

## Interview with JoAnne Akalaitis

The following is an interview conducted by *Germanic* guest editor Martin Puchner with JoAnne Akalaitis, internationally acclaimed director, including of the recent *In the Penal Colony*. *In the Penal Colony* is a “pocket opera,” directed by JoAnne Akalaitis, with music by Philip Glass, a libretto by Rudolph Wurlitzer, and set design by John Conklin. It was presented by Classic Stage Company, New York, 2001. The show premiered on 31 August 2000 at A Contemporary Theatre (ACT) in Seattle and traveled to the Court Theatre, Chicago, before moving to New York. For a description of this production, see Shawn-Marie Garrett’s “Appendix: Kafka—A Selected Production History” in this issue.

**Martin Puchner:** Could we start by talking about a central figure in your production, namely the machine itself?

**JoAnne Akalaitis:** It was one of the most interesting and creative aspects of the project to figure out what the machine would be like. It could be a symbol or a metaphor. I first said there could not be an actual machine, that it had to be a bunch of rocks on the stage or something like that. Then finally we said, well, we have to deal with it, we have to have a machine. We were all afraid not to have a machine because we realized that the only way to do the show was to have the machine. It was the biggest commitment we made. And it was one of the most amazing creative events of my life, dealing with John Conklin about how to make the machine. It was the genius of John to figure out how to do the machine, to actually have it happen.

**MP:** Yes, I can see the desire to turn the machine into a metaphor, but the story insists so vehemently on literalness [. . .]

**JA:** And that is precisely what we went for. Eventually we were not symbolical or metaphorical, we were as literal as we could [be]. It was not easy because it was a low-budget production, of course. Most theater is rather low tech, almost pathetically nontechnical, especially in contrast to big opera productions or film. Theater does not rely much on machines. But it was fun to work with these constraints.

**MP:** In the story itself, we learn that the machine was once celebrated as a high-tech invention [. . .]

**JA:** Yes, but then it breaks down before our eyes. The machine turns against the machinist.

**MP:** From reading the story, one can't really tell how exactly the machine is supposed to work, despite all the details Kafka gives us.

**JA:** It was hard to figure out how the machine actually works, how it writes on the body. It is such a beautiful and amazing concept. In our production we tried to solve this problem by having part of the machine hidden behind half-transparent plastic planes.

**MP:** Why don't we move on to a second protagonist, one that is specific to your production of *In the Penal Colony*, namely the Kafka figure.

**JA:** Well, in part it was a response to a specific problem. There is a lot of music Philip writes where nothing happens. And I felt I needed something to fill the time theatrically.

**MP:** You extracted the lines spoken by the Kafka figure from the diaries. Some of the lines describe obsessive-compulsive behavior, a hypochondriac attitude toward his body. What interested you in the diaries?

**JA:** I started out with Kafka's entire work. Then I realized that I couldn't deal with it, it was simply too big. So I narrowed it down to the diaries. I wanted it to be subjective. His oeuvre is so enormous, and I thought it was right to focus on the diaries because it was him talking in his own voice, in a very beautiful voice.

**MP:** In the diaries Kafka also records his visits to the theater.

**JA:** Kafka was not only a creative person, he was also so interested in the culture of his time. He went to the theater, he was an intellectual, he was part of Prague culture, he was right in the center of Middle Europe.

**MP:** The *Penal Colony* describes executions that took place on a grand scale, in a huge arena in front of the assembled penal colony. One could almost describe this as a kind of horrific theater. Was that something that interested you in bringing this story to the theater?

**JA:** I liked that it was a chamber piece, an intimate piece. In the theater, events are often just described. You don't necessarily have to repeat them on stage. This is one thing about the theater; you tell a story and the story evokes the big picture. We were very interested in telling stories.

**MP:** And what about the violence of this theater-execution Kafka describes? Was that something that sparked your interest in the story?

**JA:** Not at first; I wasn't sure what Philip wanted to do with the story. Then things came up, like the [Timothy] McVeigh execution. Somehow that fed into the issue of execution. In the story, the great public executions are a thing of the past. What we see is not a public execution but a private one, which is what most executions are, in North America anyway. We did research on botched executions, where they can't find a vein, where people don't die. But that was a sidebar. I don't think that it is a political piece. That's not what Kafka's story is about. I think his story is about art, about how terrible it is to be an artist.

**MP:** And more specifically about writing?

**JA:** Yes, it is about writing. Philip Glass thinks it is about transformation, how art transforms other forms of behavior. I don't agree with that, although I appreciate it. To me, the piece is about the horror of being an artist.

**MP:** Some contributors are interested in the enigmatic gestures Kafka scattered throughout his texts. Your own staging also relies on isolated gestures. Were you inspired by Kafka's text, or did you develop this choreography independently?

**JA:** In part, I derive my gestures from India, the Mudras, I am not an expert on it at all, I sort of made up my own. I am inspired by them, but the gestures I end up with are very made up, kind of dopey [...]

**MP:** Did you borrow some of them from your previous shows?

**JA:** Yes, I borrow from previous work, we all borrow, we all keep doing the same thing in some way. But I do not rely on a system. I reinvent the gestures and movements for every show, and it is always a very collaborative process. I also work with the gestures the actors bring to the process. I am very interested in the gestures actors make. Often I have no idea where they come from, I just notice them and work with them.

**MP:** Could you talk a bit more about the process of staging?

**JA:** I was really struck by how amazing to me the whole process was. It was an all-male cast, as you know. I had never worked with an entirely male cast, just a group of men. These men were so generous and goofy and collaborative and joyful. If you get a bunch of men together, that's what they do. I had the time of my life. We did warm ups to music, Aretha Franklin or Marvin Gaye. They danced to Marvin Gaye and sort of improvised. They were amazing. When I saw how they could dance together, a group of men, I saw that they could perform in a serious, collaborative way, which they did. There was a kind of maleness that I loved being not only a witness to but a collaborator in.

**MP:** *The Penal Colony*, of course, is its own peculiar male world [...]

**JA:** Yeah, a real macho world. But these guys were so different, they were so conjoined. I was very inspired by them. It was so interesting to see how generous and collaborative they were.

**MP:** What else happened during the process?

**JA:** The process was incredible. We changed the libretto a lot during the process. We constantly changed it. That's one of the great things about a work in process. I changed the choreography, I changed the blocking; but most of all we kept working on the libretto. We kept making it better and better.

**MP:** There is a lot of background information that needs to be conveyed, which the libretto does with maximal economy.

**JA:** Yeah, we changed the hell out of it, up until the last minute.

**MP:** What kinds of changes did you make?

**JA:** We made the story clearer, and also we made it work to be sung. How the

words were to be sung. The thing about working with Philip is that he is an incredibly flexible, collaborative guy. He does not think that he is Mozart. When we wanted to change something, when we wanted to cut fifteen bars, he would say, "O.K., let's do it." That was also the case with Rudi [Rudolph Wurlitzer], the librettist. That was a very exciting, creative, and lively process for me as an artist. That I can start with a piece of music and a libretto and make it quite, quite different.

There were many little changes and big structural changes. In terms of the score, there were very big changes; we cut a lot of music. It was much longer to begin with. Philip, as you know, tends to write long repetitive scores. I said, "We can't do that, I don't know what to do on the stage." Other changes concerned the language of the libretto. I happened to have very smart singers who could say when words didn't lay right on the notes. So we would say, "Let's change them." We would sit around, all of us, the whole company. The whole company would say, "How do we make these words work better?" or "Which ones need to be cut or changed to lay on these notes?"

I don't know any more what the original score is. Philip is going to record it as it was, without Kafka. The character of Kafka was my idea. I can't imagine the piece without Kafka.

**MP:** Thank you very much for this interview.

Copyright of Germanic Review is the property of Heldref Publications and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.