

## Directors on design:

# Antoine Vitez

BY RUTH E. GOLDBERG

■ Currently the administrator of the Comédie Française, Antoine Vitez (1) spent 1981-88 as head of the National Theatre of Chaillot, where he worked extensively with designer Yannis Kokkos. *Anacaona* (2) was the last play Vitez directed at Chaillot. Kokkos says his design was based on a primitive Haitian painting—"like trees of a forest seen from above."

● *L'administrateur actuel de la Comédie Française, Antoine Vitez (1) était le directeur du Théâtre National de Chaillot de 1981 à 1988 où il a beaucoup travaillé avec le décorateur Yannis Kokkos. Pour la pièce Anacaona, leur dernière collaboration au Chaillot, Kokkos a créé un décor basé sur la peinture primitive de Haïti—"comme les arbres d'une forêt vus d'un avion," dit Kokkos.*

▼ Antoine Vitez (1), der zur Zeit Administrator der Comédie Française ist, war von 1981 bis 1988 Leiter des Nationaltheaters in Chaillot, wo er intensiv mit dem Designer Yannis Kokkos zusammenarbeitete. Seine letzte Inszenierung in Chaillot war *Anacaona* (2). Kokkos sagt, das sein Bühnenbild auf einem naiven Gemälde aus Haïti beruhte, "welches die Bäume eines Waldes aus der Vogelperspektive zeigt."



GEORGE MERANI

Since being named administrator of the Comédie Française last July, Antoine Vitez, 59, has slowly and steadily injected new life into the stagnant if stately airs of France's historic theatre. With roots that reach back through Napoleon to Louis XIV and Molière, the theatre has long been known as the bastion of classic repertoire. While respecting this historic legacy, Vitez proposes to modernize the theatre's image with new plays and provocative stagings as the means to larger, broader-based audiences and a vital place in contemporary theatre.

"I've had a clear view since my beginning here," explains Vitez in his plush, antique-filled office. "It involves keeping tradition alive. Tradition is necessary because tradition is memory. But conservation, well, I would like to be traditional without being conservative." His additions of plays by Beckett and Sartre to the company's repertoire illustrate how he manages to enliven theatrical waters without rocking the boat.

For example, when the Odéon, presently the second house of the Comédie Française, reopens after the August 89 holidays, it will present Vitez' production of the Spanish classic, *La Celestine*, after its premiere at the Avignon Festival in July. It is being designed by Vitez' long-time collaborator, Yannis Kokkos.

"*La Celestine* represents an immense stairway that ascends from Hell to Heaven," says Vitez about the production design. He explains that this stairway to Heaven is essentially the whole of the decor, meant to be both functional and

symbolic. "The idea is to redo *La Celestine* with a bit of the taste of the Middle Ages — a spectacle where there is something of Heaven and Hell, God and the devil, good and evil. But it is represented in a physical manner. The characters mount and descend the stairs constantly," he elaborates. The characters' dress is a mix of contemporary and ancient, to create a sense of relevance.

Open-air performances generally necessitate special requirements of set and direction. At Avignon, the huge scale of the stage and its 27 meter stone wall backdrop magnifies the need for compensating production measures. For Vitez and Kokkos what's called for is clear. Vitez explains, "Working in an open-air space like Avignon, I direct the performance in a fashion in which performers' voices carry throughout the amphitheatre. Actors must play against the grandeur and immensity of the place, as well as the sound of the mistral -- a strong, dry wind that blows through the South of France. Players' faces must be held toward the audience — nobody can speak with his back toward the audience. You must construct an image as you would do for a painting where everyone looks outward. Naturally, the decor must be entirely conceived as to avoid any obstacle to the sound."

As Vitez admits, his spectacles owe much to the talents of his scenographer Kokkos. He discusses when and how his collaborator's input enters the scene. "I always have an idea, a starting point. More and more now I ask Kokkos for his idea. We work almost by combating together — it's a battle of ideas." During these early

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