

JE NE VEUX PAS MOURIR IDIOT DE WOLINKSKI: PROPAGANDA OR NEW DIRECTION IN THE FRENCH THEATER?

In 1968 a new play, Je ne veux pas mourir idiot, burst upon the Paris scene, moving from one experimental theater to another. Taking as its subject the background and preoccupations of the crisis of May 1968, and distilling these historical events with comic verve and trenchant humor, the play also took both its audiences and the press by surprise in shattering all French theatrical tradition. Like the théâtre de l'absurde in its attempt to pin wriggling and ridiculous human nature to the wall, it was yet unlike, for instance, the drama of Ionesco or Beckett in that it took as its point of departure an actual historical event, treating it with a kind of highly stylized realism.

For the most part the press, even the leftist newspapers such as L'Humanité, virtually ignored its existence. Le Monde, L'Express, Le Nouvel Observateur never reviewed it, and FranceSoir devoted to it only a derogatory article. The journalistic confusion as to what to make of it can be seen in a random sampling of comments. In Les Nouvelles littéraires (December 5, 1968), Mathieu Galey spoke of the play as “un défolement collectif.” In Rivarol (June 5, 1969), Claude Lorne wrote an article entitled, “A lire, à voir ou à fuir, lettre ouverte à un enragé dégage,” and Jacques Brosgol, in Théâtre 140, refers to the play as a mere cabaret spectacle, lacking unity or any controlling idea.

The director, Claude Confortès, had his own ideas about the reasons for this journalistic neglect or opprobrium. In an interview, he castigated the newspapers as fearing to live up to their own liberal convictions because their support is entirely bourgeois: “Il y a toute une structure bourgeoise qui les sert, dont ils ont besoin, et si cette structure bourgeoise éclatait, c'est la panique pour eux.” Moreover, he continued, the so-called liberals of the press, the intellectual left, will never put into practice the ideas they espouse on a purely theoretical level: “... ils vivent complètement à droite: ils ont leur maison de campagne, leur standing, mais ils jouent des jeux intellectuels, politiques, et se croient de la gauche.”

The interest of the play, despite the journalistic neglect, would seem to be twofold. It can serve as a springboard to explain the dialectic between the actual event, on the one hand, and its aesthetic transformation, on the other. In the second place, for the

literary critic in particular, it poses some important questions about the direction the French theater is likely to take in future. It has, in other words, both a topical, sociological-historical dimension and an aesthetic. For Confortès, in fact, the two are inseparable. As he said, “Il n’y a pas une grande pièce populaire, qu’elle soit de Shakespeare, de Calderone ou de Sophocle, qui n’ait pas un enseignement, qui n’ait pas un rapport avec les problèmes des gens, et ces problèmes-là sont des problèmes réels sur sa vie sur terre.” He refers to the play, in fact, as a pièce-dossier, which helps to account for the abundance of topical references in it, ranging from the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico, to the cleaning out of the Sorbonne by the police, to the threatened arrival of the repressive ex-North African military régime. Confortès underlines the significance of the popular theater, quoting the historian Michelet to the effect that the theater is “ce creuset où se forge l’âme publique.” He also asserts that a playwright should create with the idea that in future his play will be acknowledged a masterpiece: “La pièce doit être un chef-d’oeuvre au moment où on la joue, parce qu’on se trouve devant un public qui doit comprendre dans son siècle.”

The play had its origin in a form of journalism, for it was based on and written around some sketches of the satirical cartoonist Wolinski, who recorded in them the events of May 1968 on the barricades, just as they happened, and had them published in L’Enragé. Its lack of formal conventionality has led many to believe that it is a mere cabaret sketch. It is true that its kinship to the improvisation satirical review of, for instance, the old Second City troupe from Chicago, and to the more modern théâtre de combat, is clear. It resembles the “living theater” in that it lists, not one single author, but several, including the director Confortès and all the actors, in addition to Wolinski. Within a given framework, the artists are free to supply much of their own dialogue and situations. Although it has been published in the “Collection enragée” of Jean-Jacques Pauvert, in subsequent performances the actors have departed freely from the text to substitute, for instance, contemporary allusions to Georges Pompidou for those to De Gaulle, and in the preface to the text the authors admit that this is but “une version provisoire”: “Comme nous pensons que rien n’est fini, que, au contraire, tout commence, d’autres dessins, d’autres texts, viendront s’ajouter au fur et à mesure qu’il se passera des choses qui nous concernent et que nous serons concernés par des choses qui se

passeront.” Just as the actors share in creating the dialogue, so they share in financing the production, which is a kind of communal enterprise. A certain percentage of the receipts goes to the company, which divides them up equally.

Not only do the actors participate in the authorship, but also the spectators. They are invited, for instance, to sing the title song along with Evariste, whose music accompanies the performance. But as the stage directions wryly comment, “Ceux qui ne veulent pas mourir idiots dans la salle chantent. Il y en a rarement beaucoup. Hélas!”¹ The spectators are also invited to write on a panel of white paper in the theater. After all, however, there is nothing new under the sun. In much the same manner, in the eighteenth century, Laurence Sterne challenged his reader to supply his own plot, if he thought he could do better than Sterne himself, on a blank page in the midst of Tristram Shandy. The absence of the conventional theatrical trappings, such as a curtain, stagehands, or the three taps which announce the start of the performance in France eliminate the distance between actor and spectator. One actor, for instance, even stations himself in the audience, and during one performance one of the actors slapped a spectator. The player known only as “L’Ordre” engenders physical brutality to a degree that would be painful if it were not so highly comic. The play incorporates music and dance, moreover, into its structure in an open defiance of the traditional French reverence for the “purity” of the different genres. Its language is frequently outrageous and offends against decorum in an attempt to break down the barriers between the bourgeois language and the language of the people. Confortès underlines the fact that if the drama is to be no longer hermetic, no longer a mere jeu d’esprit, it must learn to use the exact word that describes a situation, even to the point of using vulgarity or the language of the street. As Confortès says, “Il faut que le langage ait son efficacité totale, qu’un mot ne puisse pas être remplacé par un autre, et que, sur un public de 1000 spectateurs, 999 entendent le mot, le sonnet, que le mot ne passe pas ouaté, feutré dans une sorte de deuxième ou de troisième sens. Le mot doit être efficace comme le coup de poing d’un boxeur.”

Despite the lack of theatrical conventions and beyond the historical relevance, however, the play does have a decided architectural balance and unity, and that unity is

¹ Wolinski, Confortès, les Acteurs, Je ne veux pas mourir idiot (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1968), p. 17. All subsequent page references are to this edition.

largely imparted by the world vision of the principal creator, Wolinski. There is, in the first place, a stylistic unity. As Confortès admits, Wolinski has “un sens poétique certain” and, like certain American novelists, such as Hemingway, attempts to use “un langage direct, simple, vrai,” to arrive at “une vérité claire, évidente.” He compares Wolinski’s motive for inviting the creative participation of others to Peter Brook’s image of the boxer. The public cannot participate when it is ignorant of the rules of the game, as it has been traditionally in the French theater. When it witnesses a boxing match, on the other hand, it knows in advance when the boxer should attack, when he should defend himself, when he should lead with his left or right. Similarly, in the theater, “l’acteur doit être une émanation des spectateurs; il ne doit pas être un être supérieur, un personnage monacal...” The theater should be, at its best, “une sorte de fête,” for all the people, as it was in the Middle Ages. It should be “une explosion de joie” of the people themselves, for “chaque chose qui est grande en art est populaire.”

To this end of creating a single unified effect for himself, his actors, and his audience, Wolinski adopts a unity of tone as well as of style. The overriding mode is comic and the tone is satirical, in keeping with what Confortès calls his basic theme, an attack “contre la bêtise, qu’elle soit de droite ou de gauche.” The rire Wolinski evokes, however, is a rire sauvage and, by that token, does maintain a certain distance between the audience and the situations portrayed on stage. The actors are, after all, on stage, for all the unconventionality of the presentation, and their pain is somehow not our pain. Moreover, it is comic; its essence is the “mécanisme plaqué sur le vivant.” When *Ordre* beats the *Etudiante*, the scene becomes almost slapstick, one of low comedy, and yet it is only a slightly exaggerated and distanced transposition of what actually happened on the barricades.

The characterization is the third principal means, in addition to style and tone or mode, by which Wolinski unifies his major themes, which include the “generation gap,” the class struggle, the function of the artist with relation to an historical event, and the stupidity of human nature in general. To this end, the characters are types rather than individuals. The play seems at the start to set up a polarity between the older generation, represented by the Orator and the *Esthète de mai*, reinforced by *Order*, and the young people, represented by the *Etudiante* and the young working man, reinforced by the

singer Evariste. But the Orator and the Esthète are contrasting as well as parallel characters; in them Wolinski shows two different modes of articulation, both in content and form. The Esthète, moreover, is linked with the Ouvrier in that both court Hermine, the Etudiante. The Orator, moreover, is played by Confortès, the metteur en scène, whereas the Esthète seems at times to shadow forth certain aspects of Wolinski the artist – a fact sufficient in itself to cast some doubt on the interpretations by the metteur en scène of the writer’s intentions. Finally, the symbolic “wedding” or mating of workers and students is an uneasy one at best. As the worker comments sardonically to Hermine,

Vous les étudiantes, vous avez l’habitude de parler.

Alors même vos conneries ont l’air intelligentes!

(p.197)

And Confortès admits that Wolinski attacks “la bêtise” wherever he finds it, among young as well as old, as we see when the Etudiante exclaims, “Il vaut mieux dire n’importe quoi que fermer la gueule” (p. 99). His sympathies, nevertheless, seem to lie essentially with the forces of change, with those who exclaim, “Depuis que je ne veux pas mourir idiot je vis beaucoup mieux.”

The Etudiante seems to represent all women, from the intellectual to Miss Universe, as well as all students. The implication may be that this is the side of “feminine” sensibility in youth, with all its passions and inconsistencies, whereas the worker is the masculine, stable, common sense side. Although the Orator and Esthete are frequently opportunistic, and the Esthete at least is profoundly disturbing – “inquiétant”—nevertheless both express fundamental truths in the play. Early in the play the Orator speaks truer than he knows, behind all his hollow phrases, when he affirms the equality of all men – “Ils respirent la même air” – which the transposition of roles within the play may also suggest. The Esthete also expresses a similar basic truth when he affirms the ridiculousness of human nature:

Le monde change.

Il n’y a que les gens qui ne changent pas. (p. 67)

The Ouvrier cries out for discussion, the Etudiante for action no matter what the consequences. The Orator is dubious about De Gaulle but will support the status quo at all costs. At the same time, while he is willing to criticize the régime, his own oratory, his

well-sounding but empty phrases, have a strong tincture of De Gaulle himself, and even some of the caricatures of him suggest a physical resemblance to him. He is anti-Fascist, yet strikes poses which, we are told, are almost Nazi-like.

The Esthete as well is capable of giving a fair imitation of De Gaulle's oratory, but his basic drives and desires are the equivalent of the Ouvrier's

Du pain

Du vin

Des femmes. (p. 21)

Not only the young, but the old ogle the student as she begins a strip tease, demonstrating the equality of the animal drives in all men. The play's inner structure is based, then, on a complicated intermeshing of the characters in which at times a polarity is set up between them, and at times they merge into each other.

The Esthète de mai is the single most complex personage in the play, in whom much of its ambiguity resides. At times we have the feeling that he incarnates certain aspects of the author Wolinski; at others he is clearly the target for Wolinski's most virulent criticism. On the one hand, like the author he affirms the power of imagination, expresses many central truths, and attempts to find the subject for a news article in everyday events. On the other hand, he aids the vicious, simple-minded Order by holding his shield while he clubs the young people, and he admits that he practices a kind of auto-culture: "L'auto-culture, ça veut dire que je ne lis que ce j'écris..." (p.49). The last statement may give us a clue as to his major function in the play. If he incarnates an aspect of Wolinski, it may be the latter's fear, as an artist, of allowing his work to become hermetic, detached from everyday reality. Claude Lorne does in fact accuse Wolinski of this fault in the article mentioned earlier in "un enragé degagé." He complains that Wolinski remains in lofty detachment and amusement above the situations he depicts. It is interesting to note that, in his artist-figure, Wolinski seems to express a fear of this very detachment. In this sense the Esthète de mai is, as his name implies, the anti-artist Wolinski is trying to avoid becoming. Anyone who can view the crisis of May from a purely aesthetic standpoint is failing to commit himself to the reality which sustains art, from Wolinski's point of view.

It is noteworthy that, even when the Esthete seeks subject matter similar to that of his creator, namely the “vie estudiantine,” he ignores the hard fact of the barricades, Wolinski’s subject, in favor of a juicy popularizing bit about student manners and morals:

Un bon papier ça serait sur les étudiants, leurs
moeurs dans les Cités universitaires avec plein de
détails croustillants. (p.51)

And, at the end, he is guilty, along with the Orator, of the supreme illogicality of the play, the assumption that the cure for youthful discontent is war, and that the student revolt is the product of a Communist conspiracy. He implicitly agrees with the Orator that the Soviets cut Germany in half, keeping it from reunification and a new invasion of France, “parce qu’ils veulent le désordre social en France” (p. 127). In addition, in the version actually performed in Paris, at the end the Orator and the Esthete, the forces of Order, seem temporarily to suppress the imagination of youth. They march around the stage chanting, “L’imagination ne passera pas, l’imagination ne passera pas,” and Wolinski’s ridicule of them makes it clear that his sympathy remains with youth rather than with those who mouth idle words and stamp underfoot any genuine creative impulse.

Yet, despite his criticism of the forces of conservatism and reaction, we are constantly reminded by Wolinski that without the conventions of the past there would be no play. As he wrote ironically in Plexus, n°18, of his own character: “Je suis vulgaire et joyeux; je suis révolutionnaire et conformiste. Qu’est-ce que je peux dire encore comme chose profonde sur moi? Ah oui, plus je fais l’amour et plus je me rends compte que ce n’est pas indispensable.” The play itself arises out of the tension between tradition and revolt. Thus Evariste, the singer, is a modern enactment of the chorus in a Greek tragedy; yet he uses the language of student dissent and of the street. He defies convention, yet acts within its framework. Similarly, Wolinski and Confortès see the play as a departure from the dégagé théâtre de l’absurde, but in the second part they evoke Ionesco’s play, “Les Chaises,” by focusing the action on a stage setting consisting entirely of five chairs. As we have already seen, even the audience participation was anticipated by Sterne. Nor is the play divorced from a certain cultural, aesthetic, and philosophic context. For instance, the student plays on the old *dicton*, “Labourage et pâturage sont les deux

mamelles de la France,” when she says, “Labourage, Aliénation, Pâtronage, Oppression, sont les mamelles de la société bourgeoise” (p. 89).

The play seems to represent an attempt to create a truly popular theater, to bring French drama back to the world after years of functioning as an intellectual exercise, whether in the Sartrian philosophic manner or in the manner of the dramatists of the absurd. To the end, it is interesting to note that life imitates art, since the student revolt is itself pre-eminently theatrical in methodology, a fact which became very clear when the students read and borrowed from texts and letters of Antonin Artaud during the crisis of May 1968. Yet, as we have tried to show, the abundance of ties to reality does not simply result in this play in a profusion of non-translatable local references; these “relevant” items are, in fact, the variables in the aesthetic equation. The play has been and is going to be translated into many different languages, and its universal appeal is facilitated by the fact that the actors to a large extent create their own dialogue. Yet it still retains a certain rigorous inner structure, a consistent vision even when the actors revise the dialogue each night, and in this it differs from the “living theater.”

Confortès and Wolinski seem to foresee a new era in the French theater, departing from the detached Ionesco and Beckett, when they speak of writing plays about Biafra or Vietnam. Yet the situations would seem to retain a certain universality, like the Lysistrata of Aristophanes, although they are rooted in the immediacy of contemporary problems. In this their play may be compared with the American play Hair, which also deals with the technique of confrontation. Although Confortès sees the confrontation of Hair as a purely physical one, as the title suggests, rather than the philosophic and political revolt of Je ne veux pas mourir idiot, yet Hair apparently struck some kind of responsive chord in the French mentality as well, since it has had a tremendous success in Paris. Unlike Je ne veux pas mourir idiot, however, it has been well-received by a bourgeois French press and public, and the production was well-subsidized, unlike the French play, which had to depend solely on the resources of its creators. For these reasons Confortès perhaps a little too easily assumes that it is a crowd-pleaser, not revolutionary, and essentially a bourgeois-capitalistic play: “C’est un genre d’opium du peuple. ...Mais elle ne pose pas des problèmes politiques concernant la répression, les revendications ouvrières, etc. Quand on parle de Hair on pense à l’amour, à la paix, à la liberté sexuelle.”

Its vision of a sexual and emotional revolt, however, represented to the American public the same kind of dissent and innovation that the political revolt of Je ne veux pas mourir idiot did for the French. The French mind, assessing the contribution of the American production, tends to forget that America is undergoing an emotional revolution of a sort that has been taken for granted in France for centuries. Thus, Hair presents a vision of a gigantic love-in – “This is the dawning of the day of Aquarius”—whereas Wolinski’s female student comments in the most blasé fashion about love and sex, “C’est bien, mais pas trop souvent”(p. 29). Hair is characteristically American in its presentation of a soulful, emotional Utopia, a concept completely foreign to the experienced and rather more cynical French mentality.

Granted these basic shades of difference in mentality, the structure of revolt is present in both plays and has a universal appeal. It would be illuminating if American audiences could see Je ne veux pas mourir idiot, the French image of protest, just as French audiences have been given the opportunity to take the American play, Hair, to their hearts.

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NOTE: In my interview with Confortès he expressed not only the willingness but the desire to bring the production to North America, particularly to colleges and universities, if there was sufficient interest in it. Readers who may be interested may contact either myself or Confortès directly.