

## CELESTINESCA



**La Célestine.** French Adaptation by Florence Delay. Directed by Antoine Vitez. Avignon, July 12 (Début), 1989.

A Review by C. Bernd SUCHER (In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Nr. 186, July 22/23, 1989, p. 16)

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### **Hell, Heaven and Jeanne Moreau**

For the opening of the Festival of Avignon Antoine Vitez staged "La Célestine." While elsewhere the offerings of theater festivals degenerate to the level of department stores, Alain Crombecque, director of the Festival of Avignon, sticks painstakingly to his concept: here you will see only new productions and world premieres. Crombecque wants to present the fashion trend of the French theater: "élite theater." There is no question that Fernando de Rojas' drama "La Célestine" belongs in this category.

Jeanne Moreau is the star of this year's Festival of Avignon. It is because of her that the production of a work known, yet not at all popular in France, was treated as a sensation even before opening night. In anticipation of this actress, people accepted Antoine Vitez' surprising choice of "La Célestine"; it was, after all, this director who had managed to make a sensational success of an eleven-hour long production of Claudel's "Le soulier de satin" in the courtyard of the Papal Palace two years ago.

On the other hand, Vitez' choice was not all that surprising: since this play, which appeared in 1499 (it is still not clear whether Rojas wrote all of it or only part), very much matches his Catholic view of the world, his (or rather Friedrich Schiller's famous) definition of the theater as a moral institution ("Theater als moralische Anstalt"), that is, theater as a place for philosophical discourse. Moreover, this text, which so far as we can tell, was not written for the stage but rather for a single reciter, requires a certain simplicity and clarity which Vitez likes: he is not an inventor of pictures or actions.

### **Shortened to Five Hours**

Certainly, he works very sensitively with lighting, and he doesn't ignore musical effects, but most importantly, he views the word, the gesture of the actor as the most valuable means of interpretation. In short: he is courageously modern, and at the same time, in an almost anachronistic way, consistently old-fashioned. The performance lasts for five hours, even though the text, up to now never completely staged because of this ultra-Wagnerian dimension, was severely cut. And even though Vitez surely knows that the attention of his audience has to have diminished by 3 o'clock in the morning—after all he is an experienced director—he forces two lengthy monologues on the actors and the spectators at the end, which the former delivered brilliantly, and to which the latter listened quietly—maybe even affected by it—before breaking into jubilant applause.

## CELESTINESCA

Yannis Kokkos, who had also created the set for "Le soulier de satin," dispenses this time with scenery. *La purété*, that simplicity which Vitez prefers, obligates him, too. A giant wooden staircase sits alone on a wide pedestal, or rather, grows out of the orchestra pit to a lofty height; leads from a blood-red hellish abyss into heavenly blue clouds, from which carved angels survey the action. A picture for children.

"La Célestine" is the story of Calisto, who with the help of the sorceress and go-between makes the beautiful Melibea amenable to his wishes, and experiences some of love's bliss with her before plunging accidentally to his death, which in turn drives her to commit suicide after confessing to her father, and impels the latter to a lengthy final lament. Vitez interprets this story as a didactic one. In other words, what Rojas formulates in a "Letter to a Friend" preceding the text and in a poem following it, the director appropriates: "La Célestine" is supposed to demonstrate the dangers of the world to the spectators (listeners) in a quite entertaining way; to strengthen them to withstand their own passions; to make them distrust quick solutions and wrong conclusions; to lead them, finally, onto the right path: to God.

However, Rojas, a converted Jew and a lawyer, is not to be taken as a moralizing religious zealot. He is a poet, wholly comparable to Cervantes, and even to Shakespeare. Very clearly—and for his own time shockingly—he paints a realistic picture of sexual lust and dependence; he criticizes the nobility, which in order to fulfill its wishes, uses subjects, unprotected underlings, bribing them by means of money and avowals of friendship. He presents the terrifying vision of an anarchy which grips society when those who come to power are in need of role models, of support (both financially and morally), of discipline and of education.

In spite of this underlying message, the performance does not turn into a sermon full of sour morals, preached by a theologian crazy about the theater. Rather, the result is a serious work of art. The shortened French version by Florence Delay dispenses with many of the monologues in which the characters attempt to persuade and convince each other. Philosophical debates are suppressed, and forthright entertaining dialogues develop instead.

### A Simple Tale

Vitez, being aware of the recitative nature of the work, quickly fills the single set with action. A change of lighting is the only means of indicating a change of locale. A walk around the staircase structure signifies a walk through town, similar to what was done in medieval plays performed in a church; a door, and the spectator is already imagining Melibea's room in her parents' house, or the dissolute beds of the prostitutes. Vitez keeps the audience alert and awake by forcing it to amplify the language and a few gestures in the imagination. Only after one engages in this stimulating co-operation does the play gain beauty; only then does one find the key to this staging, which, at first glance has no other ambition than to present a simple tale with the double purpose of provoking comparisons ("Faust," "Tristan and Isolde," "Romeo and Juliet," "Troilus and Cressida") and stimulating discussions.

Even as the author (of the play) neglects to supply alternatives for the life of the characters, the director also refuses to judge them in a clear-cut, one-sided manner, because this would be wrong in every instance. Certainly Celestina is an amoral character who is living off the lewd desires of certain people, ready to build or to destroy everything for money, to deceive and betray everybody. But repulsive, or monstrous, or even a witch, these she is not.

## CELESTINESCA

Jeanne Moreau doesn't act as if she is consciously doing evil things. On the contrary: since she herself had preferred to have a man in her bed much more than golden coins under her mattress, she wants to make available this pleasure for everyone who desires it—and, of course, she gladly accepts the rewards for this service in whatever form it takes.

When Jeanne Moreau, her white hair in a bun, speaks about the "choses sensuelles" (sensual feelings), her lips sway; her red-stockinged legs, in black half-boots become nervous; the left hand, the restless fingers, everything promises future sensual joys; her voice, clear, alert, coos seductively; her eyes flash, combining wit and lust, begetting Cupid, whose arrow finally hit poor Pármemo, Calisto's servant (a boy, a clown, an angel: Jean-Yves Dubois).

### Terror of Love

"This is joy!" Celestina rejoices. Moreau thrusts her fist into her lap and laughs, wildly and loudly. From the hellish abyss smoke and sexual groans arise. Again she has won an adept, a terrorist of love; has made an angel fall. It was Pármemo who had warned Calisto of this sorceress, who had childishly begged him not to have anything to do with her, but he, too, is unable to return to innocence, having enjoyed Areúsa (pretty and lascivious: Cathérine Ferran). Together with his friend Sempronio (a rocker of the late 15th century: Roger Mirmont), another servant of Calisto, he kills the go-between, who refused to split with them the money the master gave her for her services, as she had promised.

With his staging, which is comical in the best sense and never overdone (not even when the young people in a fit of passion rip off each others clothes and when they don't seem to care anymore with whom they copulate), Vitez poses just one question, the most difficult one: is that all there is? Is life not more than pleasure, career, passion, love? Or could the path from cradle to grave be more like a trip from hell into heaven?

For Melibea Vitez answers the question. She, who like a Botticelli-Eve (Valérie Dréville) charmed Calisto (a naïve, romantic youth: Lambert Wilson) under a tree in her father's yard, is not condemned in the end. She is saved like Goethe's Gretchen at the end of *Faust*. And what becomes of Celestina nobody knows.

Jeanne Moreau is the star. Yet the performance (starting in the Paris Odéon on September 19) is not a homage to her. Vitez has integrated her into a brilliant cast, which offers first-class actors even in the minor roles. His work may seem conservative to some, and to German ears the manner-of-speaking of the Comédie-Française actors may sound like sung arias: but it becomes obvious that Antoine Vitez is intent upon the power of the drama. He entices his audience to see, to recognize, to think.

