

Great Art and Brave Hearts (1997)

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By Nehad Selaiha

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Out of Joint plays Caryl Churchill's *Heart's Desire* and *Blue Kettle* at the National Theatre (1997). The brutal Luxor massacre had cast a pall on the whole country; the general mood was one of horror, anger, disgust and deep revulsion. The reception held on Tuesday, November 18th, by the British Council to welcome the Out of Joint Group was somber and subdued; the British government had already issued its official warning for Britons to stay away from Egypt and, despite the presence of Max Stafford-Clark (the founder and artistic director of Out of Joint and director of the guest production), his determination that the visit should take place as planned, and the frantic contacts and consultations between Cairo and London, no one really believed the actors would turn up. The first performance had already been canceled, and a generous supply of good wine was provided to help us swallow our disappointment. But the following day, just as we were getting resigned to the dismal prospect of a dull, gloomy weekend, they arrived. It was a wonderful gesture of friendship and support. I do hope they realize how much it has meant to all of us Egyptians, not just to theatre artists and lovers, and how deeply it has touched us.

On the morning of Thursday, November 20th, Max did his workshop as planned. Although it lasted only three and a half hours (he had to rehearse his actors for their first performance that evening), it was invaluable in terms of the inspiring insights it gave us into his understanding of theatre and method of work. Cultivating the power of intuition, grasping the effect of the cultural context on any process of theatrical signification, understanding the influence of the hierarchies of power on feeling, behavior and social and personal relationships, and ensemble acting were the focal points. The participants included ten Egyptians, mostly young performers and directors, two British actresses, and a brilliant AUC team made up of playwright Tom Coash, director Tori Haring-Smith, actress/director Krista Scott, and director Eric Grischat. This made it possible to view modes of expression from different cultural angles and compare notes about different responses to familiar situations. By the end of the workshop Max had won a permanent place in everybody's affection and we had gained a deeper appreciation not just of his great talent and commitment, but also of the breadth and richness of his humanity.

The stunning performance we watched that evening revealed another side of Max: the ruthless task-master. The first play in this double-bill (*Blue Heart*, the title under which the evening was billed, is an amalgam of *Heart's Desire* and *Blue Kettle*, the titles of the two plays) qualifies as an actor's worst nightmare. The action, which features an elderly trio (a sour-faced, bullying father, a brisk and sullen mother and a vague, kindly aunt) waiting, with the permanently drunken son of the family occasionally popping in, for a long-absent daughter to arrive from Australia on her first visit home, follows a lurid course and seems, like the 'platypus' referred to by Aunt Maisie at the very beginning, to represent "a completely separate branch of (dramatic) evolution." Not only does it constantly swing from domestic realism (or a parody of it) to absurdity, it also keeps stopping, rewinding and restarting from different

antecedent points, each time taking a wildly unexpected direction, and is punctuated with disconcertingly bizarre intrusions. The replays, moreover, are not simple repetitions: sometimes they are played in a kind of shorthand, at double speed, with only the first or last words of each character's lines repeated with the exact same movements that went with them before and the same intonation.

To take on a work like this which demands, if it is to work at all, absolute precision and split-second timing is a feat of theatrical daring that only a person in full command of his craft and fully confident of his actors' technical virtuosity and artistic discipline is capable of. It also requires a lot of faith, not just in the text or the author, but, ultimately, in the power of theatre to keep rediscovering its magic and infinite potential and, in the process, rediscover the world and reinvent reality.

It may seem like a paradox that a director who names Stanislavsky as the major influence on his work should team up with a playwright famous for her imaginative bravura, experimental spirit and technical innovations. But, then again, Stafford-Clark's understanding of realism takes it beyond the mere photographic reproduction of what is commonly perceived as reality, to explore the vague, hidden truths that lie under the surface and the inner lining of the heart. What he ultimately seeks to communicate is not what the world is like but, rather, how it feels on the pulse. An identical drive informs Churchill's ceaseless experimentation with form, and this explains their long collaboration.

Very early in her career, she seemed to have discovered that in life, as in the theatre, what is called reality is a convenient fiction - an artificial construct which relies on some hallowed conventions. To disrupt them and subvert the images they support is one way to discover the truth of experience and capture it in fresh images; and it has been Churchill's way. Truth, if it exists at all, is to be sought in what we feel and imagine from moment to moment, and, as such, it is sadly transient. Even memory fails us, or, at best, keeps reconstructing or reshaping the past under the pressure of the present. The only certain realities vouchsafed us, as *Blue Heart* makes clear in its title and two interlocked texts, are those of birth and death; or, as Maisie puts it in *Heart's Desire*, "waiting for arrivals and also waiting to say goodbye."

The waiting in between, like the family's waiting for the daughter whom the father calls their "heart's desire," is filled with false stops and starts, longings and regrets, fears and fantasies, unhappiness, loss and attempts at substitution, until the last and final stop. The horrendous irony, of course, is that we never consciously experience either life or death. After rehearsing the idea of death (which literally permeates the first play and carries over into the second) in various versions in *Heart's Desire* (a corpse found in the garden, the news of a tube accident in which the daughter is presumably killed, the gunning down of the father, mother and aunt by masked terrorists, the threat of arrest and liquidation in the figure of a Gestapo officer, Brian's wish that his alcoholic son Lewis had died at birth and his obsessive desire or "terrible urge to eat" himself), Churchill allows Maisie to speak about it directly. She describes the fear of it which she experiences "in the night" as "a chill in [her] blood", calls it "not a problem theoretically" but "the condition of life", then reveals the painful irony inherent in this "condition:" "I think we just stop," she says. "I think either we are alive or we know nothing so death never really happens to us."

Churchill's choice of Maisie as a vehicle for this poignant revelation is not haphazard. Not only is she the nicest character in the play, but also the most sensitive and a bit of an artist with a vivid, lively imagination. She is the one who perceives the pain of waiting, longs in song for "the wings of a dove," is interested in nature and displays a child's curiosity and sense of wonder when she speaks of the duck-billed platypus, her "favorite animal." She does not reel off scientific facts (indeed, she is very hazy and

uncertain in this area); instead, her imagination gets to work and tries to paint in words this curious, intriguing creature. She asks us to "imagine going to feed the ducks and there is something that is not a duck, and nor is it a water-rat or a mole . . . imagine this furry creature with its ducky face, it makes you think what else could have existed, tigers with trunks..."

Maisie's imagination, which delights in combining strange and disparate elements and setting them in familiar scenes, is not unlike Churchill's, and her platypus on a duck-pond is a variation on Churchill's ten-foot tall bird which suddenly makes its way, unannounced, into a very ordinary, solidly real kitchen. Indeed, one can convincingly argue that the whole action of *Heart's Desire* takes place in Maisie's mind. Her imagination (obviously nurtured on nature books, children's games and fairytales, science and detective fiction, and screen melodramas about gangsters and Nazis, and fired by the daily news reports of acts of terrorism and senseless violence all over the world) rambles freely, mixing bits of fact with lots of fiction and reenacting on the stage of the mind hidden fears and suspicions and many fantasies. Like a child's, the artist's imagination does not acknowledge the rational view of reality with its linear time, rigid spatial organization, and its meticulous segmentation of experience into carefully labelled departments. Like Churchill, Maisie has this gift, and it helps both to accept the condition of life and tolerate the waiting.

In the production, Valerie Lilley, Mary Macleod and Bernard Gallagher give brilliant performances as the elderly trio, spicing the naturalism of the acting with carefully measured dashes of parody, farce and melodrama. In their hands, every ounce of comedy was squeezed out of the hilarious stop-and-start structure without losing any of the play's darker shadows. While rocking with laughter, we were treated to sudden and deeply disturbing fitful glimpses of the bleak dark void under the dazzling surface. Julian McGowan's set and costumes and Johanna Town's lighting not only provided the exactly right frame, but were also eloquent visual signs. One look at that forbiddingly cold grey and white kitchen was enough to explain why the daughter took off to distant, colorful Australia and why the son sought refuge in alcohol. The mother was austere dressed in black and white while the father's clothes were of the same drab grey and white of the kitchen. The only colors to be found were significantly in Maisie's costume – a pinkish-beige trouser suit and a white blouse with red flowers - and those of the three young people in the play (particularly the Australian friend who unlike the daughter and the son does not belong to the reality represented by the kitchen). Another beautifully subtle visual sign was the small pot of colorful flowers, which Maisie constantly brings to the table.

In the second play, *Blue Kettle*, the two words of the title spread like a virus through the play, infecting the language, eating up words and taking their place, until the language completely breaks down and is reduced to a painful jumble of letters from the two words, wrenched out of their proper order and randomly strung. The breakdown of language seems inevitable given the abuse it suffers at the principal character's hands. Derek uses language to con elderly women who once gave up a son for adoption into believing that he is that son. His motive seems purely mercenary at first and he admits as much. But after he has collected five false mothers, we realize that there is more to it than simple greed. Derek's mother, to whom he is deeply attached, has become senile and is dying in a geriatric ward. He cannot face the prospect of losing her and to provide against it, he frantically and compulsively collects substitute mothers of different ages, ranging from late 50s to 80, so that if one dies, he will still have plenty left! His need is quite genuine and is movingly expressed in the one scene we see him with his real mother where they recall details of his happy childhood, his golden curly hair when he was three, how it got dark when he was ten, his passion for buses and golden syrup, and how they had both liked Enid Blyton and

enjoyed her stories. Derek had particularly "liked the one where there was a tree and every blue (read time) you climbed up it there was a different country."

Though forty, Derek is emotionally still a boy with acute feelings of insecurity. He dreads his mother leaving him, begs his girlfriend Enid not to leave him, and experiences his freedom only through fiction and, indeed, as a fiction. But the fiction does not hold out for long, and, like language, rapidly crumples. I cannot help feeling that there is a hidden message here, that Churchill is partly speaking about the power of the imagination and its abuse, and using Derek as a dramatic metaphor for the artist of "bad faith" who must inevitably dry up. Rather than the breakdown of language mirroring a breakdown in human communication, as some critics have claimed, in fact, the more language disintegrates in Derek's world, the closer he moves in the direction of the truth until he finally achieves a kind of personal liberation and a moment of genuine human communication and true compassion.

A text of this kind, which, like a poem, is shaped and held together by echoes, correspondences and variations on a central image or theme inevitably yields many readings and interpretations. However the readings may clash, the emotional power and deep sadness of *Blue Kettle* will continue to move audiences at a deeper level than words can reach. And once more, as in *Heart's Desire*, the acting here was finely paced and tuned and exquisitely nuanced while the spare, yet richly inspired set and lighting created mood and atmosphere and constructed a series of haunting images that together built a poetic visual metaphor for Derek's unreal world - a world of shadows and silhouettes.

Heart's Desire and *Blue Kettle* can be enjoyed separately, but they gain in meaning and impact when watched together, especially in this production. They have obvious thematic and technical links (particularly the themes of separation and reunion, substitution, the technique of repetition with variation, and the deliberate distortion of language), but Stafford-Clark and his crew of designers create other through sound and image. The most significant of these is keeping in the second play the grey walls and floor of the kitchen set in the first and projecting through them, in silhouette, images suggesting various places, both private and public. It was quite disorienting, like being inside a place and outside it at the same time, and seemed to locate the world of Derek inside the imaginary world of Maisie and make it part of her thoughts. Moreover, the hateful reality represented by the naturalistic kitchen did not seem to give way to a broader and freer one as we stepped outside it into the other play but reproduced itself in a darker, hazier, equally unreal and infinitely sadder version. Curiously, the more profoundly disturbed I became, the more deeply I enjoyed the show. I went away from the theatre thinking that however much great art dwells on sorrow and despair, it always ends up as a vigorous confirmation of life and a source of invigorating joy. Only the scene in which the family was gunned down by terrorists or gangsters in the first play soured my joy for a while.



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