# Angry young man going nowhere

## Thomas Ostermeier's adaptation of Büchner's classic Danton's Death at the Berlin Schaubühne

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Thomas Ostermeier is the 33-year-old head of one of Berlin's leading theatres, *Schaubühne*. Appointed to the theatre just over a year ago to revive its ailing fortunes, Ostermeier has concentrated on putting on a series of contemporary plays and dance pieces. In particular Ostermeier has personally directed work by the British playwrights Sarah Kane (*Greed*) and Mark Ravenhill ( *Shopping and F**king*). Kane and Ravenhill have both written plays featuring graphic depictions of sexual and physical violence dealing with the disintegration (or impossibility) of social relationships in today's developed industrial societies.

This work touches on an essential aspect of today's society—the way in which the money nexus strips every human being and relationship of profundity and dignity. There is an enormous torrent of anger detectable in these plays—some of it directed against modern capitalism. Nevertheless the lingering impression from the work of both authors is their fascination with what they see as the bestial nature of mankind, their concentration on pain and suffering, and the sort of cathartic celebration of death made popular by such thinkers as Michel Foucault.

On Sundays Ostermeier has opened up the *Schaubühne* to public discussion with politicians and postmodernist philosophers. Ostermeier's own direction of texts has met with a subdued critical reception—the most popular pieces presented at the Schaubühne are dance pieces. With his new production of *Danton's Death* Ostermeier has, for the first time, undertaken to direct one of the outstanding German theatre pieces of the nineteenth century, and one which has been part of the classic repertoire of German theatre in the twentieth. In his first year Ostermeier may have been able to attract a new, younger audience to his theatre, but in tackling *Danton's Death* he reveals he is simply out of his depth.

Georg Büchner was just 22 years old when he wrote the play in just five weeks in 1835. Its theme is the bloody second phase of the French Revolution, and it deals with a few days in the life of the Revolution's Justice Minister, Georges Danton. Danton played a leading role in the initial stages of the revolution, but now the revolution has entered into a new, more radical stage. Virtually overnight Danton's own radicalism appears moderate compared to the aims and rhetoric of the Jacobins under their leader Robespierre. The text of the play was reworked and made into a fine film by Polish director Andrzej Wadja.

Occasionally Büchner's powerful poetic text, musing on the contradiction between the avowed aim of the revolutionaries to improve the lot of the masses and the worsening situation of the people themselves, comes across on stage (to his credit Ostermeier has remained painstakingly true to the original text). But a host of elements in the new production grate. Too often scenes are broken up by extraneous elements and Ostermeier seems to lack confidence in the text and its theme.

Danton's wife is played by a muscular young actor and almost all of the female parts are taken by men. The issue of sensuality in human relationships is certainly prominent in Büchner's text but it is difficult to know what Ostermeier is trying to add by introducing a mix of genders and elements of transvestism into the play. Instead of relying on the power of Büchner's text, Ostermeier's Danton breaks down in one scene and writhes melodramatically about the stage in a fit of conscience. Crashing live music is simplistically employed to suggest the chaos of the revolution. Robespierre is portrayed as a ranting demagogue lacking any of the political finesse credited him by Büchner in his original text.

On the occasion of Danton's trial before the Committee for Public Safety (which Danton helped to found) Ostermeier makes an apparent reference to the Moscow Show Trials of the 1930s, with Danton blaring out his defence through the large type of radio microphone shown often in newsreel film of the Stalinist prosecutor Vyshinsky. But none of the effects appear to have been really thought through from the standpoint of adding to the drama. The eclecticism of many of the elements of the production indicates that Ostermeier has failed to grasp the significance of the events taking place and the subsequent debate which ensued on the development of the revolution itself.

In Büchner's original text Danton treads a thin line, trusting on the one hand that his popularity and reputation will save him from the guillotine, on the other hand reconciling himself to the possibility of death in eloquent soliloquies musing on the significance and purpose of life itself. Büchner's play was part of the debate among intellectuals and artists in Germany on the significance of the French Revolution. Leading German intellectuals followed the events in France very closely. Almost unanimously they welcomed the outset of the revolution and saw the popular movement in France and its radical demands as a means of breaking up the encrusted sediment of stagnant Germany, still divided at the end of the eighteenth and beginning

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of the nineteenth century inside a federation consisting of a myriad of small semi-feudal backward statelets. Confronted with a counterrevolutionary backlash at home and the danger of invasion by foreign armies, the revolution in France entered its second and more bloody phase in 1793-94.

Büchner's treatment of the revolution is revelatory for the way in which the main figures continually attempt to comprehend the events they are going through and to question the extent to which they are in control of social processes they had helped to set in motion. At one point in the play, as his own execution becomes more and more probable, Danton comments that "the revolution devours it own children." At another point Robespierre rejoins: "The social revolution is not yet over: He who makes only half a revolution digs his own grave." Both men are fervently striving to make sense of the dynamic of the revolution.

The more radical measures adopted by the Robespierre wing of the Jacobins to mobilise the masses led to a polarisation of those intellectuals who had initially given the revolution their support. The dismissal of the revolution and the mass movement which gave rise to it in favour of a retreat into *völkish*-nationalist homilies or the individual soul was to characterise much of the German Romantic movement in the first half of the nineteenth century. Others, such as the poet and dramatist Johann Wolfgang Goethe, made clear their distaste for the methods of the Jacobins, but regarded support for Napoleon's dictatorship as the only means of guaranteeing stability in Europe and retaining some of the gains of the revolution. For his own part Goethe wrote scathingly about the German Romantics, commenting that "the poets all write as though they were ill and the whole world a hospital."

Büchner made his own profound study of the French events—not from a mere academic or purely historical standpoint but in order to clarify his generation on the lessons arising out of the revolution. At the age of just 17 he followed events in Paris in July 1830, when a new popular uprising led to the deposing of King Charles X in favour of a new monarch, Louis Philippe, and the adoption of a liberalised constitution. The events in France were a catalyst for a broad social movement in Germany in opposition to high taxes and trade restrictions, which peaked in the so-called Hambach Festival in 1832, where up to 30,000 took part and calls were made for a united German republic. In his short adult life Büchner was politically active in such popular movements as a member of the "Society for Human Rights." Following repressive measures throughout the German Federation, the poet and playwright was forced to go into exile, suffering deprivations which certainly contributed to his tragically early death at the age of only 23. According to his brother Ludwig, in political terms Georg "was more socialist than republican."

*Danton's Death* exudes Büchner's own disillusion with the course taken by the French Revolution, but unlike many of the German Romantic poets who retreated from reality and sought in their verse to recreate a mythical *völkish* utopia, Büchner concerned himself mainly with portraying the events and personalities of the revolution as clearly as possible. In the course of his work Büchner acknowledged three primary influences: "the study of history, the study of poetic literature and the observation of what takes place around us" (quoted in Jan Christoph's excellent biography, *Georg Büchner*, Propyläen Taschenbuch, p. 540).

Against those who criticised his work for its "immorality" Büchner wrote in a letter to his family in 1835: "And regarding the so-called immorality of my book [ *Danton's Death*] I answer as follows: the dramatic poet in my view is nothing other than a history teller, but is superior to the latter in that he creates history a second time and allows us to transpose ourselves immediately in the life of an epoch instead of merely relating a dry story, to yield characters instead of characteristics, real figures instead of mere descriptions. His highest task is to recreate as closely as possible history as it really happened. His book can be neither as *moral* nor *immoral* as history itself; but history, dear God, was not made as a lecture for a girl's bed-chamber" (p. 553).

As for the French Revolution itself, if anything the controversy raging over its significance has intensified with time. Particularly in France itself there is a growing campaign amongst intellectuals and so-called postmodernists (many of them formerly attached to the French Communist Party) to denounce the revolution as a reactionary event and a blot on history. (The Russian Marxist George Plekhanov anticipated most of the arguments of the latest opponents of the French Revolution in a short and brilliant essay he wrote in 1890, "How the bourgeoisie remembers its own Revolution").

What is clear from the eclecticism and shallowness of his own presentation is Ostermeier's own lack of confidence and inability to come to grips with such historical issues. An intimate acquaintance with the historical background and controversies surrounding the French Revolution should not be regarded as a straitjacket restricting any interpretation of Büchner's text to the most literal. But a prerequisite for any serious attempt to reinterpret or modernise Büchner's text is an understanding of events which took place over 200 years ago, together with a sense of their relevance and actuality for modern society and political theatre. In this regard Ostermeier's latest production is sadly lacking.

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