

Pericles, Video, and the Chinese Actor

After three weeks of rehearsals for *Pericles*, director Andrei Serban discussed his production with Gideon Lester.

Gideon Lester: *Pericles* is currently being produced more than at any time in its history. Why did you choose to stage it at this moment?

Andrei Serban: We're living in a period of global tension. What kind of plays can we use in a time of war to help protect the world? Can theatre affect politics? I don't think so. Is theatre mainly a ring for social debate? 2,500 years of dramatic history have proved to the contrary. Still, we are on the verge of an apocalypse, and I have a hunch that we should not produce theatre that will stir up more chaos in the psyche. Why go to the theatre to experience the depression, fear, and anxiety that bombard us when we watch the news? In a time of tension, such as now, negativity is leaking everywhere, from the television to the people one meets. Our responsibility is to counterbalance the helplessness that we experience when we have no control over world events. *Pericles* falls into this luminous category. Late in his career Shakespeare became concerned with the ancient language of parables, with digging deeper into the world of esoteric truth. He sought a thread, like an invisible telephone wire, that connected him with influences from a higher level. The subtle message of *Pericles* is that there cannot be peace on Earth until there is peace in Man.

G.L.: How does Shakespeare transmit that message in the play?

A.S.: I see *Pericles* as an allegory, with the hero functioning as an Everyman who must journey through the world until he reaches

maturity. When the play begins, Pericles is a young man who wants to open himself to life and marriage. But his first adventure, at the court of Antiochus, is an adolescent fantasy – a sexual dream. He hopes to find paradise but discovers that he's really in hell, captive to the spell of Aphrodite. The incest that he uncovers in Antioch obsesses him for the rest of his life. This first scene is often cut in production, but it's crucial because it explains the loss of Pericles' sense of self, his quest to calm his inner tempest. In the allegory of initiation, this corresponds to the need for the subject to start questioning himself, to understand that he's fallen into pieces. Then the journey can begin. Pericles leaves Antioch and returns home to Tyre, where Helicanus – his father figure and one of the play's many wise old men – tells him that he must leave for the good of his country. This is the next step in his growth; he accepts a sacrifice by giving up his home and position. He then brings corn to the starving citizens of Tarsus, which I see as Pericles' attempt to expiate the sin he found in Antioch. But it doesn't work, and he journeys on. Next he encounters the first tempest, which brings him to recognize his imminent death. Ready to be swallowed by the waves, he accepts the will of the gods. Even when the fishermen save him and he enters the tournament at Pentapolis he has no desire to win. He questions his own value – is he worthy of the hand of the princess? Simonides and Thaisa see in him the potential of goodness and honesty that lie beneath his raggedy surface. As Simonides tells the jealous knights, "Opinion's but a fool, that makes us scan / The outward habit by the inward man."

G.L.: According to this allegorical reading, why does Pericles then lose Thaisa?

A.S.: Because they're both still young, they're only at the beginning of the road to completion. In the allegorical play, their union

represents the true marriage of body and soul. By now Pericles has entered the orbit of Artemis/Diana and escaped the realm of Aphrodite that he uncovered in Antioch. But Pericles must still confront challenges if he is to mature, which is why his wife is apparently taken from him. He must learn to be patient, to understand that all suffering has a reason. "Patience!" says the nurse as she brings him his baby, "This is left living of your dead queen." Acceptance is one of the major themes that Shakespeare explores in his late plays: the idea that one has to pay in advance for what is to come. It was easy for the immature Pericles to lust after the perverted daughter in Antioch. Now he knows that he can take nothing for granted. Thaisa's coffin, meanwhile, floats directly to the spiritual center of Ephesus, the home of Cerimon and Diana, and the place of mystery where the word of St. John's gospel was made flesh.

G.L.: Why does Pericles leave his daughter at Tarsus?

A.S.: Shakespeare doesn't give an explicit reason, but one explanation might be that Pericles is still haunted by the incestuous father-daughter relationship he encountered at Antioch. He has a deep subconscious fear that the story of incest will be repeated, a kind of Oedipus complex, and so he departs from his daughter. The next time we see him he is broken by the news of Marina's death, and he decides to shut the door on life. Like Thaisa, retired to a convent, Pericles seeks an exile from the living. It's a kind of death wish. Both Thaisa and Pericles sacrifice the pleasures of ordinary life in favor of austerity and suffering. At this point we turn our attention to Marina who, unlike her parents, has no need of spiritual growth. I feel that in that way she's unique in all Shakespeare. She's a poetical metaphor, less a real person than a symbol of life. What is she born with, what does she possess, that by the age of seven

she can sew, dance, and sing better than any other child? At fourteen she resists the horrible demons in the brothel and transforms the governor, Lysimachus, from a lecherous politician to a devout of the holy cross, who sees her as a representation of the Virgin. She overcomes the wicked Dionyza, the murderous Leonine, the pirates, Death itself. When on the boat she meets her old father, who is weakened by lack of food and sleep, she revives him, like Cordelia and Lear. The last journey to Ephesus is now on a calm sea, which I'm sure was no accident on Shakespeare's part. The sea is a mirror of Pericles' soul, and now it is peaceful like a lake. The two exiled hermits meet and life is renewed in them. "Now I know you better," Thaisa tells Pericles, who responds, "O come, be buried / A second time within these arms." Shakespeare shows us that the austerity of the monastery, the religious severity behind the walls, is not the real solution. At the end of the journey they must return to life, stronger and ready to live fully.

Renaissance scheme of the universe

G.L.: In your reading of the play, the world Pericles inhabits and the characters he encounters all reflect his psychic state. What, then, is the function of the four authorial figures that control his journey in the production – the poet Gower, Cerimon the magician, the goddess Diana, and Helicanus, Pericles' father figure?

A.S.: All of them are like shamans in a Brazilian voodoo ceremony, quietly catching anyone who falls. But each has a separate function. Gower is the phantom of a writer, returning to life. He's a storyteller who makes sure that the narrative doesn't go off course. His origins lie in the choruses of ancient Greek theatre, which were revived in the medieval religious dramas that influenced Shakespeare so strongly. These choruses recapitulated past events, moved the action forward, and apologized for breaks and leaps in the action or

dialogue. But Gower – an ancient figure and contemporary of Chaucer's – is also like a Brechtian or a Pirandellian character, in that he reminds us that we are watching a play. The effect is to both distance us from the story and lead us inside it. Cerimon, meanwhile, is a human who has the remarkable power to bring mortals back from the dead. He's a Dalai Lama – fascinated by the ability of science and religion to merge together in search of truth. Like Prospero he's a man who, as a result of his efforts, no longer has personal desires and lives to be of use to others. And the goddess Diana brings help from above when it's needed. All three of them are forces that protect life.

G.L.: Twentieth-century productions of *Pericles* were divided between those that sought unity (of theme, style, character, narrative) in the play, and those that celebrated its apparently fractured structure. Are you searching for unity in the play?

A.S.: I think Shakespeare was deliberately experimenting with techniques of discontinuity and interrupted narrative, to create a certain shock in the spectator. This play is not unlike the experiments of Joyce, Beckett, and the postmodernists. It demands of us an active imagination. Unlike a Broadway musical whose purpose is to entertain, where everything is given to us ready-made, *Pericles* is narrated through disparate fragments, and the audience has to participate actively. It's like a puzzle, demanding our attention. The critic Northrop Frye wrote that the structure of *Pericles* foreshadowed opera, with its narrative recitatives and dramatized arias, but it also anticipated the modern poem. T. S. Eliot said that *Pericles* had an ideal dramatic form, and his debt to its fragmentation and symbolism is clear in "The Waste Land" and his poem "Marina" that was inspired by Shakespeare's character. For me it was also crucial to cast Pascale Armand, a black actress from

Haiti, Mia Yoo from Korea, and Robert Sella, a white actor from Arizona, to act this family that must be broken apart to be reunited. They are a symbol for the Sagrada Familia of our broken planet.

G.L.: In this production you're using video for the first time. Why is the medium suitable for Pericles?

A.S.: Since Shakespeare was experimenting with a new structure, we're obliged to experiment with new forms too. So much of the action of Pericles takes place at sea, which provides an impossible task for us. How can directors and designers capture the fluidity, the light movement, the poetry of the ocean? The stage doesn't allow for the unfolding of cinematic action. This is why, together with my friend the designer Dan Nutu, I decided to experiment with a film screen to capture the dramatic changes at sea that reflect precisely the emotional peaks and troughs of Pericles' voyage. For many years I was skeptical of productions that incorporated film and video. I thought those media killed live acting. Then I saw an installation at the New York Guggenheim by the artist Bill Viola, and the recent revival of *Brace Up!*, the Wooster Group's adaptation of *Three Sisters*. Both used video imaginatively as a poetic tool, another language, and I was encouraged to do the same. The journeys of Pericles take place in the mind. The sea is an emotional, not geographical entity. Pericles' inner conflicts are mirrored in the churning of the ocean; when his spirits are calm, the sea is like a lake. These connections are subtle, and film allows us to explore the complexity of the inner life.

G.L.: In rehearsal you said that Asian actors are often more successful than Westerners at playing Shakespeare. What did you mean?

A.S.: I want to read you something from Alexandre de Salzmann's Notes from the Theatre, which is illuminating. "The oriental actor is aware that no feeling can be manifested without a special muscular preparation. He knows, for each feeling, what muscle or group of muscles he must relax or contract. He knows how to make use of them for his voice to produce a particular impression. He knows that the human body is an instrument capable of representing and showing all the feelings, even those that are most hidden and subtle; but that means the entire body, not only the face, which is the poorest part."

G.L.: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

A.S.: The theme that threads through all of Shakespeare is the quest for self-completion. I hope that as we follow the voyage of Pericles, all of us, actors and audience alike, will get a hint of the potential of human beings to improve their understanding. This deceptively simple play may be of help.

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