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T. Ryder Smith

Marat/Sade

A nytheatre voices cyber-interview



T. Ryder Smith is an actor who has been seen in many productions in NYC and around the country. In addition he has been seen both on TV and in film. He is well known for his many solo performances.

Marat/Sade is at the Classical Theatre of Harlem (HSA) through March 11, 2007. Read more about Marat/Sade [here](#).

You are a principal player in Classic Theatre of Harlem's *Marat/Sade*. Could you give our readers a short synopsis of the play and how and why you became interested in being part of this production?

*Marat/Sade is perhaps best summarized by it's full title: *The persecution and assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as performed by the inmates of the asylum at Charenton under the direction of the Marquis de Sade*.*

De Sade was a writer most notoriously known for his violent pornographic novels, but few people seem to know that he was also, ironically, a would-be mainstream playwright besotted with a love for boulevard theater. If he'd had his way, that's probably what he would have done with his life. But he'd been repeatedly jailed for various sexual misadventures and for his very barbed atheism, and his prison experiences had produced those unsurpassedly virulent prose works which made his name. He'd also played a significant radical role—between prison terms—in the French Revolution, in concert with Marat, before being jailed again under Napoleon, at Charenton, not for insanity, but as what they called "a patient of the police". A political prisoner, basically. But the head of the asylum was progressive, for his day, and allowed de Sade much freedom, including the right to stage theatrical spectacles for the other patients, as therapy.

Playwright Peter Weiss takes the liberty of imagining that one of those plays might have been about the French Revolution, and uses that play-within-the-play to explore issues of freedom and control, of the conflict between the desires of the individual and the needs of the State. And in his theatricalized environment—echoed by the "total theater" approach of the Classical Theatre of Harlem, which literally surrounds and incorporates the audience—the lines between performance and so-called reality blur: the patients playing the revolutionaries become genuinely defiant, the head of the asylum interrupts and suppresses the performance in defense of Napoleon and the Church, de Sade starts to introduce genuine violence into the stage choreography, etc. Eventually any idea of the event being "just" theater dissolves, and the "revolution" winds up being fought over again on the stage before us, with

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the audience as witness and participant.

I became interested in the production in the same way I become interested in any acting project: because I felt it had something important to say. I think many of us become actors because we want to have a conversation with our culture—with history, really—and theater, or any performing art, affords a particularly immediate, and personally accountable, means of doing that. As an artist I have an aesthetic, a world-view, and I don't ever want to feel I need to suppress or compromise it in the work I do. To me, acting is about honesty, and I've never seen how one could be honest in one's results if one's process is corrupt. So I tend to be drawn to work that is "experimental" or "transgressive", rather than "commercial", since those values are truer to my own beliefs. And while you barely survive, sometimes, at least you're able to cling to some sort of integrity. Or so you tell yourself, anyway.

But it's funny how committing to that aesthetic starts to allow certain roles to find you. In this case, for instance, I hadn't even heard that CHT was doing the play, the phone just rang one day and it was Christopher McElroen introducing himself and asking if I'd be willing to come in and audition. As it happened, neither of us had ever seen the other's work—one of the drawbacks to being lucky enough to work a lot is that it prevents you from getting to see theater!—but we'd heard good things about each other. I think I was the first actor he saw for the role—it was 10 in the morning on their first day of auditions—and since I was just going into tech with another play I'd barely had a chance to do more than re-read the script and to glance at the audition sides, and so did what I prefer in any case to do and just treated the audition as a rehearsal, following impulses and trying various approaches. Which can sometimes create a very weird event in the room, depending on how open-minded the director is, or not, but I've come to learn that the actor is auditioning the director as much as the other way around, and so any audition is in itself a test of whether or not the two should work together. And even in that empty, chilly audition room, with me trying various outrageous things and Christopher chuckling in that inscrutable way he has, the chemistry between us felt right. He liked my instincts and I liked that he trusted me.

But it was the conversations we had subsequent to that and prior to my accepting the role which persuaded me to do it, because I wanted to know: why this play? And why now? And was thrilled when Christopher said it was because of the pertinence of the play's arguments to our own political crises, the paradigm-shift going on since 9/11, that struggle between the forces of freedom and control. Which all might sound very heady, but we also quickly learned we each prefer to show things instead of explaining them, and agreed that one of the beauties of Peter Weiss' play is that it embodies all of it's themes and arguments in it's characters. It's a play about people who wind up MANIFESTING political and social effects in ways they might never have anticipated. As in life.

So I said yes and we were off.

You are playing the Marquis de Sade in this production. What special research and/or thought processes did you go through to decide how to attack this interesting role?

Interesting that you say "attack".

I love research—I think I must be a dramaturge in a parallel universe—and did an enormous amount of research for the play, but I think it's dangerous to ever let it show too much. I tend to let the research saturate me to the point

that I am able to consciously forget about it and allow it to emerge as instinct.

And so in this case I did research not only on the French Revolution—a period I've always been particularly drawn to—and about Sade—whose works I had read for many years, and whose political and philosophical positions I had a great admiration for—but also about sado-masochism, and 18th-century prisons, and about Charenton and the diagnosis and treatment of mental-illness at the time of the play. We had a good dramaturge with us, and also a guest-consultant who was a practicing mental-health physician, so there was a lot of material for us all to work with. But as I say, I think you have to internalize rather than externalize it all, lest it appear on stage as a sort of presentation of homework.

And in this case the historical researches might not especially matter to the extent that our production takes place as much today as it does in 1808, and we are playing theatrical characters as much as historical ones. We're figures in a theater-poem, suggested by history. So you play the poetry of the characters and the situation, in a kind of symbiosis with the historical facts which inspired them: I'm in Charenton and I'm in Guantanamo Bay, I am Sade the actual man and Sade the legend, but most of all I am the ideas of Sade, the poetry of his beliefs, a character who is a bundle of impulses and desires which—as Sade says and as I agree—are present in all of us all the time, whether or not we have the courage to admit it.

And in terms of the a-historical "emotional" research I did to find the part, I think I'll keep that private, except to say that I've arranged it so that I'm forced in performance to confront some deep-seated fears of mine, making each evening a pretty uncomfortable experience for me. Which is as it should be, I think.

And the whip is real, by the way. [In one scene of the play, Sade is brutally whipped.] The first time we ran the scene full out, in a dress-rehearsal, the protective lining of the shirt didn't work, and I wound up being really whipped, my back covered in welts and bruises afterwards. The actor who been doing the whipping was horrified, asking why on earth I hadn't stopped him. But I'd had to find out what it was like. And even now, in performance, with the best precautions, some lashes of the whip go wild, and catch me on the thighs or head, and I bleed. But if the performance is to be honest, and true to Sade, we have to risk that.

This is a large play and has been performed many times. What makes this production different than others you are aware of and what do you think audiences will find most interesting and timely in it?

I think you have to approach any play, no matter how "familiar" it may seem, as if it has never been done before, and we've certainly done that here. What makes this play pertinent is that it takes place in a world where Abu Gharib and Guantanamo Bay and "extraordinary renditions" are also taking place. It is not a period piece, nor is it presented in a way that aestheticizes the violence. Christopher's conception—and the total theater approach of CTH—means that everything happens INSIDE the play, that there is never a moment when it becomes, safely, "just" a play which the audience can dispassionately sit back and watch, or where they can take comfort in seeing "the hand of the director" make some sort of comment.

And I'm happy to say that it takes place in an asylum, and not in any sort of rest-home, or circus-like "madhouse". These are fervent and sometimes

dangerous people. The actors really are trying to rip those steel-mesh fences down each night.

Which makes it a very uncomfortable experience for some spectators, who seem to want an aesthetic distance from the event. Even some of the critics have complained—absurdly, to my mind, and pathetically - that the play was too noisy, too anarchic, too passionate, or that we "failed" to recite the verse with the proper "classical" clarity! Well, I say tell that to the people in Baghdad, or Afghanistan, or Darfur, or any slum. Tell them it's too noisy there. Complain to them that the arguments about who gets to live and who has to die aren't always clearly laid out and prettily articulated.

In terms of our hopes for the audience, I'm not sure it's ever useful for a performer to have any. But perhaps I would hope—and wish in retrospect that this had been true of some of the critics—that they come with an open mind, and receive the event on its own terms, rather than judging it on any preconceptions they may have arrived with. And also that they might have the courage to implicate themselves in the horrors taking place before them, and see they are no different than the ones taking place IN THEIR NAME outside the theater. That they might leave feeling uncomfortably responsible for whatever may happen NOW.

As one of the characters in the play asks: When will you stand up? When will you learn to take sides? When will you learn to see?

You are a prolific actor, having done many different types of roles. Several of those have been solo performances. What is the biggest difference for you in performing in a solo play as opposed to being part of an ensemble, and do you have a preference as to which you would like to do more of?

Whether a play has a cast of 40 or of 1, it is the presentation of an emotional and spiritual event, and you are working with the audience both as a character and as a source of transmutable energy, so there's not an enormous difference in that respect. A solo actor has to do a little more work in generating the initial energy and momentum of a performance, but after that the standard audience-actor exchange takes over.

The vast difference is in having no unpredictable, changeable, living actor up there with you to lend an immediate spark to the performance. It's a truism that one's performance is given for you by the other actors, that all you are really doing is reacting to each other, and so in a solo show you have to receive all of those reactions from the audience. (And that, whether or not you can see them! In *Thom Pain*, for instance, the house was pitch-dark, I couldn't see a single face.) And so you might have to charge the props, say, with a little more emotional weight, or the light, or certain turns of phrase. Anything to surprise you, keep you present.

Ideally, of course, you have so weighted everything onstage with the power to affect you, and are so sensitive to the emotions of the audience, that you don't even realize you are alone up there.

Until you get off-stage, that is. Which is the big drawback of solo shows: the loneliness. I've done five solo shows over the years and they have all been difficult in that sense. Theater is a social event, and being alone onstage, and having to consequently focus all of your attentions on the imaginary circumstances of the piece, and navigate it without any participation in the "feedback-loop" of the ensemble, you are left afterwards never being quite

sure—even when the audience has been raucous and when they've been quiet—whether it was a good or a bad show. Which starts to get troubling. And arriving at and leaving the theater alone is a fairly melancholy thing.

With the 40-actor ensemble of Marat/Sade, however, that's never a problem!

Privacy, though? Yikes! Not a chance!

You have also appeared in films and on TV. How do these experiences compare with live theater?

All acting is acting, and to me the difference between film and stage work seems primarily one of intensity. Film is more internalized—it's often sufficient to merely think something to have it register on screen - where theater is externalized, projected. But in either medium, so-called 'realism' can wind up being as stylized as a Restoration comedy, and vice-versa.

The larger difference comes from the temporal natures of the media: film is a captured rhythmic event whose energy is provided by the juxtapositions of image and sound, of which the actor is a single, and often only a minor, element. Whereas theater is a single enduring event, live, where the actors generate much of the animating energy themselves. And it's interesting to me that you can always tell an experienced stage actor in any medium because they seem to understand better the "architecture" of a scene or a speech, and how it fits in with the overall architecture of the piece, whereas film actors better understand the power of an individual "moment", knowing as they do that it is going to be turned over to the editor to incorporate into a larger montage.

Things get a little sticky when you have screen actors on stage presenting merely a series of private, unprojected moments with no drive or momentum, "doing too little", or stage actors on film over-reaching the stylistic or rhythmic parameters of the scene, "doing too much". I'm not sure every actor is equally suited to all media, and think the majority wind up finding their most comfortable space.

When you get the right role, though, and find the right style, in any medium, it's a tremendously satisfying feeling, and film is particularly thrilling for actors used to the stage, since once you get a scene right you can entirely let go of everything you did to lead up to it, (rather than hang on to it for the next performance, and the next after that), and can also rest in the knowledge that some small sample of your work will be preserved past your lifetime, as a kind of validation. But when the scene goes badly, the opposite is true, and you want to somehow erase it from history. Or you might do two really good takes and one bad one, but that's the one they use because the light was better, or something, and you want to add some subtitle to the screen: TAKE TWO WAS BETTER. It's nerve-wracking.

But then you might ask in general what that weird film-posterity you've committed yourself to is, and whether what you've preserved is something to be proud of at all.

So theater is truer to life, I think, in that it fades as we do. It exists only in the moment of it's happening, and then in human memory.

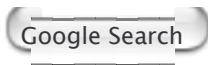
Making films is great fun, though, no matter what the result. Might one someday be given the gift of having great fun while also making a great film? One can hope.

But until, then, I'll stick with theater.

What are your plans for the near future?

I have no immediate plans. I don't like plans. I prefer to be surprised.

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"T. Ryder Smith"



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