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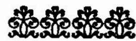

SAINT-DENIS

As managing director of the New (now the Albery) Theatre, the Criterion and Wyndhams, Bronson Albery enjoyed an apparently commanding position in the pre-war West End. But nobody is water-tight; and in Albery's case the leak took the shape of two brothers who held shares in all three theatres but whose interest in the drama did not extend beyond the box office. Far from wielding absolute managerial control, Albery could not even get permission to keep his premises in good repair. So when an appeal for help arrived from the Arts Theatre, he was glad to respond to it. In running programmes at the Arts he would at least have a free hand.

Albery was not one to over-estimate the taste of the London playgoer. On one occasion, having the Criterion vacant for a dead fortnight around Holy Week, he plugged it despairingly with *The Doll's House* which, to his amazement, played to capacity for all thirteen performances. '*The Doll's House*,' he muttered afterwards to Charles Landstone, 'they must think it's an Easter children's play!' However, in his carefree role at the Arts he backed his fancy and brought over a lively new French troupe whom he had taken his family to see at the Vieux-Colombier on a night when the show went up late and the Paris audience smashed their way in through the glass doors. In London, too, La Compagnie des Quinze were a smash. They introduced two new plays, *Noé* and *Le Viol de Lucrèce*, both written for the company by André Obey; but it was not the texts that captivated British audiences so much as the playing style. The Quinze were acrobats, mimes and musicians whose work enlarged the whole definition of acting. 'It was', Tyrone Guthrie wrote, 'like a delightful ballet, only that it had fifty times more content than any ballet ever had.' And although the individual quality of artists like Suzanne Bing and Auguste Bovério – not to mention Pierre Fresnay – was unmistakable, together they functioned as a team in total opposition to the star hierarchy. London, in short, was renewing contact with true ensemble and the forgotten art of pantomime.

The Quinze were a touring company on the model of Molière's pre-Parisian L'Illustre Théâtre. They travelled with a light-weight collapsible rostrum and a tent-like surround which did away with the need for wings and which could be packed in a single hamper. This was no mere economy but an expression of their contempt for ordinary theatrical illusion. They could evoke anything they wished without wading into what they called 'the mud of naturalism'. For a village they used some miniature roofs and a toy steeple set upon poles. When Lucrèce was seen spinning with her maidens, they presented a picture composed with the care of a Florentine painting, but they did not bother to supply needle and thread. The style was not anti-realistic, but it took off from where realism came to an end.

The response to the 1931 Arts tryout was such that Albery was able to transfer the two productions to the Ambassadors and the New, and to bring the Quinze back in 1932 and 1933. They did not make money in Albery's larger theatres, but they acquired a tremendous following among the generation of artists then heir-apparent to the British stage, and their long-term influence ranks with that of the Berliner Ensemble's 1956 London season.

The Quinze had a new name but they were not a new company. They had already been working together since 1924 as Les Copiaus – the young troupe whom Jacques Copeau had taken down to Burgundy on his retirement from the Vieux Colombier. Rehearsing in a disused *cuverie* in the village of Pernand-Vergelesses, the troupe initially did much to prove Copeau's point that a highly sophisticated return to the theatre's popular origins would find its true audience at grass-roots level. But the success of the enterprise was sabotaged by Copeau himself, who increasingly isolated himself from his actors. The greater their appetite for an audience, the more rigidly the *patron* kept them on a diet of studio exercises. In June 1929, expecting an appointment to the Comédie-Française, Copeau disbanded the company who promptly regrouped themselves, with a few new recruits,

under the *patron*'s nephew, Michel Saint-Denis. All the pent-up energies they had accumulated as the Copiaus now went into their work as the Quinze.

Family attachments aside, Saint-Denis was Copeau's natural heir. General factotum to the Copiaus, he had taken a hand in every job from running their advance bookings to writing their open-air scenarios. He was one of the troupe's best actors; he had taught at the Vieux Colombier school. And he possessed a steely intellect and a monastic dedication to his theatrical ideals no less fanatical than his uncle's. At the same time, he was determined not to repeat what he saw as Copeau's mistakes. Where the Vieux Colombier repertory had always suffered from the lack of a house author, Saint-Denis lost no time in sealing a pact with André Obey and building the Quinze's specialized repertory from work Obey wrote with the personalities and playing style of the troupe in mind. Also, having witnessed the paralysing effect of Copeau's conversion, Saint-Denis proclaimed a defiant atheism to the end of his life. 'It is always the same,' he said to a friend after visiting the aging Granville-Barker, 'with sexual impotence they seek refuge in religion or theories.'

From the viewpoint of George Devine and the English stage, Saint-Denis first enters the story in 1928 when the Copiaus visited Britain with a touring production of Copeau's *L'Illusion*. One of their dates was at the Cambridge Festival Theatre, where they were seen by Marius Goring, then a sixteen-year-old schoolboy.

> I'd never seen anything like it; the entire movement of the company was wonderful. I remember Copeau sitting on the steps of the theatre inviting his children on to the stage. And there was a young man, running and waving the mask of an animal's head, shouting 'Jouons la comédie!' That was Michel. One day, I thought, I'll join that company.

Goring got his chance six years later, having by then made contact with Copeau while studying at the Sorbonne and played two seasons at the Old Vic. The same period had seen the rise and fall of the Quinze. *Noé* and *Lucrèce* had been followed by more Obey plays including *La Bataille de la Marne* of which Agate wrote, 'this is great, perhaps the greatest acting, since on a bare stage the actors re-create not the passion of one or two, but the agony of a nation.'

However, international acclaim was no protection against the dollar crisis, and in 1934 the bottom fell out of the Quinze. All but three of the original actors left the company, and Saint-Denis gathered the remnants together and embarked on a fresh plan. This centred on a large country house at Beaumanoir, near Aix-en-Provence, which would be the base for a new troupe whose members would also hold classes for summer school students. The attachment of a school to a producing company was a basic principle of the Copeau doctrine; given the reputation of the Quinze, it might also cover the bills. Among the newcomers Saint-Denis engaged were Goring and another British-based multilingual artist, Vera Lindsay (then Vera Poliakoff). 'You lucky devil,' Devine wrote to Goring from the *Queen of Scots* treadmill, 'theatre here is utterly depressing. How I envy you.' The adventure was rather less glamorous to the impoverished members of the new Quinze, who were rehearsing in a garage measuring five by six metres and trying to raise funds to light a barn.

The restructured Quinze duly went on the road in the autumn of 1934, but their financial plight grew increasingly desperate. In November Goring embarked on a fund-raising mission which began in a dream world of wild schemes and fantasy benefactors including a mad American millionaire and the King of Siam. More to the point was the approach Goring made to John Maynard Keynes, who replied that the task of supporting the company in Provence 'must be obviously primarily the responsibility of friends in France'; but if Saint-Denis chose to launch a troupe in Britain it might be a different matter. Armed with this letter, Goring returned to Beaumanoir, firing off a stack of Quinze Christmas cards. One of them brought an answer from Devine, now promoted to Gielgud's Player King but still as disgruntled as ever. 'We shall hope to see you in a show by your company which may, by the Grace of God or Bronson Albery, bring some light to the messy dirge of our theatrical life.' The campaign dragged on for a few more months, but life at Beaumanoir had come to a standstill, and at the end of February 1935, Saint-Denis took leave of his little community to direct Gielgud in an English version of *Noah*.

At the time, he had no thought of abandoning the Quinze. In any case, he was ill-equipped for a cosmopolitan career. He spoke virtually no English; and he had none of Komisarjevsky's

flair as an *enfant terrible*. He might temporarily fit in with Gielgud's company or the Old Vic, but it would have been inconceivable for Saint-Denis to put on spectaculars for Cochran. He took the New Theatre job for the money: but it led to his changing both his country and his career.

Among his first meetings in London was one at the Motley studio, and it was on that occasion that Devine met the man who was to dominate his professional life for the next twenty years. Vera Lindsay came with Saint-Denis, and recalls her first impression of Devine as 'this strange-looking man. We were all young and rather designed; we hadn't taken on middle-aged fat. But he was fat, and dark, and special. As a young person I found it very difficult to accept him physically. But he got on well with Michel right from the start; partly because the Motleys were doing the décor for *Noah*, and Michel was attracted to the whole ambiance of the studio. It was immediately a unit. Also they were good in relation to each other, both square and big and smoking their pipes; there was a real physical sympathy between them.'

The fact that Devine spoke French supplied one immediate link and there were other obvious points of contact. They both combined acute intelligence with a peasant stolidity. They shared a prodigious capacity for hard work and an artisan's sense of craftsmanship. Their agreement over the kind of theatre they wanted was probably the strongest bond between them. But, to begin with, the best clue to their sympathy is that they made each other laugh. They set about enlarging each others' vocabulary with obscenity duels, swapping the filthiest words they knew in French and English, and ringing each other up whenever they thought of something to cap the latest taboo-breaker. They told each other jokes, often missing the point until Devine had explained why mothers-in-law are funny in Britain and Saint-Denis had shed similar light on French comic stereotypes. Not that they needed words for this kind of exchange. Just as often it consisted of Saint-Denis miming a Norman peasant driving his cows, and Devine doing a London bobby making an arrest. And before long their pantomime became a double act: they would come back, for instance, from one of their money-raising expeditions and build up a joint portrait of the patron as a pompous ass. They also played together in French, and there are stories of them corpsing through Molière and finally having to give up in speechless hysteria. Given the seriousness of their future collaboration and the autocratic impression it made on some observers, it is worth preserving the image of these two large, pipe-smoking clowns.

Saint-Denis had a month to rehearse *Noah* and he did not so much produce the play as re-produce it, taking it move by move from the Quinze prompt book. The whole cast were locked in a rigid choreographic scheme. Alec Guinness, who trotted over the stage in the wordless role of the Wolf, says he was 'driven mad by Michel's meticulous little moves'. Gielgud says that, apart from humming 'The Sailor's Hornpipe' while he hammered the Ark, every detail in his performance was laid down by Saint-Denis. Devine came out of the show rather well: he had two small but decisive parts as the Wild Man who attacks Noah with an axe, and as the kindly Bear who turns savage after the voyage. Padded out as a Stone Age Michelin Man as the first and encased in a complete animal costume under a huge shaggy head as the second, he experienced professionally for the first time the release of working inside a mask. His lumbering movement and harsh voice, however limiting in other plays, were assets on this occasion. He was, as Gielgud says, obvious casting for a bear.

The production ran for ten weeks, and was received with interest and respect, though with nothing like the rapture that had greeted the Quinze version. 'The magic was gone,' wrote Tyrone Guthrie. Originally 'it was like a glamorous but rather *passée* woman in a big shady hat and heaps of tulle. The English production was the same lady in a cold, hard north-east light, a raincoat and no hat.'

What the venture had proved was that there was to be no grand alliance between the director and the star. For Saint-Denis it was a compromised excursion into alien boulevard territory. For Gielgud it was an instructive digression from his natural line of work. Temperamentally the two were as elementally opposed as earth and air. If Gielgud was a bird, Saint-Denis was a cage. So, although the two men were pushing for similar reforms, their paths were only once more to cross professionally. Otherwise, they retreated to their separate centres of power and viewed each other's work with respect from a distance.

Saint-Denis did not have the same inhibiting effect on other star actors. Olivier, for instance, was prepared to work for him in a spirit of blind obedience. Ashcroft, who went in fear of

Komisarjevsky the director, felt entirely confident with Saint-Denis. Upon Devine, his impact was akin to that of religious conversion, and the effect was apparent both on and off stage. 'He became', says Olivier, 'more important, and his opinions crystallized. His message was strictly bound up with Michel. But independently he was now somebody to be reckoned with in personality and opinion.' Meanwhile he had gone into Gielgud's New Theatre production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Ashcroft and Edith Evans returned to the parts they had played in the OUDS *Romeo*. Devine was cast as Peter, the same kind of marginal role that had come his way at the Vic, but he seized it as a chance to repay his debt to the Marx Brothers and Chaplin. He went on wearing a bowler hat and transformed this forgettable clown into a realist character study backed up with physical comedy tricks drawn from outside the classical theatre. Devine's Player King has vanished without trace, but there are plenty of people who remember his Peter. Ashcroft says he was 'wonderful' in the part, and Gielgud that he 'did marvels' with it. Olivier says, 'I was amazed how good he was. We were all surprised, because he hadn't shown that promise in his early appearances.'

But at the moment that the 'actor effort' was at last beginning to pay off, Devine turned his back on it. He continued to act when parts turned up, but henceforth his main energies were focused elsewhere. Saint-Denis had put solid ground under Devine's feet as a performer, and at the same time furnished him with an alternative ambition to the pursuit of good parts. Up in his New Theatre dressing room he took off Peter's hat and began drawing the next magic circle.