Salome in Geneva

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Salomé in French, comme il se doit, at the local Comedie? What a wonderful start to the year! Although one never tires of handbags or Bunbury, or contemplating the stars from the gutter, Salomé performed in its original French is a rare treat and an occasion not to be missed. The audacity of Anne Bisang, both the overall director of the Comedie and director of this particular play, should perhaps immediately be acknowledged; The Importance of Being Earnest or even Lady Windermere’s Fan would have been ‘safer’ choices for the Genevan public. For some time now, however, the Comedie has been innovating and widening its sphere of influence. Not only does it allow for both traditional and more experimental productions on stage, but it has also thrown open its doors to diverse cultural activities, exhibitions, encounters and so on. Moreover, various links have been forged with other institutions in the city such as the university and the Fondation Martin Bodmer, so that Salomé, accompanied by several other events, became something of a cultural festival.

Resolutely modern, post-modern perhaps, the production itself, as one would expect, could leave no-one indifferent. Under Anne Bisang’s direction, the Comedie regularly organises lunch-time interviews between the Comedie’s literary adviser, Arielle Meyer Macleod, and a member of the troupe, on this occasion Anne Bisang herself, as well as more informal Sunday brunches where in a relaxed atmosphere the public can meet some of the actors. It was therefore fascinating to hear the director and actors discuss their interpretations of the play and individual characters. Anne Bisang emphasised the struggles for power between the grotesque patriarchal force of Herod, the spiritual influence of Jokanaan, and the unmeasured strength of adolescence incarnated in Salomé, and on the whole she was well served by her actors. At the same time, she also recognised the influence of silent films and musicals in a desire to accentuate the humour of the text. For example, the two soldiers, a very tall thin one and a
very short bald one, formed a kind of Laurel and Hardy act with one of them acquiring a stutter which led to some very funny plays on words, but few in the audience laughed, or dared to laugh out loud. Is the play simply too serious to allow such levity, or would another audience have appreciated the comedy more? Who knows? Humour is always rather risky, as is Salomé’s dance. The director had engaged a young Spanish choreographer, Cisco Aznar, to orchestrate the music and movement which made this production totally absorbing where even the most minor characters performed their parts assiduously. Cisco Aznar and Lolita Chammah (Salomé) did their best with the dance, but the world has changed enormously since Wilde invented Salomé’s dance of the seven veils, and it is difficult to suggest the frisson such a dance, perhaps à la Loïe Fuller, would have caused in the 1890s. When all is said and done, one cannot help wondering what the great Sarah Bernhardt, the only actress Wilde thought could play the part, would have done …

During rehearsals Anne Bisang allowed renowned independent photographer Hélène Tobler to keep a sort of photographic diary of the genesis of the production, and her marvellous photographs provided a spectacle of their own on the first floor of the theatre where, for once, the stars were not the actors on stage, but those behind the scenes, the electricians, the carpenters, and other technicians without whom no show would be possible. Hélène Tobler also took her camera to the Fondation Martin Bodmer and I am grateful to be able to include examples of her fine work here.

A colleague had been invited to give a talk to inaugurate a small temporary exhibition at the Fondation Martin Bodmer, so I went along, partly out of collegiality, partly out of curiosity. It has to be said that a trip to the Fondation Martin Bodmer is a ‘must’ for anyone visiting Geneva, if only for Mario Botta’s marvellous extension to the original library and for the views from Cologny. For those of us, however, who also like darkened rooms (too much light damages the manuscripts), it is difficult not to lapse into clichés when
describing the contents of the Library and Museum which constitute the Fondation Martin Bodmer. Best known for its classical collection, constructed as it is around the five pillars of Homer, the Bible, Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe, the Bodmeriana also houses unexpected treasures, and I was certainly not prepared for what was on display. By all accounts even the newly-appointed curator, Sylviane Messerli, was surprised to discover another facet to Martin Bodmer, clearly also an avant-gardist with a particular interest in fin de siècle literature. The jewel in the crown on this occasion must surely be the notebook in which Oscar Wilde wrote his first version of Salomé, but numerous other manuscripts and first editions exemplified the literary taste of Martin Bodmer. As one would expect, several Bibles with the particular references to Salomé were on display, as well as Jules Laforgue’s wonderful Salomé, Flaubert’s Trois Contes, Mallarmé’s Herodias and Richard Strauss’s musical score. Besides other texts by Wilde, including ‘Impressions du soir’, The Picture of Dorian Gray and An Ideal Husband, the exhibition also grouped relevant works such as Huysmans’ A Rebours and Pierre Louÿs’ Byblis, and even manuscripts by Conan Doyle, Ruskin and Yeats.

Alas, that exhibition has to give way to another, but I am sure I am not alone in looking forward to the next event at both the Fondation Martin Bodmer and the Comedie.

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