

Return to *Mad Forest*

Director Mark Wing-Davey mixes docudrama with fantasy in Caryl Churchill's dazzling play about the Romanian Revolution

By Gerard Raymond



Two *Mad Forests*: The New York Theater Workshop production (top) recently transferred to the Manhattan Theater Club (above). Pictured are Garret Dillahunt, Tim Blake Nelson, and Jake Weber. Martha Swope
Gerry Goodstein

One of the most remarkable theatrical experiences of last year is back in New York through November. Manhattan Theater Club has revived the New York Theater Workshop production of *Mad Forest*, Caryl Churchill's play about Romania, set before, during, and after the 1989 overthrow of dictator Nicolai Ceaucescu. It's one of her best plays and is still an extraordinary theater event. But the production's ability to challenge and

stimulate the audience, the brilliance of the acting ensemble, even after an eight-month hiatus is due, in large part, to the efforts of its director, Mark Wing-Davey.

The project was initiated by the 44-year-old British director in January of 1990, while he was artistic director London's Central School of Speech and Drama. Wing-Davey was casting around for a suitable play for the graduating students of the school. He thought the Romanian revolu-

tion, in which Ceaucescu was deposed and assassinated, offered exciting dramatic possibilities. The events of December 1989 had taken the world by surprise, even the Romanians themselves. Unlike the other two Eastern European revolutions—the Polish and the Czechoslovakian—this was the one for which there was the least preparation and where the prime movers appeared to be students, similar in age to the students of the drama school.



Lanny Flaherty and Mary Shultz in *Mad Forest*. Gerry Goodstein

“One of the problems of being an actor is that you rarely experience events on or near the frontline of whatever it is the play is written about,” remarks Wing-Davey, who is himself an actor as well. Inviting playwright Caryl Churchill to join him, he took ten students from the school to Bucharest for a one-week workshop, which was to be conducted in the manner of Joint Stock Company, the British theater group which was founded in 1974 by David Hare and William Gaskill.

In addition to Churchill’s *Mad Forest*, you can find Joint Stock’s influence in plays by Hare, in the work of Max Stafford-Clark, out-going artistic director of the Royal Court, and most recently in Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *Our Country’s Good*. In a typical Joint Stock exercise, the actor follows a “real” person and talks to him or her for about two hours. The actor then prepares a detailed character study making note of physical type, clothes worn, and biography. On the following day, the actor impersonates the character before the other actors in the group. The others will interview the actor on various details about the character be-

ing presented and actor has to improvise anything he or she doesn’t know about the person. The writer sits in on these sessions, drawing from this communal research process and then, after the workshop, writes the play.

“The only responsibility the writer has is to write good parts for the actors who have done the work,” Wing-Davey explains. But beyond that, nobody has any idea of what the result might be. He recalls how the Romanian acting students who had also participated in some of the sessions remarked that finally the truth about Romania would be told. “I had to say, ‘We may tell some truth, but there isn’t the Truth,’ ” says Wing-Davey. “We didn’t even know if the play was going to be set in Romania. That is important for the writer’s integrity.”

Nevertheless, after the workshop, Wing-Davey did tell Churchill that he was expecting a Caryl Churchill play and not just reportage. The second act of *Mad Forest*, however, is a journalistic documentation of the revolution, recreating the tumultuous events of December 20-25, 1989, through eye witness accounts

of ten ordinary characters who tell where they were and what they did on those fateful days. But the first and last acts, both of which end with a wedding, are recognizably the work of the playwright who wrote *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls*. Overlapping dialogue, brief scenes, and the use of ghosts and supernatural characters characterize the two acts, which portray the interlocking lives of two families, one peasant and the other middle-class.

Every scene in the play is introduced by an actor reading a sentence from a phrase-book, first haltingly in Romanian, then translating it into English, and then again in Romanian, but with greater confidence. The device reminds us that we are foreigners looking at people and events we can never fully understand. The very title of the play refers to the forest which grew on the plain where the city of Bucharest now stands. The paths through the forest were impenetrable to foreigners who were thus forced go around it. In anger, they called it the *Mad Forest*. As the play progresses and we travel deeper into the lives of the characters, the scenes get longer, and the sentences which introduce them become more grammatically complex.

Wing-Davey marvels at the manner in which Churchill fuses style with content in *Mad Forest*. “The structure proceeds from silence—there are no overlaps in it—through being allowed to talk and express oneself freely in the second act, through wanting to express oneself all the time, even over everyone else, which leads to conflict and other forms of violence and thrills.”

In the first act, under the grip of Ceaucescu’s totalitarian regime, the characters live in fear, silence, and suspicion, constantly looking over their shoulders. When a family sits around its dining table, conversation is conducted with the radio at full blast in case the house is bugged. Sitting down, pulling off the shoes which are a size too small, and taking a drag on an American cigarette which is a black-market item, represents a moment of sublime bliss.

In the last act, after the revolution, when the characters begin to say what’s on their minds, the result is not always pleasant. Politics has become totally confusing, nobody knows how the system works—if there is one at all. The heady

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events of the revolution are now subject to paranoid interpretations, submerged feelings of prejudice towards Hungarians, and ancient hatreds of the Gypsies surface with a vengeance. The final wedding scene degenerates into a chaos from which everyone must learn to reconstitute their society with the freedoms they have recently won.

According to Wing-Davey, no experience was lost on Churchill when writing the play. The phrase-book introductions relate to the time when he and Churchill tried to learn Romanian on their first visit to Bucharest, shortly before they took the students over. He recalls an occasion when he found the playwright reading a cheap paperback about vampires. She told him she was interested in the subject because up until then, most people's associations of Romania were with Transylvania, the home of Dracula. In one of the most effective scenes in the play, Churchill introduces a vampire who comes into the city to take advantage of the bloodshed in the aftermath of the revolution. In the black comic finale, we glimpse the vampire blithely dancing with the archangel Michael, once the patron saint of Romania's fascist Iron Guard, at the wedding party turned free-for-all brawl.

When staging *Mad Forest*, Wing-Davey tried to re-capture the culture-shock the group experienced when they visited Romania. "It is in the everyday things that you notice the difference. It is not about folk dances but actually about what people do in a hospital, how they put the fruit their visitors bring under the mattress." They learned to take nothing for granted in the country, "You can't expect an elevator to work, for instance. Or if you press button Two you may end up on the Thirteenth floor. The doors will open and there will be no light, nothing, just dark, and then somebody will get into the elevator. And you didn't even think there was a thirteenth floor!"

Even as the audience enters Manhattan Theater Club it is alerted to the fact that this production is going to be different. The house is lit by a set of disparate and clumsily strung lights, a few of which don't even seem to work. "One of the striking details that we found in Romania," Wing-Davey explains, "is that only one out of every eight lights is on." Walking along the back corridors of Romania's National Theater, for example, can be a

frightening experience because one fluorescent light flickers and then there will be darkness. According to Wing-Davey, this creates "a creeping paranoia that one feels all the time in Romania."

For the American production of *Mad Forest*, Churchill allowed the play to be reworked into American English. This is the first time she has agreed to such a revision. One of the conceits in the play is that in the middle section, the actors play English-speaking Romanians who explain the events of December 1989 to the foreigners who comprise the audience, but in the first and the third sections they supposedly speak in their mother tongue.

Wing-Davey auditioned over three hundred actors in this country, carefully selecting those who he felt would make an interesting group, "who would look like real people." But the question arose of how to mold them into an ensemble, especially when the American actors didn't have the advantage of going to Romania with the playwright and director and being part of the creative process. "I tried to recreate in miniature something of the working methods that we used when we were in Romania," recalls Wing-Davey. In the first week of rehearsals, the actors went to Queens and met with people in the Romanian community, doing exercises similar to the ones the London drama school students did in Romania.

"As a company, you need to have a series of experiences which are non-threatening and unique to you as a group," says Wing-Davey, explaining his method for creating an ensemble. The field trip to Queens and various sessions together during which the company watched videos, learned the Romanian language and how to sing "Romania Awake," the banned anthem which was resurrected after the revolution, all helped to forge a strong company during the first week of rehearsals. Wing-Davey describes the liberating nature of this process. "When you are all struggling with something new, but at the same time no one is saying you have to come up with the goods as far as performing is concerned, actors develop a sense of having some property among themselves—a secret—some of which they then share with the audience."

All the actors save one from the original American cast of *Mad Forest* are back in the current production. Watching Wing-Davey at rehearsal, one senses

that his rapport with the cast comes from his being an actor as well. Although the actors have performed the play before, Wing-Davey meticulously fine-tunes the line readings, drawing attention to the little shifts in tensions, the ever changing agendas between the protagonists, and the various nuances that lie in between each line of Churchill's sparsely written text.

"Caryl is a very accurate writer and that is one of the hardest things for the actors to get, partly because they are not used to people writing so economically," Wing-Davey notes. "For example, when someone says 'this is the last of the chocolate,'" Wing-Davey elaborates, "what they mean 'this is the last of the chocolate in Romania.' So it is a much bigger offer, the stakes are that much higher."

One of the difficulties he encountered when working with the American cast was that they were a strong and outgoing group. "Part of what you sell in America as an actor is confidence, whereas the Romanians and up to a point the British students, because they were inexperienced, have a certain reserve, something in the eyes, a certain naivete."

But *Mad Forest* was more than just an exciting project for Wing-Davey. Both he and Caryl Churchill are socialists, and for them, going to Bucharest after the revolution meant confronting the colossal failure of a system which they still believe is just. Talking to the people in Romania, they were given examples of how many of their ideals had been perverted into absurdist nightmares. "But because Eastern Europe has collapsed, it doesn't mean to say that State healthcare and State education are by definition evil and regressive," Wing-Davey argues.

Since the play deals with specific events—this December it will be three years since the Ceaucescu regime was overthrown—has *Mad Forest* dated? Wing-Davey, who is currently auditioning a new group of American actors for his third production of the play which is scheduled at Berkeley Rep and Pittsburgh Public Theater later this year, believes the play successfully transcends its historical specificity. For one thing, the play's final scenes of chaos produced by freedom is echoed in the recent events in the fragmented Yugoslavia. "But it is also talking about politics and life within any society," Wing-Davey asserts. "About how easy it is for all of us to collaborate. And how do we recognize that collaboration?" TW



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