of a solidly working-class area, he was one of the first to have a genuine opportunity to put this ideal into practice.

In 1959, the newly-formed Ministry of Cultural Affairs under André Malraux began to attack the long-standing problem of over-centralisation in France. One of its policies was to lend support to provincial drama groups, and it created a hierarchy of subsidised provincial theatres: the *troupe permanente* (permanent company) had the lowest status and received the smallest subsidy; the next grade was that of

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centre dramatique; and the final distinction was to become a *maison de la culture* (cultural centre), a centre offering a varied artistic programme around the nucleus of a theatre troupe. In December 1959, the Théâtre de la Cité became the first *troupe permanente* and the first permanent subsidised provincial theatre in France. In 1963 it became a *centre dramatique*, and furthermore, Roger Planchon was offered the directorship of a new *maison de la culture* which was to be built in Villeurbanne. The Ministry of Culture agreed to pay half the cost of the *maison de la culture* if the local authority paid the other half; it also wanted Planchon to be appointed director.

Planchon was delighted, especially as his old municipal theatre had been proving inadequate. There were 1300 seats, but only 600 spectators could see and hear reasonably well. The acoustics were, by everyone's account, terrible. Furthermore, the 1930s building was inflexible and ill-adapted to the variety of activities which Roger Planchon and his troupe had initiated over the years. The Théâtre de la Cité felt that a new *maison de la culture* could be organised in collaboration with the many organisations and groups with whom they were already working. However, the authorities in Villeurbanne saw things differently, and hoped to saddle the new *maison de la culture* with an administrative council made up of prominent citizens. Planchon wanted artistic control, and he wanted his public represented on the decision-making bodies. When Villeurbanne eventually decided to spend its money on an incineration plant for domestic refuse instead of a new theatre, Lyons considered taking on the *maison de la culture* project. The mayor, M. Pradel, hoped, however, to appoint a theatre administrator separate from the company, whereas Planchon felt that this role should be played by the artistic director, so that artistic priorities determined administrative policy and not the other way round. In the end, Lyons, like Villeurbanne, abandoned the idea.

Planchon believed that 'theatre is not an isolated artistic manifestation, but rather belongs in a social context', and that it should be, 'not a solemn and reserved place to which the middle class go on Sundays, but a real centre of culture where anyone, as he or she pleases, is free to come in at will'.⁵ Accordingly, he always welcomed within the walls of the Théâtre de la Cité de Villeurbanne artists from other theatres

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and from other fields of endeavour. Orchestras from abroad, singers, jazz musicians, and ballet companies performed at Villeurbanne, and the theatre therefore attracted not only theatre-goers but a wider audience. Following the example of Toulouse and Bordeaux, the theatre also opened a Cinéma National Populaire (CNP) in Lyons in 1968. Its aim was to present good cinema on a normal competitive basis, but to make it accessible to the lower-paid by a system of group bookings and season tickets. The new cinema abolished tipping and the selling of sweets, and provided comfortable seating, the best projection standards, and short films related to the main feature instead of advertisements and outdated news. It was well received, and two more CNPs were subsequently opened in Lyons.

Following on the tradition of the *mardis* at the Théâtre de la Comédie, at the Villeurbanne theatre the troupe organised *semaines culturelles*, week-long programmes consisting of talks and exhibitions in factories and visits to the theatre by the workers for plays and discussions. Early in its career, the Théâtre de la Cité also organised school programmes, with the cooperation of educational authorities. Members of the company were always ready to go out, on request, and talk to various groups, institutions, and organisations about the theatre, its current preoccupations, its forthcoming productions, etc. These talks, the tours of the theatre building, the preparatory lectures, the debates and discussions which the Théâtre de la Cité organised, were meant to lessen any feeling of strangeness which a new spectator might have when coming into the theatre for the first time. The theatre's system of group bookings for clubs, associations and trade unions also contributed to making a spectator feel at home, on an outing and sharing an experience with people he knew.

Roger Planchon's opinion of his public, his estimation of their tastes and of their capacity for enjoyment and appreciation, evolved from the beginning through continuous contact with them. The first, obvious problem, their lack of sophistication, was turned to advantage, as Planchon pointed out: 'The popular public, the new public, is what interests us most, because by working for them, we are led to carry our research always a little further, and because our research can only be appreciated at its full value, at first, by new eyes, unclouded by any routine or familiarity.'⁶ Because

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Planchon's new audience was generally a cinema-going audience, Planchon attempted to integrate the language of the cinema into his productions on the stage. These 'borrowings' from the cinema were readily accepted by the Villeurbanne public. In his first visit to Paris in 1959, however, Planchon was surprised to discover that people more accustomed to stage conventions did not understand cinematic sets or scenes. He reflected that 'What is taken for granted by a cinema public, perhaps theatre-goers take longer to get used to . . . one must realise that audiences are different and that one is addressing people who have a different way of thinking, a different way of laughing, and one must take this into account.'⁷ It was perhaps then that Planchon began to realise how much his work had already been affected by his audience. Indeed, the public's opinion, which Planchon was always at pains to discover, helped to determine the entire orientation of his theatre's work. The grass-roots contacts which the members of the troupe established with the public were an education for both. People speaking in factory canteens had to express themselves clearly, quickly, and confidently enough to maintain interest. They had to reflect on their work and the direction which it was taking. The actor Jean Bouise said of these visits that

It's not always so simple: presenting theatre, the nature of our work, our repertoire, all the practical propositions designed to attract the spectator to the theatre, and then saying that you are ready to come back to answer the criticisms heaped up on you, speaking about all this when the fellow is at table and has only twenty minutes, is sometimes quite curious.⁸

As the years passed, the discussions and debates and the reactions of his audiences gradually shaped Planchon's vision of what theatre should and can be. He repeatedly pointed out the value of this kind of interaction: ' . . . only theatre, today, involves the constant presence, in flesh and blood, of a creative group in the midst of the public, and the bond which is established between a permanent troupe and its public is irreplaceable'.⁹

The first productions put on at Villeurbanne were of *Henry IV* and *Les Trois Mousquetaires* (*The Three Musketeers*), because a questionnaire had revealed that local people were interested in Shakespeare and Dumas. This was, in a sense, bowing to popular demand. Yet there was never any ques-

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tion of sacrificing artistic integrity to a facile or 'populistic' form. *Henry IV* was presented in all its complexity and richness. The production of *Les Trois Mousquetaires* lampooned the novel's misogynous heroism and romantic patriotism. Every production had to be intellectually accessible, at least on one level, to a relatively uneducated audience; yet no production was to be oversimplified or patronising. Planchon's approach to any play is that of an extremely intelligent individual, who is intimately aware of the preoccupations and attitudes of his audience even as these may change:

Of course one explains and comments in a production; but I've never believed in making a theatre to attract 'the masses' with comprehensible plays or acceptable stories. What you have to do is put into the performance something of the way people outside culture see things. There's no intermediate step, no easy way in – you have to turn the whole thing round at once.¹⁰

In 1966, nine years after Planchon had moved into Villeurbanne, the young man who was to become his co-director, Patrice Chéreau, was beginning his career in the Parisian *banlieue* (suburbs). It was only in the 1960s that the French government recognised the need for permanent theatres on the periphery of Paris, the dormitory cities which were just as cut off from the cultural life of the centre as the remotest provincial town.

On the periphery as in the provinces, there were theatrical groups which had been in operation since the early fifties, without government recognition or subsidy. Many more grew up in the sixties.¹¹ Chéreau was director of the theatre in Sartrouville, a dormitory city in north-west Paris, for three years. Like Planchon, he worked with schools and with trades unions; he even presented rehearsals at union meetings for criticism and debate. Like Planchon also, he tried hard to elaborate a kind of cultural policy with his public.

In 1968, all the subsidised theatres – those in the provinces, those in Paris – were brought up short by the May 'events'. Many never recovered. Drama was in occupied factories and universities and in street demonstrations. Even those theatres working for 'the people' began to feel irrelevant. Many drama groups went on strike in sympathy with the workers; some went out to entertain people who were occupying their place of work. Planchon's company cancelled a planned tour of Canada, out of solidarity with the

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workers of France. On 30 May, President De Gaulle made a speech in which he blamed the events on organised dissident groups and on the Communist Party in particular, and called on his followers to resist the threat of totalitarian Communism. He postponed a promised referendum, and dissolved the National Assembly, promising elections if the revolutionary pressure abated, but hinting at tough measures if it did not. After this speech, Jean Vilar resigned from Avignon in protest and said that he was unwilling to take any government-subsidised post. Jean-Louis Barrault's Odéon was occupied; when Barrault refused to turn off the electricity in the theatre, as ordered, he was dismissed from his post as its director. Many drama festivals were postponed, shortened, or cancelled. Theatrical events were created everywhere, but by students and other young people, not by professionals.

It was time to take stock. On 25 May 1968, directors of popular theatres from right across France met at Villeurbanne, and, after days of discussion, issued a joint statement.¹² The statement admitted that theatres had failed to reach what they called the 'non-public', defined as 'an immense body of human beings made up of all those who still have no access and no possibility of access to cultural reality in the forms which it persists in taking . . .' The traditional culture to which theatres had been trying to introduce their audiences remained foreign and useless. Culture must be, for the working-class person, 'a way of breaking out of his present isolation, of escaping the ghetto, by seeing himself more and more consciously in a social and historical context, by freeing himself more and more from the deceptions of all kinds which make him, in himself, a party to the situations inflicted upon him'. The directors thought that theatre would have to politicise people, to make them aware of their own socially-imposed cultural deprivation. What was needed was ' . . . an entirely different conception [of culture] which does not refer to a given pre-existing content, but which expects, from the mere coming together of people, a progressive definition of a content which they can recognise'. The Villeurbanne statement, unfortunately, ended with a whimper, requesting a reorganisation of subsidies and of the administration of cultural affairs.

The most useful concept to come out of the rhetoric of the Villeurbanne conference was that of a 'progressive defi-