



## DESIGNER ON DESIGN: YANNIS KOKKOS

BY ELLEN LAMPERT

The decor for *La Celestine* is an extremely tall staircase, measuring 14 meters high," says Yannis Kokkos, the Greek-born designer who has created both the sets and costumes for the Comédie Française production, directed by Antoine Vitez and set to premiere at the 1989 Avignon Theatre Festival.

The director/designer collaboration of Vitez/Kokkos began in 1969, and has continued over the past twenty years with very few interruptions. "Our working together is almost intuitive now," comments Kokkos, in describing his relationship with Vitez, and lighting designer Patrice Trotter, with whom they often work. "After very little conversation, each of us expresses himself," Kokkos continues. "This is very rare."

"This decor is very vertical," says Kokkos, talking about his staircase design for *La Celestine*, "and like a drawing by Escher, of a staircase with no order, with broken steps." The staircase, built of real wood and worked to have the colour of an antique, will dominate the stage. Constructed by Dubuis studio near Paris, the stairs have been treated to resist both the sun and the wind to which they will be exposed in Avignon's Provençal setting. "The staircase joins Heaven and Hell," explains Kokkos, "with sculpture at the top to represent Paradise, while that at the

bottom represents the realm of the devil."

According to Kokkos, his decor is inspired by the art of the Middle Ages, with costumes which are a mixture of the Middle Ages and contemporary styles. "Even a little punk," laughs Kokkos, "but not too aggressive. The costumes create a liaison between the Middle Ages and the decadence of today."

Having worked with Vitez throughout his seven-year tenure at the Chaillot, Kokkos will now design many of the productions at the Comédie Française. "There are certain things I cannot do at the Comédie Française," comments Kokkos in regard to their change of venue. "Here there is a repertory schedule, with a different show on stage every night. This changes my basic conceptions for the decor. They also have had a repertoire of plays which limits a certain modernity. We hope to bring in more contemporary concepts."

After the performances at the Avignon Festival, 12 - 22 July, the Comédie Française will move *La Celestine* to the Odéon in Paris in the fall. "I resist redesigning a decor once it is finished," says Kokkos, "so the staircase for *La Celestine* will just have to be reduced to fit into this indoor space."

Among the Vitez/Kokkos collaborations at Chaillot were *L'Echange*, with a latex tree seemingly growing out of the stage (1); Sophocles' *Elektra*, set in 1950s Greece (2); and *Le Misanthrope* (3). They open the 1989 Avignon Festival in July with *La Celestine* (Kokkos' drawings, 4, 5) wherein, according to Vitez, "the characters will mount and descend the stairs constantly...ascending from Hell to Heaven."

Parmi les créations de Vitez/Kokkos au Chaillot, on peut citer *L'Echange*, pour laquelle un arbre de latex semblait naître du bois de la scène (1); *Electre de Sophocle*, située dans la Grèce des années 50 (2) et *Le Misanthrope* (3). Vitez a réalisé la mise en scène et Kokkos le décor pour *La Celestine*, qui ouvrira le Festival d'Avignon en juillet 89 (*Croquis de Kokkos 4, 5*). Selon Vitez, "les personnages montent et descendent les escaliers continuellement en tirillés entre l'enfer et le paradis."

Vitez und Kokkos arbeiteten unter anderem an folgenden Produktionen zusammen: *L'Echange*, wo ein Latexbaum scheinbar aus dem Boden wuchs (1); *Elektra* von Sophokles, dass im Griechenland von 1950 spielte (2); und *Le Misanthrope* (3). Ihre Inszenierung von *La Celestine* (Kokkos Zeichnungen 4, 5) wird das Avignon Festival 1989 eröffnen. In dieser Inszenierung, werden laut Vitez, "die Schauspieler ununterbrochen auf den Stufen nach oben oder nach unten steigen... von Himmel in die Hölle absteigend."