

Two British Directors Abroad

*Tim Luscombe of
When She Danced and
Roger Michell of
Some Americans Abroad.*

by Gerard Raymond

Two British directors, Roger Michell and Tim Luscombe, both made their U.S. debuts in New York recently. Luscombe directed the short-lived Broadway production of Stoppard's *Artist Descending a Staircase* and also Martin Sherman's *When She Danced*, currently at Playwright's Horizons. Michell directed Richard Nelson's *Some Americans Abroad*, which is playing at Lincoln Center's Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater.

Michell and Luscombe belong to what might be called the third generation of British post-war directors. Three years ago they were relatively unknown even in London, but now their work is attracting mainstream attention on both sides of the Atlantic.

Roger Michell, who is 33, is a graduate of Cambridge University. Cambridge is regarded as a crucible for talented directors; Peter Hall and Trevor Nunn are its best known alumni. A degree from Cambridge is generally believed to increase a director's prospects in England tremendously. But, Michell says, what the British press often refers to as the "Cambridge mafia" is a two-edged sword. "Some people will hire you because you've been to Cambridge but others feel that you have had all these privileges and will give the job to someone who hasn't had a secondary education instead." Michell says it was a good training ground for him. There is no theater

course at Cambridge so aspiring directors have to raise the money for their productions and "you just do it yourself." Michell read English literature but spent most of his time directing 20 plays at the university.

Shortly after graduating, Michell apprenticed at London's Royal Court Theater on a scholarship. "The Royal Court has a great tradition and is a wonderful first house to work in. I still think of it, in some ways, as being my spiritual home, my first church." In his first year there, he had the good fortune to assist playwrights Samuel Beckett and John Osborne.

Michell is currently a resident director at the Royal Shakespeare Company, having joined the company five and a half years ago. Although he has directed two Shakespeares and a Restoration comedy at the RSC, his "particular passion" is new writing. One of the highlights of his career at the RSC was his 1987 production of Vclav Havel's *Temptation*. Michell says it was "a real thrill" to meet with the dissident playwright who is now the President of Czechoslovakia. "When we did the play, Havel hadn't seen one of his own plays for twenty years, so we made a three-camera video of the production which we smuggled back for him to see."

Tim Luscombe is 29 and studied at

Oxford. He spent his university years directing and acting though he actually graduated in geography. After Oxford, he took on various jobs in West End theater administration—ticket tearer, stage-door keeper—saving up to go to drama school. On finishing a course in directing he returned to London and worked as an assistant on several West End productions while producing and directing plays in London's fringe (the equivalent of off-off Broadway). But two and a half years later, at 25, Luscombe realized his career was going nowhere. "My work was getting better but nothing was happening. I was determined to chuck the whole thing and gave myself three months to make a decision about my life."

During this period he started to adapt *Pomp and Circumstance*, Noel Coward's only novel for the stage. Coward's estate showed interest and Luscombe thought that he would "make his mark in the proper theater as a writer." As luck would have it, the Coward estate asked Luscombe to direct *Semi-Monde*, a previously unproduced Coward play, which was presented as a charity benefit in 1987. "It was non-paid work but I got to direct this very glitzy night with a cast of sixty. And of course that was the perfect showcase because everybody who was anybody in London was there."

Semi-Monde effectively launched Luscombe's career. Suddenly the young director was deluged with offers. The following year, 1988, was a banner year for Luscombe. He directed Coward's *Easy Virtue* at the King's Head, a dinner-theater in the fringe. The production was an instant success and it transferred immediately to the West End. Meanwhile, the company which produced *Semi-Monde* asked Luscombe to direct a star-studded revival of Terence Rattigan's double bill *The Browning Version* and *Harlequinade* in the West End. The plays were critically hailed and Luscombe went on to direct *Artist Descending a Staircase*, yet another unqualified success, at the King's Head.

Luscombe was initially resistant to directing Stoppard's play because it was a radio script, but when Dan Crawford, the American who founded the King's Head, told Luscombe that "Tom [Stoppard] was keen that he do it," he hesitated no longer. "If Tom had even heard of me this was good enough!"

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Three years ago, *Luscombe and Michell* were unknown. Now they're acclaimed in London and New York

Having started off by heavily re-writing *Artist*, Luscombe found, during rehearsals, that the original play worked perfectly well on stage. The show that opened, apart from one cut, was basically the same script that Stoppard had written in 1972. The critics loved the production and it transferred to the West End at the end of 1988, giving Luscombe three highly successful commercial productions in the West End in a single year.

That year he also directed an opera at the now defunct Sadlers' Wells in London. This venture, Offenbach's light opera *La Belle Hine*, is the one major disaster of his career and Luscombe doesn't include it in his resume anymore. "It was one of the worst productions I have ever seen, let alone directed," he says candidly. "I got booed on stage on opening night, the night the director has to take his bow." He describes it as an "appalling" experience: "You think it will just be emotionally traumatic, but it is actually physically threatening. You can't see anybody, there is just a dark cavern of booing. I shook for hours." He admits he was "flattered into doing it," but feels he shouldn't have because he didn't know enough about opera.

Also in 1988 ("I was at the stage of my career that I could not turn anything down"), Luscombe directed Sherman's *When She Danced*. It was his third hit at the King's Head, but the only one not to transfer to the West End. Sherman's play had originally been produced at a regional theater (directed by Robert Alan Ackerman with Pauline Collins in the lead), but it never made it to London. Luscombe was thrilled at the chance to direct the play. "I had been fan of Martin's work since I knew I was gay. His work meant so much to me when I was growing up." Sherman appreciated Luscombe's work on the

play to the extent that when Playwright's Horizons decided to mount it in New York, he asked that Luscombe direct it again.

Roger Michell also came to New York because the playwright involved, Richard Nelson in this instance, wanted the director who had served his play well in London to do the same thing in New York. Gregory Mosher, artistic director of the Lincoln Center says that he had his heart set on directing *Some Americans Abroad* here but Nelson, promoting Michell, persuaded him to see the original RSC production last year. When Mosher saw Michell's work, he says he had no doubts that Michell should direct the play in New York as well.

Both Michell and Luscombe have now directed American productions of plays they previously staged in London. Did they find the actors and working conditions any different here? "I arrived in this strange city for the first time expecting to find all kinds of differences," says Michell. "But I was really comforted and reassured when I went into the rehearsal room, I immediately felt at home. The same problems, the same profanations, the same energies, I loved working with this group. The only real difference I found with these actors was that they were really concerned with what they were eating on stage! Does this have sugar, has this got diary products in it? I guess that Americans are very aware of what they eat, whereas in England the food is so bad there everyone eats anything!"

Describing *When She Danced*, Luscombe notes that it switches "like a Preston Sturges movie, deliberately, from one thing to another very quickly." He says the American cast found that difficult in a way that the English actors didn't, but on the other hand he "never had to say a word

about the on-stage sex life of the lead characters." It took a lot of work with the English actors who are not so tactile, he says, but Elizabeth Ashley and Jonathan Walker as Isadora Duncan and her Russian lover Sergei Yesenin, "just came together and were the most raunchy pair ever. Having said that," Luscombe concludes, "the difference between English and American actors is impossible to qualify and it is varied as there are many actors."

Unlike Roger Michell, whose career has been based in the subsidized world of British theater, Tim Luscombe, with three West End hits, has a high profile in the commercial world. But his career went into something of a slump in 1989. He was a nominee for the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Newcomer of 1988, but lost the prize to director Richard Jones (who is scheduled to direct the London production of *Into the Woods*). From then on he was only offered scripts that had been turned down by Jones. Nevertheless, after a stint in Norway where he will direct a production of Alan Ayckbourn's *A Small Family Business* in Norwegian, he returns to the West End to direct Joan Collins in a revival of Coward's *Private Lives* scheduled for September. Has he got any offers to direct at the RSC or the National? "Not that my agent told me about this morning," he quips, adding, "I'd love to work at both places."

Roger Michell will direct Isaac Babel's *Marya* at the Old Vic next month. It will mark his first London production outside the RSC since he joined the company. He says he has been happy to stay within the subsidized sector: "That's where my tastes lie, doing work which I suppose would not generally be commercially viable." In July he will direct *Two Shakespearean Actors*, a new play by Richard Nelson, which like *Some Americans* was also commissioned by the RSC.

Michell is the only "resident director" at the RSC. The other directors there are "associates." The designation means that Michell has not yet directed a play at the main stage in Stratford and as he points out "it means I get paid less, basically!" But

he adds he is no hurry to change his status. "I want to be really sure of the play and the company before I do my first main-house show in Stratford—it's a very difficult stage so I'm not rushing." As the most junior director in the company he says, "I rather value my slightly new-boy position. It's not quite in the thick of all the blood-letting. I just get on with my work."

This season we have seen three generations of British directors working in New York (TheaterWeek 1/1/90). "I don't think it's a trend, it's just the

fluke of this season," says Gregory Mosher of Lincoln Center Theater. Playwright's Horizons' artistic director, Andre Bishop, also doesn't attach a great significance to the phenomenon. He says that Luscombe is the first non-American they have employed in twenty years. But perhaps what is important is not that these two British directors are working here, but rather the fact that new plays by two American playwrights, Sherman and Nelson, were produced for the first time in London, rather than in New York. □

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