

A Theatrical Polymath

Jeremy Sams Translated *Indiscretions* and Composed *Arcadia*.

By Gerard Raymond

Stephen Sondheim once referred to Jeremy Sams as the first true polymath he's ever met. Chatting with Sams at a small London coffee shop, I remind him about that compliment. "I think he just wanted to use the word," the multi-talented Englishman responds, laughing. "We have a lot of things in

common—writing music and words, and silly passions like games and crosswords—but he is the mountain to my molehill." Well, alright, but nonetheless it's a pretty impressive molehill.

At present, New York audiences have the opportunity to witness two facets of this extraordinary man: translator and

composer. He translated Jean Cocteau's *Les Parents Terribles* for the Broadway production of *Indiscretions* and composed the music for the Lincoln Center production of Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*. But there's more. A one-time pianist, the boyish-looking 38-year-old has also conducted the music for two major Sond-

heim London premieres (*Sunday in the Park With George* and *Assassins*), and, more recently, he has turned director as well. His next major directing assignment: the London production of Sondheim's *Passion* in the West End this fall.

One might trace the two main strands of Sams's career to those of his parents—his mother taught piano and his father is a linguist and an expert on lieder. Sams studied French and German at Cambridge, but majored in music instead. ("Listening to a piece is far easier than reading a book, because you can do something else at the same time," is the explanation Sams gave a British newspaper about changing disciplines midstream.) He was house composer at the Royal Shakespeare Company for four years, but he displayed the full-range of his talents at the Royal National Theater where, in the past two seasons, he translated Moliere's *The Miser*, wrote music and lyrics for Alan Bennett's adaptation of *The Wind in the Willows*, and worked on *Arcadia* and *Les Parents Terribles*.

Although *Les Parents Terribles* premiered in Paris over half a century ago, audiences at *Indiscretions* needn't be wary of encountering one of those stilted translations of foreign language texts one sleeps through at school. (By the way, Sams isn't responsible for that insipid English title; Sondheim helpfully offered him 25 brilliant title options, but the producers vetoed them all.) According to Sams, translation implies the kind of transformation experienced by Bottom when he was "translated" into another being in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. "*Les Parents* is an absolutely modern, cutting-edge piece. You have to translate contemporaneously because there is no point in doing it in P.G. Wodehouse slang." In fact, Sams doesn't translate line-for-line anymore. "You have to reinvent," he says. "It should sound as if it has been written by a writer, rather than translated by a translator."

Of course, the kind of transformation Sams likes to effect doesn't necessarily endear him to the copyright holders of the originals. Sams relates how his translation of *The Threepenny Opera*, produced last year at the Donmar Warehouse, met with resistance from the Brecht estate; they wanted the English version to sound like German rather than like English. But Sams's primary con-

cern is "speakableness." He completed the entire job of translating *Les Parents* in a single week while resting at a health farm, he relates, describing how he used to wander around the grounds intoning the lines of his work "to make sure they were speakable, to get the pulse of thing going."

An academic purist might find Sams's approach to the original text a bit perturbing, but for Sams, the historical context of a play is only a starting point. "I would much rather go forwards and move from what is there, using the text as a cause rather than a symptom," he explains. "You have to work out what the playwright is trying to say, what the dynamic is, and decide how to put it into English. As a translator you can speed the action on, or slow it down, and you can highlight all the things you find interesting or essential." In his translation of *Les Parents*, for instance, Sams has made the relationship between the father and his son's girlfriend sexually explicit, whereas in the French it remains somewhat ambiguous.

When Sams explains the subtle changes he has wrought, one realizes what he means by saying the finished product should be that of a writer and not a translator. He has, in fact, filtered several details from his personal life into the play. Take for example, the key word, *incroyable*, which all the characters in the play use, and which the Cocteau text indicates should be pronounced in a particular way. Sams translates the word as "unbelievable"—a word which he says his girlfriend Maria Friedman (Dot in the London *Sunday in the Park*) uses constantly. "I pretty much coached the cast to say it like the way she does—'Unbelievable,'" says Sams grinning.

"You have to remember that Cocteau was writing in French for a French audience in the 1930s," Sams continues. "Directors very often say to me, 'my feeling is that this is about this or about that and can you possibly push it in that direction,' and, of course, I am delighted to do so, because it serves that production. I mean, ideally, every new production requires a new translation." The only previous English translation of *Les Parents* was done in the '50s and, in Sams's opinion, it's "in strong need of cutting."

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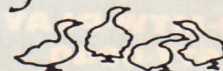


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Writing incidental music for the theater, may, on occasion, be less personal than translating (Sams confesses that the innumerable scores he wrote for Shakespeare's countless battle scenes at the RSC have become a bit of a blur), but when the score is for a play like *Arcadia*, the job becomes a labor of love and passion. Sams describes the music he wrote for Trevor Nunn's production of the Stoppard play as one of the most complicated things he has ever done.

In the play's intensely moving climax, two couples dance their way across the stage to the final curtain. The music is played live every night and the musicians must take their cues from the actors, who have the freedom to speed up or slow down the action as the mood takes them. "It would have been impossible to do it on tape," Sams explains, "but in order to make it absolutely fail safe, I had to write seven or eight rallying points in the music, with several safety bars, which I hope no one will ever notice." But it's even more complex than that.

The dancing couples occupy the same stage, but not the same century. One pair is from the 19th century and they waltz to the strains of a piano in the next room; the other couple, living in modern times, dances to disco music coming from a garden party outside. The two strands come together at the end of the play, but marrying the music was no easy task since waltzes have three beats to a bar (3/4 time), while disco music has four beats. "If you listen carefully," Sams says, "you will notice that I wrote a lot of tracks where the disco music is three to a bar. It would mystify people in an actual disco, they would all fall over!"

Although he is indeed a true polymath of the theater, Sams downplays the diversity of his activities saying they all have one thing in common—rhythm. "Writing theater and telly, music, translating lyrics, operas and plays, and directing—they are all about pulse and pace." He says that because of the way he grew up, his metaphors are related to music. "When I look at or direct a play, it is in terms of we need a crescendo here or this movement comes in here. Basically it is all music."