

# education

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## *The Philanthropist Lecture Series*

On April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2009 as part of Roundabout Theatre Company's ongoing Lecture Series, Ted Sod, Dramaturg for the Education Department interviewed Shawn Marie Garrett, theatre scholar and critic; contributing editor of *Theatre* and professional dramaturg, followed by audience Q & A.

**Ted Sod:** Let's talk a little bit about Christopher Hampton. Our audiences recognize that he wrote the stage and screen adaptations of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. He wrote *The Philanthropist* when he was twenty-three, yes?

**Shawn Marie Garrett:** Yes. Twenty-three is a young age at which to write a play, especially a play as formal and sophisticated and delicate and intricate as this one. It's impressive. Hampton is known for his variety. It's very difficult to pin him down. He's done everything from writing librettos to directing films. He does quite a bit of writing for film. I think if we could say one thing it's that he's the master of adaptation, particularly adaptation for film. But this play, as you mentioned, was written when he was still a student at Oxford. It was first produced at the Royal Court, which is a theatre in London very well known for new plays. *The Philanthropist* went from the Royal Court to the West End. So it was remarkable success for Hampton, I think it was only the third play he had written.

**TS:** When he was eighteen he wrote a play called *When Did You Last See My Mother?* which also moved to the West End. What can you tell us about the period in which this play was written?

**SMG:** Hampton wrote the play in 1969, and in 1970 it was produced at The Royal Court Theatre. It's very different from a lot of other artistic enterprises that were going on at the time. Obviously, the world was aflame in 1968, '69, and '70. There was a revolution in the streets of Paris that students were leading and involved in. In this country, many campuses were erupting with protests and so on. I think, among other things, this play is a response to is the lack of that kind of activity at Oxford. There was hardly any kind of student protest at Oxford. Hampton said that it was a more sedentary place. He used the word "sedentary." Certainly this play was a response to his being at Oxford at the time.

**TS:** He is also riffing off Moliere's play *The Misanthrope*, correct?

**SMG:** Correct. Hampton read French and German at Oxford. Moliere and Racine, two playwrights from the Baroque high classical period of French theatre, were his special subjects. He did indeed take Moliere's play, *The Misanthrope*, as his inspiration for *The*

*Philanthropist*. In fact, in the play there's a kind of wink, wink moment, in which one of the characters asks "name the play in which a man who loathes humanity outrages everyone around him." And no one answers. The answer is *The Misanthrope*. It's certainly not in any way necessary to know Moliere's *The Misanthrope* to appreciate *The Philanthropist*. *The Misanthrope*, as the title suggests, is about a man who loathes people. He just can't stand everyone around him. He's in a milieu that is very well-to-do; leisure class people who spend most of their time sitting around, discussing things and being witty, playing games with each other, sometimes quite cruel. It is a little bit like the world of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Hampton said that he felt like the modern equivalent for that might be Oxford, where people have the time to indulge in things like love of language, or witty word play, or anagrams; competitions on the sofa or around the living room table that are purely intellectual. Obviously, the character of Phillip, who is the philanthropist, is the opposite of *The Misanthrope*. He's a guy who infuriates everyone because he's so nice. I think mostly Hampton wanted to write something that was the opposite of *The Misanthrope*. What if it was a guy who infuriated everyone because he thought everyone and everything was fine? How might this kind of character be intolerable? And then I think the other things he took from Moliere, in general, and *The Misanthrope* in particular, is the very strict formal structure of the play. The director has very nicely divided the scenes and each one is associated with one of the seven deadly sins as I'm sure you all saw. Hampton subtitles *The Philanthropist* "A Bourgeois Comedy," which is very much the thing that Moliere made famous.

**TS: Why is it perfect that this play be set in Oxford?**

SMG: First of all Oxford is quite decentralized. It consists of various residential colleges. As a student and even as a Don, a professor, you are affiliated with Oxford, but your closest affiliation is with whatever college you may be associated with. In the case of Hampton, it is New College. Secondly, the main way in which knowledge is conveyed to students is through tutorials. The tutorials are private sessions in which the student and the professor get together. The student brings a paper that he or she has written, reads it, and the professor listens apparently while drinking sherry. They basically critique the student's efforts. The result of all of this is that your entire experience is guided by three, or at most four, Dons. In other words, you don't have this wide exposure to a large number of professors as you normally do in American Universities. You take five classes with maybe five different professors every semester. In this system you develop extremely close relationships with three, maybe four professors. The Dons live among the students in these residential colleges. Obviously, like any academic setting, the whole idea of the "ivory tower" is much in effect at a place like Oxford. Believe me, as a resident of Barnard's ivory tower, I can say that I completely identified with this play in many respects. I recognize many of the attitudes. One of my friend's spoke of just being surrounded by the ghosts of the past at Oxford. It's really a medieval town and medieval university. If you're sensitive, he said, you constantly feel both inspired by the people who've gone there and the contributions that have been made by the university; but you're also a bit intimidated. Most people leave feeling uplifted and glorified by having been at Oxford. Or alternatively they feel a little bit rebellious against that tradition or

sometimes a combination. And obviously the class system in England is so much more pronounced than it is here. And at Oxford that's even more the case.

**TS: Hampton breaks his plays down into four categories and he calls *The Philanthropist* a character play, as he does *Les Liaisons*...do you see it that way?**

SMG: I was struck by the fact that it seems to be to be a very concerned with morals and ethics in this play. In terms of what drives the play, certainly the characters are more important than the plot. Not much happens, or when something does happen, it happens and the consequences are very few. Unlike Moliere, there's not this sort of intricate weaving of events that then have effects that feed the next event. I feel as if events happen in order for us to see how characters react to them and not because we're drawn in by the suspense of what the consequences of those events might be.

**TS: What about the portrayal of women in this play? Is this very much of its time? It seems like Araminta's a student and she beds her professor.**

SMG: She's very contemporary in a way.

**TS: And Celia talks about wanting somebody to handle her. Then there's a character, Liz, who doesn't speak...**

SMG: She apparently is the most passionate and exciting. I think that certainly Feminism is in the air in the play. I think it seems as if Hampton has integrated some of the questions that were being raised at the time through the character of Celia, but I don't really feel that we've solved any of those problems. I ask myself: "Why would someone as intelligent and vibrant as Celia say, 'I don't think you can control me'?" She's attracted to Philip because he's safe; perhaps because he's not abusive and not emotionally aggressive.

**TS: Does it feel of it's time, in terms of the women...**

SMG: It feels of it's time, but it doesn't feel dated to me. I guess I'm sad to say that a question like "Why are young women attracted to men who aren't, perhaps, good for them?" can still be asked today. I can't tell you the number of times that I've seen these kinds of situations playing out as I'm sure all of you have.

**TS: Phillip's a philologist. This is a very unusual occupation. The only famous philologist that I'm aware of is Jacob Grimm, who was, of course, part of the Brothers Grimm. He studied philology because he was interested in the German language.**

SMG: I don't want to bore everyone to tears on the subject of philology, but I think there's a couple of interesting things to say about philology with respect to this play. One is that philology means that "love of language," and a person who studies philology really studies language; but I think that it's interesting to note that there are two kind of

branches. I'm oversimplifying a little bit. One is the study of the history of language and that's what Phillip is oriented towards. In other words, philologists of that type might study Sanskrit, they might study ancient languages, or they might study modern languages like German or English. They would study the history of the language, the etymology, the contributions of Latin, Anglo-Saxons and English; when certain words came into play and how they were shaped over time. So that's quite academic. It's something that's quite detached one could say. There's another branch of the study language that became very hot in academia. It's actually alluded to in this play; Structural Linguistics. And that involves a historic study of language. It involves language as it is put together now; looking at the structure of any given language and seeing how it mechanically works. How does language work when people use it? This is something that Phillip does not understand at all. He can't understand the performance of language. In other words, people may say to him, "I can't stand you," and they may mean, "I love you." But he can't read those...

**TS: Emotions?**

SMG: The emotions, correct. Or what Noam Chomsky calls "the performance of language."

**TS: I want to talk about what's going on in the play outside the walls the room they are in at Oxford. Members of Parliament are being murdered. Authors are being shot.**

SMG: Alarming things are happening.

**TS: And the characters are oblivious.**

SMG: I think Hampton is raising the question. He doesn't seem to present a very satisfactory answer. There's a character who blows his head off. There's the guy who goes in and mows down various members of Parliament. There's F.A.T.A.L., an organization that's going to kill 25 of the best known British authors... I do feel that we're meant to take it comically; probably because it's filtered through this very sheltered world of Oxford. "Oh, dear! That's awful! Would you like a cup of tea?" It was 1970, and there was a feeling that the world was collapsing, just like there is now. One could become depressed by looking at the news and thinking about it, but what can one really do about it? One feels totally helpless. Again, I don't think Hampton presents any sort of answer here. I don't think he has an answer. I'm not sure anybody has the answer; but he certainly raises the question. It seems like so many things in this play are opposing poles. The pole of isolation and being resigned is juxtaposed with the pole of being totally committed to something. Neither of them is necessarily morally right, but they're just. I think both are there for us to measure.

**TS: Alright, it's your turn to ask some questions. We've done plenty of Pinter here, as you long-time subscribers know; but we rarely do that generation of playwrights that comes after Pinter, which includes: Hampton, Stoppard, Churchill, David**

**Hare, etc. British plays from this particular period are new for many of our subscribers and we're curious about what you make of it, and what your questions are.**

**Q1: You haven't discussed the title of the play. Obviously it's not the way you normally use the word "philanthropist." Do you think you could explain that?**

SMG: It has a similar root as the word misanthrope in "anthro", being "mankind". One is a misanthrope if one hates mankind. With *The Philanthropist*, I think maybe he is evoking an older meaning which is slightly more obscure; a lover of humankind, which I think describes Phillip.

**Q2: What other playwrights went to Oxford with Hampton?**

TS: I don't really know... I know they have graduated 25 prime ministers, but I don't know what other playwrights!

SMG: I'm not sure who was there at Oxford with him.

TS: We don't know who was there, but I will tell you that I interviewed David Grindley, the director, and I asked him what the difference is between Pinter and writers like Hampton, Hare, and Churchill. He said the main difference was that a lot of the generation before – Pinter, Coward, Rattigan – were actors prior to being writers. Many of the younger writers were university-trained.

SMG: One thing that distinguishes Hampton is that he went to university. So did David Hare. The person that Hampton is most closely associated with is David Hare. As soon as they graduated from Oxford, they, together with another playwright who's not quite as well known, formed a theatre company. They took over the Royal Court Theatre; they were the new generation. All of their plays are quite different from the earlier generation in that they are very intellectual and they're more interested in philosophical problems. They're a little bit wittier; the writing is a little bit lighter.

TS: And certainly with Hare, he's political. He is probably considered more political than Hampton.

**Q3: In this particular play, I sense a change of tone in the second act. Do you have any comments about that?**

TS: I think that's a very good observation. When I saw the play, the people behind me had a very hard time with the first act, but got really into it in the second act. Do you think that's because the infidelity comes into play in act two, Shawn?

SMG: I'm wondering if you are talking about the first scene in particular, which does seem almost to belong to a different play. In any case, whether we are talking about the first act of the performance, which takes place in a couple of scenes, or just the first

scene, I think the play picks up steam frankly. The first scene is kind of shocking, and it's almost as if it's some kind of prologue. Hampton introduces the subjects that this play is going to deal with: commitment versus resignation and the love of language versus action. It feels a little bit like a prologue and I think it's quite different from act two.

TS: I want to tell you that I did asked Christopher Hampton about the scene in which John shoots himself and the audience gasps. It must have been truly shocking forty years ago. He said he didn't have it end that way at first; John just walked out of the room. It ended benignly. That's when he came up with the idea of the student shooting himself, which, of course, plays out beautifully at the end.

SMG: It does feel a little bit to me like a device.

TS: The shooting at the end or the beginning? I feel like plays of this period deal with exposition and they require our patience. I think our patience has dwindled, and we want the plot to kick in. The writing is different; it's about the characters, about understanding who these people are. Braham, really, is sort of an egomaniac who is used as the butt of humor, but sort of shows us what the other two men aren't and, of course, is there for Celia to go to bed with.

SMG: And wears a fabulous costume.

TS: Yes, he wears a fabulous costume right off of Carnaby Street.

**Q4: This is more a comment than a question. The play was advertised as a comedy and when I saw it, I thought it was more of a tragi-comedy. It opens with a very tragic act, which everybody seems to think is comical. The actors onstage make fun of it. They don't see it as a tragedy. At the beginning, when he sits down, everyone in the audience expects that it's going to be a tragedy, but at the end and it's a comedy. It's the reverse. Philip's a philologist who takes everything very literally. He doesn't understand other people and they don't understand him. It's very existential...which is absurd in a way.**

TS: Well, I think you made some good points. It's really up to the audience to interpret whether they see this as a comedy or not. We know that Hampton wanted to write a comedy. He subtitled it "A Bourgeois Comedy." He sees it as a comedy, Whether or not you do, of course, is up to you. I can't tell you how many times I have been asked, "Why is this play being marketed as a comedy? I didn't find it funny." And there's nothing I can really do about that. You know what I'm saying? You either respond to it humorously or you don't. Now I think that it's a very provocative comedy. It provokes thought and there is an undercurrent of real emotion. I think Hampton is very clever at turning it on us. He doesn't want you to get too complacent and feel comfortable. He keeps pulling that rug out from under you.

SMG: The ending is just great.

TS: The audience really enjoyed the ending today.

SMG: What you observe, I think, is absolutely true. I think that's very true of the inspiring play. *The Misanthrope* is a very dark comedy, maybe Moliere's darkest comedy. You know, to be an academic, I would say the only actual definition of a comedy is a play that ends in marriage. It doesn't actually have to be funny. Interestingly, this play does not end in marriage.

**Q5: I thought the presentation of the letters that become names of the seven deadly sins very interesting, but I had a hard time finding connections to greed and gluttony.**

TS: I read that one of the other inspirations for Hampton writing this play was that each one of the characters is more or less represented as a seven deadly sin. Celia is pride. Braham is greed. Liz is envy. John is wrath. Don is sloth. Araminta is lust. It's Phillip who is gluttony, and that's the one I'm still trying to find my way into. Unless, of course, it's just like he eats words and keeps them inside, I don't know, I'm still struggling with that.

SMG: He drinks a lot.

**Q6: Was the setting in the original production like this one?**

TS: The setting is a directorial choice. See how the set looks like its floating? David Grindley wanted to keep this flavor of sort of Oxford rooms, if you will. He also wanted to introduce something modern with his designers, to give it sort of a contemporary feel. So that scrolling of letters into words is his touch.

**Q7: Phillip may have loved people, but he seemed to lack the emotional or sexual energy to love the individual. When Celia decided not to marry him, he thought okay, possibly someone else. He seemed so attuned to words and analyzing them that he did not get any emotional overtone to the words.**

TS: Yes, we mentioned a little bit earlier that the emotion eludes him. Yes, we feel that way too.

SMG: That maybe links into the title *The Philanthropist*. As you said he loves people with a capital P. He loves humanity, but he can't seem to love an individual. I think your observation is quite astute.

TS: I feel like he does love Celia, but it's the way he knows how to love her and it is just not enough for her. I also think that he doesn't want to be alone.

SMG: That's what I feel.

TS: I feel the loneliness factor is so clear when he takes action. He actually does something very active when he throws Don out of his room. He makes a stand and says, "Get out!" It doesn't last very long. He calls him right up and says "Sorry," and "let's not get sentimental," and "I'd love to eat with you." He is someone who is on a trajectory, but it's incrementally changing.

SMG: I don't know if he changes.

TS: You don't think he changes? I see change in that anagram at the end. I think he's saying, "I'm going give this up." "Oh thee hated anagram" comes from...

SMG: Could be... of course, if he blew his brains out, I would be totally persuaded that he changed.

TS: Well, yes.

SMG: I was very glad that he didn't.

TS: Half of our subscribers would not re-subscribe if he blew his brains out.

**Q8: One thing I noticed is that this play has some resemblance to themes in the play Butley...**

TS: Yes, that play is by Simon Gray.

**Q8: And it had Nathan Lane in it?**

TS: Yes, the revival had Nathan Lane playing the title role. The original production starred Alan Bates. And you're right. It's about a professor who's caught in a romantic triangle if you will and yes, it's from the same period.

SMG: I did write down other plays that were going on in the London theatre at the time: Pinter's *Silence, Night* and *Old Times* were all '69-'71; Edward Bonds' *Saved*, the infamous play, which was censored because it was so violent and terrifying.

TS: Bond really pushed that violence button like Sarah Kane did.

SMG: Yes, exactly. Peter Brook was in his theatre of cruelty phase; he was doing a play about Vietnam. Jerzy Grotowski, the famous Polish director, was very influential, lots of ensemble theatres: The Living Theatre, The Open Theatre. There was a lot of experimentation going on. My impression is that *The Philanthropist* is a different kind of play for this time period.

TS: I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Shawn Marie for educating us today. Thank you for joining us, we appreciate your patronage. Our next lecture is on May 2<sup>nd</sup> for *Waiting for Godot*. We'll see you then.