

ELIOT'S POSERS

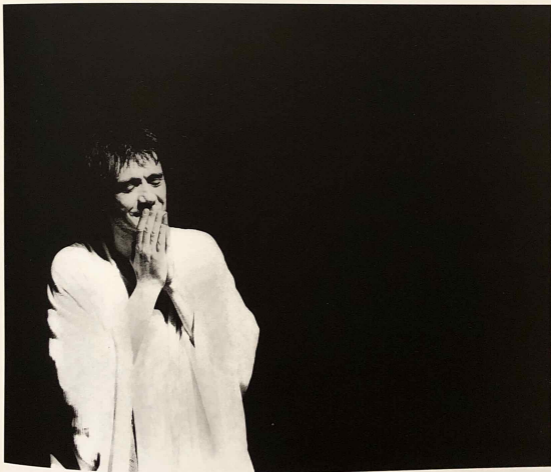
Michael Billington

How does one judge a production of a play in a language one does not speak? I find no problem if it is *Hamlet*, *The Cherry Orchard* or Pinter's *The Homecoming*: plays whose texts have entered one's bloodstream. But watching T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* – which Art Inter-Odeon presented in a Romanian translation at London's Almeida Theatre in July 1996 – was a baffling and yet ultimately rewarding experience. I felt there were many things I didn't get: specific Romanian references I couldn't understand. Yet Marcel Iureş's magnificent

performance as Becket had a bony asceticism and spiritual authority that transcended the language-barrier. What also came across was the fierce commitment of the company to the idea that Thomas Becket's resistance to state power and his ultimate acceptance of martyrdom brings liberation to the people and imparts the power of speech.

The play itself had a strange history. Eliot wrote it in 1935, under commission, for performance in the Chapter House of Canterbury Cathedral. It was initially well

THOMAS. *And I am not in danger: only near to death.*
(*Murder in the Cathedral*, part II)



received and, in Britain, has had periodic revivals; but my chief memory is of watching it in draughty churches with faulty acoustics and struggling to pay attention to Becket's agonised deliberations on the temptations of martyrdom. But, in recent years, we have come to see the play in a new light. Peter Ackroyd in his 1985 biography of Eliot suggests the play is partly a self-portrait of its author and that its imaginative centre lies in 'its obsessive presentation of guilt, uncleanness and the void'. Steven Pimlott's 1994 Royal Shakespeare Company production, by setting the action in the period of the play's composition, also reminded us that Eliot was making a strongly political point about the conflict of Church and State and the urgent need for spiritual resistance to dictatorship. In short Becket, 'always isolated... always insecure', is a projection of Eliot himself; but he is also the prototype of all those twentieth-century churchmen who have bravely resisted state tyranny.

It was the last idea that, understandably, seemed to inform Mihai Măniuțiu's Romanian production. I saw little hint of what the text calls 'old Tom, gay Tom': the skilled diplomat who had previously been Henry II's chancellor and the first Englishman since the Norman Conquest to fill high office. Instead, Iureș's Becket was a craggy, weatherbeaten, knobby-featured figure in an oatmeal gown, resisting the temptations of earthly power with a mixture of fear, apprehension and stubborn, obdurate heroism. What one saw in him was a prototype of moral resistance to an imposed and arbitrary authority; yet he also suggested the human vulnerability underneath the martyr's robe.

Some of the symbols in the production were puzzling to an English spectator. I didn't fully understand the idea of the

chief tempter being a demonic, sinister black-hatted figure looking, to local eyes, like the mass-murderer, Jack the Ripper. The significance of the women of Canterbury covering the knights who murder Becket with sand also eluded me. What one could grasp was the imagistic power of the crop-haired, androgynous, ragged member of the chorus who acted as a mixture of Becket's internal conscience, alter ego and spiritual protector; and the moment when, while cradling the dead Thomas in her arms, she let forth a rush of nervous speech very clearly implied the liberating consequences of individual martyrdom.

Above all, what appreciated in London was the mixture of theatrical virtuosity and ensemble commitment. The stage was constantly alive with writhing figures, scattered grain, pools of blood. The air was filled with a strange mixture of sounds from strings, percussion, mournful Middle-Eastern pipes. And at the centre of the production was Iureș's sombrely magnificent Becket with his tortured dignity. In England *Murder in the Cathedral* often seems a rather dry play in which the doubting Thomas agonises over the potential arrogance of martyrdom. But, in Romanian hands, it became a much more urgent play about the symbolic power of sacrifice and the need for resistance to oppression. One may not have understood it all. What moved one was a sense of the company's personal investment in the experience: the feeling that we were watching not just a highly skilled piece of art but a necessary production with strong political resonances for its performers.