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Kin(g)ship and Power

Edited by Eric Nicholson

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Michael Coveney*

Dominique Goy-Blanquet, *Shakespeare in the Theatre: Patrice Chéreau*, London: Bloomsbury (The Arden Shakespeare), 2018, pp. 272

Abstract

London theatre critic Michael Coveney reviews *Shakespeare in the Theatre: Patrice Chereau* by Dominique Goy-Blanquet, tracing the career of a great director to its roots in a love for the Elizabethan theatre of Shakespeare and Marlowe, noting how a famous production of Richard II proved so influential that Shakespeare replaced Moliere as France's most performed playwright. The author vividly evokes a modern chain of European theatre stemming from Brecht through two of Chereau's most significant post-war mentors, Roger Planchon at the TNP, Villeurbanne, and Giorgio Strehler at the Piccolo in Milan. Chereau, who died in 2013, was a director of remarkable taste and intellect, his productions of Marivaux redefining that playwright and his imagination creating a lunar landscape for the new plays of Jean-Marie Koltes, Jon Fosse and others and frequently a Shakespearean dimension, too. The book is a compendium of fascinating production detail and a compellingly argued history of a crucial period of European theatre in which Chereau played a leading role.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Elizabethan theatre; Patrice Chereau

The director Patrice Chéreau, golden boy of French theatre and, to a lesser extent, cinema, who died aged 68 in 2013, was internationally renowned for his stagings of Marivaux, Marlowe, Shakespeare and Wagner's *Ring* at Bayreuth, but his career, at a glance, seems eclectic and inconsistent.

It is the intriguing achievement of Dominique Goy-Blanquet's book that the various strands are interwoven into a clearly connected tapestry with Shakespeare its predominant motif. And the influences and project choices are discussed in the context of post-war European theatre, especially in Italy and France itself, and his impact throughout the artistic world. Chéreau emerges, in this account, as not only a great artist in his own right – which we knew – but a key historical link, maybe the strongest, in the chain of the European theatre forged by Brecht and Meyerhold through Roger Planchon and Giorgio Strehler through Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine to Peter Stein and Ivo van Hove.

The Flemish director van Hove studied Chéreau's work intensely and closely, just as Chéreau had gone to Berlin to study the work of Brecht's Berliner Ensemble. Each of these great directors – and van Hove is already acquiring an international reputation that may even outstrip, if he doesn't spread himself too thin, Chéreau's, who never did – works with a highly developed cinematic sensibility,

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not in the way of the gratuitous use of live video and documentary material, but in the 'atmosphere' of the stage, the intensity and naturalism of their actors, and their avid deconstruction of power games and sweeping changes in societal upheavals. And they shared a deeply informed enthusiasm for the films of Visconti, Bergman, Orson Welles and Elia Kazan.

Concentrated elements of eroticism and violence are common to both directors, as well as what I'd glibly label an aesthetic grandeur, architectural vision and rarefied good 'taste'. Chéreau absorbed the Brechtian theatre but reacted against it, never embracing the virtually incomprehensible notion of "alienation". The blood and guts of his theatre would always embrace the audience without creating the sort of critical, objective distance Brecht advocated and which still informs the beautifully restrained work of Peter Brook.

Goy-Blanquet having identified the well-springs of Chéreau's inspiration in the Elizabethan theatre, it is easy for us to deduce a continuity between, for instance, his revival of Christopher Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris* at Planchon's Théâtre National Populaire in Villeurbanne, near Lyons, in 1972, and his sumptuous movie version of Alexandre Dumas's political bodice-ripper *La Reine Margot* (1994) in which the impossibly beautiful Isabelle Adjani as Marguerite de Valois is a butterfly broken on the wheel of an arranged marriage, intrigue and violence in the Shakespearean battle between Catholics and Huguenots for the succession.

And both pieces have the St Bartholomew Day massacres at their black hearts. The account here of that Marlowe revival is staggering: Chéreau and his regular designer Richard Peduzzi created a city of tall houses on a vast laguna, evocative of a Piranesi tower, the surrealist paintings of Paul Delvaux and de Chirico, with assassins flitting around in Magritte bowler hats and Elizabethan doublets, the chiaroscuro lighting – designed, crucially, throughout the rehearsals and not, as is usually the case, at the end of them – revealing double-faced alliances on both sides before the orgy of blood-letting.

The spectacle was hugely controversial, Chéreau denounced as "a spoilt brat of the bourgeois state" and a traitor to the spirt of Jean Vilar, who had founded the Avignon Festival in 1947 and transformed the TNP in 1951; Chéreau, who told an interviewer at the time that he yearned for an allegorical theatre where ideas would at long last ignite emotion by dint of beauty, would triumph in both Vilar arenas in the coming years. He had already instigated a sea change in French theatre with his 1970 revival of Shakespeare's Richard II, the first in French since Vilar's at the first Avignon Festival.

He saw *Richard II* as a political tragedy of Renaissance humanism and, although he remained unconvinced by Jan Kott's political arguments in the already highly influential *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964), he did recognise in *Richard II* the old feudal class retreating before the rise of a new power, that of money, with the monarchy acting as banker. *Richard* opened in Marseilles and moved to the Odéon, Paris – nominated the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe in 1985 when Giorgio Strehler, who had encouraged Chéreau, was appointed by Jack Lang as the head of a new European theatre project – and was promptly denounced by Chéreau's own translator, the venerable Pierre Leyris, who abominated everything done by Planchon and his protégé; but, again, the impact was

considerable.

This was the first major exposure of the Chéreau style with the production team he had established while running an avowedly populist theatre in the commune of Sartrouville, seventeen kilometres to the north west of Paris: Peduzzi's signature tall structures were lit by André Diot, with sound by André Serré and costumes by Jacques Schmidt. The courtyard of a feudal palace was covered with seventeen tons of sand among the huge pillars of a castle jail, and the action pursued in a world of wooden machinery, drawbridges and winches marking the ups and downs and transfer of power. Chéreau himself played the title role (after a leading actor defected) and Gérard Desarthe, his future Peer Gynt and Hamlet, was Bolingbroke.

Within a decade of this performance, notes Goy-Blanquet, Shakespeare had replaced Molière, of all people, as the most performed playwright in France. The outlandish element of a soundtrack quoting Maria Callas, Pink Floyd and Janis Joplin belied Chéreau's attentiveness to the text. Over the subsequent years his forensic study of Shakespeare would justify his creation of a parallel play to the author's where he felt necessary, with cuts and minor re-writes in translation, but always with respect for Shakespeare's artistic genius.

It's an interesting assertion of Goy-Blanquet that Chéreau found contemporary theatre writing, on the whole, too restrictive for his ambition, for what he called when a young schoolboy, finding his love of theatre and cinema, his war machine against melancholy. His father, a friend of Roger Planchon's, was the well-known painter Jean-Baptiste Chéreau, his mother a textile designer and his maternal great grandmother, Lise Tréhot, a model for Renoir in many of his best loved early paintings.

At the prestigious Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris, young Patrice ran the school's theatre group and linked up with several future colleagues and lifelong friends: the costume designer Schmidt; Jean-Pierre Vincent, who would run the Comédie-Française; and Jérôme Deschamps, the future manager of the Opéra-comique. He was always reading voraciously, studied German literature for two years at the Sorbonne and took over the Sartrouville theatre aged just twenty-two. The idea of theatre as a public service, endemic to the TNP, which he'd discovered at the end of the 1950s, was enhanced by an invitation to visit the Piccolo Theatre of Strehler and Paolo Grassi in Milan, where he learned Italian, directed plays of Pablo Neruda, Tankred Dorst, Marivaux and Wedekind, and, in 1969, his first opera, Rossini's *The Italian Girl in Algiers* for the Spoleto Festival.

And then Planchon invited him to join him as his co-director at Villeurbanne. The TNP visited London four years later, in 1976, the first foreign company to play at the new National Theatre on the South Bank. The productions were Planchon's magnificent version of Molière's *Tartuffe*, whose pastel-coloured, trompe-l'oeuil set splintered apart at the moment of revelation; and Chéreau's revolutionary edition of Marivaux's *La Dispute*, which was unlike any production I'd ever seen in London to that date, even during the famed World Theatre seasons at the Aldwych in the 1960s: stripping away centuries of powdered wigs and 'marivaudage', Chéreau presented an eerily Shakespearean forest, lit by moonlight in a jungle bursting mistily through Peduzzi's high barricades, where four adolescents,

raised from childhood by black servants, discovered their sexuality, and bestiality, in a supervised Sadean experiment.

In that same year, Chéreau's *Ring* at Bayreuth, conducted by Pierre Boulez, invented a new high (and 'low' for some vociferous critics) standard of opera production, bathing the epic on a crepuscular blue light – the DVD recording is a particularly good souvenir of the event – creating a hydraulic dam on the Rhine, replacing mythological flim-flam with metropolitan endeavour and finding a Shakespearean dimension to the destructive paternalism of Wotan – and a radically definitive Brunnhilde in Gwyneth Jones. The original Chéreau *La Dispute* was in 1973, and before he re-worked it for later tours, the director responded to Edward Bond's *Lear* with typical bravado. As in all her 'Shakespearean' reports, Goy-Blanquet's critical exegesis is detailed and illuminating, noting the ways in which the director does not at all share Bond's nihilistic pessimism. Although she doesn't spell this out, it's clear that Goy-Blanquet believes that the changes and arguments the director makes and has with the playwright – Shakespeare or Bond – are rooted in a close examination of the play's meaning, not in careerist vanity of any kind.

At the same time, Chéreau himself knew that the French theatre of his day was a director's theatre, the British primarily a writer's. His last TNP show was *Peer Gynt* in which Desarthe played the hero from youth to old age, prefiguring Hamlet in registering his endless struggle against the monster within himself, the fear that inhabits us all.

The production propelled him into his appointment as managing director of the Théâtre des Amandiers ("almond trees") in Nanterre, the suburban town west of Paris where, in 1968, the students' revolt began, led by Daniel Cohn-Bendit. *Les événements* and the Algerian war of independence ending just six years earlier are the two main historical landmarks in the French cultural history of the 1960s, and both informed the work of many French theatre practitioners, not just Chéreau, whose temperament was exactly attuned to the zeitgeist while resistant to its more vulgar expressions.

Over his eight-year stint in Nanterre, he supervised, in effect, a national theatre of dissent, with a production of Jean Genet's Algerian war play, *The Screens*, transposed to a contemporary setting of French immigrants; the plays of his great discovery – you might say, invention – Bernard-Marie Koltès, and of Heiner Müller and Hervé Guibert; and the visits of such other vaunted maestri as Robert Wilson, Peter Stein, Luca Ronconi, Pierre Boulez and Luc Bondy. There were workshops and student productions, a self-contained facility of cafés and studios, galleries, all of it fuelled by his own restless activity and mercurial interventions.

On my first visit there in 1985 I saw Chéreau's revival of an early Marivaux play, *La Fausse Suivante*, and found Jane Birkin as a countess responding with palpably erotic ardour to a disguised chevalier (Laurence Bourdil, who was one of the young girls in *La Dispute*), allegedly spying on her assigned fiancé elsewhere in the household. There was nothing coy or artificial about their encounter; the exact opposite, in fact, and I've felt ever since that this is how the Viola/Cesario and Orsino scenes should be played in *Twelfth Night*. It was electrifying, and played out again in one of Peduzzi's monumental, grey, eerily dead-of-night set-

tings with sickly lighting, a perpetual dawn chorus of farmyard noises and actors clothed in sweeping capes, tricorn hats and high boots on a large curved ramp supporting a single classical doorway.

Around this time there was a trend across Europe of appropriating old warehouses, markets and tramsheds for performance – Peter Brook had reanimated the old Bouffes du Nord as early as 1974, and struck out with two startlingly austere and unrhetorical productions of *Timon of Athens* and, a few years later, *Measure for Measure*. In Britain, following the Roundhouse in London, we had the Royal Exchange in Manchester and the Tramway in Glasgow, but no production I saw there, not even Brook's *Mahabharata* in the Tramway, sucked up the atmosphere of the old building to the extent that Chéreau's Nanterre production of Koltès's *Dans la solitude des champs de coton* did when it visited the old 19th century covered market of Les Halles, in Brussels, in 1987.

The former life of the renovated building – it had also been a car park – seeped into this philosophical tango for two players, The Dealer, a black bluesman, and The Client, a psychotic punk, with a resonating vengeance. The action was played in a traverse staging with the audience banked up on either side, somewhere in the shadowy environs of cranes, commerce and warehouses. But what was being traded? Drugs, sex, the meaning of life? The tense encircling of the actors reminded us of the boxing ring in Brecht's early thriller in the asphalt jungle, *In the Jungle of the Cities*, and the ornate, deliberate prose had a distinct echo of Diderot's dialogues, particularly that between Diderot and Rameau's nephew in the gardens of the Palais-Royal. And there was something of Beckett's tramps, too, frozen in time and purpose. But again, there was a Shakespearean dimension to this matadorish contest, the approach and the resistance, in notions of friendship, treachery, love.

The production was part of a four-pronged assault from Nanterre at the Avignon Festival of 1988: the others were the long overdue *Hamlet* – for which Goy-Blanquet was commissioned to write a translation of John Dover Wilson's *What Happens in Hamlet?*, a lodestar for Chéreau's thoughts on the play – Luc Bondy's revival of *The Winter's Tale* and "Scenes from Chekhov". In the background of all French Hamlets to date had been, says Goy-Blanquet, Paul Valéry's vision of the impending death of civilisation after the First World War: "From an immense terrace of Elsinore which extends from Basel to Cologne, and touches the sands of Nieuport, the marshes of the Somme, the chalk of Champagne, and the granite of Alsace, the Hamlet of Europe now looks upon millions of ghosts" (qtd in Goy-Blanquet 2018: 103). Not in Chéreau's *Hamlet*. Having absorbed all these echoes, the play's history and context, the director discards everything and starts, says Goy-Blanquet, "from the raw text, the bare set, nude flesh, bodies level with the ground among raised pillars or aggressive machinery" (p. 104). Just as for Peter Stein, his motto is, "What is not understood by the actors will not be performed" (p. 106).

Similarly, if Chéreau had a good reason not to direct a piece he wouldn't. Verdi's *Othello*, for example, he deemed not worth doing because, in his view, it was so far inferior to Shakespeare's play. And a film about Napoleon's last love on Saint-Helena, slated to star Al Pacino and Juliette Binoche, was abandoned af-

ter seven years' work for lack of adequate funding. One of his most extraordinary achievements, as documented by Goy-Blanquet, was to inject Racine's *Phèdre*, at the Odéon Ateliers Berthier in 2003, with Shakespearean intensity, thus brfeaching the usual gap in French theatre between body and mind, analogous to the gap between public and private theatre, low brow and highbrow. Chéreau did this by refusing to observe the end-stopped lines of the alexandrine, running them on to flow with the sense, not the metre; making Theseus and his son, Hippolyte, object of his mother's inflamed passion, look very similar; and by bringing catastrophe and death onto the stage, flouting the rules of classical decorum in the cause of theatrical truth.

Chéreau remains best known internationally for two films: *La Reine Margot* and *Intimacy* (2001) based on two stories of British author Hanif Kureishi, whose screenplay for *My Beautiful Launderette* (1985) had much impressed him when he saw it with Bernard-Marie Koltès. In *Intimacy*, Mark Rylance as a bar manager who has left his wife and family had explicit on-screen sex, once a week, and without any verbal communication, on dingy neutral territory in south London, with Kerry Fox as a married, small-time fringe theatre actress. Rylance's barman, inevitably, becomes obsessed with Fox's actress, breaks the rules of the deal, and follows her into her private life, thus courting disaster and precipitating an ambiguous tragic ending.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the movie, and a side-issue, was the account given of it, and the reactions it prompted, by Fox's real-life partner (now husband), the Scottish journalist Alexander Linklater. As quoted by Goy-Blanquet, his article, published in both Prospect magazine and the Guardian, reveals that Linklater had already experienced and dealt with the role of playing a sexual outsider: as a teenager playing William in As You Like It, he inadvertently came upon the much older girl playing Audrey, on whom he'd developed an uncontrollable crush, having sex in a car with the boy playing Touchstone.

Linklater honestly recounts the bumpy emotional ride he endured watching the film, at once sublime and deeply upsetting. But he came through on the other side. He and Kerry have two boys. Rylance has remained schtum on the film, declining an invitation from the Young Vic to play *Macbeth* directed by Chéreau for his first production on a British stage since *La Dispute*. Instead, in May 2011, Chéreau directed Jon Fosse's *I Am the Wind*, done into English by Simon Stephens, at the Young Vic. Two men – are they brothers, lovers, companions? – go on a journey. A simple raft heaves out of the floor on a lift. The men set sail. They eat a little, drink schnapps and head for the open sea. They are not waiting for Godot, they are looking for him, perhaps… the excitement mounts.

This very short play was strange, beguiling, hypnotic and irritating all at once. But the painterly production, at once epic and small-scale, showed the genius of Chéreau and designer Peduzzi at its most poetic and seductive, and my mind dissolved in images of the forest in the moonlight in the Marivaux play all those years previously. Not only that. Chéreau had cast two outstanding young British actors – Tom Brooke and Jack Laskey – as the castaways on their journey of discovery to the heart of the best European theatre of our day. I felt proud. Let's hope Brexit, if and when it happens, does not pollute that memory.