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The Emperor Up A Cul De Sac?

by Eric Shorter

The extent to which self-appointed artists should keep out of our way is disputable. It is in one way exciting to come out of the theatre and find oneself having a cup of coffee or something stronger with them. It is in another way disconcerting.

Or even if you don't get as close as coffee but watch them in the flesh answering questions from all and sundry, their response, and in particular their presence, can seem like an anti-climax. Some of them are superbly impressive. Fluent, witty, charming, handsome (or beautiful), they measure up to all our awed expectations.

Not always, though. Sometimes they are best left invisible. Not just because they aren't handsome or beautiful, or particularly articulate. But because their kind of art is best tasted untutored. It needs no introduction or prologue. It may need both when you have tasted it and fancied it and want to know what it's supposed to mean.

For essentially such work is inexplicable. You're either drawn to it or repelled. Hence the fascination for his admirers of Robert Wilson's personal ap-

pearance at the San Sebastian Film Festival. Mr Wilson is an American. Born in Texas and trained as an architect, he has acquired since the late 1960's a reputation with theatregoers in Europe and the United States though scarcely in Britain.

Based on a style which is hypnotically slow and precise in its mimetic solemnity, his plays or "operas" (as he likes to call them) are based on a subtle combination of visual effects and sound. Very little dialogue intrudes. Even less narrative or plot.

Yet in the theatre, though his shows are a test of patience as the curtain rises to disclose nothing happening and nobody talking just intimations of movement and intention from the puppet-like actors – he creates with silence and ponderous choreography (to the point of slow motion) a sense of suspended time.

It is as if he had devised another scale of chronology, one in which the normal pace of life had lost all significance. Let the actors take minutes to cross a stage. Allow half a minute to light a cigarette. Or nearly a minute to pour out a glass of milk (with over amplified glug-glug sounds to accompany every drop).

Mr Wilson's snail's-paced style is also like a magnifying glass.

It will focus on every gesture with surprising intensity. It makes us look anew at everything. It may not have a regular story tell. It has a most irregular way of presenting the figures it brings before us. And since he has been bringing before us his idea of a play for more than 15 years, his name as an experimental, director and author has swollen with time.

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The growth has not come purely from public demand. His "operas" are heavily subsidised. But although they could never attract enough people to pay the cost of staging them, they attract what is known as critical interest. What do his operas "mean"?

The search for significance supplies the critic with copy. The more puzzling the show, the more mystery to contemplate. Hence the verbal speculation. The provocation of pleasure as you sit at one of his plays, if you are just a spectator with no literary duties, is less obvious.

Does Wilson's work attract people who are not there to write about it? If so, their presence argues some artistic appeal or compulsion. And I think I know what that is, without claiming to be able to define it.

When a dramatist rejects all the usual devices for drawing our attention to what is happening on stage his nerve alone seems engaging. Why is he doing it? How does he think he will get away with it? Who does he think he is?

Well, nobody knew what Robert Wilson thought he was doing until he turned up at San Sebastian with video versions of his plays or straight videos (though straight in the circumstances is hardly the word for his tortuous, not say tortured art).

As we sat in front of half a dozen TV sets about to unleash his works, we felt lucky to enjoy the "author's" presence over our shoulders, so to speak. For he had come to supervise the exhibition of his video films which indicated a most unfashionable desire to reach a wider audience than he had found in the theatre. And by agreeing to introduce his works – generously pausing after every ten words for the interpreter to transmit the Wilson thoughts to the Spanish audience – he provoked in his followers a curiosity which he seemed anxious not to satisfy.

Is this why in Britain his experiments have never found much favour? Or even been allowed to? There was once at the Royal Court Theatre something called *I Was Standing On The Platform Hallucinating When...* or something similar; and to my knowledge there has never been anything else.

But in France and West Germany and Italy and the United States his effusions, though trying, have been cautiously welcomed as attempting to extend the boundaries of theatrical art. His ambition, though questionable, has been recognised as original, even if its originality gives limited pleasure.

Always subsidised, always addressed to the élite among self-consciously intellectual playgoers Mr Wilson's style is particularly daring, and while watching it some people raise the old question of the emperor's new clothes.

If Mr Wilson hadn't chosen to speak (or rather murmur) his views on his art at the San Sebastian Festival's video section I would have been tempted to say that he was an original. But speaking as he did, as if addressing morons, and presenting on TV screens versions of his work for the stage – in particular *Deafman Glance* (1970), compressed into just over half an hour – he created an impression of mild contempt for the spectator. His "explanations" of his work sounded as if addressed to children. Is that how he views us?

Any artist has a right to be obscure or "difficult". To answer questions on it with phrases like. "Many people ask me what my work means and I say that I just don't know" is in the tradition of Harold Pinter or Samuel Beckett. It is a well-worn path of evasion.

Wilson's path, still "novel" after 14 years, suggests a cul de sac and a cul de sac which anyone is welcome to walk up. But don't say you haven't been warned.

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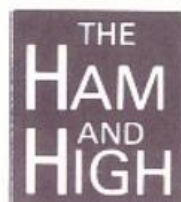
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From December 13th 1984

KISSING GOD

Devised and Directed by

PHIL YOUNG

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KISSING GOD

It has always seemed to me that the active collaboration between the worlds of theatre and television, at an early stage on a given project, is an area that has hitherto been curiously unexplored. It was therefore particularly exciting when Andree Molyneux at the BBC and I discovered that we both wanted to commission Phil Young to devise a new play, but were unable to afford (alone) the extra cost of the long (13 weeks) rehearsal period necessary for this particular method of work, where the play is created by the director and the actors. We therefore decided to pool our resources and enter into a genuine co-production to enable us to work together on a project that would have been impossible for us to contemplate separately.

The play, having been devised and performed at Hampstead, will then be recorded in the studio in February with Phil Young directing the same company; the BBC has agreed to delay transmission should there be further interest in the life of the stage production. This is of course not a project that would necessarily work with all writers, but in this case, both Hampstead and the BBC were convinced that Phil's method of work would create a piece that would be suitable for both stage and screen.

It is an exciting and original venture and one that I very much hope will lead to further collaboration between the two media. In the meantime I would like to thank Andree Molyneux and the BBC for their contribution and commitment to the production of this new play.

Michael Attenborough

Director—Hampstead Theatre

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A Hampstead Theatre/ **BBC tv** Co-Production

KISSING GOD

Devised and directed by **PHIL YOUNG**

Amy **KATE LOCK**

Mark **DAVID BAMBER**

Babbli **FEROZA SYAL**

Harry **ANTON LESSER**

Designer **PETER HARTWELL**

Lighting **RORY DEMPSTER**

Stage Management

JANE HARDING, LIZZI COCKER,

KAREN BALLARD, MARIE McCARTHY

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- Scene 3 A month later
- Scene 4 Two weeks later

ACT 2

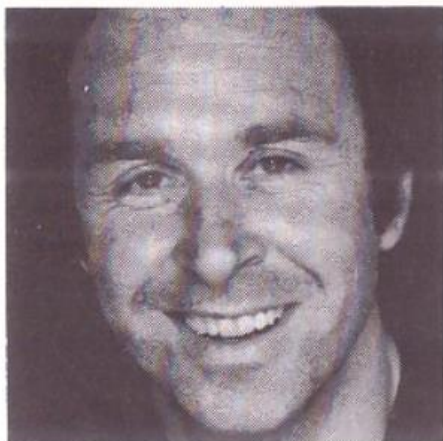
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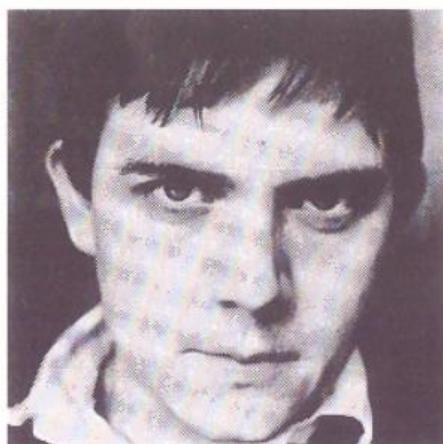
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PHIL YOUNG Born Liverpool. He graduated from Leeds University Workshop Theatre in 1976 and received the inaugural RSC Buzz Godbody Award for his production of Georg Kaiser's *Gas* at the National Student Drama Festival. He first became involved with devised work with Mutable Theatre touring London community centres, old people's homes and youth clubs. Formerly Associate Director at Liverpool Everyman and Leeds Playhouse, his London work includes Richmond Orange Tree, Greenwich Theatre, Croydon Warehouse and the Almost Free Theatre. In 1981 he formed Public Property Theatre Company to present new work at the Old Red Lion pub, Islington; productions there included David Halliwell's *Creatures of Another Kind*, David Clough's *In Kanada* and his own devised play *Crystal Clear* for which he received the 1983 Evening Standard Most Promising Playwright Award and which later transferred to Wyndham's Theatre. This year he has directed Adrian Mitchell's *Man Friday* at the Half Moon, and Terry Johnson's *Cries from the Mammal House* at the Royal Court. This was the first Open Hearted Enterprises production which he founded with Terry Johnson and Philip Wood. He is a member of the Directors' Guild of Great Britain. He is married to actress Deborah Black and has two baby sons, Isaac and Joel.



DAVID BAMBER Trained at Bristol University and R.A.D.A. Repertory experience includes *Teeth 'n' Smiles*, *Habeas Corpus*, *Once a Catholic*, *Time and the Conways*, *Design for Living* and *Master Class*. In London, *Wednesday* at the Bush, *Heroes* at the New End, *The Arbor* at the Theatre Upstairs, *Outskirts* for the RSC Warehouse and *The Oresteia* at the National. Most recently he played Oliver in *Progress* by Doug Lucie at the Bush and prior to that played Shostakovich in *Master Class* by David Pownall at the Old Vic and Wyndham's. TV credits include *Feel Free*, *Cockles* and *Crown Court*. Film: Charles Bishop in *Privates on Parade*.



ANTON LESSER Has played a number of roles with the RSC including Richard in *Henry VI*, Michael in *Sons of Light*, and Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* and has also appeared in their productions of *The Dance of Death* and *The Fool*. Other theatre work includes Anthony in *Julius Caesar* (Tyne and Wear), Betty and Edward in *Cloud Nine* (Everyman Liverpool), Constantin in *The Seagull* (Royal Court) and Hamlet in *Hamlet* at the Warehouse and Piccadilly. Television work includes Troilus in *Troilus and Cressida*, Edgar in *King Lear* (both directed by Jonathan Miller), Orestes in *The Oresteia*, Philip in *The Mill on the Floss*, Ken in *The Daughters of Albion*, Alexey Ivanovich in Dostoevsky's *The Gambler*, Trofimov in Richard Eyre's production of *The Cherry Orchard*, Wilhelm Fleiss in *Freud* and Willy Price in *Anna of the Five Towns* (to be screened by the BBC in the spring). Film work includes *The Missionary*, *Good and Bad at Games* and *Sakharov*.



KATE LOCK Repertory includes seasons at Derby, Leeds and Liverpool Playhouse, Leicester Haymarket, Edinburgh Lyceum and Bristol Old Vic. She toured with the Paines Plough Theatre Company in *Days Here So Dark* by Terry Johnson and *The Decameron* by Justin Greene and worked with Phil Young on the national tour of Mike Leigh's *Goose Pimples*. She also appeared in *Riff Raff Rules* by Vince Foxall at Stratford East and was recently seen playing Tessie in Shirley Gee's *Never in my Lifetime* at the Soho Poly. TV credits include *A Little Princess*, *Prometheus*, *Katy*, *Angels*, *Dutch train Hijack*, *The Other One*, *Penmarric*, *Sweet Nothing*, *Coronation Street*, *Cribb*, *The Brief* and will shortly be appearing in *Tuesday's Child* for the BBC which she co-wrote with Terry Johnson.



FEROZA SYAL Trained at Manchester University Drama Department. Theatre credits: *One of Us*, a one woman show which she co-wrote with J. Shapiro and which won her the Most Promising Performer Award at the 1983 Edinburgh Edinburgh Fringe (subsequently televised by the BBC in the series *Open Space*), *The Great Celestial Cow* by Sue Townsend for Joint Stock Theatre Company on tour and at the Royal Court, *Red Devils* by Debbie Horsfield, *Minor Complications* by Liz Bond at the Theatre Upstairs. Television credits include *The Bill*, and *Mind Stretchers*. Film: *Majdhar* for Channel 4 which was shown at this year's London Film Festival.

PETER HARTWELL has designed both set and costumes for *The Glad Hand*, *Wheelchair Willie*, *Not Quite Jerusalem*, *The Genius* and *Sergeant Ola and his Followers* for the Royal Court, *Marie and Bruce* and *Seduced* for the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, *Cloud Nine*, *Epsom Downs*, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, *Borderline* and *Crimes of Vautrin* for the Joint Stock Theatre Company, *Delicatessen* for the Half Moon. Work as set designer only includes *Loose Ends* and *Meetings* at Hampstead, *Rat in the Skull*, *The Arbor*, *Operation Bad Apple*, *Top Girls*, *The Grass Widow* and Edward Bond's *Saved* and *The Pope's Wedding* currently in repertory at the Royal Court, *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* at the National and *She Stoops to Conquer* at the Lyric. He also co-designed *Orfeo* for the English National Opera.

RORY DEMPSTER started in rock and roll during the '60' with Jimi Hendrix and The Who amongst other groups. He then joined Nottingham Playhouse where he lit David Hare and Howard Brenton's *Brassneck* and Jonathan Miller's production of *King Lear*. After Nottingham he joined the Royal Court where he lit numerous plays. Since then he has been freelance working as far apart geographically as Adelaide, Edinburgh and Dubrovnik Festivals. Productions include *The Madras House*, *Weapons of Happiness*, *Plenty*, *A Month in the Country*, *Don Juan* and *Summer* and *A Map of The World* all at the National Theatre, *The Rocky Horror Show*, *The Crucible*, *All my Sons* and *Comedians* in the West End. Other work includes Janacek's *The Makropoulos Affair*, and David Hare's play *A Map of The World* in Australia, *Dreyfus* at Hampstead, *The Communication Cord* for Field Day and the Irish tour and Hampstead, *A Moon for the Misbegotten* at the Riverside Studios and Mermaid, and *Boesman and Lena* for Field Day. Most recently he has lit *Boesman and Lena* at Hampstead Theatre, *Benefactors* at the Vaudeville, *Seachange* at Riverside Studios and *Hightime* and *Not Act* for the Field Day Theatre Company. Future projects include Athol Fugard's *The Road to Mecca*, and Howard Brenton and David Hare's new play at the National Theatre. He is an Associate Director of Riverside Studios.

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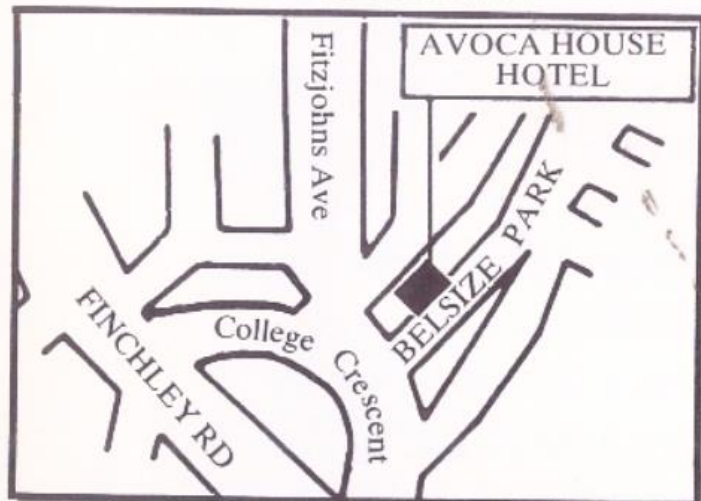
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VIRGILIO BLACK & ETHNIC ARTS ARCHIVE

CHEERS ALL ROUND

by Patrick Ludlow

Drinking on stage has its hazards. It is never as easy as we try to make it look. Real alcohol is abnegation of our art of make-believe. It is never used by true professionals. That's for after the show, in the dressing room – the actor's finest hour.

For gin, see plain water. If tonic is to be added fill split with more plain water. The aeriated variety can be too popping and cause hiccups. Properly mixed, burnt sugar and water does well for whisky and diluted Wincarnis make colourful wine.

As with eating on stage, authors seldom allow enough time for the pouring of drinks. Just try fixing eight drinks in sixty seconds while talking at the same time. Certainly with rehearsal, as with the quick change, you'll cut your time.

But you'll need to work at it if the drinks are varied and you have to pause and listen to: 'Mine's a pink, old boy. And if you don't mind I like the gin in first – rather more a gin pink, than a pink gin – that is, if it's all the same with you.'

Champagne corks are as variable as the wind. After wrestling with the wire they can blow their top like a hurricane – the liquid soaking the leading lady – to descend from a great height to smash the glass.

Or they can be so tardy that the play is over before the bottle is opened. Naturally we don't use real champers and Bulmers put up an imitation which is easier to deal with. But with that variety there may be no pop at all in which case the sound must be synchronized from the prompt corner.

My most alarming experience, of serving drinks on stage, was at the first performance of a play that I had adapted from the French. And the uncomfortable result could be blamed on no one but myself.

In the first act there was a sluggish scene where drinks were handed round in a formal manner. At that time the drinks



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CHEERS ALL ROUND – continued

trolley had just been invented but it wasn't the elaborate job it is today: rubber wheels, sockets for bottles, etc. So it seemed an original touch to push round the trolley (my part was the host) to each of my guests and regale them with a drink and a bon mot. As the adapter I spent a great deal of time fixing the business to run smoothly with the dialogue – and as the director I took great pains at rehearsal.

'Moumou', as it was called on the Continent, ran for two years in Paris at the delightful little Palais Royal. Actually, I'd seen it in Brussels (playing to enormous business), while on my way back from occupied Germany, and subsequently acquired the English rights.

The originality of the farce was that for two acts Moumou was homosexual but for the third act normal. Apart from that it was pure, or rather impure, Gallic bedroom complications stirred by the expert Jean de Letraz.

I'd allocated three weeks for rehearsals but my band of mummers were so adroit that when a pressing offer with a guarantee (not to be sneezed at in the days before subsidies) came along to open after two, we took it. It would be a bit of a rush but my stage staff said they could manage with one Sunday night dress rehearsal and the company happily worked extra hours, with props and clothes, in my large London rehearsal room. The words were spot on – and the business well and truly sorted out.

But at the eleventh hour the theatre (one I hadn't played before) despite their eagerness for the attraction, refused to allow a Sunday dress rehearsal. And moreover insisted on our opening with a Monday matinée. Apart from the fact that it would surely be a deadly audience, where was the time for our vital D.R? It didn't happen.

Every moment of that Monday morning was utilised setting up our new scenery, doing the lighting, and arranging the furniture and drapes. There was a generous rake on the stage which posed problems for the flats but such was the pressure that I didn't realise the havoc it could cause my drinks trolley.

At that fated matinée, at one terrible moment, it careered off on its own. Catching it in the nick of time, but with a jerk, over went the bottles smashing the glasses. One bottle looped the loop, fell over the trolley, and rolled down the gradient over the footlights and into the orchestra pit.

Once that invisible line, between mummers and audience, is crossed our world of make-believe is lost.

By the evening show we'd cured most of our problems but frankly I wished (and so did others) I'd never seen the bloody trolley.



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* Samuel Johnson's prologue at the opening of Drury Lane, 1747