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Mixing the Old and the New On Stage: Praising American Classical Theater, Not Burying It

By CHRIS HEDGES

The theater company founded by Jeffrey Horowitz nearly 25 years ago was born out of a conflagration - literally. Mr. Horowitz had been given a role in 1977 with Zero Mostel in "The Merchant" by Arnold Wesker. Mr. Mostel, however, died after one performance. And Mr. Horowitz, who should have been enjoying a shot at the big time, was back on unemployment.



"These great plays are about the way we live and die."
JEFFREY HOROWITZ

With not much else to do, he decided to polyurethane the wooden floor of his tiny studio apartment in the West Village. The maker of the product, however, had mislabeled the can, leaving out the warning that the pilot light on the stove had to be turned off. When he was in the bathroom he heard "what sounded like the air being sucked out of the room."

"I looked out the door and saw flames leaping up to the ceiling," he said. "I had to run through the fire to get out. I got third-degree burns on my feet. I took the \$50,000 I received in the settlement and used it, against the usual parental advice, to start Theater for a New Audience."

His current production, "Julius Caesar," is an example of his hallmark: the fusion of the modern and the ancient. The stage setting at the Lortel Theater in Greenwich Village evokes the iron girders and concrete slabs at ground zero. He places the actors in modern dress.

He said for him the most chilling scene comes when a mob tries to hunt down a conspirator named Cinna and finds instead Cinna the poet.

"I am not Cinna the conspirator," the hapless poet cries as the mob descends upon him. "It is no matter, his name's Cinna," a member of the crowd yells. "Pluck his name out of his heart."

"They cut his throat," said Horowitz, as he runs his finger across his own neck.

As the company's artistic director Mr. Horowitz picks themes each season that he believes run like rivers beneath the surface of society. This season his theme is betrayal. His last play, "The General From America" by Richard Nelson, about Benedict Arnold, dealt, like "Julius Caesar," with the nature of patriotism and what it means to be a traitor.

“I’ve betrayed nothing that has not already betrayed itself,” Arnold acidly says at the end of the play.

“You see, especially in ‘Caesar,’ how fickle the citizens are,” Mr. Horowitz said. “Shakespeare shows us the kinds of words and actions that are used by those in power to manipulate people.”

Mr. Horowitz, 56, who grew up in Miami, was a British-trained classical actor. He found roles but was always fascinated with the challenges of making classical theater resonate in America. He disliked the British snobbery that denigrated the American interpretations of classical plays.

“There was a perception that American artists could not handle classical texts,” he said. “Beginning in the 1930’s with companies such as the Group Theater, the American actors became known for physical and emotional power, but they were also labeled as inarticulate. This was nonsense. There is no one way or accent to speak Shakespeare. No one culture owns the classics.”

He said he was “rooted in the tradition of the actor as the primary communicator of the author’s language.” And he drills his actors in delivery. Cicely Berry, the voice director for the Royal Shakespeare Company, works with his actors and directors “to develop the skills of mastering Shakespeare’s texts.”

“The actor has to be able to express great language, to respond to its rhythm, the way a pianist has to train his or her fingers to play.”

But along with a care for language comes a belief that classical texts can resonate in contemporary culture. Since the Theater for a New Audience started in 1979, Mr. Horowitz has read the newspapers as closely as the stack of scripts that clutter his office. He mixes modern plays and classical plays each season “to make the point that classical theater does not live in the past.”

“The themes dealt with by classical authors such as Euripides are also dealt with by contemporary authors such as Edward Bond and Richard Nelson,” he said. “The themes repeat because the problems repeat. Human beings are always dealing with love, death and violence. These great plays are about the way we live and die.”

Mr. Horowitz, who has two sons, Jake, 8, and Simon, 4, is married to Melissa Gradel, a writer and one of the leaders in the Brooklyn chapter of Voice of the Faithful, a Catholic lay organization formed as a result of the priest sex-abuse scandal. They live in Brooklyn. He can often be seen in the theater with his oldest son.

Mr. Horowitz has the look of a slightly rumpled English professor, his silver hair cascaded down over his ears. As he talked in his small office on Christopher Street, he jumped up to pull down books to find quotations he liked, along with a literary essay about his next play, “Don Juan” by Molière.

“Great theater can be not only a forum but our conscience,” he said. “The artist should not only entertain, he or she should be the channel through which we think and reflect. There is no point in doing a classical play unless we can answer the question of why we should do this play now.”

Yet while he searches for plays that help illuminate moral ambiguities, he dislikes didactic theater, theater that preaches a political line or viewpoint.

“Life is complex,” he said. “Art is about the questions, not the answers.”