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BONNIE MONTE Directs
Classics with a Twist

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Bonnie J. Monte: “Breaking the rules should happen far more often than it does.”

The Monte Spin
AN INTERVIEW BY CHARLES NEY

Bonnie J. Monte, bundled up against the Thursday morning chill in overcoat, hat, gloves and matching scarf, rushes a little breathlessly into a rehearsal of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. This most popular comedy, to Theatre of New Jersey’s in the 1960s and inspired by the Troggs. Shedding overgarments as she speaks, Monte, an intense blonde-haired woman with an animated, focused manner, launches a pre-run pep talk for the actors.

As Theseus and Hippolyta invoke the waning moon, Monte whispers notes to her assistant. She seems to grow more excited as music cues come up. She flags the stage manager to pinpoint a sound cue. Clearly this is a director in her element.

I’m surprised that Monte—who has headed STNJ, among the largest Equity companies in the Northeast, for 18 years—is supervising this school tour herself. At break I ask her how often she directs the plays for this program. “Setting the tone for the season, I direct upon occasion,” she allows, adding, “I think that as artists we get so complacent in this nation about not remaining hands-on: ‘Oh, we’re artistic directors and we’re not going to do that.’ We just get lazy.”

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, centered in the suburban bedroom community of Madison, lies almost in the shadow of Manhattan. Founded in 1962, it is the second-oldest Shakespeare theatre on the East Coast (Joseph Papp’s New York Shakespeare Festival was founded just eight years earlier). The theatre reaches more than 100,000 adults and children annually through its production season and myriad education programs. Its mission, Monte is fond of noting, is to “illuminate the universal and lasting relevance of the classics for contemporary audiences.” Thanks in no small part to Monte’s persistent efforts, the company added an outdoor stage component five years ago that witnessed a 40-percent increase in attendance last summer.

Back in 1990 when Monte took over STNJ—then called the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival—it was known for what she calls a “museum approach” to Shakespeare and was mired in economic difficulties. Since those days, she has steered the theatre toward fiscal success and innovative production values, added performance venues, expanded the STNJ season (recently adding an eighth yearly mainstage production), developed an array of education programs and even built a new theatre.

A stone’s throw from NYC, audiences line up to see her irreverent stagings of the classics.
In all, Bonnie Monte has directed more than 40 productions for STNJ, about half of them Shakespeare. This upcoming season she will direct King Lear (a first for Monte), featuring Daniel Davis, as well as a work by one of her other favorite playwrights, Tennessee Williams’s A Streetcar Named Desire.

Originality is the watchword of Monte’s directorial style. Her 2007 Henry V was conceived as a bare-bones rehearsal in the mainstage playhouse with discarded flats against blank walls, old set pieces scattered around the stage and actors dressed in rehearsal clothes. The first lines were uttered by an exhausted Jack Wetherall slowly climbing out of a trap door: “O for a Muse of fire.” The conceit was that an overworked troupe was about to embark on a run-through rehearsal of Henry V that was really anything but a run-through.

Her productions are likely to earn critical acclaim for her innovations as well as for their solid interpretive foundation. Reviewing a 2004 Macbeth that Monte populated with not three but thirty witches, the New York Times described the horde of spirits as “lovely ladies poised provocatively behind, or, in the manner of a Greek chorus, in the wings—silent, watching, waiting…. The effect is chilling.” Her sumptuous 2006 Cherry Orchard elicited this from Variety: “Monte has staged a haunting evocation of a 19th-century estate and its world-weary inhabitants.” Show Business Weekly said of the production: “Monte directs Orchard with passion and purpose, and her adaptation is flawlessly faithful to Chekhov’s style—evoking humor, honesty and tragedy, often in a single sentence.”

Over the years, Monte has delved ever more deeply into what she calls Shakespeare’s “amazing poetry” and the “hidden layers of rich, complex images” that lie beneath it. “Buried within those complex images are archetypal, iconic symbols that speak to us,” she believes. “All the inspiration you need to create the visual landscapes for the plays—the worlds of the plays—are in those images. Here we tend to lean toward creating metaphorical kinds of worlds in which these plays can reside, inspired by the imagery in the text.”

Monte believes no less deeply in her theatre’s mission than in her own working methods. “Every single moment of the production must be specific—massively specific from an emotional point of view, from a physical point of view, from a directorial point of view, from a behavioral point of view,” she emphasizes. “I will sit with a young director or
a young actor and say, ‘Do it again, do it again, do it again! It wasn’t specific. What do you mean? Why do you say that?’” She is equally likely to boast that she has “one of the greatest teaching theatres in America,” adding, “I don’t think that there are a lot of them left. There are a lot of people in the field who want to use talent, but they don’t want to nurture talent.”

During the time we spend together, Monte appears to be clearly in charge of her environs and her theatre, yet warm and compassionate to colleagues and associates. She doesn’t compromise her principles but is capable of a quiet intimacy and generosity. She’s also funny, quick-witted and relishes telling a good story.

CHARLES NEY: How did you get started directing Shakespeare?

BONNIE MONTE: I feel that I knew more about Shakespeare as a little kid than I did in my high school and college years, or even in my early theatre years, because my mom inundated me with it. I loved it until I got to school—and then a bunch of teachers who didn’t teach it very well turned me off to Shakespeare.

So I kind of ignored Shakespeare until this job came up. I had never directed Shakespeare professionally when I took over this theatre. So it was scary at first. But in a weird way, my naïveté regarding the canon and all things Shakespearean has helped me tremendously, I believe. There was no cynicism. There was no jadedness. There continues to be nothing except the joy of discovery. To some extent I approached the plays without fear—as though they were stories like any other stories, and you just had to tell them right. So to some extent, the lack of scholarship has helped me. Eighteen years later, I know far more than I actually want to know sometimes!

But isn’t that a good thing?

Yeah, it is a good thing. I leapt right in.

But you started off with irreverence?

Exactly. The very first thing I did here was The Tempest. I did it somewhat as an homage to [the late director] Nikos Psacharopoulos, with whom I had worked at Williamstown Theatre Festival in Massachusetts. I had a blast. But I also learned how much I didn’t know, and then started to apply myself in order to be not only a good director, but a good Shakespeare director.

I remember my first transitions were clunky. I didn’t understand how to create a kind of seamless segue. There is a

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very special technique and art in the ability to transition from one scene to the next, seamlessly and flawlessly, to the point where the audience is absolutely unaware that you have evolved into the next scene, and yet they know exactly where they are and where those characters are. There is tremendous technique involved in doing that.

It seems that the more you do know about the punctuation and the scansion and the rules, the better you are at knowing when to break them and why you should break them—and I think breaking them should happen far more often than it does. But you have to be pretty confident about why you’re breaking them and when you should, so you can then explain it to the actor in order for it to make sense emotionally and motivationally.

Sometimes I’ll say, “You know what? It just sounds better the other way.” In part, that’s because our ears are different 400 years later—what we hear and the words themselves have different connotations. But there are rules: It’s poetry; it has a rhythm; there are certain things you have to pay attention to. You can’t become an abstract painter and break the rules of classical painting until you first can paint something non-abstract.

How many of the plays have you directed?
I’ve directed 40 shows since I got here, not counting Shakespeare LIVE! events, so probably 47 or 48 shows—and I’d say half are Shakespeare. The theatre has done a bunch of them twice. This will be my fifth time doing Midsummer.

I have done the Scottish play twice. I did it in ’92, which was my second season here, with some fabulous ideas that only partly worked. I learned in that first go-around what the problems of that play are, and I became obsessed with it. I thought about it for 12 years, then I did it again. It took me down some very radical roads. I was extraordinarily proud of it. And I can’t wait to do it again.

What were the keys to unlocking Macbeth onstage?
In essence, I deleted the witches—but, in reality, I did not delete the witches. The thing that chills us most about Macbeth is the character’s transformation from this amazing great guy to this horrifying figure. How does it happen? It happens because the heart of darkness that resides in all of us—and resides within Macbeth—got stronger than the heart of light, which also exists in each one of us. As the darkness becomes stronger than the goodness or the lightness, he starts to go away. The witches become not just “heh, heh, heh” witches, but a tangible evidence of that heart of darkness. The whole kingdom starts to become more and more corrupt, and all this bad stuff starts to happen. The 2004 production came just in the midst of my despair and desperation about how the world around us was becoming more and more horrifying.

The witches became this corporeal, visceral evidence for the growth of that corruption and negativity and evil and darkness. Sometimes there was one witch and sometimes there were 30. And they were everywhere! The lines didn’t change, but the more evil Macbeth became, the closer they got to him. Finally there was a moment in the play where the witches actually touched Macbeth—the whole audience would gasp.

So my treatment of the witches had nothing to do with the supernatural, or with trying to make a wackier witch costume than the last production. The witches were simple, in black, and you never saw their faces—but they created this sense that a horrifying darkness was just growing and growing and growing. In the end, they were hanging on him—there was one main, beautiful witch that he ultimately embraced. She was with him until he died. Then she went away. Audiences came out of it literally horrified—they said they had never felt the play the way they thought they did after seeing it. Since it was done during a colloquium, several Shakespeare scholars saw it as well, and they all kept saying, “No one has ever approached the play this way.” I feel as though that play is to me as The Tempest is to Giorgio Strehler—I just want to work on it as an evolutionary project my whole life.

You are doing King Lear this season?
Yes—I have never directed it, and I am really excited about doing so. When you read the play, you are so moved—you feel such depth from all kinds of emotions. So the goal, ultimately, is to do a production that breaks my audiences’ hearts. And I think that will happen. I have a wonderful actor with whom I haven’t worked in years—he is formidable. We’ll see what happens.

“Macbeth is to me as The Tempest is to Giorgio Strehler—I just want to work on it as an evolutionary project my whole life.”

After being with this theatre for 18 years, what is the next stage? What are your dreams? Sustaining a classic company in this day and age is no easy feat. What we at STNJ are most proud of is that the quality of the work, on very little money, is world-class. I can say with full assurance that it’s better than most of the Shakespeare done anywhere in this nation. And yet the resources and the support systems get more and more fragile.

I am trying to get the institution in such a place of stability that I can spend less time protecting it and more time on certain artistic endeavors. Right now I am allowing all of my focus, with the help of my board and staff, to go for the creation of a major endowment that will provide monetary insurance for seasons that may come in short—for those “Oh, my God, the roof just fell in!” moments, for all of those dilemmas that can take the theatre down if you don’t have some kind of protection. I am determined to get this endowment created.

The second part of this campaign would be to raise another large chunk of money to attain a support facility that we do not have right now, in order to centralize the entire STNJ operation. I have administrative staff in an attic in a building across campus; I have a huge number of my staff out in Irvington, in a dangerous area where the scene shop is; I have teachers working in other spaces. I need to get everyone centralized. We are either the sixth or seventh largest Shakespeare theatre in the nation right now—and one of the tops in terms of quality—but we are managing to do that without the adequate support systems that a Shakespeare theatre needs.

So the new facility would help centralize operations.
Ideally I’d like to renovate an old building for reuse, for environmental and cost reasons. We have been scouting possible locations—we want it right in between the two performance spaces, the indoor and the outdoor.

The outdoor space has only been running a few years.

Five years, going into our sixth. It is a Greek amphitheatre of about 1,000 seats—but we tend to cap it off at 500, because people are so into picnicking that they take up a lot of room. We let them do that. We more than tripled our audience out there last year—they love Shakespeare outdoors.

You oversaw the new theatre in your first decade, then in your second you introduced the outdoor theatre. Are you adding shows?

We added to the mainstage season last year—seven on the main stage, one on the outdoor stage—as well as three touring productions of Shakespeare LIVE!, two touring productions with the Next Stage Ensemble, and running twelve or thirteen education programs (some of which are for young artists, some for students, and some for adults and/or educators). It is kind of a full-circle loop created to suck in anybody that we can—then we don’t let them go. That’s a huge amount of work generated at an excellent level of quality on only $4.3 million this year. The philosophy of the company is “necessity is the mother of invention.”

Talk to me about your work in the last five years or so.

I have somehow glommed on to Alexander Ostrovsky and made him a household word for my audience. He is considered the Shakespeare of Russia. He wrote more than 50 plays—some of them are horrible, some of them are Shakespeare adaptations. Almost no one in America knows his work, partly because the translations are so bad that one doesn’t really find the heart of the play. I have done three of his plays so far, and I did the translation/adaptation of two of them. I have somehow connected with the heart of Ostrovsky—I get it, for some reason. I think that’s in part because my life with the Russian playwrights was so strong at Williamstown. Nikos was to some degree a master at that stuff. That’s where I learned my craft in terms of the Russians.

Do you speak Russian?

No, I don’t know Russian. But because I speak and read Greek a little, the Russian words are pronounceable to me. So what I’ll do is get a Russian friend to do a literal translation for me, then prod my translator to work with me on dissecting the text just by sounding out the words and saying, “Does the word really feel like it’s supposed to feel?” It’s a pretty detailed investigation of the actual language, even without speaking it.

I do speak French, so I have translated from French, and I have a knowledge of Italian because my dad was Italian and didn’t speak English until he was 10 or 11. So I heard it a lot when I was little. I can’t speak it fluently, but I translated and adapted Pirandello’s Enrico IV from Sicilian, painstakingly. That’s something I love doing—you are talking to a woman who, as a child, invented her own language and made everyone learn it with her.

What else do you want to do?

What I really, really, really, really want to do at the moment, though I can’t afford to and I keep trying to get the funding—I want to do what will probably be only the second revival ever of Kurt Weill and Paul Green’s Johnny Johnson, a great, major, antiwar American musical that no one ever does. I know I’m going to do something amazing with it if I can ever afford to do it. I may have lost my opportunity for it to be immediately relevant, because the war [in Iraq] will be over soon, I’m praying. If the war does end, great. My brain would shift to something else more relevant. But if not, then I will try to do it in 2009. It’s a difficult, horrifying, sprawling, imperfect, epic piece—65 characters, stylistically elusive, massive orchestra, musically difficult. It’s bizarre and fantastical, I think.

I am dying to do Peer Gynt for the same reasons. Camino Real is one of my favorite plays in the whole world. I did a production
of it in '99 and I'm dying to go back to it in the same way I went back to Macbeth. I am a huge Williams fanatic, in part because I once had the opportunity to work with him for a year and a half. I'm also dying to do Hamlet, which I have been secretly thinking about for 25 years. That's probably in 2009.

Do you have a philosophy of art for the theatre?

Theatre artists have the amazing job and privilege of being the people chosen by the larger tribe to tell the story of humanity—it's our job to spend our whole lives studying what it means to be human; to find incredibly effective ways of taking what we think that means, and putting it into two-and-a-half-hour sound bites; to condense our intelligence and knowledge down into digestible chunks for the rest of humanity. In doing so, we must become, in essence, Renaissance men and women in a subcultural, select tribe.

While we are often derided or given short shrift or made fun of, we are probably wiser about things than most people on earth—we must be, because we are forced to examine the heart and soul of every kind of human being that exists. We have to know as much as we can. We have to be like devouring animals that swallow up all the knowledge and visual stimulus that we can. And we're able to do that as our work!

More practically, how do you deal with the specifics of staging and blocking?

My scripts are completely color-coded. I have an amazingly detailed code and symbol system. I go into rehearsals with such a level of specificity—even though I am willing to throw it away the minute I find something better or an actor brings me something better. That is the collaborative part of the process. But I have been known to draw detailed maps of the entire landscape. For The Cherry Orchard, I came in with these watercolors that I had created of the entire estate. The walls of the rehearsal room were covered with them.

Do you have things you feel like you need to do before you go into rehearsal?

I have two books that I keep for every show—my little notebook and my script with all the blocking. In my notebook I write copious notes about what I want to say to my actors on the very first day at the very first minute—how I want them to start pursuing this particular project from the very beginning. Sometimes I'll bring in scores of books—not just books of scholarship but things like paintings of the period—so that they have a quick, easy reference for things. And then there's the blocking script—sometimes it may take two hours just to block one page, depending on the complexity. Other pages, I just write, "Play around with it." I know that that will have to be something really organic that the actors and I find together. It's like doing a storyboard for a movie, because each moment is a shot. I use it as a guide, as a road map.

On occasion I will say to an actor, "That's taking the play down the wrong road. You can't do that. Please try this instead—you'll see how the payoff is going to happen." I will certainly get benignly dictatorial when I need to, but I don't know that anyone would ever call me a dictatorial director.

What do you hate?

I hate incompetence. I hate mediocrity. I hate laziness. I hate actors who walk around going, "I want to be a great actor!" Then when you give them the opportunity to do great material with great characters and great language and a great script, they don't do it. I hate whiners. I hate arrogance. I hate people who forget what it means to be an artist. The crucial thing is to find actors or directors or designers who are true artists—they're a vanishing breed.

Charles Ney has spent the last four years interviewing more than 40 artistic directors and directors across the U.S. for an upcoming book, Directing Shakespeare in America: 21st-Century Perspectives. He has directed at the Illinois and Texas Shakespeare Festivals and teaches directing and acting at Texas State University.

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