**TORTURE ON STAGE: PETER ZADEK'S STAGING OF
*MEASURE FOR MEASURE***

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***Abstract:** In his 1991 French production of Shakespeare's Measure for Measure, the fourth of his career, German director Peter Zadek amplified the low-life scenes, first in the streets of Vienna and also in the prison, where he presented Pompey, the tapster-pimp turned apprentice executioner, as being as fully involved in his new job as he had been previously in the streets of Vienna under Mistress Overdone's orders: now he is chopping up and sawing up naked females on stage. This paper will present some of the aspects of this expressionist sado-masochist version of the play, and discuss its legitimacy.*

***Keywords:** expressionism, low-life scenes, Measure for Measure, Shakespeare, staging*

1. Introduction

Like many theatre directors, the German director Peter Zadek has a favourite play within the Shakespearean canon, and indeed he has come back to this, the “problematic” *Measure for Measure*, several times during his prolific career. A dark comedy written during the Jacobean period and the first new play to be performed in front of James I and his Court at

Whitehall Palace on December 26th 1604, this piece was performed very frequently on the German stage in the 1960s and '70s, with Zadek himself contributing to the scandalous representation of the Dukedom of Vienna in two memorable versions in Germany, namely in Ulm in 1960 and in Bremen in 1967. However, his interest in the play might tentatively be traced to a much earlier period, that of the beginning of his career as an actor in Oxford, with the Oxford University Dramatic Society's (Davy 1944) 1944 performance, directed by Nevill Coghill and with Richard Burton in the role of Angelo.

When Zadek came back to the play in 1991, the circumstances were very different from those surrounding his two previous German productions. Firstly, the text was delivered in French, and the premiere took place in Paris. Zadek had been invited to France many times to present his German productions; however, on this occasion he was directing a number of famous French actors in a faithful translation by the leading French translator Jean-Michel Déprats. The production was commissioned by the Théâtre National de l'Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe in Paris, and then toured in France and Switzerland, with performances over a period of five months, from February 7th to June 1st 1991.

In 1967 Zadek had substantially rewritten the text in line with his usual practice, altering the plot and the denouement. In 1991, however, he preferred to follow Shakespeare's text in the full complexity of his late style, based as it is on religious argumentation combined with bawdy innuendo, although many cuts were made to the longer speeches. He even stuck to the traditional reading of the play at the point of the denouement. Although Shakespeare does not provide Isabella with a spoken answer to the Duke's two proposals, Zadek's Isabella did not hesitate to walk towards the

Duke, with a smile on her face and an extended hand, as a sign of agreement to his proposal of marriage. However, as might have been expected of him, Zadek added a hint of provocation, as the Duke and Isabella then turned towards each other and burst out laughing, as if to indicate that this marriage was just a social pretence and a good old joke.

Before dealing with the theme of torture on stage, I would like to give a very brief outline of two general theatrical principles upon which this particular production was based.

2.1 Some of the Theatrical Principles of this Production

The stage was left fairly bare, leaving ample space for the actors to move around, and also for various areas to be defined with moveable props (as we will see later) or special lighting effects (for example Claudio's prison cell in Act 1).

The back wall was covered in succession with two painted "winter" and "summer" cloths reminiscent of the neo-Fauvist movement of the 1980s in Berlin. These had been painted by Johannes Grützke, an artist with whom Zadek had been working since the start of his Berlin years, i.e. since 1981. The "winter" cloth represented a mountainous landscape of high snow-covered peaks and frightening narrow valleys. Of course, this dramatic backcloth had nothing to do with Renaissance Vienna or with the "houses of resort" (1.2.93) located in the suburbs in Shakespeare's play, but it could very well suit the sense of complete isolation of Mariana's "moated grange" (4.1). In order to further develop this winter of moral discontent under the rule of Angelo, the Duke's "precise" Deputy, white flakes fell on Claudio as he made his way to the prison, a rope round his neck (1.2).

In the centre of the other cloth, “summer”, four female silhouettes painted in orange and green, with their grimacing faces roughly outlined in black recalling the style of Kokoschka or even of Goya, gave an impression of being caught against their will in the inescapable spiral of fate.

At the denouement, the two cloths were superimposed: the female silhouettes in their loose robes appeared to whirl against the cold, static, imposing mountains, showing that summer could come back at last, with the return of the Duke. But this produced the effect of summer being a somewhat unsettling season, with extremely passive females with sad expressions on their faces and closed eyes, showing the terrible anxiety experienced by women in this man’s world.

A sliding partition suggesting a high red brick wall roughly cemented in places made it possible to subdivide this space at the back, thus producing two areas, one front stage facing the audience, and the other further back, hidden behind the wall, outside the bounds of the city now governed by the Duke’s Deputy. Thus from the sides of this partition Mistress Overdone or Pompey her Tapster were able to enter the main acting space without being noticed or invited. This proved that this wall, despite being high and well-guarded, was unable to keep out all the creatures who transgressed the “biting laws” that had lain dormant and that severe Angelo wanted to impose once again on the citizens of Vienna. And all the skeletons that some would have preferred to keep double-locked in a dark corner were free to creep back. Indeed, Zadek even had a skeleton displaying his skull, who frightened the characters behind their backs and stole Angelo’s cigarette without him noticing it.

In order to avoid the magical atmosphere of the traditional stage, Zadek asked his lighting designer (André Diot) to keep the lights on in the

auditorium for the whole three and a half hour duration of the performance, with the result that stage and auditorium became one space with the same rules. However in this particular case, it seems that this Brechtian convention unsettled the audience, who had expected that they would be sitting in the dark and focusing their full attention on the stage in front of them in accordance with the conventions of the classical Italian playhouse. A few reviewers mentioned their unease in this brightly-lit space, where the audience were conscious of their neighbours' movements and of any noise they made. So instead of creating a distance between plot and reality, between actor and character, this device amplified the reactions of the audience, thus creating a barrier between the different members of the audience, who were seated next to each other but did not form a harmonious group.

Zadek usually works with the same group of actors who have been trained according to the same acting principles and who form a coherent ensemble, stressing the collective rather than the individual rendering. However, for this production he chose his actors individually, some of them being very famous performers, for example the film star Isabelle Huppert in the role of Isabella. Thus, instead of favouring a coherence of acting style, this selection prompted the audience to consider the actors individually rather than together as a group, and so to keep their attention focused on some particular actor's physical movements on stage, rather than concentrate on the character's development in the course of the plot. Some of the reviews focused on Huppert, comparing her performance with previous parts she had played in films or plays. In this way the attention which should have been paid to the plot and to the acting of the entire cast singled out one performer, leaving out the interaction between Huppert and

the other characters and thus losing much of the general meaning of the play. Instead of favouring the creation of an ensemble, the production ended up favouring the star system. And as a result, Isabelle Huppert was caught between her rendering of the character in the play and her reputation as a film star, with her presence being in a way treated as an independent entity to be judged by the audience and commentators.

In Shakespeare's comedy, Isabella deliberately chooses to keep a low profile. She applies to become a postulant in the Order of Saint Clare, an order very well known for the excessive severity of its rules, which are mentioned by Shakespeare in an ironical way in Act 1 scene 4:

[...] I speak not as desiring more,
But rather wishing a more strict restraint
Upon the sisters stood, the votarists of Saint Clare. (1.4.3-5)

She wants to keep away from men and worldly affairs. However, the first encounter that imposes itself on her is a visit from the "Fantastic" Lucio, a self-proclaimed libertine, who has just boasted of being a regular visitor to Mistress Overdone's pleasure house. And in her second plea to Angelo, in Act 2 scene 4, in spite of herself, it is in overloaded images of seduction that she evokes the physical torture she would be ready to suffer rather than yield to the Deputy's sudden sexual urge:

[...] were I under the terms of death,
Th'impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,
And strip myself to death as to a bed
That longing have been sick for, ere I'd yield
My body up to shame. (2.4.100-4)

So the play's most puritan female character, the one who aspires to purity and prayer, is the very person who comes out with the most overtly sexual sado-masochistic allusions. It was easy, then, for Peter Zadek to amplify this tendency in his production by applying the topos to different passages.

Keeping these few points in mind, let us now approach the subject of torture on stage. I will consider two sections of the production which involve the "low-life" characters of Vienna, in particular Pompey, Mistress Overdone's Tapster, and Mistress Overdone herself, both specialists in the sex industry.

2.2 The Stage Plays within the Play

Mistress Overdone is a character familiar to the crowd gathered in the street in the play's explanatory scene, and she contributes to the plot by breaking the news of Claudio's arrest, cutting short Lucio's banter with the two gentlemen:

Well, well, There's one yonder arrested and carried to prison, was worth five thousand of you all (1.2.56-7)

She obviously knows the young man and gives a brief but complimentary account of his character, which can be trusted as it is later corroborated by Escalus (2.1.5-6). She also knows Lucio and his partners, all frequent clients of her business. The fact that they can meet openly in "a public space", according to the stage direction, and joke about prostitution (and its risks for health), proves that the morals of the Duchy of Vienna are somewhat loose and the laws lenient. Although she has been in the trade for a long time and has used her two eyes and had a few husbands, Mistress

Overdone nevertheless needs her Tapster to inform her about the new laws concerning the demolition of the suburbs in order to eradicate such houses of pleasure as hers (1.2).

In Zadek's production, this was the winter season of Angelo's rule, with the white mountainous landscape and the snow falling, but Mistress Overdone's trade still seemed to be thriving. What was noticeable here was that prostitution was not confined to "the Bunch of Grapes" (2.1.128) or to any other rooms in her house, but could be carried out openly and even take over the whole space of the stage. Mistress Overdone and Pompey carried on their trade right out in the streets, without needing to hide their purposes indoors under some false pretence. In this sequence, Pompey was wearing the same kind of long thick black fur-trimmed velvet coat that Angelo and Escalus were wearing, as if he was also a kind of moral judge in his own district, lording it over the girls employed by his Mistress. The cigar he was smoking proved the importance of his social position, but unlike Angelo who had a matching medieval hat, Pompey wore a modern cap which clashed with his rich outfit, proving that the vulgarity of the Tapster showed through the "borrowed" robes of the official character.

Both he and Mistress Overdone (with her black jacket and gloves) were comfortably clothed to endure the winter season, unlike the girls, who were either naked or wore very low-cut evening dresses. In fact in this production the girls were full-sized silhouettes painted on plywood, with grotesque shapes and lascivious gestures, representing prostitutes plying their trade. The fixed expressions on their faces and the sadness in their eyes suggested that they were sex slaves whose sole function was to be a source of income for their madam and her business partner by providing pleasure to their male clients.

Peter Zadek amplified this passage with some stage business which formed a full sequence of its own. Pompey could be seen grabbing the money the prostitutes earned, which would be stuck on one of their buttocks, and then counting the wads of bank notes with an expression of utter satisfaction, under the greedy stare of Mistress Overdone.

This episode, which is to be found nowhere in Shakespeare's text but could be defined as a stage sub-plot, made a deep impression on the audience. Many reviewers described at length the actions and doings of Pompey and gave full vent to their own imaginations, adding their metaphorical images to the already striking visual tableau.

In his review René Solis (2009:18) compared the silhouettes to "cowgirls on a shooting-stand" at a funfair. Further on, he spoke of Pompey "emptying the girls' meters", an ambiguous polysemic metaphor which could equate the girls with mere slot/sex-machines or to painted female substitutes only designed to be shot at. In both cases, the reviewer's underlying bawdy innuendoes were certainly not fortuitous, and they encouraged audience and readers to develop their own subsequent images along the same lines.

Thus the inhumanity of the situation the girls had to endure was clearly identified and amplified: they were shown as naked in the cold, lacking the minimal clothing needed to preserve their health and dignity, having the implement used for piling up the money (that they had earned but that was swiftly taken away from them) inserted into their own bodies. Unable to protest or rebel, these silhouettes seemed to be mere toys at the mercy of Mistress Overdone and her Tapster, experiencing psychological and physical torture in sad, silent submissiveness.

The other passage I would like to discuss concerns a very enclosed space, the prison, not Claudio's cell circumscribed only by the light coming from the spotlights above, but the space in which Pompey has been asked by the Provost to be the executioner's helper in his "mystery":

Provost. Come hither, sirrah. Can you cut off a man's head?

Pompey. If the man be a bachelor, sir, I can; but if he be a married man, he's his wife's head; and I can never cut off a woman's head (4.2.1-4).

When Pompey is charged with this responsibility, and before he is asked to participate in the task, he delivers a soliloquy in which he compares the prison to Mistress Overdone's establishment because so many of her regular customers have been caught:

I am as well acquainted here as I was in our house of profession: one would think it were Mistress Overdone's house, for here be many of her old customers (4.3.1-4).

Shakespeare does not people the prison with all these wrongdoers ; it is sufficient for Pompey to list them all and briefly state their offences.

Peter Zadek took yet another stand. The whole space of the stage was the prison, so instead of being an enclosed space, it spread all over. Pompey was not "at the wheel of Caesar" (3.2.42-3) as Lucio jokingly puts it, but very much at ease in any circumstances and able to get by, with the boundaries seeming to expand around him. However, in this space there were once again many tortured females.

While Pompey was trying to heal a minor wound by blowing on a man's index finger, the silhouette of a heavily chained woman stood behind

him, but no one paid any attention to her. With an unhappy expression on her face and her dishevelled hair she offered the forlorn image of a prostitute now become a prisoner, without any hope of a generous friend to bail her out or a word of attention from the former pimp turned apprentice executioner.

Another female figure stood there at the back of the prison when the Duke, using a gratuitous sadistic stratagem, chose to keep Isabella ignorant of her brother's reprieve (4.3.110-148a). Again it was one of the many plywood silhouettes, painted as naked, but with a heavy chain round her neck and hanging upside down, which is an even worse torture and a further degradation of the female body.

So in this section there was a doubling of torture: the moral and emotional pressure that the Duke exerts on Isabella, which is in the text, and at the back, the physical torture of an anonymous woman being punished for the sin of the flesh, a sin that the Duke suggests that Isabella should commit to save her brother's life.

Just in front of the oblivious pair, the inert body of a woman was shown, lying on her back. She was wearing only a black top and a kind of chastity belt or instrument of sexual torture, with obvious bruises on her upper legs, which she held apart, as if she had been tortured in the position of sexual intercourse, or rape, or even both. Her right arm was set at an uncomfortable right angle, her hand still showing signs of resistance before the final state of deathly immobility.

Before this particular moment, Peter Zadek had added a subplot of a special kind. From a wicker trunk which stood on stage, Pompey had fished out all kinds of objects: a pair of blacksmith's tongs, a fire-poker, and some arms, legs, and other body parts, which he threw out across the space with a

very concentrated expression. He was now fully engaged in the activity of deputy executioner, still dealing with the body, but also with dismemberment and torture. Having found the tool he was looking for, Pompey carried the inert body to the bench and started to saw off the right leg of what could have been taken for a plastic shape. But to the great surprise of the audience, the actress started to scream, spat out a greenish liquid substance, and promptly disappeared into the wings. So in fact this was not a dummy at all but a real human being on stage.

3. Conclusion

Back in 1967 Peter Zadek had asked his scenographer, Wilfried Minks, to keep the props to a bare minimum: two ordinary chairs borrowed from the modern world and used in a very inventive polysemy.

In his 1991 production Zadek took a completely opposite approach, filling the empty stage with a heterogeneous collection of *bric-à-brac* that lent itself to extensive stage business involving large numbers of female silhouettes and real actresses that Shakespeare did not make part of his drama but which made an impression on the audience. These subplots were duly recorded in the press; in fact, in some cases they were almost the only details to feature in the reviews, sometimes provoking all manner of exaggeration on their part, thus proving that the visual effects produced were extremely impressive and lodged in people's minds. In fact the images created such a degree of shock that the stage business at times took over as the message of the play: it was not Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* which was being performed on stage and under discussion in the reviews, but actually all the subplots added by Zadek, which stood for the real play. Were these pieces necessary, or were they simply designed to contribute to

the general effect of provocation that Zadek enjoyed creating? Zadek has indeed proved to be a proponent of provocation at all costs, and has even stated that “the real provocation in the theatre is not of an ideological or political type, but of an aesthetic one” as Didier Méreuze reports (1991:12).

And this is also why he returned to Shakespeare and in particular to *Measure for Measure*, because, as he stated in the Programme for this production: “What I appreciate in Shakespeare is the savageness”. Indeed Zadek used it to explore the dark side of human nature, the violent passions of males and the utter despair of women. But we may wonder why he showed so many tortured female bodies at the mercy of males’ extremely savage lust.

All the same, we would do well to remember the anonymous character of the prostitute who unexpectedly escapes from torture by managing to flee at the very last moment before she is dismembered, just as Claudio escapes death and Isabella escapes the strict rules of the convent. As if Peter Zadek meant that some characters, especially those who are really pure at heart even against all appearances, can find a way to escape their terrible fate and find life.

We must admit that this unsettling vision was a source of dark fascination, just as some of Zadek’s previous productions had been. However, this provocative sado-masochistic version of the play was not quite to the taste of its French audiences, who considered it to belong to the tradition of the German stage and to be in line with the director’s style rather than their own.

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