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"Romanian" Shakespeare on the New York Stage: Andrei Serban's *Hamlet*

To search for reviews of European Shakespeare productions on the American stage is to be reminded that almost every Shakespeare performance seen in the US is the product of a director whose native language is English. With a couple of notable exceptions (Bergman, Strehler, Ninagawa) there are almost no reviews or press releases for non-English Shakespeare performances in the extensive files at the New York City's Library for the Performing Arts.[1] Although European Shakespeare productions seldom cross the Atlantic, fortunately their innovative ideas frequently do. American directors have been absorbing and recycling European influences in their Shakespeare productions for decades, but especially the eastern European work during the mid-twentieth century. Occasionally there is an even more direct influence – a European director will migrate to New York for an extended "visit". When this happens, particularly when the visit gradually morphs into a long-term residence, usually due to a combination of financial success and political exile, the work that results raises questions about international creative boundaries and national identity. This is the case for Rumanian-born director Andrei Serban, who came to the US intending to stay for a couple of months, but who, thirty years later, is still there and a citizen. What makes his position unique is the continuing identification for over three decades of Serban as a Romanian director. This paper considers how this dual identity as Romanian/American may have been a factor in the critical reception of Serban's "disastrous" 1999 production of *Hamlet*.

[1] There are performances in Spanish, but it counts almost as New York's second language. The same would have been true in the early-to-mid-twentieth century with the Yiddish theatre in the city.

The press clipping file at the Lincoln Center Performing Arts Library contains dozens of reviews and articles on the American productions directed by Andrei Serban. His work is generally viewed as representative of mid-twentieth century European avant-garde practices. In these reviews and articles Serban is nearly always identified as "Romanian-born", often at his own instigation. The European connection is furthered by linking him to Peter Brook, with whom he worked as an assistant for one year. Even after spending nearly all of his adult life working in the US, Serban continues to be discussed – and to present himself – as a representative of an innovative European approach to Shakespeare.

However, it could logically be argued that, after thirty years, Serban is in fact more a part of the American theatrical landscape – or even the international globe trotting theater community – than a link to the Romanian theater. His American work includes long stints with innovative theatres – Ellen Stewart's La Mama E.T.C. (Experimental Theatre Company), Joseph Papp's New York Public Theatre, Robert Brustein's American Repertory Theatre – and with academia, including teaching assignments at Yale University's Drama School and directing a theater program at Columbia University. In fact, when he finally returned to Romania in the 1990s to head the Bucharest National Theatre, Serban remained a full-time member of Columbia's faculty.

When Andrei Serban began his US career in the 1970s he was hailed as "Romania's Gift to Theater" (Hodenfield 36). He started by working with two powerful forces in New York's Off-Broadway theatre movement: Ellen Stewart of La Mamma E.T.C., who arranged for the 26 year-old Serban to come to the US on a Ford Foundation Grant in 1969, and Joseph Papp founder of the Public Theater and its New York Shakespeare Festival (NYSF). Although he would work with Papp for only four years, 1977–1981, Serban's American reputation even now is based on those early days at La Mama and NYSF. His "ground-breaking" Greek plays, *Medea*, *Electra*, and *The Trojan Women* were done in various incarnations for La Mama between 1972 and 1975, with the best-known production *Fragments of a Greek Tragedy* in 1974. His highly-acclaimed experimental production of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* was done for Stewart's theatre in 1976 and repeated there in 1980. He continues to return occasionally to La Mama and in 2001 directed *Richard 3* [sic], a "whittling down" of *Richard III*, with additional bits from *Henry VI*. It featured a triple-cast Richard and most of the actors came from his Columbia University class.

During the 1970s Joe Papp was managing director of the Mitzi Newhouse and Vivian Beaumont Theaters at Manhattan's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. He hired Serban to direct plays by, among other writers, Brecht and Chekhov, including a legendary *Cherry Orchard*. Serban did no Shakespeare for NYSF under Papp. Serban specialist Ed Menta says Papp planned to have the young director do the three parts of *Henry VI* in the 1992 season, but nothing came of it after Papp's death in 1991 (153). In fact, Serban did not

return to NYSF until 1994 when he directed *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and again in 1998 for *Cymbeline*. Both were moderate critical successes. Then, in 1999 he directed a Peter Zadek-style *Hamlet* that in the second half of this paper will be discussed in the context of New York performances of the Royal Dramatic Theatre of Sweden's *Hamlet* in 1988 and the English National Theatre's *Hamlet* in 2001.

Serban has carved a niche for himself in America as the resident eastern European director of imaginatively re-imagined classical theatre and, more recently, opera. Ironically, when he returned to Romania to head the Romanian National Theatre his proposed changes were rejected as attempts at Americanization, which, in turn, resulted in his resignation three years later (Blumenfeld 230, n. 4). His current reputation in America has also lost some of its original luster, though he is still seen as an important director. Much of what were once experimental in Serban's work – minimal sets, mixed period costumes, colour blind casting, fragmented texts, characters' unexpected presence in scenes, bodily functions, nudity – are now fairly mainstream. Serban's work during the 1980s for Boston's American Repertory Theatre, though full of quirky touches – such as Katherine and Petruchio's boxing-ring fight in a Mafia-laden *Taming of the Shrew* (1998) – was still fairly straightforward by current standards. By 1999 Serban's experimentalist mantle had become a comfortable tag for all concerned, and had come to mean not much more in terms of production style than what most other directors were doing everywhere.

However, in December 1999 Serban staged a *Hamlet*, in a style that might be called ''traditional experimental-confrontational'', that moved the New York critics out of this comfort zone. They were insulted by a vomiting Hamlet, a Gravedigger whose shirt said CLOWN and Gertrude with a Marge Simpson beehive hairdo. Only *New Republic* critic Robert Brustein, an old colleague of Serban's, saw the connection to the director's theatrical roots, the earlier experimental European productions and to Zadek's turbulent Shakespeare where bare-breasted Gertrude and gorilla-suited Othello offered ''resistance to the expectations of the public'' (Canaris 56).

As background, it needs to be noted that there have been annual visits to New York by various British companies. These were primarily the mainstream Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre, but also included slightly more experimental groups, including Cheek by Jowl, Northern Broadsides, and Edward Hall's Propeller Company. Occasionally, when a major director is involved, there is a non-English production of Shakespeare. Ingmar Bergman came from Sweden, Yukio Ninagawa from Japan, and there are scattered examples of other exceptions. Continental Shakespeare is still imagined/remembered as liberated, fuelled by long-standing traditions of avant-garde theatre, a site of radical experiments by controversial but respected directors. In contrast, New York radical productions were and still are usually confined to Off-Off Broadway

black box theatres. Seen by only a handful of people and rarely reviewed, they are missing from performance archives. Andrei Serban, however, has made sure he is in the archives. His record has always been a mix that swings back and forth between great success, moderate achievement, and sheer failure. However, reviews need to be read in context, which is why I want to explore the New York press's response to Serban's *Hamlet* in relation to their reviews of two non-American productions of the play, seen at approximately the same time.

Between 1988 and 2001 the New York stage held, if only for a few days each time, several "imported" *Hamlets*, including one by the Royal Shakespeare Company, another directed by Peter Brook, and the two that I will discuss here. The first is the widely praised Royal Dramatic Theatre of Sweden's *Hamlet* directed by Ingmar Bergman in 1988; the other is Great Britain's National Theatre production, directed by John Caird, starring Simon Russell Beale in 2001. Together they offer useful examples of mainstream critical response to a highly innovative non-English production (Bergman) and to a radically different casting choice for the lead in *Hamlet* (Beale). Both were visiting international productions, and were praised for their innovations. However, similar elements in Serban's "American" production were castigated by the same critics.

The reviews of Bergman's production of *Hamlet* provide a fascinating palimpsest of New York theatre critics fully accepting a number of unusual innovations, including Claudius and Gertrude in the act of anal sex as the court of Denmark stands round them and applauds. The production had toured internationally and came to the US as part of the BAM New Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, for only a week, as is typical of the Festival. The significant changes made by Bergman start when Claudius enters rolling across the floor with Gertrude en route to a very public display of lust. Later, the king uses Fortinbras' letter demanding Norway's lost land as toilet paper. In the prayer scene Claudius cavorts with a drunken hag. Ophelia is on stage to witness much of the action, including the stabbing of Polonius and her own funeral. The Grave Digger performs a vaudeville act wearing a bowler hat and bulbous nose. Fortinbras is a Central American military dictator accompanied by soldiers dressed in ominous riot gear. The command "go bid the soldiers shoot" is his cue for the off-stage firing line assassination of Horatio.

The production, by all accounts, was thrilling. It received highest praise from New York critics; the performances were soundly applauded, as was the director. Three things helped to set the critics "free": it was performed in Swedish, the director is revered and has an impeccable reputation, and – equally important – his films are familiar. *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), in particular, provided a performance "memory" the critics could use to measure and discuss what they were seeing. This meant they did not have to think solely in terms of *Hamlet*; they had the Bergman films. *The Christian Science Monitor* even titled their review "Bergman's cinematic '*Hamlet*' on stage" (DeVries 21). Mel

Gussow at the *New York Times*, who thought Bergman had been "surprisingly faithful to the spirit" of the play, found the effect of Ophelia as observer "a bit like that in 'Fanny and Alexander' where we view family history through the eyes of young Alexander". Gunnel Lindblom, a very vain Gertrude, is "well remembered from Bergman films" by Gussow (5). Writing for the *New Yorker*, Mimi Kramer touches on the many *Hamlet* references in *Fanny and Alexander* and notes the differences between the film's loving and liberal Ekdahl household and this violently carnal Court of Denmark. Characters "roamed about the stage or lingered in the background – much like the ghost of Oscar Ekdahl". She also argues that despite all the changes and innovations, nothing seemed wildly unusual in the production except the chance to see "inspired traditionalism [...] Shakespeare straight-forwardly performed by a first-rate company of European classical actors" (82–83). A third well-informed critic, Michael Feingold from the *Village Voice* felt that although this was not the most startling version of the play, this "Bergmanized *Hamlet*" was filled with "plenty of startlements". Feingold recalls Peter Zadek's *Henry V*, from "35 years ago" where the king delivered the St. Crispin Day speech "boozing in bed with a French whore" just as Claudius does in "O, my offense is rank". Characters, like Ophelia, who hovered on the fringes of scenes were evocative not of a specific film for Feingold, but connected to Bergman's "own partly surreal, filmic sensibility" and his transfer of film techniques such as jump cuts and overlaps to the pacing of the stage performance (1988: 97).

The *New York Post* is a daily tabloid with a predominately blue-collar readership. Its main theatre critic, Clive Barnes, points out that "Bergman takes liberties with Shakespeare that would scarcely occur to an English-speaking director [...] [and] hardly puts a foot normal". Yet, Barnes finds it throws "light on the play [...] It is a contradiction of genius". He objected to much that Bergman does, however, including having a "dull and peasant Ophelia" hovering about (1988: 30). Interestingly, not only is he the critic who is most uncomfortable with the Bergman production, he also seems to be the only one who does not connect to Bergman films, though he mentions the Swedish director's other stage productions. On the other hand, Howard Kissel in the even more conservatively working class *Daily News* celebrated Bergman's ability to challenge, irritate, illuminate and – above all – communicate, although he objected to Gertrude and Claudius making "lewd unrestrained love to the applause of the courtiers". Kissel's nod toward Bergman the filmmaker, whose reputation would be known to *Daily News* readers but not necessarily the actual films, is to say that "as would be expected" the play is full of "brilliant visual ideas" (1988: 51).

While the critics took the Swedish-language *Hamlet* in their stride, the reaction to the Royal National Theatre's version directed by John Caird thirteen years later produced some unexpected moments of uneasiness, primarily because

of Simon Russell Beale's physical appearance as "A great Hamlet of very solid flesh" (Kissel 2001: 45). The critics' response is a good example of what happens when they move outside their comfort zone. Casting the portly, middle-aged Beale confronted their expectations of a young, romantic hero, though in most other respects this was a traditional performance. Caird was best known to New York critics as the director of the Royal Shakespeare Company's highly acclaimed adaptation of Dicken's *Nicholas Nickleby* (1982), but his recent Broadway musical version of *Jane Eyre* had been poorly received. Howard Kissel, still with the *Daily News*, found the Caird/Beale *Hamlet* the "most illuminating" one he had seen, precisely because "at first sight" the "short and chunky" Beale "does not seem right to play Hamlet". For Kissel, Caird's emphasis on religious imagery and the "liturgical incidental music" was just right for "Shakespeare's most overtly Christian play" (2001: 45). At the *Village Voice*, however, Michael Feingold's review, "Son Blocks: A Boy's Best Friend is – Not His Director", starts off with references of Beale's appearance, noting that Gertrude's line "He's fat and scant of breath" (5.2.290) could "sit, unashamed, in both senses" on Beale who is "slightly thick of speech as well as of body, a cherubic, cartoon-like figure whom you might more naturally expect to see playing a bureaucrat [...]" The performance, though, was praised for growing "steadily more moving – a phenomena so rare in English Shakespeare acting that some of my less experienced colleagues called it a new approach". Caird comes under Feingold's attack for a production that "was bad beyond belief, at points nearly a laughingstock". Some of the elements that offended Feingold were the sense of a "religious allegory", the crucifix, the "mock-Tudor liturgical chant", the relatively empty stage, the chandeliers, the omission of Fortinbras, every performance except Beale's – and all those trunks. For Feingold it was like "an Anglican church service performed in a baggage claim area that had once been a ballroom" (2001: 65).

Robert Brustein, in *The New Republic*, agreed. He found it "like watching a historical re-enactment of a nineteenth century actor-manager Shakespeare". With a few exceptions he thought the supporting cast dreadful, all sounding like "BBC announcers" or "gay Oxford dons, including the women". The setting had too much of the waiting room at Paddington about it. Even Beale, did not escape and was called "too short, too middle-aged, and too epicene to be the scholar, soldier, and courtier that Ophelia admires". But above all, he disliked Beale's "superior sense of scornfulness" (2001: 31). (Both Brustein and Feingold had been happy with Peter Stormare's Hamlet in Bergman's production, but neither had seen him as the great centre of the play). At the *New York Post* Donald Lyons' review, "To flee or not to flee. That is the question", starts with remarks on the "short and fat" Beale, but also notes he is "sharp, smart, sensitive and stimulating". Lyon even likes the other actors, some of whom he recognized from British television shows (26). Finally, at

the *New York Times* Ben Brantley was full of praise and saw this as "The Prince in Us All". He gets one-third of the way into the column, which starts off with highest praise for Beale, before even mentioning rather casually that the actor is "shortish and stocky". More than half of his review focuses on Beale, while other actors are seen mainly in the way their characters interact with Hamlet. When Brantley does turn to Caird, it is to celebrate his "story techniques that have become his signature [...] a self conscious sense of the performers as a circle of tale tellers who resourcefully summon scenes into being" (2001: E1+). The most enthralled of the critics, Brantley doesn't even mention the trunks and suitcases.

The case was very different though when Brantley reviewed Andrei Serban's *Hamlet* the year before. The production was at the Public Theatre, an Off-Broadway institution by now, but one still capable of shaking up its audiences. Serban's *Hamlet* had its roots as much in the Public's past, in Joe Papp's confrontational *Naked Hamlet*, as it did in Brook or Zadek. However, many of the critics tended to see Serban's production, though obliquely, as the product of personal eccentricity, somehow connected to the director's European roots. John Simon, known as the bitterest of New York critics, felt that in "a better world" Andrei Serban would be "a men's room attendant". He also complained about the costumes "by fellow Romanian Marina Dragichi and the dismal and obsessive music by honorary Romanian, Elizabeth Swados, all striving to do to Shakespeare what Ceausescus did to their country" (48).

Part of the reaction to Serban's *Hamlet* lies in the way that his early experiments had been absorbed into standard theatrical practices over the years. By now, no one expected to be startled by this well-known director, although critics continued to praise or complain about his over determined inventiveness, his privileging of concept over content. This time, Serban managed to stir up the kind of controversy that had been an integral part of his early career. The production was "a travesty" (Gluck 56, Isherwood 88), "a lunatic display of directorial folly" (Heilpern 19), where "everyone loses out to Mr. Serban's directorial whims of iron" (Brantley 1999: E5). The major difference, though, was that in the earlier days the critical line was drawn between the establishment press and the young independents. This time the critical reception was overwhelmingly negative across the board. Only Debra Jo Immergut in *The Wall Street Journal* found a middle ground for what she saw as a "hit and miss production" that ranges from the "silly and self-indulgent" to the "spine tingling" (A16). A balance was also suggested by a review in the *New Republic* by Robert Brustein, former head of Yale Drama School and founder of American Repertory Theater, who provided an alternative record and, therefore, creates a different memory for this production. He sees it in the context of Serban's theatrical roots

where one of the earliest commitments was to challenge and unsettle the viewer (2000: 32).

Peter Zadek once pointed out that if you go to the greengrocers to buy a cabbage, you expect a cabbage. If they give you something else, you will be displeased. Serban defiantly did not produce the cabbage. His *Hamlet* definitely unsettled the critics, perhaps in part because they had gone to see Liev Schreiber, an actor they particularly admired, do "his" Hamlet. When this seemed to be buried under a barrage of distancing devices, they hated every aspect of the production. The exception were the moments when Schreiber sounded the way they expected him to, like "the best Shakespearean of his generation" (Immergut A16). They attacked elements of the production which under usual circumstances might not have drawn ire. The bareness of the glazed wall set, the mixed period costumes, the flying Osrick, Claudius's tape recorder, the Gravedigger's use of Yorick's skull as a ventriloquist's dummy were only the beginning of a long list of complaints. Laid side by side with the things they found intriguing in Bergman's production, many of the details, such as the Gravedigger, seem not dissimilar. The critics hated the vomiting Hamlet that Serban gave them, yet they had praised Bergman's "retching" Hamlet. They objected to Serban's Gravedigger who carried on a ventriloquist act with Yorick's skull, yet praised a similar approach by Bergman. Clive Barnes even suggested that Claudius's performance might have been inspired by Bergman's production (1999: 67). However, where critics had been intrigued by Claudius and Gertrude's lusty sexuality in Bergman, they now castigated the couple's "grotesque" groping (Isherwood 88). Casting Schreiber had signalled that this was to be a major *Hamlet*. Newspapers set aside space for lengthy reviews, and they were written. The attack was very specifically against the director, who, in half of the dozen major reviews, is still identified as the "Romanian-born" director as though that foreign birth explained a radical production. The major elements that had once brought Serban high praise were now turned against him.

One of the curious effects of reading these detailed, negative reviews is that many of the theatrical devices sound quite good. For instance, nearly everyone cites, usually as a complaint, Hamlet's advice to the actors where a procession of actors carry posters of previous film and stage Hamlets across the stage, ending with Schreiber's own picture. Diane Venora (Gertrude) even carried the poster of herself as Hamlet from an earlier NYSF production. However, it was this type of interpolation that led the *New York Time's* Ben Brantley to complain that despite "flashy exaggerations" and "jokey demeanor" this Denmark is a "circus production [that] [...] offers very little that isn't usually addressed in the teaching of the play in high school English" (1999: E5).

Critics objected to not being allowed to sink into the production, to become wrapped up in it – and in Schreiber's performance. Instead, they were denied their anticipated pleasure and were disturbed by house lights brought up

unexpectedly, Swadow's eclectic music, Hamlet putting on a pig snout and bloody apron after stabbing Polonius, and the general "vaudevillian'' pace (Isherwood 88). Particularly disturbing to the critics was Lynn Collins's constantly shifting interpretation of Ophelia, part predator, part moveable doll. They also object to having two actors as twin Fortinbrases at the end.

The critics had gone to enjoy *Hamlet*, not to be challenged by it. Recent Shakespeare productions at NYSF had been comparatively mainstream. Serban's latest work, though full of quirky touches, had been fairly straightforward by current standards. Critics, not unreasonably expected the same this time. Instead Serban would not let them sink comfortably into the production. He had returned to the avant-garde theatrical roots these same critics had formerly celebrated in reviews praising him, comparing him to Peter Brook, applauding his new look at the classics. They had been encouraged by Serban to cite his European background. Freed from confines of performing in English, this was the background that opened up new ways to exploring Shakespeare's plays. It is very possible that Serban's *Hamlet* was as truly dreadful as the critics claimed, that his ideas were merely gimmicks. The production may not have come together in the way Serban had envisioned. No video recording is available, so the only publicly shared memory is in the reviews. On the other hand, if Serban's goal had been to unsettle the audience, to keep them aware that they were watching "a native Romanian who trained with Peter Brook'' who "approaches the classics with absolutely no respect for tradition or orthodoxy or authorship'' (Brustein 2000: 32) – he definitely succeeded.

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