

Jean Giraudoux' *The Madwoman of Chaillot*
If They're Greedy They've Already Lost

By
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The Madwoman of Chaillot draws us into a beautiful fantasy about truth and beauty, grounded in a sort of reality, and transcending place and time to illustrate truth about our own day and age. Jean Giraudoux himself stated that, "There is no theatre which is not prophesy," *The Madwoman of Chaillot*, translated by Maurice Valency, unlike other plays of that era, stands the test of time. Giraudoux gives us, in his final play, a lasting fable about the joy of life. Countess Aurelia sums up what the playwright seems to intend us to take away after the curtain falls, "To be alive is to be fortunate."

In spite of having seen the rise of the National Socialist Party first-hand as a diplomat in Germany, and having watched his beloved Paris invaded and infiltrated by an occupying army, Giraudoux had not lost his faith in the basic humanity of mankind. He spins a beautiful vision of the world, "the living must live...the living must die...autumn follows summer...spring follows winter...there are four elements, happiness, millions of catastrophes, that life is a reality, that it is a dream..." (*Visitations*). Despite his transcendent, almost mystical view of life, Giraudoux remains grounded in reality and in *Madwoman* offers a practical, if outrageous, solution to the problem he postulates, how do we combat the evil infiltrating our world and robbing us of our happiness? The Madwoman's response...get rid of all the evil people...at once...after a fair trial, of course.

At the time of *Madwoman's* writing, Paris was an occupied city in the middle of the Nazi occupied northern and western France—*Zone Occupée*. (The south was under the control of the Vichy government and was known as *Zone Librè* or "Free" France.) To many in the outside world, the Nazi occupation of Paris seemed to have no cultural impact. Parisians were very proud of the fact that, in spite of the ever-present Swastika, the show went on. Theaters were full, galleries remained open, *corps de ballet* continued to dance. Paris life seemed to outsiders to be unchanged. The truth, however, was darker and subtler. Jean-Paul Sartre writes in his essay, Paris Under the Occupation, "In Avenue Foch, however...we would hear from neighboring buildings, all day long and late into the night, cries and suffering and terror. There was nobody in Paris who did not have a relative or friend arrested, or deported or shot. It appeared that there were hidden holes in the city and that it emptied itself through these holes as if from an internal and incurable hemorrhage. We spoke little of it at the time; even more than with the famine, we hid this uninterrupted bleeding, partially out of prudence, partially out of dignity... At night we'd hear them. Toward midnight the sound of footsteps would resonate on the pavements, the steps of those few late pedestrians who wanted to get home before the curfew, and then there would be silence." But in *Madwoman of Chaillot*, we see a Paris as if the occupation was only a passing figment of the imagination--a bad dream that from once awakened, would soon be forgotten in the light of day.

The Madwoman of Chaillot was first produced in the original French (*La Folle de Chaillot*) in 1945, two years after Giraudoux' death, and just after WWII ended in Europe. The playwright's long-time collaborator, Louis Jouvet, produced and starred as the Ragpicker. The play was a tremendous success. Audiences had no problem drawing comparisons between the antagonists and the recent occupying forces. Giraudoux himself set the play aside after writing it to be produced "on Oct. 17, 1945, as he whimsically specified, anticipating that the Nazis would be driven out by that time. As a matter of fact, it was produced on Dec. 19, 1945." (Brooks Atkinson, NY Times reviewer, Jan 9, 1949)

The Broadway production opened in 1948 at the Belasco Theater (it moved later to the Jacobs Theater) and ran until 1950. The Maurice Valency translation was directed by Alfred de Liagre, Jr. Christian Berard, who designed the Paris production, designed the sets and costumes. John Carradine starred as the Ragpicker, and Martita Hunt as the Countess Aurelia. Hunt won a Tony Award for her role. NY Times reviewer Brooks Atkinson wrote that the play was, "...*fantasy which is pure in heart and achieves through magic some of the conclusions that we cannot achieve in life. For a couple of guileless hours in the theatre The Madwoman of Chaillot disposes of evil with grace and humor in a spirit of civilized make-believe.*" (NY Times, January 9, 1949)

Why *The Madwoman of Chaillot* and what has it to do with audiences at this time? The themes of corporate greed versus generosity of spirit, and the disempowerment of the poor, speak directly to us, in 2015. In the midst of a world war, the playwright seems to have foreseen many of the social issues the "Western" world continues wrestle with: multi-national corporate greed, class warfare, and the loss of beauty, truth and kindness at the hands of the cultural, political and intellectual elite. When the Ragpicker plays devil's advocate defending the greed of the men in power, asking for "a little human understanding", it's not a far stretch to picture a multi-billionaire with a bad comb over, asking for our votes with one breath, and insulting half the population with the next. We can imagine ourselves seated at the next table at Chez Francis overhearing the corporate President, the Baron and the Prospector as they conspire to destroy Paris in order to get at the lake of oil that they want to believe lies beneath. We easily imagine that we're overhearing modern day corporate raiders conspiring to violate public trust by stripping retirement accounts, flaunting environmental regulations, or embezzling public funds. It may be easier for audiences to accept that these men of the most evil intent exist than it was for theater-goers of 1948, since in this time we have lived through financial and environmental scandals such as Enron, Bernie Madoff, Lehman Brothers, and the BP Oil spill.

While the afore mentioned scandals are still fresh in the collective consciousness, this generation and the generations to come will have their own Prospectors and Presidents to battle. Criminal activity on a global scale such as Volkswagen's admitted rigging of automobile software to cheat US environmental law is just one recent example of corporate executives putting stock prices ahead of public health and safety. The cars in question were rigged to pass environmental testing while in reality emitting as much as 40 times the legal pollution limit.

When the Prospector announces his intent, "*They say where we pass, nothing ever grows again. What of it? Is a park any better than a coal mine? What's a mountain got that a slag pile hasn't? What would you rather have in your garden—an almond tree or an oil well?*" Our thoughts turn to places like Montana and North Dakota, currently under major oil company exploration and production using hydraulic fracturing (fracking) and horizontal drilling, which threaten to leave the land irreparably scarred. Or to the debate over the Keystone Pipeline and other Alaskan oil and natural gas projects, which pits Alaskan jobs and economic interests against environmentalists and conservationists, who seek to leave the unspoiled wilderness untouched.

Because the environmental issues, fantastically absurd in 1943 (after all, who would ever dismantle a beautiful city to get at a lake of petroleum?) don't seem so far fetched now, new productions of *Madwoman* are sometimes updated to make the play more relatable to new audiences. In June 2015 the Randall Theatre, a community theater in Texas, staged *Madwoman* in a contemporary setting in order to more easily make connections between the Paris conspiracy and current regional environmental concerns regarding fracking.

70 years have passed since Giraudoux' death so the original French version of the play is now in

the public domain, allowing theater companies to create fresh productions of new translations. Earlier this year, Theatre du Jour toured a condensed version to rural northeast U.S. states where fracking is also a real and controversial issue, where needed jobs creation issues are pitted against known and unknown threats to the environment. In this condensed version, titled *Mad: A Fracking Fairytale* (1), fantasy aspects of the play are highlighted, and a few oblique references to fracking are added, but otherwise, the story, as conceived by Giraudoux, “*plays out perfectly and requires no prior knowledge of the original.*” (John Stoltenberg)

Theatre du Jour’s production of *Mad: A Fracking Fairytale* was also brought to the District of Columbia Art Center in March of this year, just ahead of WSC Avant Bard’s original production of a new translation of *The Madwoman of Chaillet* by Laurence Senelick. Senelick says that his challenge was to keep the idiosyncrasy of the French while making the language accessible to 21st Century audiences, much as Maurice Valency was charged with making the play accessible to 1940’s Broadway audiences. By going back to Giraudoux, Senelick was able to translate not only the French, but also Giraudoux’ intentions with the language. (2)

Reviews for productions in recent years are rarely negative, which speaks to the strength of the play, and the good feelings it engenders. Because the roles of the Madwomen are each bigger than life, they are generally noted positively in reviews. Besides those characters, several reviewers have mentioned how good the respective ensembles were. The colorful characters that made up the Paris street scene are frequently noted as important to the general atmosphere. In a play with such a large cast it can seem as if actors are waiting for their turns to speak, but with each actor clear in their reason for being where they are, the ensemble will add to the action and not distract.

Some common pitfalls of modern productions include some confusion in the climactic ending, where it is unclear who the various groups of people led to their doom are intended to be. Therefore the meaning of their demise is lost on the audience. (3) Some reviewers mention that there was a lack of focus, or too much going on in various productions. It seems that these pitfalls will be avoided with keeping action focused throughout.

It is worth noting that *The Madwoman of Chaillet* was also produced as a musical, *Dear World*, in 1968, starring Angela Lansbury. The production ran for only four months, though Lansbury won the Tony Award for her performance. There is also a movie version of *The Madwoman of Chaillet*, featuring an all-star cast alongside Katherine Hepburn as the Countess. The movie version directed by Bryan Forbes (*Whisperers*, *Deadfall* and *The Stepford Wives*), is set in the 1960’s. It was a commercial flop and is generally considered a poor adaptation of the original.

In *The Madwoman of Chaillet* I see a play about basic human worth. What we value as human beings, how the poor are devalued, the powerful over estimate their worth and how each group defines for themselves the significance of truth and beauty. For the Countess and Irma alike, bookends in the tale of life, beauty, kindness and happiness are totally integrated. “*I hate ugliness. I love beauty. I hate meanness. I adore kindness.*”

- (1) <http://dcmetrotheaterarts.com/2015/03/09/the-mad-a-fracking-fairytale-at-theatre-du-jour/>
- (2) <http://dctheatrescene.com/2015/06/03/liberating-madwoman-of-chaillet-laurence-senelick-on-his-new-translation-at-wsc-avant-bard/>
- (3) <http://www.talkinbroadway.com/regional/la/la65.html>