

Orpheus Descending: Radical Politics Of The Soul

*The Peter Hall Company revives
Tennessee Williams's neglected play.*

by Gerard Raymond

Vanessa Redgrave recounts an incident that took place in 1959 at the Royal Court in London, shortly after the ill-received British premiere of Tennessee Williams's *Orpheus Descending*. The Italian actress, Isa Miranda, who played the lead, gave the stage manager a little box made of Italian leather and told him that one day an actress was going to have the success that the play deserved—the success that Miranda hoped she herself might have but didn't.

Apparently, Miranda had fallen and hurt her back very badly the night before the opening. "So this wonderful actress had to go on and perform shot full of drugs to still the terrible pain, and consequently didn't give the performance that people had seen her give," Redgrave explains. Miranda's little memento remained in the safekeeping of the Royal Court's stage manager until last December when Redgrave scored an unquestionable triumph in the role. The stage manager gave Redgrave the token saying he felt that the late actress would have wanted Redgrave to have it.

Redgrave is now recreating that role on Broadway. She plays Lady Torrance, an immigrant Italian in a Southern red-neck community; it is her first Williams role. Film director Sidney Lumet once invited her to do a remake of *A Streetcar Named Desire*: "I was dying to do another film with Sidney but I somehow felt that the work had already been done



John Haynes

Vanessa Redgrave in *Orpheus Descending*

by Vivien Leigh, Marlon Brando and [director] Elia Kazan. You don't want to do a remake until you feel there is something in the subject that didn't succeed in coming out the first time."

Her first encounter with *Orpheus Descending* was not through the 1959 Royal Court production (even though it was directed by Tony Richardson to whom she was married at the time) but through the Lumet film version, *The Fugitive Kind*, which was released in 1960 with Anna Magnani, Joanne Woodward, Marlon Brando, and Maureen Stapelton.

Peter Hall has said that for "sheer dangerous creativity" Redgrave is unequalled. Indeed it is this fearless capacity for taking risks on stage that transports her performance from the excellent to the unforgettable. She employs a southern Italian accent, generating much humor from Lady's fractured English and, at the same time, amplifying her foreignness as "the Wop's daughter" to the racist community in which she lives. In one passionate scene, the 52-year old actress fearlessly disrobes. She approaches Val Xavier (Kevin Anderson)—the young man who can save her from her deathly marriage—naked, investing the moment with tenderness and vulnerability.

The current revival of *Orpheus Descending* not only enhances one's esteem for the actors involved, it also heightens one's perceptions of the author as well.

The play was first presented in 1940 in Boston as *The Battle of Angels*. It was Williams' first professionally produced full-length play. The Theater Guild agreed to produce it, Margaret Webster directed it, and although the lead had been written with Tallulah Bankhead in mind, the part was given to film actress Miriam Hopkins, who was keen on returning to the stage. The opening night was fraught with technical disasters and part of the Boston audience booted or walked out. Its critical reception was not

Martha Swope



Anne Twomey,
Tammy Grimes,
Kevin Anderson, and
Sloane Shelton in
Orpheus Descending.

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entirely damning, but the word of mouth in high society circles was damaging. The Boston City Council demanded cuts and the production was closed down after its scheduled two-week run. The Theater Guild then dropped its plans to mount the play in New York.

The Battle of Angels was dedicated to the memory of D.H. Lawrence, whose understanding of human sexuality deeply affected the 29 year-old playwright. Williams, who also used Christian imagery and Dionysian myth liberally in this original draft, described the play as “a mixture of super religiosity and hysterical sexuality co-existing in a central character.” After this major failure, Williams’ career eventually took off with the Chicago opening of *The Glass Menagerie* in 1944. His status as one of America’s greatest playwrights was confirmed when *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened in New York in 1947. Nevertheless, in this successful period and through the decade that followed, Williams worked intermittently on the ill-fated *The Battle of Angels*.

“A play is never an old one until you have quit working on it,” he wrote in 1957. “[This play] never went into the trunk, it always stayed on the workbench . . . I believe that I have now finally managed to say in it what I wanted to say, and I feel that it now has in it a sort of emotional bridge between those early years and my present state of existence as a playwright.” And so, seventeen years after its first incarnation, *The Battle of Angels*, after going through several title changes (*The Dismembering Furies*, *Memories of an Orchard* and *Something Wild in the Country*), opened at the Martin Beck Theater in March 1957 as *Orpheus Descending*. It was directed by Harold Clurman, starred Maureen Stapelton, Cliff Robertson and Lois Smith, and closed after sixty-eight performances.

“I met with a truly shattering setback with the failure of *Orpheus Descending*,” Williams wrote in his *Memoirs*. Four years earlier, *Camino Real*, directed by Elia Kazan, had been savaged by critics and although *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (also directed by Kazan) was a major success in 1955, Williams found himself in an ever deepening emotional crisis.

Donald Spoto, author of the invaluable Williams biography, *The Kindness of Strangers*, quotes from a letter Williams

wrote to his producer and friend Cheryl Crawford, where he says that he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown at this time. He was also relying heavily on alcohol and pills to get himself through the day. Working on the final revisions to the play, Williams wrote, "I am an anxious troubled person. I can't write about anything I don't feel... I wrote from my own tensions. For me this is a form of therapy."

Soon after *Orpheus* closed Williams went into therapy for the first time in his life. His turmoil was articulated by the character Vee Talbott (Tammy Grimes) in *Orpheus Descending*: "We live in light and shadow—that's what we live in, a world of light and shadow—and it's confusing."

In 1957, *Orpheus* received mixed reviews, some critics condemned its excessive melodrama, others damned it with faint praise: "Even a second-rate play by Tennessee Williams is better than most of the plays that turn up on Broadway" (Brooks Atkinson in *The New York Times*). The play failed in London two years later, but enjoyed some success in Paris where *La Descente d'Orphee*, translated and produced by Raymond Rouleau, featured the comeback of the great French actress Arletty. In 1961, the play became the first Williams work to be produced in the Soviet Union. The popular film actress Vera Maretskaya played the lead and the production remained in Moscow's Mossoviet Theater repertory for the customary seven years. But for many, the success of *The Night of the Iguana* in 1961 notwithstanding, *Orpheus Descending* marked the beginning of a downward trend for Williams.

Audiences and critics wanted Williams to go on writing the plays they wanted to see, like *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. They were not willing to accept what they perceived was an obsession with violence and morbidity. But today his concerns can be seen as very real issues. "No one would dare call him melodramatic today," insists Redgrave. She recalls that when the company (both the London and the Broadway casts) first assembled, Peter Hall said to them that *Orpheus Descending* was "Tennessee's most directly socially conscious play."

Hall's interpretation of the play as being "about a whole community hung up

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Anna Magnani, Marlon Brando, and Joanne Woodward in the film *The Fugitive Kind*.

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on their bigotry, racism and prejudice," is one of the keys to his successful re-interpretation of *Orpheus Descending*. As Arthur Miller wrote in his book, *Timebends*, Williams was not "the sealed off aesthete he was thought to be. There is a radical politics of the soul as well as of the ballot box and the picket line." Redgrave describes him as "a multi-channeled receiver for tuning into the outside world and all human beings. Some of these people he knew. His sister Rose [who was forced to undergo a lobotomy at the age of twenty-eight], inspired a great deal of his work and I believe epitomized for him all the innocent and wretchedly abused people in the world."

In Hall's view, the play is "not a naturalistic piece—played naturalistically it is embarrassing." Using electronic

music, enhanced sound, and lighting effects, he creates the ideal atmosphere for Williams's horrific and poetic vision—the sound of barking dogs remind us that blacks are being hunted down in the county and also conjures up the hounds of hell. The very elements that bothered audiences and critics in 1957—Williams's synchronization of Orphic, Dionysian and Christian mythologies, mini-arias and soliloquies often delivered directly to the audience—rise intrinsically out of this setting. It is clear that Harold Clurman made a mistake in persuading Williams to cut out the Prologue from the 1957 production, which Hall has restored. In this unconventional opening, two women directly address the audience and tell the story of how Lady's father was destroyed by the Ku Klux Klan for serving liquor to

blacks. Far from being clumsy or over-written, as originally criticized, this Prologue sets the mood and tone of the whole production and prepares the audience for the horror that is to come.

"These are means to get deeper into reality, not away from it," says Redgrave. She explains that there is no other way to get at the essence of "any period or series of events which are as shocking and as destructive as those with which Tennessee is concerned." In the play, as Redgrave describes it, "an extreme right-wing, racist society is terrified of and totally hostile to other races (black Americans and Jews), intolerant of communism and radicals, and hostile to any art, which as Tennessee said, must challenge what a society is about." She mentions that Lady Maria St. Just, executor of the Tennessee Williams estate, told her and Hall that sometimes she felt that she couldn't take Tennessee to the theater because he would go and see a play like *Hedda Gabler* with a wonderful cast and would shriek with laughter. "He laughed because it was so true and that gave both me and Peter a key to the approach to working on this play—how to understand and communicate it," says Redgrave.

Peter Hall and company communicate such a stirring theatrical experience that, as Frank Rich wrote recently, Hall "may have found an aesthetic route into some of the obstinate works that derailed the playwright's career." The "rediscovery" of *Orpheus Descending* three decades after it was rejected on Broadway is most appropriate for a play in which the author refers to tokens which are passed on from generation to generation. "Wild things leave skins behind," says Carol Cutrere (Anne Twomey), a survivor at the end of the play, as she cradles Val Xavier's snakeskin jacket. "...these are tokens passed from one to another so that the fugitive kind can always follow their kind."

For Redgrave, the snakeskin jacket is a symbol of the survival of what "a given society and its ruling regime fears and which it tries to suppress and destroy." She deplores the fact that "so much human life is so wilfully and contemptuously destroyed and wasted in the process...it is only the knowledge that such tokens exist that gives meaning to life." □

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