

THE ARDEN SHAKESPEARE



SHAKESPEARE
IN THE THEATRE:
PETER SELLARS

Ayanna Thompson

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Shakespeare in
the Theatre:
Peter Sellars

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*This book is dedicated to
Samuel Yates
and
Emily Lathrop,
who represent the future of performance studies*

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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 and
Farah Karim-Cooper*

Introduction

In 1994 Peter Sellars was hired by the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, Illinois, to direct a production of *The Merchant of Venice*. At thirty-six years old, Sellars had already established himself as the wunderkind and *enfant terrible* of the theatrical world, having won the MacArthur Fellowship (or 'Genius Grant') just over a decade earlier in 1983, and being hired as the Artistic Director of the newly created American National Theater at the Kennedy Center in 1984. Sellars was the talk of the theatre world, and the artists at the Goodman were excited to work with him. They were hoping his *Merchant of Venice* would be the theatrical event of the year.

Because he was busy directing another production up until rehearsals began, Sellars faxed a one-page document to the Goodman, outlining his conceptual approach to this production of *Merchant of Venice*. In it he wrote:

Four centuries ago, at the moment that modern capitalism was being invented, Shakespeare wrote a play that remains the most astute and shockingly frank analysis of the economic roots of racism that we have. He called it, not insignificantly, 'THE MERCHANT OF VENICE.' Shakespeare's Venice is an international city whose trading partners include China, Africa, the Americas, and the Arab world.

quoted in PETTENGILL, 'Peter Sellars's *Merchant of Venice*', 299

Sellars then explained that his production would explore the continued impact of economic racism by setting the play in contemporary Venice, California, a location that was meant to evoke the Los Angeles ravaged by race riots only two years prior in 1992. He continued his letter, writing:

By inviting black actors to take the roles of the Jews, Asian actors to play Portia and her court, and Latinos to play the Venetians, I can begin to touch the texture of life in contemporary America, and the metaphor and the reality of anti-Semitism is extended to include parallel struggles and their related issues.

quoted in PETTENGILL, 'Peter Sellars's *Merchant of Venice*', 299–300

With the renowned black American actor Paul Butler cast as Shylock, the Goodman advertised the production to black Chicagoans as a Shakespeare production that would speak directly to contemporary American racial politics. And it did, but the production also did so much more that was unexpected.

For the most part the audiences at the Goodman reacted with confusion, many leaving the theatre during the intermission. As David Richards wrote in his review in the *New York Times*:

Delivered at a glacial pace, with only tables and chairs for a set, the production lasts four daunting hours. At one recent performance, two-thirds of the audience bolted at intermission and those who held out to the end had the glazed look of hit-and-run victims.

RICHARDS, 'Sellars's *Merchant of Venice Beach*'

The unpopularity of the production became a type of running joke for reviewers and critics, many re-hashing the exact same narrative about audiences running from the Goodman during the intermission.

In hindsight, though, Sellars's production of *The Merchant of Venice* has been treated as both unflinchingly reflective of the early 1990s and eerily prescient of what was soon to come in the early twenty-first century. It not only reflected back the recent horrors of the Rodney King beating, the police officers' acquittals and the subsequent widespread racial uprising in Los Angeles, but also anticipated the Black Lives Matter era of the early twenty-first century, when activists organized to fight systemic racism and the killing of innocent black Americans. Although largely critical of Sellars's *Merchant*, James Loehlin presciently wrote: 'When Shylock warned of the danger to the city if justice was denied him . . . he addressed the audience directly, and the battering of Rodney King appeared on the video screens. It was a devastating moment, true to the play, to Sellars's vision of contemporary America, and to the actual situation of an upper-class white audience confronted by black anger' (Loehlin, 'Review', 94). Sellars's production anticipated an historical-cultural landscape in which white Americans are forced to confront expressions of black American rage – a rage that is provoked by long-enduring structural inequalities.

This anecdote about Sellars's *Merchant of Venice* tells in miniature the strange polarizing effect Peter Sellars's approach to Shakespeare has had on audiences, critics and scholars. In the moment, Sellars's Shakespeare productions frequently divide audience members into those who are enraged and those who are enraptured. And over time, public opinions of Sellars's productions often change and migrate to reflect more positive views, as if viewed with an intellectualized hindsight his productions appear both insightful and more pleasurable.

When one reads about Peter Sellars in the popular media, however, one inevitably discovers that certain tropes and narratives constantly get recycled about him as if knowing them imparts anything about him as a person or an artist. Here's a typical example from an early profile written in 1984 in the *Washington Post*:

At 26, he has been called ‘a Wunderkind,’ an ‘enfant terrible,’ an ‘upsetter of apple carts,’ and ‘the most outrageously exciting director on the American stage today.’ Even when his unorthodox productions hurtle up against critical disapproval, it is generally accepted that a ‘boy genius’ is at work. His mind is astonishingly hyperactive. But then, just take a look at his person.

He stands only 5 ½ feet, although he rarely stays put long enough for anyone to go get a tape measure and check. His hair swoops back in an elongated brush cut that suggests he is speeding along behind the wheel of a 1950s convertible. The elfin sparkle in his eyes registers somewhere between zeal and hilarity. If he always seems to be running late, it’s because he is.

RICHARDS, ‘Theater’s Whirlwind Wunderkind’

Two years later in 1986, the same reporter would go on to write: “Iconoclastic” seems to be the adjective most frequently employed’ to describe Peter Sellars (Richards, ‘ANT & the Adventures of Peter Sellars’).

From these profiles we gather that Sellars has wild hair that defies gravity by spiking upwards; he is diminutive in stature and youthful in energy; he greets the world and almost everyone in it with a joyful familiarity which almost always expresses itself through a hug; and his zany appearance – frequently sporting colourful shirts that are paired with matching bead necklaces – mirrors his zany approach to theatre. A boy genius with a MacArthur ‘Genius’ award to prove it. A modern-day Amadeus, or a real-life Peter Pan. An egomaniac with monomania. A polarizing figure who cares for nothing so much as himself.

Like most commonly circulated tropes and narratives, there are some bases in truth to the ones ascribed to Peter Sellars (although not the egomania!). Yet their constant recirculation often serves as a substitute for a more thorough and thoughtful engagement with his work on conceptual, artistic and aesthetic grounds. This book seeks to offer that corrective by systematically

working through Sellars's unique approach to Shakespeare, analysing the historical, social and aesthetic culture out of which he emerged, the purpose, process and techniques he has developed for his classical productions, his approach to casting with regards to race, and finally his attitude towards audiences with regards to artistic accessibility versus provocation.

There are many contemporary Shakespearean directors who inspire controversy through their avant-garde productions featuring seemingly revolutionary interpretations, stagings, castings and/or *mise en scène*. Peter Brook's 1970 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the Royal Shakespeare Company, for example, was immediately disarming in its simplistic staging; the stage was essentially a white box without any set pieces except wires that allowed the actors to float and hang above the stage. In the intervening years, it seems as if every actor, reviewer and scholar who claims to have seen that production also claims to have been influenced by it. Brook's revolutionary style almost always inspires expressions of love and adoration.

Sellars's style, on the other hand, often inspires expressions of derision or dismissal. A review published in the *Harvard Crimson* in 1979 could almost stand in for all the negative reviews over the course of Sellars's career. 'Assaulted by Sellars' sound and fury, we feel confused, trapped, and embarrassed', asserted Katherine P. States, then an undergraduate writing for the university paper. 'Why does Peter Sellars have so much contempt for his audience that he goes so far out of his way to make things inaccessible?' (States, 'Full of Sound and Fury'). Reviewers who have struggled with Sellars's productions often claim that his iconoclastic approach creates theatrical experiences that are by and large inaccessible to normal audiences, and these reviewers then tend to assume that the production's inaccessibility reflects the director's narcissism and/or monomania. Unlike the generative assumptions that are ascribed to Peter Brook – reviewers assume Brook is attempting to expand theatrical experiences – caustic assumptions are often ascribed to Peter Sellars.

And yet, I will argue that Sellars's impact has been just as significant and influential as the beloved avant-garde directors like Peter Brook. Sellars's approach, vision and final productions seem to operate as cultural litmus tests, ones that delineate the borders for acceptable versions of avant-garde theatre. At these borders reside tensions between the classical and the political, technique and process, casting and race, and accessibility and innovation. These faultlines will serve as the organizing principles for this project, with chapters devoted to each one. But first we must address the man.

Biographical Background

Peter Sellars was born on 27 September 1957 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a blue-collar American city known as the 'Steel City' because of the numerous steel mills and steel-related businesses that operate there. It is also a vibrant city for the arts. On growing up in Pittsburgh, Sellars says: 'Pittsburgh is interesting: Martha Graham, Gertrude Stein, Andy Warhol. It's a very interesting cultural scene. That is what I grew up with' (quoted in Marranca, 'Performance and Ethics', 54). Nonetheless, Sellars has said that his very early childhood was not one filled with theatre. His mother was an English teacher, and his father worked in a radio station. In fact, the young Sellars was more interested in herpetology than anything else as a youngster: he had numerous pet snakes and other reptiles and amphibians. Yet in the sixth grade, at the age of ten, Sellars asked to work as an apprentice in Pittsburgh's Lovelace Marionette Theater because an older friend he admired was doing the same. Sellars worked for a year at the concession stand and gift shop. 'My first job,' Sellars said, 'was mastering the total popcorn cycle. I packed it, sold it, I cleaned it up off the floor' (ANT, 'Fact Sheet'). Sellars continued, 'After awhile [*sic*] the Lovelaces made me a curtain puller, which is where I learned the lesson of curtains . . . it can totally change the effect of a performance. Finally, my last year

in junior high school I was allowed to work a puppet' (ANT, 'Fact Sheet').

An experimental puppet company that marketed its productions to adults as much as to children, the Lovelace Marionette Theater had a profound effect on Sellars's artistic sensibilities. Margo Lovelace, the founder of the Lovelace Marionette Theater, became a mentor and friend to Sellars. Lovelace introduced Sellars to the French surrealists and avant-garde theatre in general. In 1984, Sellars told a reporter for the *Washington Post*:

I remember, when I was 12, Margo handed me a book on the set designs of Josef Svoboda – this is in Pittsburgh! – and said you should know about him. That's not your traditional notion of set design right off the bat, but it was for me. Or she'd tell me, 'There's this production of *The Good Woman of Setzuan* at La Mama, directed by Andrei Serban, that I think you should see.' So I got this slant on things early on. Beckett was normal for me, not Arthur Miller. If it was unlike Beckett, it was weird.

quoted in RICHARDS, 'Theater's Whirlwind
Wunderkind'

The slant against the typical kitchen-sink dramas so popular in mid-century American theatre made Sellars's interests and approaches stand out from an early age. The Brechtian distance that Lovelace maintained in her marionette productions influenced Sellars's ideas about how audiences should engage theatre in profound and indelible ways. In addition, through his puppet training he learned to edit pre-recorded vocals for the puppet routines. Therefore, Sellars claims that 'splicing is part of my aesthetic and it seemed perfect for Shakespeare with his use of surprising juxtapositions' (Sellars, phone interview 1).

After a few years working at Lovelace, Sellars formed a touring puppet theatre company with his younger sister, and they performed for five summers at the Elitch Theater in Denver,