

Schiller's Don Carlos: the "light and warmth" of a timeless play

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12 November 2004

The production of Friedrich Schiller's (1759-1805) classic historical drama *Don Carlos* (1787) directed by Michael Grandage recently finished its run at the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield, England. The play will transfer to the Gielgud Theatre in London from February 3, 2005 (previewing from January 28) for a limited 12-week run.

Don Carlos opened Grandage's final season at Sheffield Theatres and is his last production as associate director following a successful five-year stint in the city. Under his stewardship, Sheffield has hosted productions such as *As You Like It*, *Richard III*, and *The Tempest* by Shakespeare that have included acclaimed performances from actors such as Derek Jacobi, Kenneth Branagh and Joseph Fiennes.

Don Carlos has been newly translated by Mike Poulton, with excellent stage design by Christopher Oram. The cast includes Richard Coyle as Don Carlos alongside Claire Price (Elizabeth, Queen of Spain), the excellent Derek Jacobi (King of Spain) and Una Stubbs (Duchess of Olivarez). Mention must also be made of Emery Battis for his depiction of the Cardinal Inquisitor, who appears in the final scene prepared to wreak havoc and shed blood.

In 1987 Grandage himself appeared in the title role in an acclaimed revival, directed by Nicholas Hytner at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester.

Don Carlos is set in sixteenth-century Spain during the reign of Phillip II (1592—1597). The Crown Prince Don Carlos, heir to the throne, is in love with his childhood friend Elizabeth of Valois, to whom he was once betrothed but who is now his stepmother following her marriage to Phillip.

In order to resolve his all-consuming passion for Elizabeth, Carlos enlists the trust of his closest childhood friend, Rodrigo, Marquis of Posa, recently returned from Flanders, to set up a meeting with her. Carlos intends to confess his love to Elizabeth regardless of the consequences. The Marquis, hearing of the Carlos' quandary, has other designs and hopes to direct Carlos' unrequited passion towards a full-scale rebellion against his father's tyrannical regime.

The play opens with a scene shared between Don Carlos and Domingo, the King's Confessor, played by Michael Hadley. Above them is a large incense container that has been slowly swinging on a chain and exudes a pungent smell that lingers for the duration. The minimal scenery of the stage is dark, shadowy and threatening, concealing a number of exits. The few windows are high up and barred. Carlos is consumed by melancholy and crouched, seemingly crushed by this claustrophobic world, his father's bitterness towards him, his hatred for his father and the terrible guilt he harbours regarding his secret, unrequited love for Elizabeth. The mood has been captured superbly.

Upon later confronting Carlos, Rodrigo appeals to him to "step back into the light, Prince". However, he is not yet able to lift Carlos' mood—such is his profound alienation and sense of despair.

Don Carlos is set against the backdrop of the Spanish king's suppression of rebellions in his conquered territories, particularly the Low

Countries, and the insidious presence of the Spanish Inquisition. During the reign of Phillip II, the Inquisition still persecuted suspected heretics. The Catholic Church, in its fanatical defence of the decaying order, is a constant menace hanging over events. This presence is summed up in Poulton's treatment as King Phillip declares, "The instrument God places in my hand is terror." In one of the final scenes, Alba reveals that someone has been just been tortured, as if he were discussing the weather.

Secretive looking figures dressed in habits stand on the fringes of scenes throughout the play, conjuring up a court riddled with spies, eavesdropping, hushed words, intrigue and plotting. These are troubled times. There is more than a shade of Elsinore here.

Domingo is wary and feels threatened by the future, represented by Carlos and Elizabeth. He confides in the Duke of Alba, the king's bloodthirsty general, who is preparing to bloodily suppress a rebellion by the people of the Netherlands:

Elizabeth and Carlos were cast in the same mould
Reformers, innovators, both over-full of zeal

They have contracted the same terrible disease: Humanity
And Humanity you know is very contagious (Act II, scene 9)

Don Carlos was a product of Schiller's formative years as an artist and was originally based on a seventeenth century book by the Abbe de Saint-Real entitled "Dom Carlos Nouvelle historique" (1672). It is here that the fictional secret passion, an unfounded rumour, between the real life Carlos and Elizabeth was first penned.

The historical Don Carlos was born in 1545 to Maria Manuela of Portugal—the first wife of his father. Carlos was remembered as a somewhat nervous and eccentric figure, prone to paranoia, who exhibited early signs of mental illness. Amid rumours of him preparing to flee Spain, his father ordered him kept under virtual house arrest, where he died under mysterious circumstances in 1568 aged just 23.

Don Carlos was Schiller's next major play following his first, *The Robbers*.

The Robbers had received instant critical acclaim upon its appearance in 1782 at the Mannheim National Theatre. He had begun it while still at the austere and strictly regimented Wurttemberg Military Academy, which he had attended since the age of 14 after being spotted as a promising pupil. The academy was established by the Duke of Wurttemberg, Karl Eugen, in order to train the future officers and officials of the state. Whilst at the Academy, Schiller absorbed himself in the poetry of Klopstock and the works Shakespeare and the first phase of the Romanticist period known as the *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress). Johann Wolfgang Goethe's first novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), had a profound impact on the young Schiller.

Despite the promise of *The Robbers*, and its local success, the 21-year-old Schiller had been forbidden by Eugen to pursue a literary career. Eugen disliked Schiller's style and the content of the play. Ignoring this advice, Schiller fled the academy. *Don Carlos* was to be completed in various stages and fragments. He began writing *Don Carlos* whilst in

seclusion as an army deserter on the estate of a friend in Bauerbach, near Mannheim in Thuringia. Schiller spent the next 10 months living there as a fugitive.

Later he won a one-year contract at the Mannheim Theatre and was able to complete several other plays, including *Intrigue and Love*. The contract was not renewed and he lived for some time in considerable financial difficulty. Despite this he continued work on *Don Carlos* and published the first act in his own journal, the *Rhenish Thalia*. The play was completed over a period of four years, during which he published more extracts from his ongoing work in 1786 and 1787. The delay in completing the work was due to Schiller grappling with the emphasis, formal structure and content of the play and of his own study into the historical period being depicted.

Whilst superficially a “personal and family tragedy”, *Don Carlos* operates on many levels. It is very much a classic artistic text of the Enlightenment and was completed just two years before the outbreak of the French Revolution. Schiller engaged with the essential themes of the time—justice, equality, freedom of expression and conscience, religious bigotry and state persecution are all present in the work.

In her informative introduction to a 1996 translation of *Don Carlos* and a later work by Schiller, *Mary Stuart* (1800), Professor Lesley Sharpe traces the significance of the play and its place in the history of theatrical drama:

“Schiller looks at the history of the sixteenth century as a man of the Enlightenment. In the struggle for freedom of religion he sees the beginning of the struggle for a more tolerant and humane society. In *Don Carlos*, though the representatives of that new way of thinking are doomed, the movement of history is on their side. Phillip himself is aware that his empire is waning and Schiller brings forward the defeat of the Spanish Armada by 20 years in order to signal this incipient decline. Posa speaks with the assurance of one who knows the future, accusing Phillip of trying to put his hand into the spokes of a wheel that must turn” (*Oxford World Classics, Don Carlos and Mary Stuart*, introduction, page xv, ISBN: 0192839853, Oxford University Press).

In the initial concept of the play, *Don Carlos* was more central to the drama. But over time Posa became the more prominent character and the one who links the various subtexts of the story. Sharpe writes that Posa “has held himself aloof from the court thus seems to threaten none of the courtiers, who can therefore speak generously of him. His aloofness is a strategy to give him independence of action and it is this impression that attracts Phillip” (ibid. xxi).

A critical scene in the play is when Posa is first summoned to the king. During this meeting, Posa condemns despotic rule while arguing for a “natural” and gentler government in which peace reigns. Posa says to the king, “You want your garden to flower eternally! But the seed you sow is death”. His honesty is able to breach the king’s emotions, so that he is given the power of a second in command.

Sharpe remarks of Posa’s character that he is “of course an anachronism. No sixteenth century Spanish grandee could speak in such terms and Schiller was well aware of the fact. Woven into Posa’s arguments is Schiller’s knowledge of the political philosophy of his time. It is one of the vital debates of the Revolutionary age, Schiller’s own age, which is being enacted. In it we detect the impact on German intellectuals of the American War of Independence and hear echoes of the German natural law tradition, of Rousseau’s faith in natural sentiments and of Montesquieu’s famous characterisation in *De l’esprit des lois* [the Spirit of the Laws] of the different types of government” (ibid. xiii).

As important the character of Posa is to the structure of the play, Schiller considered that the persona of King Phillip was the essential fulcrum of the drama and that “If this tragedy is to move people it must do, as I see it, through the situation and character of King Phillip”.

The dimensions of his character; his continuing isolation, ever-growing

suspensions and disappointment are drawn out as the play progresses. He first refuses reconciliation with his son who begs him to change course and to allow him to go to Flanders instead of the Duke of Alba in order to establish peace, and later weeps to the astonishment of his court at what he considers Posa’s humiliating “betrayal” of his trust.

Sharpe comments in her introduction, “Though we recoil in horror at his desire to destroy all that remains of Posa’s vision, Phillip himself is revealed to be the unhappy pawn of the Inquisition, chastised by the fanatical blind Cardinal Inquisitor for having forgotten for a moment that for kings human beings are simply numbers” (ibid. xii).

The completion of *Don Carlos* in 1787 invoked in the author an artistic crisis of some magnitude. The play can now be seen as a transitional stage between his earlier and more mature works. He was never entirely satisfied with *Don Carlos* and was concerned with the problems of form and structure in drama and what role art was to play in a truly developed and mature human culture.

Schiller wrote a series of letters in an attempt to clarify the meaning of the play in response to its critics. In one he summarised his wish that the play “take truths which, to anyone well-disposed toward humankind, must be held as most sacred, but which, up to now, have remained the property of the exact sciences, and to carry these over into the realm of the arts, to quicken them with light and warmth, and, thus implanted in the human heart as a vital, active motive, to reveal them in powerful struggle with the human passions.”

Following the completion of *Don Carlos*, Schiller did not write a play for more than 10 years, devoting himself to a study of historiography, tragic art theory and dramatic form. He also authored a series of aesthetic essays, works of historical artistic research and a large number of poems. During this time he again turned to Shakespeare and read Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The first fruit of this labour was the first part of a *History of the Revolt of the United Netherlands from Spanish Rule* (1788).

Comparisons between Hamlet and the character of *Don Carlos* have been made, and there are certainly parallels. Schiller himself said, “*Don Carlos* has the soul of Hamlet ... and my own pulse”.

He revered Shakespeare and attempted to appreciate the significance of the new dramatic form contained within *Hamlet* and the extraordinary new and vital persona of the title character. In his *On the Art of Tragedy* (1792), Schiller identified the weakness, the “Achilles heel”, of classical tragedy as: “the blind subordination to fate” which is “always demoralising and offensive for free, self-determining beings”.

Since its first performances, *Don Carlos* has found a receptive audience. In its German birthplace, some of the protagonists supporting the revolution of 1848 would quote in their speeches the words of Posa. And in his study, *Russian and Soviet Theatre—Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, Konstantin Rudnitsky recounts that Schiller’s plays held a special place in the theatre of the new revolutionary society of the Soviet Union.

“In the Civil War years, the plays of Friedrich Schiller enjoyed huge popularity. Their freedom-loving spirit, their characteristic opposition of heroism and villainy, their wealth of dramatically effective situations—all this guaranteed success with an unsophisticated audience. *Intrigue and Love* and *The Robbers* were enthusiastically acted by amateurs in numerous clubs. The Bolshoi Dramatic Theatre in Leningrad, led by Alexander Blok, Maria Andreevna and Maxim Gorky, opened on February 5, 1919 with a production of Schiller’s *Don Carlos*” (*Russian and Soviet Theatre—Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, page 75, ISBN: 0500281955, Thames and Hudson).

Rudnitsky continues, “The attraction of the broad masses to the classical repertoire was explained not only by the fact that the beauty and emotional richness of plays by Griboedov, Gogol and Ostrovsky, Shakespeare and Moliere, Schiller and Beaumarchais and other great writers were revealed for the first time to audiences who had previously not had the opportunity of going to the theatre ... they served as it were to

unite the distant past with the present day and instilled in the audience feelings and ideas close to and consonant with the Revolutionary struggle” (ibid. 48).

The Bolshevik revolutionary and literary figure Anatoli Lunacharsky noted of the play that “in this, according to Schiller’s idea, first apostle of the idea of freedom, we the people of the revolutionary avant-garde, can in a sense recognise our predecessor ... not for one moment does the audience doubt in the final triumph of Posa’s idea, a triumph which Posa himself, of course, could never have foreseen” (ibid. page 49).

The reappearance of Schiller’s *Don Carlos* on the stage in Britain today, with its passionate attempt to imbue the ideas of the Enlightenment with “light and warmth”, to show the struggle between reason and superstition, between freedom and tyranny, is to be welcomed. One hopes that Grandage’s rewarding production receives a wide audience during its forthcoming performances in London.



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