

Danton's Death at the National Theatre

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A review of *Danton's Death* by Georg Büchner in a new version by Howard Brenton at the National Theatre in London, directed by Michael Grandage.

Danton's Death, the famed play by German writer Georg Büchner, follows the conflict which took place in March and April 1794 within the "Mountain"—the most revolutionary wing of the French National Convention.

Georges Danton had been one of the leaders of the French Revolution along with Maximilien Robespierre, but he began to have doubts about the Terror that had consigned opponents of the revolution to the guillotine. He was arrested, condemned and executed. Robespierre himself would not long survive him. He would be guillotined a few weeks later in July, or Thermidor as it was known in the revolutionary calendar. The play concerns the political crisis within the revolutionary movement that led to the deadly conflict between Danton and Robespierre and the beginning of the reaction that would shortly bring Napoleon Bonaparte to power.

The events and personalities involved in this conflict have been an endless and fruitful source of fascination for writers, historians and revolutionaries. Büchner's play was one of the first and most brilliant literary attempts to grapple with the subject. He wrote it in 1835 in a matter of five weeks when he was on the run from the authorities in Hessen, where he had been involved in a revolutionary uprising. So shocking did it seem in the 19th century that it was not premiered until 1902. Since then it has come to be regarded as one of the key starting points of modern European literature. It is perhaps better known in Germany than on the British stage, but it is a play to which English writers have repeatedly returned. Trevor Griffiths has written about Danton's last night in *Who Shall be Happy ... ?* and Danton reappears in his *A New World* meeting with Thomas Paine in prison as he does in Büchner's play. The National Theatre production is Howard Brenton's second version of the play.

Why should this play have such a powerful attraction? The reason is the range of themes, all them relevant to the modern world, which it addresses. *Danton's Death* examines the nature of revolution, the relationship between men and women, friendship, class, determinism, materialism and the role of theatre itself. It seems to offer an almost inexhaustible source of inspiration. The problem is that if any one of those themes is emphasised at the expense of the others then the entire character of the work is transformed.

Michael Grandage's production of *Danton's Death* at the National Theatre, starring Toby Stephens as the revolutionary Georg Danton, is beautifully staged. It uses a simple and elegant

set to good effect. The final execution scene is powerfully done. Many of the performances are first rate: Elliot Levey as Robespierre, Kirstie Bushell as Julie, Danton's wife, and Eleanor Matsuura as the prostitute Marion, are particularly strong. Yet something is missing. What on earth is it all about? Why is Robespierre trying to kill Danton? Why can Danton not resist? It might almost be a personal dispute between these two men and Danton's inability to avoid his death the result of an unaccountable, psychological lethargy on his part.

The immediate problem is that Brenton has removed two small scenes from the original play. Both of them are crowd scenes. They are very short scenes in an already short play and it is difficult to see that there was any good reason for dropping them. Running time is hardly a question. The play gains nothing in clarity without them. In fact it loses something crucial. The effect of taking them out is to unbalance the whole work because omitting them removes a character that has a vital role to play in the conflict between Danton and Robespierre. That character is not an individual, or rather it is the many individuals who make up the crowd, the mass of the population, the *sans culottes*, the poor who must get their living by selling their labour and their bodies on the streets of Paris. Once this element is removed from the play we are left with a largely personal drama in which two individuals are pitted against one another in a conflict that lacks any substantial basis in the wider framework of social relations.

Danton without the crowd is not really Danton. He is left as a rather effete, weary man who simply cannot be bothered to take the necessary action to defend himself. What brought Danton to the head of the revolution was his relationship with the *sans culottes*. He expressed their material interest in overthrowing the unequal state of affairs that existed in France under the *ancien regime* and establishing a more just society. Robespierre was able to defeat him because he still reflected the interests of that social layer. If that relationship is left out of the play then Robespierre loses his historical stature and is reduced to a rather dogmatic man with a prissy concern for morality. Neither man is truly himself once the crowd scenes are taken out of the play.

Other characters and themes of the play are similarly left hanging in the air without the crowd scenes. The prostitute Marion has a long monologue in which she explains her attitude to sexuality. It is strangely out of context without one of the missing scenes in which a husband and wife argue about their daughter who has turned to prostitution to support the family. In isolation Marion's monologue appears distinctly misogynistic as though Büchner wanted to present women as calculating, mercenary and lacking in profound human feelings.

The point which Büchner is making only becomes clear when Marion's speech is set beside one of the missing scenes in which a citizen declares, "Yes, a knife, but not for the poor tart. What has *she* done? Nothing. It's her hunger what whores and begs. A knife for the people that buy the flesh of our wives and daughters."

When Marion's monologue and the missing scene are brought together we can see that Büchner is saying that the quality of personal, sexual relations is diminished by a society that is dominated by social inequality and in which some people must sell their sexual favours to survive. Marion's lack of affect has a social basis when both scenes are present. The absence of genuine intimacy in private sexual relations is organically connected in the play to the character of public social relations.

In the 19th century *Danton's Death* offered a new way of looking at sexual relationships and the dramatic techniques Büchner developed to express his insights were no less new. Even in the early 20th century when Büchner was revived there was something shocking about his clear-eyed, unsentimental attitude towards sexuality and his sudden shifts from intensely private and intimate scenes to the public arena. To cut these sudden shifts out of the play is to make it a less revolutionary piece of theatre than it was and has no justification when modern theatre audiences would hardly be confused by such a technique. What was a revolutionary technique in Büchner's day is the stock in trade of modern cinema and television. A film or television director can cut between scenes as rapidly as Büchner and expect his audience to grasp what is happening.

Howard Brenton has no problem with such rapid shifts in his own television work for the thriller *Spoons*. Modern theatre-goers already have this dramatic vocabulary at their disposal. What they do not have is Büchner's grasp of the impact of gross social inequalities on intimate sexual relationships which they are predisposed to understand in precisely those sentimental terms that Büchner rejected. Marion's monologue retains its shocking character in the National Theatre production, but it is reduced to a purely personal statement that has no wider social significance once the crowd scenes are removed. Like Danton and Robespierre she has been pulled out of context by this simple excision of two small scenes. The revolutionary implications of her speech are lost and the audience's preconceptions are not challenged.

The fact that such a small piece of editing can have such a major effect on the play points to the masterly precision of Büchner's technique. He was by training a scientist and doctor. When he died in 1837 he had just won a teaching position at the University of Zurich. The play was written on his dissection table and it has something of the character of a dissection about it in which each organ, each social element, is laid out before us in an entirely objective manner. Büchner is offering us an autopsy of the French Revolution performed at the moment when it reaches its fatal impasse. He allows us to examine his meticulously prepared specimens and draw our own conclusions rather than beating us over the head with his message. It is a powerful dramatic technique so long as all the parts are present. Those two missing scenes, small though they are, are essential to the play.

Büchner's dramatic method was in keeping with his form of materialism, which was intensely biological. He was inclined to

see society as an organism in which each part was organically related to another so that social processes and the actions of individuals were to a large extent predetermined. Consciousness, either social or individual, played a very subsidiary role for Büchner. His materialism is in that sense pre-Marxist. In terms of philosophy this is a weakness, but as far as drama is concerned it need not be, particularly in relation to the French Revolution whose participants had only a limited understanding of the role of consciousness themselves. But Büchner's form of determinism has always provided an opportunity to present *Danton's Death* as an essentially anti-revolutionary play.

Danton approaches his death for the most part fatalistically and the flashes of resistance that he expresses prove to be futile. Some critics have interpreted Danton as a self-portrait of Büchner and suggested that he had become disillusioned with revolution by the time he wrote the play. A letter he wrote to his fiancée Minna Jaeglé at about this time is often cited as evidence of his pessimism. But Büchner was engaged in intense secret revolutionary activity while he was writing *Danton's Death*. It is difficult to square the image of a disillusioned man with the man who was plotting to break his comrades out of prison and establish a printing press to spread the message of social equality in semi-feudal Germany. Nonetheless, this is the interpretation that Brenton and Grandage offer the audience at the National. Revolutions necessarily end in futility amid factional fighting and senseless bloodshed according to this version of the play. Taking out the two crowd scenes indelibly fixes this interpretation.

It is an interpretation that says more about the outlook of the current intellectual world and one time left-wing playwright Brenton than it does about Büchner. In the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the decline in trade union activity in the West, it has become extremely difficult for writers to imagine a revolution in anything other than the most disastrous terms. There is a sharp contrast here between Brenton's foray into the 18th century and Trevor Griffiths' *A New World: A Life of Thomas Paine*. The American and French Revolutions provide Griffiths with a context in which revolution can still be imaginatively recreated and a connection made with contemporary class concerns. But for Brenton, the French Revolution only offers further confirmation of the hopelessness of the entire revolutionary project whether in the 18th century or the 21st.



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