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JEAN-LOUIS BARRAULT — *Nancy Cunard*

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theatre today! ^{Spring} 1947

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JEAN-LOUIS BARRAULT AS HAMLET

Nancy Cunard

OF THE INNUMERABLE VERSIONS of *Hamlet* that have been acted this is one that will long be remembered and chronicled with praise. To some, an individual and distinguished performance. To others, an experience as well—to have seen our greatest play done in French by the dynamic Barrault in the translation of one of France's leading prose-writers, André Gide. To some, Barrault will have seemed all fire and flame. To others he will have interpreted *Hamlet* with more sophistication than is usual in the vision of English actors. One of the things that stands out prominently is that *Hamlet* is an extremely well constructed play. Its heart and bone, its whole being, seen through the veil of translation, are as noble and strong as in the original tongue. Barrault's performance has endeared *Hamlet* to me yet more.

Of the many scenic interpretations this is probably one of the more austere ones—black and grey and white, and full of restraint. Unlike the luxury with which Leslie Hurry and Tyrone Guthrie invested costumes, scenery and movement in Robert Helpmann's production in London in March 1944, the French actors wear the same dress throughout (with the exception of Ophelia in the mad scene). The sets are well-proportioned and clever use is made of curtain-effects. A bare stage most of the time. It is a handsome and dignified performance, and, apart from the iron grimness of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's costumes and those of the secondary characters, the robes show imagination. *Hamlet* in traditional black, very classic. The King and Queen in several contrasting grey tones. What opulence can be got out of that colour, especially topped by the Queen's admirable headdress. Ophelia in the mad scene—some will say she was too "Parisienne"—a dream in blue chiffon, every flower in its place, her madness expressed rather in prancing and dancing than by any wild wind of disorder. Hélène Bernsen (Ophelia) is extremely pretty in this scene and her acting is good throughout. King Claudius (Pierre Renoir) has all the majesty and restraint of the role. Queen Gertrude (Marie-Hélène Daste) interprets the character in a feminine and human

way, particularly in the scene with Hamlet in her chamber. The Ghost (Georges Le Roy) with impressive make-up, is highly effective; Laertes, noble, Horatio and Polonius, well-acted. In all, it is a cast of fine quality. Scenery and costumes are designed by André Masson, a long appreciated painter. The music was written by Honegger who makes much use, and good use, of flute and clarinet with tuckets between some of the scenes. Perfectly enchanting is the little wordless "mime" danced to music before the mummings speak their lines. The

Ghost's presence is announced, then accompanied, by advancing and receding drum-taps the effect of which adds greatly to the suspense that Shakespeare intended.

Hamlet's first appearance is marked by a sigh—which we note the King take as a threat—and this sets the key for tragedy in suspense. It is the start of the increasing oppression that lies over Denmark's court. One remembers how Shakespeare, with his consummate art, indicates this oppression (apart from the roles of the main characters) in the talk, two or three times, not more, of those un-connected with the court. Dark, uneasy and morbid, an inner world, that court. What a contrast is the sunlit entry of Fortinbras at the end.

Hamlet in his classical black—a good figure, swift of foot, moving beautifully, quick-changing in manner—Barrault plays Hamlet in a *rational* way. This becomes quite evident after Hamlet's scene with the Ghost when he is telling Horatio what has occurred. It is then, at this precise moment, that the "madness" begins. To Barrault it is "madness" in quotes; it is feigned. Hamlet



Lipnitzki, Paris (Lloyd)

is mad really at no moment; all is pretence. That is Barrault's interpretation. There is no uncertainty, no floating between, no double personality, part-sane, part-demented, no borderline—as many of us see Hamlet's character. That Barrault should view *Hamlet* thus is no detraction to the tragic and urgent sense that imbues the play and that he conveys throughout. Helpmann acted the part with mystery; he was petulant, wilful, poetic. Barrault's is a very different Hamlet. At moments he is even sophisticated. His first strictures "Fragility, thy name is woman" strike that note. And certain of his small mannerisms, the flick of fingers, the wave of the hand, would not be out of key in a more modern, less classical play. That is a word I can apply to his rendering: it is very "modern." His sincerity is obvious and he has the feel of it all—as much as that is possible in another language and in prose. He has no fear of giving expressiveness full rein but there is certainly no over-acting. At first sight of the Ghost he falls to the ground, he writhes. Ever after vengeance works



Independent News Service

The Mime scene from the film, *Les Enfants du Paradis*. The whole of this mime, with Barrault in the same part of Baptiste, shares a programme with *Les Fausses Confidences* by Marivoux in Barrault's current season of repertory in Paris.

like a leaven. This comes over well, as it should, throughout.

Hamlet's letter to Ophelia, the scene with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—contrasts in manner that are one of Barrault's assets. Many sequences were finely spoken—"What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba" and the soliloquy "The play's the thing." From here the tempo moves more quickly and the greatest lines, who knows, in the English language, "To be or not to be" are perhaps Barrault's best moment. He is cruel, hard and decisive with Ophelia when he sends her to a nunnery. He terrifies her as would a lover today in a fit of jealousy. And then at the end of this he breaks down, he weeps, and suddenly all becomes simple and affecting. That is one of his quick-changing moments and it is one one remembers.

Another contrast: the coaching of the mummings. This was the best en-

semble, this and the actual mumming of the conscience-catching play. As the travelling actor says his lines, Hamlet, watching the King, is remarkable; his exultation savage, triumphant. All of this is as exciting as it should be; the build-up, the growing ill-ease of the two sovereigns before they sweep out, the beginning of Hamlet's revenge, his certainty now of guilt. And highly dramatic is Hamlet's scene in the Queen's chamber; his remonstrances and sudden gentleness with her and then the return of tenseness and assertiveness, as he drags Polonius's corps right across the stage.

Once again I thought I detected a "rational," very "rational" and not at all a metaphysical mad-not-mad Hamlet when he stands behind the King on his knees at prayer and cannot kill him. He must wait to kill, for God may listen to the King's repentance at this moment. Hamlet wants no pardon for

the murderer, he must suffer after death. This is brought out by Barrault with fine savagery.

Hamlet and Horatio with the bantering, "philosophising" grave-digger—a moment's respite from ill-ease—until the finding of Yorick's skull. And hard on this, after the fine lines on "imperial Caesar," the quick-change to the tragic when Hamlet learns for whom the grave is being dug. But in the short scene with the effeminate courtier who conveys the invitation to the duel with Laertes, Hamlet has regained a cold grip on himself; he turns irony on to the courtier. In the duel he is violent, passionate, perfect master of gesture. Indeed, his fencing gestures are as tense and effective as words. As the rapiers flash one thinks how good a film Barrault could make; his expressive face and movement should be perpetuated in a Hamlet screen version.

The *mise en scène* triumphs with the

entry of Fortinbras, his astonishment at the dead and dying in front of him, his respect for Hamlet. Instead of what could easily be an anti-climax, Masson has made a climax of this difficult moment, this ending. Masson has let himself go after the restraint and mainly grey tonality. Fortinbras is a warrior prince in scarlet and black and white with a tremendous plumed helmet; his soldiers resplendent in chequered doublets and long-hose. A different country, a different civilisation almost, is thus suggested. You may say that this last moment, this extraneous, added element, is not important after the magnitude of the three acts and several scenes (as *Hamlet* is given here). But it indicates what care and feeling have gone into the presentation.

One can conceive of many translations just as one can conceive of widely different renderings of Hamlet. Gide's is smooth and even in quality. How exact it is will be judged best by comparing the two texts. To my mind, lack of blank verse, lack of that superb measure takes away from *detail* in dramatic quality. One recognises the soliloquies and tirades and somehow one waits for the current, the surge of the iambics, or some thing that would correspond. Presentation, acting and general march of the play are, however, dramatic as an entity. I do not think I can say that the words in French soar at any moment, although several sequences are striking, even in French. That raises the whole question of translation. Would one say that two thirds of the beauty of Shakespeare lies in the lines as they were written, in English? To mention two Hamlets, seen with a long interval between, Irving the younger's and Helpmann's, both of which in very different ways were outstandingly fine—did these renderings soar because their art as actors was lifted on the very wings of the blank verse? I think that is so. But what is to be done? Translations have to be made and any French critic can say what I am saying about an English prose version of Racine. Here and there Gide does use some rather strange words, such as "boudoir" for the Queen's mediaeval chamber, and "relancer" (to look for) which is rather slang, and Polonius is called "un vieux bébé." Having done a translation of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* into French metre, I know something of the ever-attendant and often insoluble difficulties. Better a sound prose-version than high-falutin or "ham" lines that make one hot to read, let alone to listen to.

Gide himself in the Preface to his translation says:

"Nothing is easier than to step aside from exactitude in favour of lyricism and so lose one's footing. But the point is: nothing must be lost—nor footing, nor wings, nor sense, nor rhyme (or rhythm), nor logic, nor poetry, and all this is so difficult that it often seems unsurmountably so. I would like this never to be apparent."

Appreciation of Barrault by French audiences is immense. Fifty performances of *Hamlet* in February and there are waiting queues that show how the conjunction of Shakespeare and Barrault is the biggest draw at this time in Paris. It is good that this should be so. And good too is Barrault's mixed pro-

gramme of plays that will continue until some time in March at the Marigny: *Les Fausses Confidences* of Marivaux, *Baptiste*, Pantomime-Ballet by Jean Prévert (who did the script for *Les Enfants du Paradis*), *Les Nuits de Colère*, by Armand Salacroux (on Occupation) and *Le Procès*, adapted from Kafka by Gide and Barrault.

Indeed, this list of plays—one Shakespeare tragedy, one Mime, one Eighteenth Century comedy, one Documentary (the nearest description that comes to mind)—suggests that the repertory has been chosen deliberately to show as many kinds of theatrical entertainment as is possible in four nights of play-going. It might be that London, whose repertories seem haphazardly collected by comparison, could learn a lesson here.

"What's Hecuba to him": from Andre Gidé's Translation

POLONIUS.—Venez, Messieurs.

HAMLET.—Suivez-le, Messieurs. Demain nous viendrons vous entendre. (*Sort Polonius avec tous les Comédiens, sauf le premier.*) Ecoute, mon vieil ami: Pouvez-vous jouer "le Meurtre de Gonzague"?

PREMIER COMÉDIEN.—Oui, Monseigneur.

HAMLET.—Tenez cela prêt pour demain soir. Vous pourriez, au besoin, étudier une tirade de douze à seize vers, que je me propose d'écrire et vous prierai d'intercaler, n'est-ce pas?

PREMIER COMÉDIEN.—Oui, Monseigneur.

HAMLET.—Parfait. Suivez ce Seigneur et tâchez de ne point trop vous gausser de lui. (*Sort le Premier Comédien.*) (*A Rosencrantz et à Guildenstern.*) Mes bons amis, je prends congé de vous jusqu'à ce soir. Vous êtes les bienvenus à Elseneur.

ROSENCRANTZ.—Mon bon Seigneur!

Sortent Rosencrantz et Guildenstern.

HAMLET.—Ainsi soit-il; que Dieu vous suive! Et me voici tout seul! Oh! quel rustre je suis! quel esclave informe! N'est-il pas monstrueux que cet acteur, dans une fiction, un simulacre de passion, puisse ainsi forcer son âme jusqu'à obtenir ce visage blêmi, ces yeux pleins de larmes, cet aspect égaré, cette voix haletante, la soumission de tout son être à ses propos! Et tout cela pour rien! Pour Hécube! Qu'est Hécube pour lui, lui pour Hécube, qui vaüle tant de pleurs? Que ne

ferait-il pas, alors, sous l'inspiration et la dictée de mon chagrin? La scène serait inondée de ses larmes; ses cris horribles créveraient les tympan; il affolerait le coupable, emplirait l'innocent d'angoisse, confondrait l'ignorant, stupéfierait l'ouïe et la vue. Moi, cependant, morne et misérable comparse, Pierrot lunaire, défaillant à ma cause, je reste sans voix! Sans voix, pour un roi, dont un damné complot a défait la fortune et la vie! Suis-je un couard? Qui me traitera de lâche? me donnera du poing sur la gueule, m'arrachera le poil et me soufflettera? Qui me tirera par le nez? Qui me renoncera la protestation dans la gorge jusqu'au fond des tripes? Allons! qu'il vienne celui qui fera cela, que, parbleu, je n'aurai pas volé! Car il faut croire que je n'ai qu'un foie de pigeon, incapable, sous l'oppression, de fiel amer; ou sinon j'aurais déjà gorgé tous les vautours du royaume des viscères de ce goujat. Sanglant, obscène scélérat! Scélérat visqueux, libidineux, perfide! O vengeance! Quoi! quel âne je suis! Quel beau courage il a, ce fils unique d'un très cher père assassiné, que le ciel et l'enfer poussent à la vengeance, et qui, comme une putain, épanche son cœur en paroles; qui, comme un maque-reau, se soulage en imprécations de bordel! Fi! Malheur! A moi, ma raison! J'ai oui dire que certains criminels, à la faveur d'un spectacle et par l'habileté de la mise en scène, ont eu l'âme saisie au point de confesser aussitôt leur forfait. Car le crime, sans recourir à des paroles, s'exprime avec une merveilleuse éloquence. Je veux que ces acteurs représentent devant mon oncle quelque action semblable au meurtre de mon père. Je surveillerai ses regards; je ferai pression sur le vif; qu'il bronche, et je sais ce qu'il me reste à faire. Le spectre qui m'apparut peut bien être le diable (car le diable revêt parfois d'agréables dehors); et, peut-être, fort de ma faiblesse et de ma mélancolie, abusant de son pouvoir sur les fantômes, me leurre-t-il afin de me damner. J'attends des preuves plus précises. Ce spectacle sera le traquenard où prendre la conscience du roi.

Il sort.

