

Central Park Siege

By Gerard Raymond

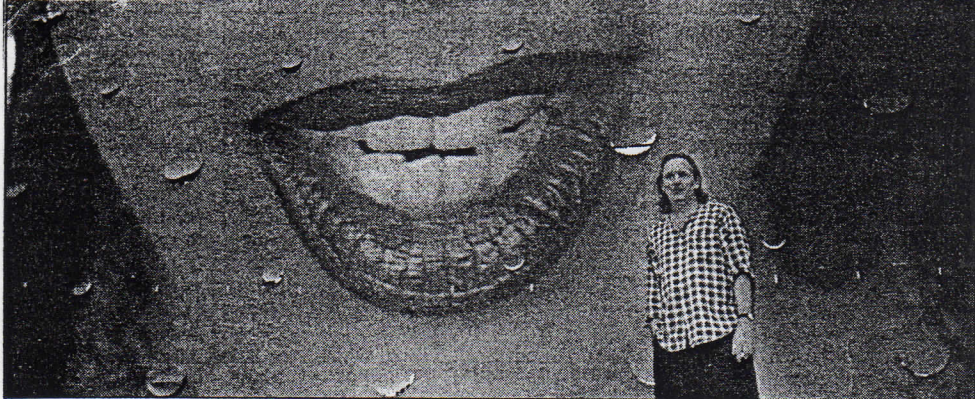
Yelling war cries and banging billy clubs on wooden shields, a phalanx

you talk to anyone involved in a Wing-Davey production is *democratic*. The director accords equal status to the actors regardless of the size of their

tor," Wing-Davey elaborates. "I have found that the collective intelligence of the group is really quite massive when it is harnessed. Everyone under-

jeep. "We didn't want horses," Wing-Davey explains, smiling. "The jeep has the military function of a chariot, and it represents a male weakness for shiny mechanical things."

It is now the last day of rehearsal at the Public Theater and the cast seems a bit nervous. Once they move to Central Park, they will have to adapt to the open-air stage. And a week later the validity of Wing-Davey's rehearsal style will be put to the test in front of an audience. But the director has a way of inspiring confidence in his cast. "I completely trust him," says Nelson. "You always feel that Mark is pushing you toward a certain place, and he knows what that place is."



ANDREW GOLDBERG

Mark Wing-Davey: The director as benign autocrat

of actors advances across the Public Theater's Lu Esther rehearsal room with choreographed precision. "We need music here to give it texture," director Mark Wing-Davey instructs composer Mark Bennett, who makes notations in a pad. Wing-Davey is orchestrating a combat scene in the Trojan War, the backdrop to *Troilus and Cressida*, the New York Shakespeare Festival's current production at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park.

For the first two weeks of rehearsal, Wing-Davey, choreographer Daniel Banks, and the 30-member acting company forge a thrilling physical language—a combination of percussion and dance—to invigorate the play's clamorous battle scenes. Wing-Davey has also been conducting an intensive research-driven rehearsal process, one of his hallmarks as a director. According to actor Tim Blake Nelson (who was also a cast member of Wing-Davey's Obie-winning 1991 production of Caryl Churchill's *Mad Forest*), the director's meticulous program in the early stages focuses on research, creating an ensemble, and learning a common vocabulary. This may seem like a waste of the precious five-week rehearsal for a complex Shakespeare play, but a similar technique helped make *Mad Forest* one of the most rewarding theatrical experiences in recent memory.

Aside from the usual rehearsal room paraphernalia—props, costume sketches, the odd bits of furniture and actors' apparel—there is a table piled high with reference books. This is standard for a Wing-Davey production. The 18 principal cast members were each asked to prepare a report on a special topic relating to the world of the play—everything from Elizabethan eating habits to notions of beauty and deformity and the treatment of women in Renaissance and classical times. Actor Stephen Spinella, who won a Tony last year for his performance in *Angels in America*, gave a 25-minute lecture on syphilis; his character in this play is dying from venereal disease.

A word that crops up often when

role, says Nelson, who plays Thersites, a scurrilous Greek with a caustic tongue. Elizabeth Marvel, for instance, may have the title role of Cressida, but she will also join the anonymous ensemble of soldiers in battle when her character is offstage during the last part of the play. Wing-Davey also encourages input from everyone working on the production. "The more people feel that they have influenced the shape of the show, the more they will feel an ownership of it," observes choreographer Banks.

Paradoxically, while everyone gets to have their say, the British director runs a very tight ship. "On *Mad Forest* you were given very strict parameters; he was specific about when you turned your head," recalls Nelson. "But within those limits you can do anything." The various research projects, the actor explains, give them a freedom to respond to what Nelson describes as Wing-Davey's benign autocracy. "I think the more you know about a world, the more far-reaching your choices are. Mark never tells you how to make it work; he says this is where he needs to live, and you have an arsenal to make it happen."

Nearly two weeks later, Wing-Davey is supervising the load-in of the set (designed by Derek McLane) on the Delacorte stage; soon two huge blue walls will flank the cubelike scaffolding that represents the city of Troy. "I love actors," he remarks. His empathy is not surprising; he is an actor himself. Even though he has extensive stage credits in England, his reputation as an actor in this country is founded on his performance as Beeblebrox in the BBC cult-hit series *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*; more recently he made a brief appearance as Edina's accountant in an episode of *Absolutely Fabulous*. Wing-Davey has also spent much of the past 15 years teaching acting at several institutions including London's Central School of Speech and Drama (where *Mad Forest* originated) and New York University.

"Actors are intelligent people and don't need spoon-feeding from a direc-

stands that you may discard 95 percent of whatever it is that you are trying, but there are ideas and images which come out of these talks and exercises which are not predictable. I like that sense of journey. This production will be significantly different, I think, than it might have been if I had planned it all on a drawing board."

Of course, Wing-Davey started with some pretty clear ideas about *Troilus and Cressida*, which happens to be one of the less frequently performed works in the Shakespeare canon. "I think it is a dark and funny play, and it has interesting things to say about men and women. The men on their own in the Greek camp are bitchy and scheming, not pleasant people. And then there is the Trojan ideal where, in my take on it, the ideal of courtly love—the perfect woman—is destructive in terms of what it does to those men." When the play opens, the war has been going on for seven years, and everyone realizes that the ostensible cause of the battle, Helen, who was stolen away from Greece by the Trojan prince Paris, is not worth fighting for. "They are fighting because they are fighting," says Wing-Davey, "and that seems to me to have a lot of resonance in terms of current disputes around the world."

In fact the director embraces a contemporary approach to Shakespeare. "Part of what is interesting in doing theater is the sense of the event in the present; that is my watchword," he explains. A major influence on his production, Wing-Davey says, is the modern verse rendering of Homer's *Iliad* by the British poet Christopher Logue (the entire cast got photocopies of it). Logue makes free use of striking contemporary allusions—the atom bomb flash from Bikini atoll or the roar of Niagara, for example—in his adaptation of the Greek epic. "I am very interested in having a nonreverential approach to Shakespeare, and I told myself to be unafraid to use modern images when I felt I could use them." So don't be surprised to see the Greek commanders roll up in a gold-plated

Theater

In the meantime, the press office at the Public is preparing a notice to warn unsuspecting parents that the production contains material which may not be suitable for children; as Thersites sardonically points out in the play, it is all "war and lechery." Wing-Davey doesn't shy away from the play's uncomfortable aspects, or the lack of an upbeat ending. He says he is not looking to offend the audience, but his production will not be a tourist attraction. "Cultural tourism is death for Shakespeare," he insists. For him, *Troilus and Cressida* is about the "essential folly of man—how we like to think that we can plan things—and the play grimly shows that we cannot." ■