

Reclaiming the Theatre

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ

There's something odd about the Berkshire Theatre Festival producing David Mamet's "American Buffalo," which critiques our economic system of free enterprise, and having to load up the playbill with advertisements and courtesy photos of season donors. It's like an anti-weapons protest funded by the U.S. Department of Defense. But what's a fine theatre like the Berkshire to do here in America, where public money

for the arts is next to nothing? Well, a theatre solicits help from individuals and businesses and in so doing has to become reticent about treating theatre as an instrument of social commentary and economic analysis. The safe way is to treat theatre as an instrument of entertainment, as in: "Oh, isn't David Mamet funny?" I mean, how can you seriously bite the hand that feeds you? You can only pretend bite, perhaps while kissing.

Tina Packer, artistic director over at Shakespeare and Company, also in the Berkshires, while likewise depending upon corporate support, somehow manages to claim the high ground, if only because she's holding to Shakespeare. This season she took on directing "King John." What a rare and timely choice! The play turns out to ring with tones of here and now, full as it is of political manipulation and clergy interference in politics. I loved Ms. Packer's use of live rock music to accompany the battles staged in slow motion. It made them forceful and raucous where in the small summer theatre they could have seemed simply small.

Foundation funding assures the existence of the expensive enterprise that is New York City's Lincoln Center Festival. But the theatre I saw there this summer eminently trumped the idea of an arts organization being beholden to people with money. Honestly, my hat is off and my head is bowed to Lincoln Center for bringing in who they did, three of the four most creative directors alive on earth: Robert Wilson of the United States; Adrienne Mnouchkine of France; and Yukio Ninagawa of Japan. Only Peter Brook was missing. These directors, more than skillful stage crafters, more than consummate interpreters, are the innovators, those who open the theatre to unforeseen, unpredictable possibilities. They

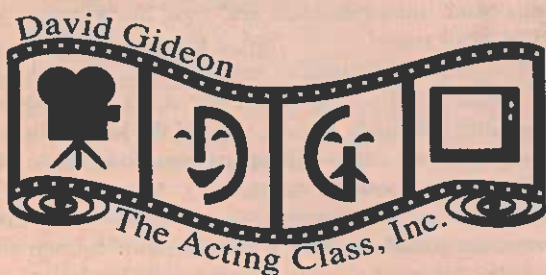
JOANNA ROTTÉ is a director, actor, writer and teacher. Her books include *Scene Change* and *Acting With Adler*. Professor of Theatre in the graduate program of Villanova University in Pennsylvania, she specializes in Script Analysis. She appeared in "The Visit," "By the Bog of Cats..." and directed "Summer and Smoke" at the Villanova Theatre. Ms. Rotté directs for the Philadelphia Fringe Festival, recently a music adaptation of *Prajna* by the late Tibetan meditation master, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and "True West" at Villanova University. Her Comments on Acting are available at: www.homepage.villanova.edu/joanna.rotte

are the insightful visionaries, and their work, while innately theatrical, presents our world as it is. They are also radically different in style, one from another.

My first encounter with Robert Wilson was the revival of "Einstein on the Beach" at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1992. I remember becoming restless during the hours of performance, though other people seemed to withstand restlessness. But certain pictures he made with movement, set design, light, sound, everything, stay with me to this day. I later saw other Wilson pieces and though each was in some way wonderful, none surpassed the minimalist majesty of "Einstein." Then, no more than three summers ago, when I was as usual in the Berkshires, I went with Joseph Chaikin and his dramaturge over the Mohawk Trail to the great MASS MOCA gallery to take in an exhibit of Wilson's "14 Stations" artwork. Our dramaturge friend dared to suggest, as others had hinted, that Robert Wilson's day as a theatre artist may have come and gone. But apparently no one mentioned it to Mr. Wilson or he wasn't paying any mind, because not too long ago he went to Indonesia and eventually returned to Lincoln Center with "I La Galigo" — his finest achievement since "Einstein," and its polar opposite. Where "Einstein" was rarified and aristocratic, a postmodernist dream with watery waves of Philip Glass music, "I La Galigo" is earthy and rural, dense with percussion, a folk story based on an Indonesian creation myth. Fifty Indonesian actors, dancers and acrobats perform the action. An authentic Bissu transvestite priest is seated downstage observing the play and sometimes narrating. Singers accompanied by musicians chant the entire script. The content is a departure for Wilson. "I La Galigo" features sexual love; and moreover, since we are at the beginning of time, there is incestuous desire between a twin brother and sister who fall in love within the womb. "I La Galigo" exudes images that could never have appeared in the meta-sexual "Einstein," and still the production, while offering ancient happenings and traditional sounds, bears a modernist existential heart. "I La Galigo" ultimately reveals how the middle world, our plane of existence, came to be. In a time past any intervention from the gods, we gained our non-dependence and simultaneously our alienation. We became free and we became bereft, and what we have left in the middle world is each other and we grow old.

In 1996, I flew to Montréal for my first taste of an Adrienne Mnouchkine production: a rendition of Iphigenia and the Orestia, called "Les Atrides," performed by her talented Theatre du Soleil actors and infused with elements of Asian theatre including the look of Indian Kathakali. On the Mnouchkine stage, we encounter people or beings we're unlikely to meet at home or pass on the street. In "Les Atrides" we are hounded by the indomitable Furies of Aeschylus, costumed like massive lion/dogs, and they scare us. In "Le Dernier Caravanserail" (Odyssees), as produced by the Festival at Lincoln Center, we follow the fate of refugees from Russia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Kurdistan and Iran, and their woeful dilemma pains us. Mnouchkine's is theatre that transports. It's epic and does much with stagecraft and ensemble to evoke pity and terror. In the opening sequence of "Caravanserail," a rope and pulley are stretched horizontally across the stage. A massive rolling river of grayish silk being blown by heavy fans and made to rage by stagehands whipping the fabric from within consumes the stage below. A rattan box, for smuggling people across the river, hangs from the rope. There is the sound of tempestuous wind overpowering the shouts, cries and wails of those attempting to employ the smugglers and escape oppression. Some fall in the water and disappear in the waves, some are nearly pushed in, and some make it over in the basket or by hand over hand. They are people fleeing their countries; and as the river reveals, there is danger in the crossing and there is more danger in the landing. Strangely, the cloth-water with which they contend appears more real and fearsome than does water in any movie. It is as if Mnouchkine is using theatrical artifice to reclaim the truth of theatre, by taking reality back from the camera. But making the river real is not simply a terrific stage effect. It stands for the meaning of "Caravanserail." All 42 scenes of the two-part, six-hour play, performed by 36 actors, reflect the tenuous nature of existence: the near-impossibility of escape from peril and the great loss attendant upon escape. My heart was hurting as I saw men, women and children, over and over again, trying to make it to some other side. In "Caravanserail," Mnouchkine gives us contemporary (not Ancient Greek) wanderers, who seek asylum in a world offering little shelter and much war. In meeting the wanderers

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INTERNATIONAL SCENE BY SUE FEINBERG

Lyric Theatre & The Helpmann Awards

I recently returned from a three week visit to Australia during which time I had the opportunity to view several productions at different theatres in Sydney. The theatre scene in Sydney is alive and well.

One of the largest and most active theatres in Sydney is the Lyric Theatre. This state of the art live entertainment theatre is at the eastern end of the Star City Complex. Since opening in November, 1997, with its superb acoustics and intimate design, the Lyric Theatre has presented a wide range of leading local and international entertainment events.

One of the productions I saw, "The Producers," which originated in New York, was very entertaining and well attended. The complex in which the Lyric Theatre is located consists of a casino, bars, restaurants hotels and apartments. "Beauty and the Beast" and "Menopause The Musical," (which I also attended) were playing at the Lyric as well. The head manager of the Star City Complex is Ross Cunningham. The Lyric Theatre was the winner of the 2002, 2003 and 2004 awards of the New South Wales Best Entertainment Venue. The Lyric Theatre has hosted a range of international and local productions including "Mamma Mia!," "Oliver!," "The Wizard of Oz," "Singin' In The Rain," "Annie," "The Sound of Music," "Slava's Snowshow," and "Showboat."

I also attended the Helpmann Awards at the Lyric Theatre. The scope and diversity of the awards was impressive in that it relates to theatre, opera and ballet. The Helpmann Awards also incorporates the James Cassius Award for outstanding contribution to the Australian entertainment industry. The Helpmann Awards, named in honor of Sir Robert Helpmann

and to commemorate his memory and achievements, were established by the Australian Entertainment Industry Association (AEIA) to recognize, celebrate and promote our entertainment industry, similar to the Tony Awards on Broadway and the Olivier Awards in London.

The awards ceremony is attended by some of Australia's foremost personalities in the entertainment field. Mel Brook's production of "The Producers" won five Helpmann Awards including best musical. Susan Stroman won as Best Director of a Musical. And Cate Blanchette received the Best Actress award in a production of "Hedda Gabler" produced by the Sydney Theatre Company. This play is coming to New York in the near future.

At a reception afterwards, I had the opportunity to meet some of the leading personalities in the Australian theatre, including Cate Blanchette. Ms. Blanchette told me that she "is looking forward to making her New York acting debut and that acting in "Hedda Gabler" is a very challenging experience."

For info: Star City 80 Pymont Street, Pymont, New South Wales, Australia, (02) 9777 9000, www.starcity.com.au.

Seymour Theatre Centre

The Seymour Theatre Centre is a performing arts center housing three theatres, a café, bars, and gallery space. Performances in the theatres in the theatres range from concerts and theatre presentations to dance, opera and performances for young audiences.

The Seymour Centre is part of The University of Sydney and hosts a range of educational activities, conferences and public lectures as well as being the home of a number of resident companies such as Arts On Tour and Theatre Dwa Konie.

In 1966, Sydney businessman, Everest York Seymour, left a significant bequest for the construction of a building to serve as a centre for the cultivation, education and performance of musical and dramatic arts. The University of Sydney became the trustee of this bequest and the Seymour Centre opened in 1975.

A few of the affiliated companies are The Song Company, Australia's premier vocal ensemble, which presents its own subscription series in Sydney, Hawkesbury District, Newcastle, Brisbane, and Melbourne; Theatre of Image is NOW's premier theatre company for children; and The Company produces quality main-stage visual theatre in Sydney but also tours regionally, nationally and internationally.

Resident Companies include: Arts on Tour; Theatre Dawn Connie, formed five years ago, by Artistic Director Andy Bizarre. The ensemble's work has been influenced by Polish companies Gardzienice and Teatr Piesn Kozla.

The Seymour Theatre Centre's 2005 season includes B Sharp presenting "National Security and the Art of Taxidermy," Theatre Sports-Cranston Cup-Heats, "World According to James," Tim Bruer Quartet, and the Gai Bryant Ensemble. Upcoming: Jeremy Barnett — "Legal Highs," 2005 Sydney Peace prize lecture by Olara Ottunu — United Nations Special Representative for children in armed conflict, "The Hothouse," "Pearlie in the Park," Sydney Regional Drama Festival, State Dance Festival, Vusi Mahlasela, "A Couple of Blaguards," "Rendra," Gareth Koch, Wiener Zeitung, and "Amajuba: Like Doves We Rise" — presented by Company B.

For info: Seymour Theatre Centre City Rd, Chippendale NSW Australia ♦

The National Asian-American Theatre Company

The National Asian-American Theatre Company (NAATCO) was founded in 1989 by Richard Eng and Mia Katigbak, to promote and support Asian actors, directors, designers and technicians through the performance of European, classical and contemporary work. The work actively develops an Asian American audience and an appreciation of Asian American contributions to the theatre arts in America today.

NAATCO performs its chosen repertory as written, with no forced Asian cultural association. The repertory's importance comes not only through the valuable training it provides, but also through its ability to reach across ethnic boundaries to illuminate abiding characteristics of human nature.

As the Company says: "It is through the superimposition of our Asian faces on a non-Asian repertory, interpreted by arts and the diversity and universal references, which helps to serve the text very faithfully, reflecting and examining the kinship among disparate cultures. The company also says that affirmations of timeless values with insights about old works

can come from unexpected faces."

A few of their past productions include "Ivanov," "Eyes of the Heart," "Antigone," "Air Raid," "Fuenteovejuna," "House of Bernarda Alba," "Harmfulness of Tobacco," "A Phoenix Too Frequent," "Othello," "He Who Says Yes," "Falsettoland," and "Tales of Unrest."

For info: The National Asian American Theatre Company, 520 8th Ave. #31, NY, NY 10018, (212) 244-0447, info@naatco.org. ♦Sue Feinberg

"The muses are always with us,

always right above us,

in the air and about us, everywhere.

They are the angels of creativity who can help us reach a state of total bliss in our writing."

— Alida Brill

Reclaiming the Theatre

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— suspended above a river or hanging from a helicopter — we meet ourselves, clinging to the illusion of safety, and we have pity.

I first experienced Yukio Ninagawa's theatre at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. It was "Macbeth" and for the final battle Ninagawa created a holocaust. Macbeth and Macduff fought as samurai using swords and martial arts, set to the reverberation of a Bach organ, with red streamers flying until the earth itself was drowning in blood. Ninagawa is priceless and peerless for creating startling or shocking and at the same time gorgeous effects. This summer he brought three of Yukio Mishima's adaptations of classic Japanese Noh plays to Lincoln Center. In "Sotoba Komachi," the first of the three, pretty (plastic) camellia petals fall from the skies, one by one, throughout the action, each one landing with a "tok" sound (reminiscent of the drum sound of Noh — "tok, tok"). All the while, an unspeakably hideous old woman, who was once the lovely poetess Komachi, struggles with an attractive young poet over the notion of love. In the third play, Yoroboshi, a contentious, difficult, alienated, gorgeous young blind man is asked by an arbiter to decide between two sets of parents, his birth parents and adoptive

parents, and he rejects both. At the end, abandoned in the arbitration room, he envisions a conflagration as the stage is engulfed in light, glare and siren sound. And then there arises the voice of Yukio Mishima as it was recorded in 1970 when he seized control of military headquarters in Tokyo, attempting to rouse the nation to pre-war nationalistic idealism. But Mishima took his own life, then and there, by means of seppuku, the samurai's traditional and excruciating way of ritual death that is essentially disembowelment via a short sword. So in the play as we are hearing the last exclamations of the playwright, the young man on stage is witnessing in his mind's eye some unmitigated horror, which may be a Hiroshima or Nagasaki vision, but surely an apocalyptic one. Born in 1935, Ninagawa would have lived through the World War II incineration visited upon Japan. His beautiful work more than anyone else's makes art of our human tendency, our capacity, for annihilating each other.

They are great ones, these three directors, and if you come across their work, no matter who is funding and sponsoring the productions, I would say, be there. ♦2005

Written exclusively for "The Soul of the American Actor."



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