

# The Best of Britain

The director Deborah Warner and the actress Fiona Shaw  
*Electra*-fy the classics.

by Gerard Raymond



Fiona Shaw in *Hedda Gabler*, directed by Deborah Warner at the Abbey Theater in Dublin.

**F**ROM THE MOMENT HEDDA GABLER enters in her nightdress, frantically looking for signs of her period you know this is not your average Ibsen. We are watching Fiona Shaw, one of the leading lights of the British stage, directed by an equally major artist, Deborah Warner, in a remarkable production of the classic play at Dublin's Abbey Theater in Ireland.

In this silent prologue, Hedda

pounds her stomach in frustration as if trying to force a miscarriage; later in the play she burns her rival's "child"—a manuscript. Hedda desperately wants to inspire a work of art

from her husband or her former lover, but she is doomed to mundane domesticity.

By the time the play ends, two and a half hours later, Warner clears the stage of furniture; the actors play out their domestic drama in a bare room with an intensity one might associate with King Lear howling against the storm. As Shaw puts it, "tiny actions in drawing rooms have massive effects."

These two 30-year-old women are the hottest talents in British theater today. In the four years since Warner directed the landmark *Titus Andronicus*—acclaimed for its brutality and simplicity—at the Royal Shakespeare Company, she has established herself as one of the premier directors of Shakespeare in England. Demonstrating a flair for the more challenging plays in the canon, she also directed a fast-paced, black-comic *King John* at the RSC in 1988, as well as the Brian Cox *King Lear* for the National last year.

Fiona Shaw was born in Ireland but never appeared on the Irish stage until *Hedda Gabler*. Her reputation, like Warner's, was established with her work in Shakespeare at the RSC. With her imposing height, her sharp features and a riveting presence, she is, as a Dublin critic put it, "one of those fortunate few who displace air on the stage." She and Warner first teamed together for a lacerating production of Sophocles' *Electra* in 1988. In the same season Shaw played Rosalind in *As You Like It* at the Old Vic and, once again under Warner's direction, Shen Te in Brecht's *The Good Person of Sichuan* [sic] at the National. That year, Shaw won the London Critics Award and the Laurence Olivier Best Actress Awards for all three performances.

**T**alking with the director and her leading actress over tea in a Dublin hotel, just two days before *Hedda Gabler* opened last month, it was ob-

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Neil Libbert

Shaw in the 1989 National Theater production of *The Good Person of Sichuan*.

vious that the two women share the same sense of adventure as they work together on the classics.

Warner initially resisted the idea of directing *Hedda Gabler*. "I was dismissive of it," she explains, saying she

didn't even want to look at it. "But I knew that Fiona hadn't played it and ought to, and I felt sorry that I really didn't want to do it enough to be doing it with her." What turned her around to the project was the chance not only to work with Shaw but also with set and costume designer Hildegard Bechtler. The three of them had worked together on *Electra* and discovered they spoke the same theater language.

"I don't think any one of us would have done it without the other two," Warner continues. "We wanted to use it as an opportunity to get the *Electra* team back together."

When Warner and Shaw talk enthusiastically about this unusual combination of director, actress, and designer, one understands why they do theater and why their work is so good. These artists do plays for the excitement of discovering together what the work is about. And the thrill for the audience is going along that same journey with them.

The danger is that the group could

#### Warner and Shaw in New York?

The Brooklyn Academy of Music had planned to bring *Electra* to New York but the project is stalled due to a lack of funds.

First staged in 1988, *The Guardian* described the production as an evening of "fierce lucidity and driving passion that never for a second makes you doubt that you are in the presence of great drama." Shaw's fearless performance was terrifying in its intensity. "Shaw appears to have been feeding on a diet of raw meat in preparation for *Electra*," commented *Time Out*. "Her body naked under a black shift, she presents an uninhibited portrait of a woman—unsexed, unhinged and uncompromising—clawing at her flesh and the walls as she mourns her father's death and seeks his revenge."

This December Thelma Holt is producing a revival of *Electra* at River-

side Studios in London. "One of the reasons we wanted to revive it was to play London again and then take it to New York," says director Warner. They will tour England and Paris but so far New York is uncertain. A spokesman for BAM says the project is "still live", but Thelma Holt says there is no deal at present and she is not counting on the U.S. leg of the tour to occur.

Both Shaw and Warner are passionately committed towards bringing *Electra* to New York even though Shaw acknowledges that the physical rigors of the production are not altogether enjoyable. "It's not that we feel we have to take everything we do," Shaw explains, "but every now and then you want to take something because you feel it has an international base. One feels what a waste of a piece of work because you know there is an audience that would like to see it." □



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## Warner is drawn to plays that terrify her: "I'm not interested in the plays that I know how to do."

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tend to do the same things over and over again. But there is little likelihood of this happening with Warner and Shaw. Shaw selects roles that challenge her and Warner is drawn to plays that "terrify her." "I'm not interested in the plays that I *know* how to do."

**F**or both actress and director, working on this 19th-century play has been an uphill task. "To rehearse it is

difficult because it is not poetic, I think," comments Shaw. One obstacle towards getting to the inner poetry they seek is the fact that the author's original voice is in a language foreign to them, and they are working from a 1950's translation by Una Ellis-Fermor. "There is the original language from 1890 Norway, and there is Ellis-Fermor writing in 1950. So you have to pick the play out, peel it down and try and have a look at it, and *then*

your work starts. It has been a tricky process because you keep falling down holes."

Shaw points out the hazards of playing a character that entered the popular vocabulary. "You say *Gablersque* meaning some black dress and a rather vampish looking woman, with a pistol in her hand being very grand and spoiled. It is very hard to get rid of that image, if only to make sure that it is really there. But I am delighted that, for us at least, the great discovery about the play is that this character no longer has to involve any particular female qualities. Instead, it seems to be a very humanitarian exploration of people in the provinces. A lot of people's parents come from the provinces. In that way the 19th century can be great probe to remind us where we all come from, small towns."

For Warner, the rehearsal process removed layers of preconceptions that she had about the play from other productions. But she places part of the blame for those fixed ideas on Ibsen's shoulders.

"I think passionately that Ibsen's stage directions let him down terribly. Theater was in a very different state then and I am sure I know he wanted in some way to guide. But they are in fact very, very misleading and we sometimes got stuck on them. I wish I had had the wisdom to delete them before we went in to rehearsals." Shaw relates with a laugh how some actor would say a line with "a sneering smile" and when questioned they would discover it was because the actor had read it in the stage directions while studying the script the previous night.

**S**haw describes the challenge that faced them as they tried to break out of the drawing-room nature of the play. "You have to leap from somebody dusting a piece of furniture to shooting one's self, and that is vaulting, really." Shaw calls it a "minefield" through which the cast must walk. "Often you get the domestic area of Hedda right—being bored and wandering through the rooms—and



Fiona Shaw as Electra and Susan Colverd as Chrysothemis in Deborah Warner's 1988 production of *Electra*.

then you don't know how you get from that to the violence, both symbolic and real?"

Warner found *Electra*, in some senses, much easier to do because "you have an hour and a half of seamless stage time—you're either in that world or you're not." *Hedda Gabler*, on the other hand, has "huge holes between acts, hours that elapse between Act III and Act IV" which Ibsen did not link. With the same sense of freedom with which she staged the eloquent prologue, and jettisoned the misleading stage directions, she also wrote "a silent scene of the house just living and breathing" to link the acts. Between the first two acts a maid goes about her chores clearing and straightening flowers. Before the intermission is over, Hedda enters and falls asleep on the sofa.

**W**arner usually works with minimal sets on bare stages; this is the first time she has used a drawing room with walls, doors and windows. But the walls themselves seem to go into infinity—there is no ceiling. As Shaw's Hedda feels more and more stifled by her domesticity, she hauls chairs and tables, craving more space. The house and the life she has chosen turns out to be not what she wants at all. In the final scenes of the play the room is almost empty; the set itself has transcended the conventions of realism. According to Shaw, "It is very much what I hope the play does to audiences; they come expecting to recognize themselves and find that what they recognize is frightening."

Shaw relates how during rehearsals Warner seemed to be waiting for the play to lift off. "It's like singing high notes. It's about getting up there. And you have to get the bourgeoisie up there without the aid of speeches, poetry, or kings." Warner concedes she is interested in a play "only when it is of a given size." Otherwise, it is "probably not worth the experiment."

Two years ago Shaw described what it was like to be directed by Warner: "It is like you're a wallflower sitting at the edge of the ballroom waiting to be asked to dance. Now and then you are asked by a particularly handsome prince—and you can flourish. Deborah is that very releasing person." □



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