

Theater: Ancient & Modern

The topic was approached not from a historical standpoint but from how modern directions use the ancient and medieval plays and ideas to give them a new life for the 1990's.

Benjamin has been involved in staging 6 productions of *Hamlet*, but each has had a different take on who Hamlet was. That's what makes theater exciting: *drama* is literary and historical; *theater* is the study and practice of performance. Benjamin is not a dramaturge or a historian but a practitioner who asks how we bring a play to life for a modern audience and how many liberties can or should a director take with a script.

Novelists, knowing that readers will interpret in their own fashions, create scenery and interpretations in a one on one pattern, novelist directly to reader. Playwrights do not have the same sense of ownership as a novelist, knowing that the script has dramatic potential but its realization belongs to directors, actors and others in a collaboration of playwright, cast and audience. Directors walk a tight-rope between going overboard, beyond what an audience will accept, and not finding a sufficiently new approach for a familiar play.

A modern director wants to make a play relevant. How, for example, do you make *Oedipus Rex*, with no on-screen violence or sex, believable for an audience weaned on MTV and graphic violence in film? How do you make it exciting and enjoyable when you don't have morphing or explosives or \$100 million for special effects? You look for the universal themes: duty versus desire or social versus personal needs, contrasts/conflicts which still arise today. How does a modern director bring across the desire versus duty theme?

Among the successful adaptations of dramatic classics Benjamin has been associated with [especially in staging/design] was an Interlaken youth production of *Macbeth*, presented not only as a personal drive for power but also as a battle between clans. To bring this out for high school students, generally afraid of Shakespeare from years of prejudice, required updating, making it more understandable and logical. So the production team looked at the feudalism of the 13th – 14th century as parallel to modern gangs. Some very minor adaptations allowed the play to be set in Los Angeles, in a warehouse crumbling in on itself. Some traditionalists in the audience hated it, but most of the audience could relate to the thematic content of the play.

Artists need to validate what they are doing in adapting, and audiences must understand and enjoy. When Peter Sellars adapted Mozart's *Così fan tutte* to a modern diner setting, Benjamin failed to see the relevance and justification for that. In Houston a director converted *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to a musical, with a bluegrass band and a setting of 1850/60 Texas; it worked very well. A musical version of *Medea*, projected in New York, bombed while still in the investment stage.

Normal techniques of adaptation include updating the dialogue, removing obtuse vocabulary and [if the work is not originally in English] choosing the most workable translation.

Beyond adapting locale, you can adapt character, for example by casting counter to type, something theater will take more risks on than movies will. For example, in last year's Stockton production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon's sidekick, Puck, normally played by a light, airy fellow, was played by a 6'2" 315 pounder, which changed the normal dynamics of the play. When Puck says, "I go, I go, look how I go." The actor stumped off slowly, rather than the quick customary exit. Patrick

Stewart's current playing of Prospero tones down the normal physical dominance over Caliban and the others and relies on verbal control – and this works wonderfully.

You can also cut scenes or move some around. Shakespeare, himself an actor, would probably understand. Change is needed to fit the times.

The exhilaration of taking a script and bringing it to life on stage outweighs, for many directors, the pull of TV jobs. Audience-cast interaction, possible only in live performance, is seen when, at the end of *Marat/Sade*, the inmates kill the guards and storm the audience.

Question & Answer Discussion:

Eugene O'Neil brought Aeschylus' *Oresteia* to life in *Mourning Becomes Electra* by translating themes and universal truths to modern drama. A Stockton production of *Godspell* a few years back played with characters trapped in a New York subway car.

Which is better to undertake: an old play (e.g. Shakespeare) with few/no stage directions or a modern one with pages of directions? It is more challenging, though more difficult, to work with one where you can and must interpret.

Modern young audiences are less willing to suspend disbelief. Older audiences raised on radio (not realistic TV/film) are more willing to accept as real what they can see is not real – a leap of trust. A father some time ago asked his son: "Which do you prefer, radio or TV?" the son replied, "Radio. The pictures are better."