

# Danton's Death

Theater

Stan Ovshinsky

1965

We attended the preview of DANTON'S DEATH, the first play by the Repertory Theatre of the Lincoln Center in their new, attractive Vivian Beaumont Theatre.

The directors, Herbert Blau and Jules Irving, were previously co-producers of the San Francisco Actors' Workshop where they had earned acclaim for the imaginative and excellence of their productions.

To understand the impact and pertinence of the play, we should report two dramas that went on in the theatre. What happened in the theatre, both on stage and off, indicates the pertinence of the thesis of the playwright, George Buechner. Buechner, who wrote this play at the age of 21, struggled with determined passion to understand the meaning of the French Revolution. How could leaders who had obviously done so much to destroy the old order and who believed in a new and a more just society, accept and participate in terror and murder as a political means? The main characters including Danton, have accepted the execution of the libertarian Hebertists, former heroes of the Revolution. The Hebertists favored an immediate end to food shortage and price controls and the distribution of private-property. The Hebertists said that the people had had revolution but no improvement of their deplorable situation. Robspierre, and St. Just, who believed in private property, considered that, even with the Hebertists out of the way, they were not safe, since poverty, the fear of foreign invasion, and the "encirclement" of conservative nations threatened them at every side. "Liberty must triumph at any cost...the Constitution cannot be established. It would guarantee immunity to attacks on our liberty, because it would be deficient in the violence necessary to restrain them..." The moderates, who had gone along with the bloodletting from the start, agonized over the terror that they had helped install. One deputy asked, "Am I a murderer or a prisoner?" Danton, who promoted the September Massacres, who apparently engaged in foreign speculation, who was pleasure-loving and sensuous, feared the extension of the terror, but felt himself a captive of the events, ambiguously unwillingly or unable to extricate himself from that of which he is so much a part. This is the basis of the drama on stage.

The drama off stage is an extension of the same dilemma, for Blau has written mimeographed program notes in which he compares President Johnson and napalm bombing with the use of terror to preserve ideology. The sheet distributed to the audience proclaims: "THE TERROR IS DEAD! LONG LIVE THE TERROR!"

"The French revolution was a series of small nuclear explosions climaxed by the reign of terror. It came at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century when enlightenment looked over the abyss to anarchy, and in our own time, absolute unreason. The terror was designed by the Committee of Public Safety as an instrument of order. 'Terror, but not chaos.' The bloodletting seemed required by history. Terror, according to Robspierre, Castro, Verwoerd, Mao Tse-Tung and President Johnson, is the moral whip of virtue."

"This is not to equalize all aberrations of power, but to recognize-as Buechner did at 21-- that nobody has a premium on tyranny. By fault or default, from whatever good motives, we are all executioners. 'What is it in us that whores, lies, steals and kills?' The question may be hard tack for a new season. But we may as well begin with the balance of terror. We would hold our peace if we had it."

Many in the audience were horrified. There was very little applause. The next day there was public outcry in the newspapers. Blau censored and revised his program notes.

The play is a stunning technical production. The settings and lighting by Jo Mielainer, the electronic music by Morton Subotnick, helped extend the drama from the written word to all the senses. The acting was for the most part bad, an important exception being Robspierre, played by Robert Symonds. The directing at times approached that of a high school play. HOWEVER, the strength of the writing in this new version by Blau, the basic intelligence and talent of the directors, the power of the play itself, make this play a MUST. It is on the whole, and that is how such a drama is to be viewed, a titanic attempt, and in many ways successful, to do an important play with moral and intellectual implications that are universal. The integrity of the direction and the understanding of the subject are superb. While there are defects, one must still say DANTON'S DEATH is one of the best plays produced in the New York theatre for many years. We look forward with great hope to the remaining productions of the Repertory Theatre.

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