

CONTENTS

Introduction

9

GHOST OF A VOICE

15

A COUPLE

29

EXILE

57

FEVER

77

WINTERSLEEP

111

About the Playwright

143

About the Translator

144

INTRODUCTION

The pleasure of translating the plays of Marie-Claire Blais has also been one of re-discovery. Written in the late 1970s and published under the title *Sommeil d'hiver* by Les éditions de la pleine lune (1984), four of these plays have been performed on Radio-Canada — one of them twice — and the title play has received a staged reading in Paris. (Further details are noted at the beginning of each play in this edition.)

Marie-Claire Blais has long been known as a poet and, most of all, as a novelist — particularly for *Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* (1965), later adapted to the screen, and for which she received the prestigious Prix Médicis in 1966; *Le sourd dans la ville* (1980), also made into a film; and *Visions d'Anna* (1982), which won her the Prix de l'Académie française in 1983. The Athanase-David award crowned her career in 1982, and her fiction has been translated into thirteen languages.

While certain of her full-length plays are well-known in the French-speaking world — notably *l'Exécution* (1968), *La nef des sorcières* (1986) and *l'Île* (1989), which have also received English translations — these have not yet attracted the same attention elsewhere as her fiction. Of her other plays, a considerable number of short ones in particular, virtually none has ever been read or performed in English. The sole exceptions are my earlier versions of two plays printed here: “Ghost of a Voice” (*Canadian Theatre Review*, Fall, 1994) and “Exile” (*Rampike*, Fall, 1997).

These short-to-medium-length dramas by Marie-Claire Blais can rewardingly be considered from a number of angles. In fact, they must be looked at on their own special terms if a producer or a director is to

INTRODUCTION

avoid serious mistakes. First, given the author's overwhelming reputation, it is tempting to look at them superficially as an extension of her novels, an innovative form of interior monologue. That four of these five works have been done as radio plays at least once would seem to bear this out, but such a reading ignores too many aspects of these plays, and of the live theatre.

To begin with, "Wintersleep" itself is undisputedly a stage play working with explicit theatre conventions: blocking, doubling, lighting, set, special effects, and so on. With its tragicomic reworking of ritual and the Medieval Morality play, plus more than a hint of ballet and a very modern vision of Everyman, it is the essence of the visceral, communal experience that is theatre.

In the case of the others, until now performed as radio plays, should we simply follow the only-too-obvious lead of their first productions and of their literary qualities? Should we treat them as experiments in a new pseudo-novelistic form somewhere at mid-point on the road to true drama? This is the trap set by a surface reading of the plays, and the answer has got to be "No". Certainly they present a new form of cerebral drama . . . to a point. The shifts in voice, in point of view and in layers of consciousness provide us with possibilities not available in the cinema, nor in fiction, but this does not mean the plays are an incomplete hybrid.

It helps to gain the proper perspective if we consider the "Chamber" plays of Yeats and the works of Ibsen: not just his realistic, "feminist" ethos, but the rarified other-worldliness of the later plays, such as *When We Dead Awaken*. The particular medium and the intimacy of Yeats are echoed in Blais, if not the same thematic and mythological bent. The austerity, the abstraction and the sense of bestriding several existences and multiple levels of consciousness at once have a good deal in common with Ibsen. In fact there is a decidedly Nordic sensibility to these plays, something which is strong in Quebec writing — though rarely discussed by critics.

INTRODUCTION

There is a musical quality to Blais' plays, only slightly less in the melodic sense than the rhythmic. The pauses, the subtle twists of wry and savage irony, especially in "Fever" — almost Pinteresque at times — are an ever-present part of what can make the staging of these plays, like the translation, so challenging and rewarding.

On the matter of translation, it will be apparent that I have frequently chosen levels of diction which are less abstract or formal than the originals. Primarily, this is necessary for the lines to work and to have a degree of verisimilitude in English, but it also clarifies the subtext needed by an actor or a director, rather than betraying the author's intentions with a more literal or superficial rendering. Thus the work has been partly one of adaptation or the search for shading and equivalences, not only in meaning but also in visceral effect. It is this type of demand on the theatrical eye and ear that makes drama, especially semi-poetic works like these, a particularly pleasant though risky adventure, certainly more so than fiction, and at least as much as poetry.

"Ghost of a Voice" obviously lives in the shifts between music and voice, vastness and intimacy, isolation and fusion, introspection and diffuseness; it prepares us not only for the aural modulations, but also for the layered consciousness and rapid, fluid shifts of voice and point of view that characterize the following plays with increased complexity. Like the others, it exists not more in the content than in the dynamic, not more in what is said than in how and when it is said, or even *not* said: this is the "becoming" or retrieval of voice. Even so, this play is much more than a matter of sound: "Ghost of a Voice" says so itself.

Blocking and lighting can certainly elicit a great deal of depth and nuance from this play, and were it to be paired in performance with "Exile", not only would they reveal more about one another, but the advantages of subtle lighting and other visual effects on the impact and the texture of both plays would be apparent.

The shifts of scene and time in "A Couple" require lighting and sound effects, possibly also props and bits of set and costume. There

INTRODUCTION

might be an advantage to stretching time (perhaps even from the late sixties, to the nineties, to the turn of the century) and centring these vignettes on an undefined “here-and-now”. (On film or T.V., intercutting could be most effective here.) Certainly, projections onto parts of the set could help evoke both the focus and the texture of the play, for the subtext is crucial and never far below the surface. After all, it is not really the clichéd content of the debate between Françoise and Jean-Pierre that propels the play, but rather the dynamic . . . what, once again, is *not* said: the shifts, the obstacles, the doubts and the questionings — the “how” and “why” more than the “what”.

Each character is grappling not just with her companion but with the imbalance between her own innocence and knowledge, her own spontaneity and control. It is more than a question of patriarchy or domination (though these are definitely part of the air they breathe): Blais’ feminism is too profound, subtle and complex for simple stereotypes. The world just *is* . . . and complicated at that. How else could the portrayal of Françoise be as critical — even as unsympathetic — as it is?

“A Couple” provides a notable change in atmosphere and in social class, and on a double-bill would give an intriguing counterpoint to the rawer and rarer mood of “Fever”. Both are concerned with the paradox of defining oneself in reaction to the “other”, whether this be alter-ego, partner, or foreigner.

“Exile” returns us to a middle-class, intellectual milieu, this time a faceless prison-country, a broken, shifting landscape out of time and place, where only a few oligarchs pulling the strings have any idea what lies ahead (and then perhaps only dimly and from moment-to-moment). With great prescience, Blais gives us characters who are not only uprooted and bewildered, refugees who are in part the passive accomplices in their own alienation. Victims, they have helped massage themselves into complacency and acceptance; they have “adjusted” themselves forever lower. This kind of self-betrayal reminds one of Bergman (especially *Shame*) or several of the plays of Strindberg, but here we are dealing

INTRODUCTION

with what has since come to be known as the “post-cocooning generation”.

This setting is probably the most complete and brilliant in the collection, and the edgy staging might be the most rewarding. Orliel emerges from . . . the mist . . . the walls . . . the imagination? Is this “Otto Frank” character a figment of the Woman’s fantasies . . . her memory . . . her wishful thinking . . . a warning of the future . . . simple reality . . . or all of these? How is it that the Woman and the Man see him separately, and he misleads the husband? Once again, the opportunities for a director are considerable, and to ignore the importance of lighting or the possibility of a surrealistic/expressionistic set (perhaps a moving, shifting one), or of partial projections (possibly even onto the actors themselves), is to sell the play short, weakening its texture and reducing its dimensions.

Its bittersweet modulations, the implicit analysis of artistic and intellectual failure and the sharp contrast in settings make “Exile” a very fruitful companion-piece to “Ghost of a Voice”.

The fourth play, “Fever”, provides us with a strong atmospheric counterpoint to the fifth, “Wintersleep”, as well as the already mentioned parallels with “A Couple”. It not only makes exhaustive demands on the actress, but her multiple roles as character, narrator and impersonator make it extremely difficult to do this as anything but a radio play. To adapt it to the stage or screen would require considerable ingenuity and restraint in the use of voice-overs and visual effects. In live performance, these would be the only short respites the actress could expect. Further adaptation (the use of additional voices or characters, for example) would only weaken the play by causing it to lose focus and intensity.

The satirical, even devastating mimicry and irony are what set this play apart. It is a bravura piece in which the actress, while in the ebb and flow of her own febrile emotions, sees through others as in an x-ray, sometimes hearing the echo of her husband’s voice, even while he is

INTRODUCTION

actually speaking. Smoothly and yet in white heat, she carries on her inner monologue, her Pinteresque conversation, her anticipation of what her husband will say, and her mimicry of everyone they meet. This, more than any of the plays, except “Wintersleep”, fuses inner dilemma, marital friction and the flux of human identity all into a whole.

If in “Fever” we are lost inside the narrow, winding alleys of the mind, in “Wintersleep” we stand outside ourselves, like the deceased suspended at the moment of death. Marionette-like, the Dead Man is manipulated, even molded, especially by the Make-up Girl, and he can scarcely do more than observe and endure until morning. Will it all begin again, aided by forgetfulness, or will it really end, or is this just one of the last stages of dying? The Dead Man leaves not so very much changed from when he “lived”: unaware, helpless, uncommitted. The women in his life almost all blend into one — a more manageable onstage *tour de force* than that in “Fever”. Here, too, the comedy is frequent, though less savage, and runs from the chill farce of the Beggars to the pitiful smirking of the Man with the Record-Book.

As always, Blais’ characters are “becoming”, in one case even tearing through the scenery in a way that suggests the use of Spandex or Velcro. A burning bed appears and disappears, as does an Arctic landscape; the marionette-like use of characters recalls the surreal quality of the Bread and Puppet Circus (or again, the later plays by Ibsen, who was himself influenced by the early use of puppets). The evident parallels with ritual and Medieval drama have already been mentioned, and this ghost without a voice wends his way to a death which, unlike Everyman’s, is never quite complete.