

THE ARDEN SHAKESPEARE



SHAKESPEARE IN THE THEATRE:
PATRICE CHÉREAU

Dominique Goy Blanquet

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Shakespeare in
the Theatre:
Patrice Chéreau

SHAKESPEARE IN THE THEATRE

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FIGURE 1 *Patrice Chéreau with Vincent Pérez during the shooting of Hôtel de France, 1986. Photo © Pénélope Chauvelot.*

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume in the *Shakespeare in the Theatre* series focuses on a director or theatre company who has made a significant contribution to Shakespeare production, identifying the artistic and political/social contexts of their work.

The series introduces readers to the work of significant theatre directors and companies whose Shakespeare productions have been transformative in our understanding of his plays in performance. Each volume examines a single figure or company, considering their key productions, rehearsal approaches and their work with other artists (actors, designers, composers). A particular feature of each book is its exploration of the contexts within which these theatre artists have made their Shakespeare productions work. Thus, the series considers not only the ways in which directors and companies produce Shakespeare, but also reflects upon their other theatre activity and the broader artistic, cultural and socio-political milieu within which their Shakespeare performances and productions have been created. The key to the series' originality, then, is its consideration of Shakespeare production in a range of artistic and broader contexts; in this sense, it de-centres Shakespeare from within Shakespeare studies, pointing to the range of people, artistic practices and cultural phenomena that combine to make meaning in the theatre.

*Series Editors: Bridget Escolme, Peter Holland,
Farah Karim-Cooper*

INTRODUCTION

At age 24, Patrice Chéreau became nationally famous with a production of *Richard II* that earned him insults in *Le Monde*, France's most respected daily newspaper, from the no less respected poet Pierre Leyris, his translator. Six years later, his fame grew worldwide when his centenary *Ring* made Winifred Wagner, keeper of the Bayreuth flame, want to shoot him, but ended with an hour-and-a-half-long standing ovation. In 2011 directors from around the globe flew to London for his first English production, *I Am the Wind*, at the Young Vic. The curtain fell with a crash in 2013 while he was rehearsing *Comme il vous plaira* (*As You Like It*), a production designed to celebrate Shakespeare's 450th birthday. Every event of Chéreau's eventful career in between, whether opera, film or theatre production, shocked, surprised, enchanted and moved audiences as no director ever had before.

Shakespeare was first summoned on Chéreau's stage in the wake of the May 1968 uprising, to answer the students' political queries in Dimitriádis's *Prix de la révolte au marché noir* ('The price of rebellion in the black market'), and remained with him to the end. After their long exchanges over the texts of *Hamlet* and *As You Like It*, his favourite translator, the poet Yves Bonnefoy, thought that a man like Chéreau, 'both fascinated by violence and capable of the deepest tenderness, impetuous yet affectionate and faithful, was attracted to Shakespeare in whom he recognized a similar polarity of the *Dasein*, the being-in-the-world, with enough room in the spirit to allow every aspect of its contradictions, tensions, to contribute to a less inhibited and thus more generous existence'.¹

Even before the theatre, painting dominated Patrice Chéreau's youthful landscape. When invited to the Louvre in 2010 to create

his own ideal exhibition, he remembered regular visits there as a child with his father, the painter Jean-Baptiste Chéreau. His mother Marguerite Pélicier was a textile designer. His maternal great-grandmother Lise Tréhot had modelled for Renoir, and left her descendants with a nest egg, three unsigned canvasses kept on top of the family wardrobe, until his parents sold them to buy a dilapidated eighteenth-century house in Anjou they would seldom visit.² They lived in a presbytery facing the church. The child was fascinated by the funeral pageants he could watch from home – as he was by the Semana Santa (Holy Week) in Seville when the family took a holiday trip to Spain.

Textiles and textures, colour and light, the shadow of death. It is no easy task to distinguish fact from fiction in this strange eventful history. Chéreau's own memory may not be entirely reliable, and rumour stalked him to the end. The obituaries added error to invention. One confused Renoir with Rodin as the artist who immortalized Lise. Another asserted Patrice had learnt German on the job in three months to 'bawl out' the stage-hands of *The Ring* in their own language, blithely ignoring the fact that he had been an early visitor to the Berliner Ensemble, while translating Kleist and Lenz himself for his student productions.³ The label 'aesthete', soon misguidedly attached to him, would stick. His father was acquainted with Roger Planchon, one of France's leading directors, then manager of the Théâtre de la Cité in Lyon-Villeurbanne where he would exhibit Jean-Baptiste's works,⁴ and teenage Patrice was allowed to attend rehearsals. The play, Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*, gave him his first tangible access to the Elizabethan world, where he would return throughout his career. Planchon found the boy very shy, but a decade or so later he went to see Chéreau's productions in Sartrouville, and eventually invited him to co-manage the Villeurbanne Théâtre National Populaire (when Jean Vilar's illustrious TNP was transferred to the suburbs of Lyon) and direct Marlowe's *Massacre at Paris*.⁵

Why young Patrice came to the theatre, he does not quite know: 'I'm sure that images were there to begin with; words

came later.⁶ But not images built in the loneliness of an artist's studio like his father's. Images that told a story, the sum of his permanent questioning of art: would the Louvre exhibits speak of depression, lethargy, mortality, or meditate on painting, portrayal, bodies? 'And what bodies? Desire, the lack of desire, the death of desire, the diseased body, the mutilations?' The exhibition, opened on All Souls Day, which happens to be his birthday, saw the creation of Jon Fosse's *Rêve d'automne* in the salon Denon of the museum, while Waltraud Meier sang the *Wesendonck Lieder* surrounded by Goya's paintings: 'We set ourselves an absolute duty of story-telling, a unique narration that would encompass everything, all the words that will be pronounced, the various styles of music that will be heard, the movements of bodies through space.'⁷ All combined as in a grand opera to make 'a long, plaintive, melancholy song, cruel at times, with its moments of grace and despair, a quest for beauty, constantly threatened by time, work, desire, the spectator's gaze'.⁸

Chéreau's harshest critics regularly paid tribute to his unique talent for conveying the story through an image, like the separation of the royal couple in his youthful *Richard II*, drawn apart by the drawbridge's motion. This, his first major Shakespeare production, was designed in collaboration with the painter-architect Richard Peduzzi. Until their decisive meeting, young Patrice used to build his own sets. His personal experience of painting helped him to organize space, submit the real to his will, make it opaque or transparent, complex or simple but always readable to an audience:

My father's fight with those of his paintings he had pronounced to be failures, the corpses and the pieces of plywood that strewed the floor of his studio bore testimony to the violence of the fighting: yes, I do recognize myself there, as in his mix of deep laziness (the kind that compels you to work all the time) and frenzied energy which is the stuff of my own fight, a fight that has its arena in me but somehow plays itself out without me, powerless everyday,

this trade that does not have a respectable name but that I endure and practise nonetheless with tenderness and violence.⁹

From his earliest days, theatre and cinema constituted his own ‘war machine against melancholy’.¹⁰ The father’s struggles with painting, and with illness, appear in the suffering bodies of his drawings, *Dessins de la Salpêtrière*,¹¹ as they would in the son’s staged tableaux. The child Patrice was haunted by the fear of abandonment, by the death of his grandparents. His grandmother’s dead body, the first corpse he saw, is what he will recall in the paintings chosen for the Louvre exhibition, with words borrowed from the last Plantagenet’s nightmare at Bosworth: “Despair and die”, Richard’s victims told me at age 15, but I answered, no, I will work in the theatre.¹²

1

The Formative Years

No matter how clumsy and ugly the teenager felt, he seems to have arrived fully armed at Lycée Louis-le-Grand, the first step to his conquest of the stage. He joined the school's Groupe de théâtre, where he met Jacques Schmidt who would be his costume designer, Jean-Pierre Vincent, future administrator general of the Comédie-française, Jérôme Deschamps, future manager of the Opéra-comique, Michel Bataillon, now the living archive of contemporary theatre. Jérôme Clément, who would found and preside over the TV channel ARTE, he already knew from the Lycée Montaigne when they were boys. Having practised fencing, Chéreau was able to fix the duels in the school's repertoire.¹ There were many, he remembers, in *Romeo and Juliet*, in which he played the part of an old man, his other specialty. In no time he and Vincent took the leadership of the group, then spent the three years before baccalauréat doing all the jobs themselves.

Educational sources

Young Chéreau read as he ate, voraciously, as he always would. Very little fiction, apart from *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, which followed him through the years. And 'useful' theoretical works – mostly, exegeses: 'everything about Shakespeare, for instance'.² He and Vincent aimed to create a new style of

acting, away from the current declamatory mode, with a patchwork of American burlesque, German expressionism, and what they understood of Vsevolod Meyerhold's Biomechanics. While Vincent learnt Italian to read Goldoni, and have access to Meyerhold's exercises via Italian translations, Chéreau translated 'useful' essays on Brecht or Piscator. Throughout his career, each new project set him to read everything he could find related to its matter – history, context, criticism, earlier productions – or unrelated. Wagner's *Ring* takes him miles away from the text itself, on 'a circumnavigation' that can speak to his and his actors' imagination, followed by a 'journey underground to its very centre',³ then a self-command to 'forget everything and really start telling the story'.⁴ In preparation for directing extracts with the students of École des Amandiers, he re-read all Shakespeare's comedies. While working on *Hamlet*, he commissioned a translation of John Dover Wilson's *What Happens in 'Hamlet'* so the whole cast could read it. In the first stages of preparing *As You Like It*, Starobinski's essay on *L'Encre de la mélancolie* ('The ink of melancholy') sat by his side.

Before Shakespeare, his first passion was German literature, which he studied for two years at the Sorbonne, along with Bernard Dort's lectures on the theatre, and those of Edouard Pfrimmer, a translator of Brecht. Yet he never felt tempted to put on Brecht's plays, and claims he never understood the alienation effect, which he definitely did not practise. An early witness like the radio producer Lucien Attoun remembers he was wholly oriented towards German dramaturgs at the time, entranced by Klaus-Michael Grüber, and began to read the nineteenth-century farces of Labiche when he heard that Peter Stein was interested in the playwright. The interest may have travelled the opposite way: Labiche was on the Louis-le-Grand syllabus in the mid-1950s, and Stein directed *La Cagnotte* (*The Piggy Box*) two years after Vincent's German performance of the play in Bochum in 1971.⁵ There was a lasting rivalry between the Brechtian disciples, and similar tastes. If Stein came first with Edward Bond, directing *Saved* in 1967, and

with Ibsen, it was Chéreau who led with Shakespeare, Jean Genet, and Koltès.

The 21-year-old Chéreau detailed his likes and dislikes in one of his earliest interviews (perhaps the first) on his production of Labiche's *L'Affaire de la rue de Lourcine*. A great admirer of Jean Vilar when a teenager, he has moved on, and is moving away from Brecht, though he still finds much to learn from him. His marked preference now goes to Planchon, followed perhaps by Adamov, Lavelli . . . Most of the current celebrities leave him cold. He quite likes Genet despite some weaknesses, but dismisses Roger Blin's recent creation of *Les Paravents* as a complete failure; feels awed but untouched by Beckett and would never want to put on one of his plays. Barrault's work he finds sloppy, Ionesco's philosophy superficial and vulgar. 'You judge these famous people from the height of your future achievements', his shrewd interviewer tells him.⁶ Yes, he has seen their productions, read their plays, including all of Labiche. When questioned about the changes made to the text of *Lourcine*, he explains he found the ending unbearably weak, a complete reversal, and a denial, of the mechanism Labiche has so skilfully set out, which shows a couple of petit-bourgeois turning into would-be murderers. In the play, they wake up from a bad dream to find it was all an illusion and they have committed no crime: after depicting them with vicious precision, Labiche tells us they are not dangerous, nor so nasty as they seemed. So Chéreau simply cut the end, an operation he will repeat time and again for varied reasons, and added pieces from other plays by Labiche to create a broader picture of their milieu.

Chéreau's literary preferences, rehearsed near the end of his life in a reading at the Odéon, ran from classic to contemporary, from Shakespeare's Sonnets, Georg Büchner's *Lenz*, Hofmannsthal's encounter with the paintings of Van Gogh, Rimbaud's *Saison en enfer*, to Hervé Guibert's portrait of Orson Welles, and the monologue of Anna in one of Koltès's earliest plays, *Sallinger*.⁷ Not only direct sources of inspiration, or powerful influences, they sketched a brief account of himself.

Discussing this selection of texts, Chéreau admitted he was a poor reader of drama, even before his encounter with Koltès, who made other living dramatists suffer by comparison. The shock of his first encounter with the magnificent language of Büchner was Jean Vilar's direction of *Danton's Death*, followed by Büchner's translations of Victor Hugo's *Lucrèce Borgia* and *Marie Tudor*. Orson Welles, his youthful idol, embodied all he had ever wanted to do: 'Shakespeare, the theatre company, the cinema all converged in my mind.' Apart from Fritz Lang, whose *M* (1931) he saw fourteen times, his other favourite filmmakers were the rare ones who also directed plays, Bergman, Kazan, Visconti – matching his own ambition. Yet even with these strong precedents, it had taken him years before he felt legitimate in practising both arts.

More than reading dramatists, an early experience of live theatre formed an important part of Chéreau's training. From the age of 13 he went to see plays once a week, buying tickets himself out of his meagre pocket money for Théâtre des Nations, Comédie-Française, everything on show, even 'boulevard' low-brow comedies. He discovered Vilar's Théâtre national populaire (TNP) in the 'theatrical desert of 1958–60'.⁸ His first intoxicating experience was the Berliner Ensemble's visit to Paris in 1960, after which he made regular trips to Berlin. The encounter so fired him that he drew fictive sets copying theirs, for fictive productions, until he built his first one at Louis-le-Grand. His interest in the Enlightenment and in the *Sturm und Drang* was sparked off later, while a student, but really grew around his production of Lenz's *Soldiers*, when he read Starobinski's *L'Invention de la liberté*.⁹ The French Revolution with its discovery of a world that might live without God and religion had an important bearing on his development. Marivaux was a way to learn drama, 'a resolutely modern drama in its analysis of the heart and the contradictions of the heart'.¹⁰ Actually Chéreau did much to make it modern, by breaking its crust of golden elegance to extract a harsh social critique from its picture of a violent society. Most of his early productions, up to Bond's *Lear*, would explore the

mechanisms of successful or more often aborted revolutions, and what caused them to fail, ‘the bloody passage from one era to another’.

A no less significant part of Chéreau’s education was at the Cinémathèque rue d’Ulm. There he first saw Eisenstein, the Expressionists, and Visconti, Bergman and Kazan, but did not feel attracted to the Nouvelle Vague that was so popular among his age-group – a lack of interest he would later deplore. There he met one of his first masters, Orson Welles. For the 16-year-old, Welles was both a model and an inspiration: ‘here is one who comes from the theatre, I would ponder, and who makes films’.¹¹ *Citizen Kane* was done with theatre actors. A 21-year-old Welles had directed *Horse Eats Hat*, adapted from Labiche’s *Italian Straw Hat*, at the Mercury in 1936, his second production for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) after the *Voodoo Macbeth*. No doubt 21-year-old Chéreau thought of Welles when he made an equally ruthless adaptation of Labiche’s *Lourcine* thirty years later. And perhaps he felt a touch of envy for the WPA, the largest New Deal agency, which recruited millions of unemployed people in public works projects: one of its branches, the Federal Art Project, created community art centres around the country, commissioning thousands of artists to engage with art production, art instruction and art research. Welles introduced him to Shakespeare:¹² Welles’s film *Mr Arkadin* ends with a Shakespearean exit line, ‘Fifty million marks for a seat on that plane.’¹³ Alongside those learned references, memories of silent movies, of Chaplin and Buster Keaton, would be tapped to help him find a common ground with the popular audiences of Sartrouville when he took over the management of the local theatre at age 22.

Political nomadism

The story of those formative years was repeatedly told in the obituaries of 2013. Let me briefly recall the Parisian scene of

the early 1960s, when Lycée Louis-le-Grand and its female equivalent, Lycée Fénelon, sizzled with arguments over colonial wars and theatrical politics – Vilar’s modern adaptation of Aristophanes’ *Peace* or his *Arturo Ui* at the Théâtre de Chaillot, Bergman’s *Wild Strawberries*, Resnais/Duras’s *Hiroshima mon amour* and *Marienbad*, Jean-Luc Godard . . . During France’s last colonial war, Chéreau found himself taking sides instinctively, he recalls, at a demonstration that turned into a fight between partisans of ‘*l’Algérie française*’, whom he found too arrogant, and supporters of ‘*l’Algérie libre*’. Several street marches later, after being caught by the police carrying his thick Latin dictionary (an odd weapon, but a good prop to a story), his political commitment was radicalized when, sitting behind a café window, he witnessed the violent beatings that caused the deaths of nine demonstrators at the Charonne underground station in 1962.

With the support of suburban communist municipalities, several theatres had opened on the periphery of Paris, in the wake of Vilar’s democratizing programme. The new Vincent/Chéreau company took part in various festivals, and were invited by Bernard Sobel, another committed Brechtian, to perform on the large stage of Gennevilliers.¹⁴ They interpreted Marivaux and Labiche, there and in smaller Parisian venues, with a liberty, cruelty and energy that soon attracted serious critical attention.¹⁵ When offered the use of the Théâtre de Sartrouville in 1966, Chéreau established his company there. His commitment to popular theatre sent him and his actors to perform in factories, meet works councils, take part in trade union seminars, discuss with teachers and generally strive to reach a new audience. They offered not only plays but also debates, lectures, exhibitions, concerts and films. Chéreau’s editorial in the first issue of the theatre magazine, *théâtre 78*, stated he would give pride of place to creation: ‘Here is a new utopia: create spectacles in Sartrouville’, not just offer the people culture through consumption of the world’s treasures, but involve them at the source of the process, a research into the repertory and the work of theatre directing.¹⁶ This research

involved his own special brand of politics: the third issue began with the statement that 'Our trade, we believe, is to tell stories', a creed he would always adhere to, and ended with a quotation from Nizan: 'What Marx says in the Manifesto, if this book is properly read: Man is love, and he is prevented from loving.'¹⁷ The phrase 'if this book is properly read' is important: to Chéreau, proper reading meant breaking through the surface of a text and extracting the hidden tensions he detected in its depths. To Lucien Attoun, who spotted another source, Chéreau confessed he had seen Visconti's film *Senso* sixteen times, breaking his earlier record with Lang's *M*. The tragic tensions of human love would be persistently explored in his most political tales.

Adulation and hatred dogged him from the start, some of the critics accusing him of being a threat to 'good theatre'.¹⁸ His production of Molière's *Dom Juan* in 1969 was denounced as sacrilege, its depraved, ruined aristocratic hero as the degradation of a mythical figure. It was performed on a set co-designed with Peduzzi as 'a machine to kill libertines': Molière having sided with those in power, the statue of the Commander embodied the sum of repressive forces.¹⁹ Among other transgressions, Chéreau cut the famous scene with M. Dimanche. Why? Because he judged it badly written! The reviews of his productions reproduced in his Sartrouville magazine were quite laudatory, except the devastating comment he ironically quotes at the end of the list: 'At age 23, Mr Chéreau has some qualities of the great stage directors: breadth, authority, neat ensemble work, and all their faults, from a sense of swank to total scorn of text and author.'²⁰ This was in April 1968.

According to Bernard Dort, also writing in April 1968 in *Les Temps modernes*, 'the theatre is haunted by one question: its ability to represent contemporary reality, to summon on stage the world we live in'. The aim was to reach a larger public than its traditional bourgeois audience. The new subsidized 'popular theatres' would have to choose: either remain museums of dramatic culture, or directly confront reality and play a part in the establishment of a new society.²¹

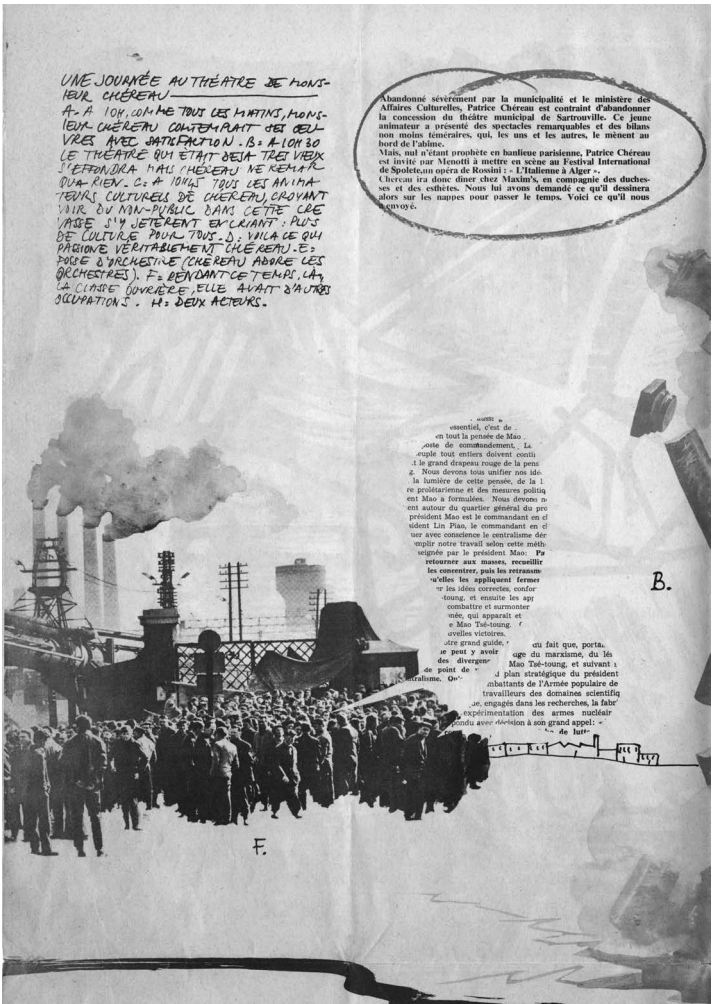


FIGURE 2 Chéreau's answer to the journalists who asked him what he would draw on the tablecloths to while away the time now that he was leaving Sartrowville. Action culturelle du Sud-Est, March-April-May 1969, no. 3. Archives IMEC.

For young Chéreau, the choice was ready-made. He enjoyed the heady experience of 1968 but its brutal conclusion, engineered by the CGT trade union, sealed his distance from the Communist Party. At Planchon's invitation, he had attended the meeting of the directors of Maisons de la Culture, whose Déclaration de Villeurbanne on 25 May stated everyone's right of access to culture, and expressed their common will to meet the 'non public', i.e. the people who never went to the theatre.²² The Sartrouville statistics after one year of existence reported over 23,000 spectators for 48 productions, and 18,000 educational brochures distributed. But state funding did not come up to expectations, and Chéreau's experiment was expensive. The Prix des Jeunes Compagnies won by his production of Lenz's *Soldiers* brought him 60,000 francs, but the show had cost double that sum. The Sartrouville experience ended in bankruptcy: the debts totalled 600,000 francs, a third of which was covered by the State and the Town Hall, leaving the remnant to Chéreau's charge. A special issue of the theatre magazine in March 1969 announced his resignation.

The bankruptcy also registered the failure of ideologies: 'How could one possibly create a popular culture in a non-popular State?'²³ He no longer believed in a management guided by the spirit of Vilar's 'théâtre populaire', which 'failed to answer all the expectations it had raised': 'the notion of a humanist culture for the people paid for by the bourgeoisie was an all-round illusion, not just a lesser evil, a betrayal, perhaps'. His manifesto, entitled 'An exemplary death', pointed out the deep misunderstandings and confusions that beset the ideology of 'popular theatre' in contemporary France.²⁴ No matter how progressive they hope to be, intellectuals are on the side of the masters; artists cannot change the world, only discuss it, nor hope to augment their popular audience indefinitely, nor do the job of schools. It was impossible to pursue a creative aesthetic research and at the same time chase new spectators.

The young bankrupt was saved from the dole by Paolo Grassi's invitation to Milan. His next step, with the Piccolo

Teatro, during the Fascistic threats of the 1970s, moved him on to less open statements, reflecting on the modes of transmission and translation of politics to the stage. Giorgio Strehler had visited Paris with his *Opera da tre soldi* in 1960, the same year as the Berliner, and as powerfully entranced him. It was Planchon who showed his young disciple photographs of Strehler's *Galileo*: its setting designed by Luciano Damiani determined his ensuing work, Chéreau later realized.²⁵ He showed those same photographs to Richard Peduzzi, and both endlessly looked at them, wondering what made them so beautiful: 'The whole Italian art of architecture, the science of painting were all there, placed at the service of a renewed Brechtian thought.'²⁶ Looking at Damiani's sets, one cannot miss their echoes in Chéreau and Peduzzi's, the elegance and sobriety of the design, the architectural symmetries, the delicate colours, the lighting that gave warmth to the austere scenography. Chéreau was even tempted at one stage, after a quarrel with Peduzzi, to work with Damiani, but the temptation was short-lived.²⁷

Strehler was the master he had chosen for himself, Chéreau would remember in his funeral homage to the great Italian director, a man for whom 'the theatre has a responsibility towards the world and society', who had taught him 'everything', and first 'how to tell a story through the poetry of the theatre, how to combine levity and seriousness'.²⁸ Strehler's perfectionism, Damiani's scenography based on Da Vinci's 'study of forces', their fight against 'old habits', their joint effort with Paolo Grassi towards a 'theatre of labour' could not but appeal to the young artist.²⁹ Strehler's lessons were spelt out in his now famous open letter to the actors after the first run of Brecht's *Galileo*, on the challenge presented by epic theatre, its tendency to greyness and indulgent slow rhythm: 'remember that narrative theatre is above all a way of thinking, a form of commitment. It teaches moral responsibility, choice'.³⁰

Strehler's motto, inherited from Jacques Copeau's example, was 'Theatre representing moral responsibility in a collective

context.³¹ He worked in Italy at what Vilar was trying to do in France, ‘an art theatre for everybody’. They had a common ideal, theatre as a public service, which Chéreau would attempt to create at Sartrouville, a common master, Copeau, and similar plays on their to-do lists, *Richard II* and *Murder in the Cathedral*, *Dom Juan*, Büchner’s *Danton*, Strindberg’s *Storm*, some Brecht.³² Two of those, *Richard II* and *Dom Juan*, Chéreau would also direct, and play the part of Camille Desmoulins in Andrzej Wajda’s *Danton*.³³ The Piccolo Teatro in Milan had opened the same year as the Avignon festival, 1947. Strehler and Grassi’s manifesto expressed a will to make the place a meeting point for the community and to work in depth to widen the audience of the theatre.³⁴ When Chéreau failed to achieve this aim in Sartrouville, it must have seemed natural to pursue it in Milan where Grassi was calling him, and to learn Italian.

Chéreau’s time in Italy began with Pablo Neruda’s *Splendore e morte di Joaquin Murieta* and continued with Tankred Dorst (*Toller: Scene di una rivoluzione tedesca*), Marivaux (*La Finta Serva*, translated from *La Fausse Suivante*), Wedekind (*Lulu*), and his first opera, Rossini’s *L’Italiana in Algeri* which he took to the Spoleto Festival. His choices are not eclectic, he asserts at the time, though what exactly guides them at that stage, he finds it hard to explain.³⁵ Eclectic perhaps, yet persistently concerned with the victims of oppressive regimes and decadent societies. His list of leading characters is eloquent: Toller, an antifascist intellectual; Murieta, the Mexican Robin Hood, depicted by Neruda who died suspiciously soon after the fall of President Allende; Lulu, brutally manipulated from age 12 and driven to crime; Marivaux’s *Demoiselle*, the Mistress disguised as Servant, who unmasks and punishes the cynical fortune hunter Lelio. Through Marivaux’s work, Chéreau felt he was reading and understanding the whole of the eighteenth century: behind the optimistic ideology of the Enlightenment, hovered *Dangerous Liaisons* and the Marquis de Sade, both of which would cruelly serve to expose human nature in his production of Marivaux’s *La Dispute* in 1973. He would

eventually return to *Lulu* in Alban Berg's opera with the conductor Boulez, after their *Ring* in Bayreuth. During those years of Italian exile, he also answered commands and invitations like a 'mercenaire', a soldier of fortune.³⁶ Like the shabby actors of *Murieta* who entered already made up for the show, carrying battered suitcases.

The suitcase that keeps returning in Chéreau's shows was originally his own, a situation that ended when Planchon called him back to France. Together they co-directed the new Théâtre National Populaire, transferred to Villeurbanne in 1972. Yet only when given the management of Les Amandiers in Nanterre, a decade later, would Chéreau be able to create the place to live and work in that he had dreamt of in Sartrouville. The transfer of the TNP – Jean Vilar's historical creation – from Palais de Chaillot to the suburbs of Lyon was no mean feat. After Vilar's departure, and his successor Georges Wilson's rather poor level of success, the then Minister of Culture Jacques Duhamel offered the direction to Planchon, who agreed under various conditions, the first being he would stay in Villeurbanne. Duhamel in his roadmap stressed the value of Vilar's heritage but bowed to the fact that the TNP, lodged as it was in a rich residential area of Paris, was no longer either national or popular, and needed a fresh impulse.³⁷ Duhamel agreed to the move, naming jointly at the head of the renewed institution Chéreau and Planchon as artistic directors, flanked by the administrator Robert Gilbert. The actual management was entrusted to Planchon and Gilbert. Chéreau, who had lost his licence after the Sartrouville bankruptcy, could have no 'commercial ability'. He felt himself to be a guest there: it was not his own house, though he enjoyed the luxurious conditions and the freedom of creation he was offered after years of hard living. Some of Planchon and Chéreau's early supporters felt betrayed, and accused them of having hijacked the TNP to serve their own ends with public funding. Renée Saurel for one – she had reviewed three of Chéreau's productions in *Les Temps modernes* (Jean-Paul Sartre's magazine) – wrote that the former rebels had turned

into accomplices of 'Power', the government: they had embodied renewal, now they represented compromise. The new forms they offered barely masked the fact they had given up all efforts to cater for the working class and fallen into an aestheticism devoid of any real political foundation.³⁸

A decade later, when Mitterrand's election brought the Left to power, Jean-Pierre Vincent was named at the head of the Comédie-Française, and Chéreau was offered the management of the Odéon, but chose to settle down in the suburban Théâtre des Amandiers in Nanterre.³⁹ On the opposite edge of Paris the director Ariane Mnouchkine was entrenched in the old Cartoucherie de Vincennes. The year 1968 had erupted into the University of Nanterre, sending thousands of students into the streets with the slogan '*Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands*' (we are all German Jews) when their German-born leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit was expelled from France. The experimental University of Vincennes, the most durable imprint left by 1968, was erected just around the corner from Mnouchkine's fortress. Both artists chose to stay on the periphery, and build there a company, though each attached different meanings to the term. Mnouchkine's is a permanent revolution – each new project to this day brings together a new group of hard-labouring actor-workers in a new configuration – whereas Chéreau surrounded himself with a team, a substitute family of friends who worked with him from one project to the next, like Jacques Schmidt who designed his costumes; André Diot, in charge of the lights; André Serré, the sound engineer; and Richard Peduzzi, his scenographer to the end. Their methods also differed radically: Mnouchkine's first concern was to create compelling images; Chéreau's, to penetrate the text.

After Planchon, Vilar and Strehler, and the disenchantments of Sartrouville, Chéreau's artistic evolution was strongly influenced by his meeting with the playwright Bernard-Marie Koltès, which was crucial to his engagement in the Nanterre project. There he would be able to fulfil what he considered his first duty as a director, bring an unknown talented playwright to the attention of an unprepared audience. Political commitments