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## Review Of "The Marriage" By W. Gombrowicz And Performed By La Comédie Française

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## The Marriage (review)

Allen J. Kuharski

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(L to R) John McAdams, Barbara Pitts, Stephen Belber, Amy Resnick and Mercedes Herrero in *The Laramie Project* by Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project. Photo: Ken Friedman.

piece were stunning and sensitive, with the minimalist set and stark lighting matching the Wyoming landscape and the vast starry Laramie sky (set design by Robert Brill, lighting design by Betsy Adams). The set felt very accurate, she said, except for the inclusion of rows of sagebrush, not that sagebrush is absent in the Wyoming landscape, but that it evoked a clichéd version of the Western wasteland. The theatrical equivalents, for me, were the visual references to *Our Town*. During the funeral and trial scenes, characters held black umbrellas, creating an image that was visually stunning but also felt imposed. The sagebrush and umbrellas encapsulate, for me, the recalcitrance of small-town Western clichés amidst a sincere attempt to represent the possibility of a true west.

But an even more powerful image for *The Laramie Project*, which came out in the talkback and which shadows the title, is The Names Project, the vast patchwork quilt (too big now to ever be shown whole) commemorating the lives of the many and various people who have died of AIDS. What the Names Project does for the gay/AIDS community, *The Laramie Project* does for the Laramie commu-

nity. Its strategy of sewing together fragments captures the community's unresolved struggles, the variety of its individual personalities, and, finally, its ultimate resistance to ever being wholly contained within any representation.

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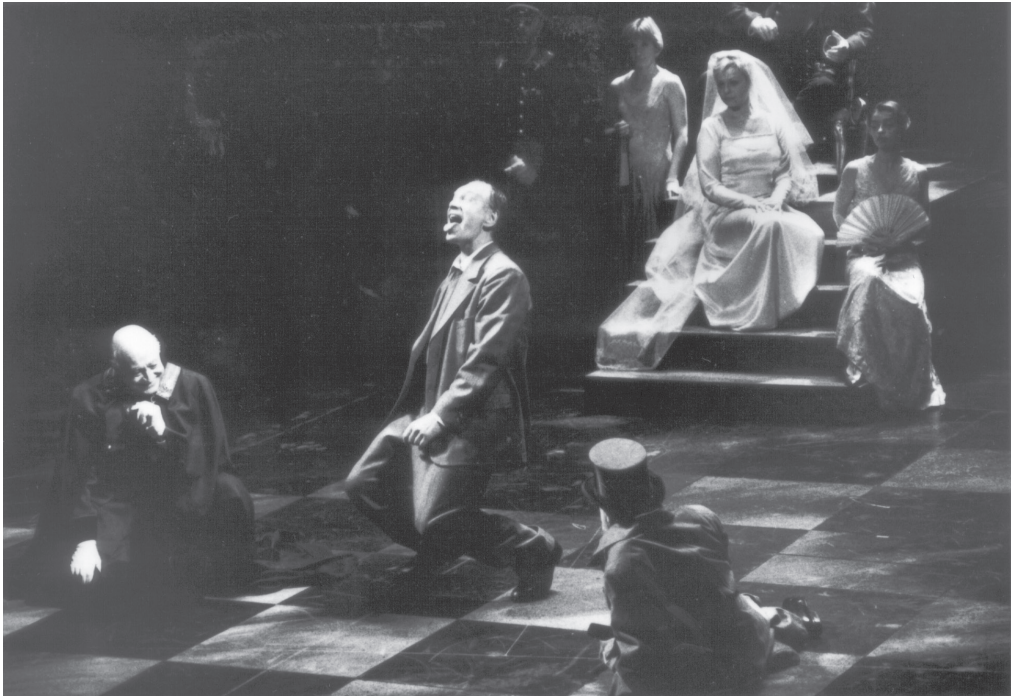
**THE MARRIAGE.** By Witold Gombrowicz. La Comédie Française (Salle Richelieu), Paris. 26 April 2001.

Polish playwright Witold Gombrowicz (1904–1969) was a French and Argentinian émigré whose work was largely banned in communist Poland during his lifetime. *The Marriage* (1944), Gombrowicz's most ambitious and difficult play, has found appropriate theatrical proponents at the Comédie Française in director Jacques Rosner (an admirer of Brecht and the child of Polish Jews who emigrated to France in the 1930s) and Andrzej

Seweryn (a Polish actor who joined the Comédie Française after several years with the Peter Brook company and is currently their lead actor). In the production, Seweryn plays Henry, the lead and tacit self-portrait in Gombrowicz's play.

The Comédie Française production belatedly fulfills Gombrowicz's wish for his works to be staged by established classical companies before more avant-garde ones—although the production history of *The Marriage* in France and Poland has been exactly the reverse. *The Marriage* can be understood as a theatrical jazz riff on characters, plots, and themes from *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *Othello*, *Faust*, and Calderón's *Life is a Dream* played in counterpoint with Jarry's *Ubu Roi*. Like *Hamlet*, Gombrowicz's drama begins with Henry's homecoming, which is also the dream of the exiled Gombrowicz in Buenos Aires in 1944. The play is ultimately both a black mass and an exorcism, a potentially cathartic confrontation with the darkest aspects of the self and a degraded and corrupted social order.

Rosner's boldest directorial choice is the casting of Seweryn in the leading role. Henry is supposed to be in his twenties, a Polish soldier on the front in Northern France at the end of World War II, dreaming of his return to Poland. Seweryn, already in his fifties, instead plays Henry as Gombrowicz the middle-aged exile in Argentina at the time that he wrote the play. One price for this apt but high-concept approach is the potential confusion of any audience not already familiar with both the play and Gombrowicz's biography. The other is the diluting of the play's ending and its implications for the character of Henry. Seweryn's otherwise bold and passionate performance (for example, he fully exploits a passage in act 3 to stage a *tour de force* assault upon the etiquette, decorum, and propriety of the actor/audience relationship of the elegant Salle Richelieu) is ultimately blunted by his choice at the end to step out of the play and back into the persona of the dreaming—but ultimately detached—Gombrowicz in exile. This loss is one no program note can correct.



Henry (Andrzej Seweryn, center) and Molly (Céline Samie, upper right) in the Comédie Française's production of Witold Gombrowicz's *The Marriage*, directed by Jacques Rosner. Salle Richelieu, Paris. Photo: San Bartolomé.

Rosner and Seweryn, however, do engage the play's charged and complex erotic dimension. Women throughout the play are classic Oedipal conflicts (Henry's violent displacement of his father and symbolic rape of his mother) and an inverted version of the story of Goethe's Faust and Gretchen. Henry's sexuality reflects his protean and ambiguous sense of identity and Seweryn's performance clearly embodies the character's implied bisexuality. One of the iconic moments of the production is a three-way embrace of Henry, his fiancée Molly, and his youthful companion Johnny, with each of the characters in turn being sandwiched by the other two.

In spite of her few lines, the character of Molly is the ethical and erotic crux of the play. Céline Samie plays the character as a robust and rather dim blond bombshell straight out of a Feydeau farce. Such an interpretation, however, flies in the face of Gombrowicz's apparent design to make Molly a latter-day composite of Goethe's Gretchen and Shakespeare's Ophelia and Desdemona. The choice to perform Molly as an exile from boulevard comedy instead veers into crude misogyny via hoary theatrical cliché. While Gombrowicz was hardly a feminist, he was a radical and thorough critic of patriarchy and his treatment of sexuality and gender was ultimately more nuanced and paradoxical than Rosner's production conveys.

In contrast to the disappointing vulgarity of Samie's Molly, Roland Bertin and Christine Fersen give bold and confident performances as Henry's alternately shell-shocked and obstreperous parents. Gombrowicz's play, which proves no less an opportunity for Bertin than for Seweryn, is an excellent ensemble vehicle. Yves Gasc as the Drunkard, Henry's ultimate foil and *doppelgänger*, also expertly exploits his role as a kind of Mephistophilian gang leader. Laurent d'Olce plays Johnny, Henry's confidant and alter ego, his Horatio and unwitting Cassio, and provides Seweryn with a strong counterpoint of attractive youthful vigor and insouciance.

For Roland Bertin, the production is his swan song after a long and distinguished career with the Comédie Française. Bertin's massive body unexpectedly resonates with the play's heightened language, in which every possible variation of the words "pig" and "swine" are obsessively repeated. Bertin's body, which moves aggressively and even haughtily in the role, provides a visual self-indictment of both himself and the family. Henry must struggle to deny his father's obvious "swinishness" no less than Molly's apparent promiscuity. Bertin clearly relishes the role, and his

go-for-broke attack raises the stakes for everyone else involved.

Rosner's direction is overall a savvy, if cautious, blend of classical and experimental approaches to Gombrowicz's work. His staging pointedly references the work of Tadeusz Kantor (e.g., goose-stepping soldiers in oversized uniforms, Molly's grotesque transformation into Henry's bride, a landscape dominated by a broken wooden cross). Designer Thierry Leproust's flat and monochrome painted backdrops recall the work of Polish artist Franciszek Starowieyski, whose exquisite and cruel images in turn evoke the annotated anatomical drawings of da Vinci.

While the combination of Gombrowicz's text with Rosner's staging is certainly a stretch for the Comédie Française and its audience, apart from the prestigious venue the production ultimately breaks no new ground for the play that wasn't explored in the 1970s. Rosner's "establishment" production on the one hand reaffirms Gombrowicz's place in the contemporary theatrical canon alongside the likes of Genet and Pinter (who are also part of the company's season this year) and on the other belies his ongoing appeal to a variety of innovative young directors across Europe. Based on the audience's response at the two early performances I attended, however, the production's provocations seemed as welcome as they were overdue.

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**LE BOURGEOIS GENTILHOMME.** By Molière. La Comédie Française (Salle Richelieu), Paris. 19 December 2000.

The centerpiece at the Comédie Française this past season was Jean-Louis Benoit's production of Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, the acknowledged masterpiece of that "total theatre" genre of the seventeenth-century, the *comédie-ballet*. A forerunner of the modern musical comedy, but quickly supplanted by the Lully/Quinault operatic repertoire, the genre of *comédie-ballet* effectively died with its creator, leaving *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* subject to scholarly and critical distortion that for centuries erroneously considered it flawed as dramatic art, while all the while acknowledging its popularity. One of the company's most produced works, the play has seen no fewer than four productions at the Comédie Française since the Second World War, those directed by Jean Meyer, Jean-