

# Christopher Hampton's 'Savages' at the Royal Court Theatre

Though the English Stage Company at the Royal Court has always declared itself a writers' theatre, it has as often as not been a writers' and directors' theatre, enabling a relationship between the same two people to develop over a period of years and a number of plays. Thus, Christopher Hampton and Robert Kidd began their playwriting and directing careers respectively with *When Did You Last See My Mother?* and continued to work together on *Total Eclipse* and *The Philanthropist* – the most recent product of their partnership being Hampton's innovative and controversial *Savages*, now transferred to the Comedy Theatre. In the following interview with the Editors, Christopher Hampton outlines his work since the success of his first play swept him off his undergraduate feet, and describes in detail the serious and time-consuming project of tackling in *Savages* a contemporary political theme. Inset at appropriate points are answers from Robert Kidd and Paul Scofield, commenting on the problems confronting director and leading actor in their work on *Savages*; and Martin Esslin rounds off this Casebook in a return-bout with the reviewers, summarizing their reactions to the production, taking them to task for aesthetic and ideological inadequacies, and finally offering his own interpretation of the play.

First performed by the English Stage Company, Royal Court Theatre, London, 12 April 1973. The production transferred to the Comedy Theatre, presented by Michael Codron, on 20 June.

Alan West	Paul Scofield
Mrs. West	Rona Anderson
Carlos	Tom Conti
Crawshaw	Michael Pennington
General	Leonard Kavanagh
Attorney General	Gordon Sterne
Ataide Pereira	Glyn Grain
Major Brigg	A. J. Brown
Chief and Bert	Frank Singuineau
Elmer Penn	Geoffrey Palmer
Kumai	Terence Burns
Pilot	Leonard Kavanagh
Co-Pilot	Glyn Grain
Indians	George Baizley
	Lynda Dagley
	Thelma Kidger
	Donna Louise
	Eddy Nedari
	J. C. Shepherd
Robert Kidd	Director
Jocelyn Herbert	Designers
Andrew Sanders	
Andy Phillips	Lighting Designer
John Haynes	Photographer

After the transfer to the Comedy Theatre, the part played by Geoffrey Palmer was taken over by Donald Douglas, and those of George Baizley and Donna Louise by Minoru Tarada and Maxine Nightingale. The parts of Ataire Pereira and the Co-Pilot were cut following revisions.

## Synopsis

### ACT ONE

**Scene One** Indians gather around the fire, as visiting tribes enter. Alan West, spotlight downstage, tells the Indian legend of the origin of fire.

**Scene Two** As Mr. and Mrs. West dress for a diplomatic function, the revolutionary Carlos and the guerrillas burst in, kidnap West, and leave his wife bound and gagged.

**Scene Three** West is black-hooded and chained to a bed in the guerrillas' hide-out. Carlos informs him of the terms of the kidnap – the release of 25 political prisoners – outlines the political aims they hope to achieve, and explains the repression of the Brazilian military dictatorship, which has forced the guerrillas to take up violent tactics. Carlos' tone is friendly and matter of fact.

**Scene Four** Indians dance while West, spotlight downstage, tells the legend of the origin of the stars.

**Scene Five** Mr. and Mrs. West and Miles Crawshaw, a young anthropologist, drink coffee after dinner. West describes the English lady who was sold worthless Indian land in Brazil through an ad in *The Times*. Crawshaw communicates his enthusiasm for the Indians and explains their plight – by the time he submits his thesis, the tribe he's studying will probably be dead. The story of the Indian Protection Service, as Crawshaw tells it, is acted out by the Brazilian General and Attorney General: when the latter documents the corruption, the evidence is destroyed at the Ministry of Agriculture, and the IPS is replaced

Left: Guerrillas wearing Mickey Mouse masks confront West as he dresses in Scene 2.

Right: West and his wife discuss the plight of the Indians over after-dinner drinks, Scene 5.



by FUNAI, a new organization staffed by the same people, and presumably carrying out the same policies. West makes sympathetic noises, then changes the subject to his interest in poetry – specifically, the poetry of the Indian legends.

**Scene Six** Guerrilla hideout. Carlos tells West the state of the kidnap negotiations. West suggests his kidnap is not the best way for the guerrillas to achieve their aims. They arrange new reading matter for West, poetry instead of propaganda, and make a date to play chess together. The relationship is amicable.

**Scene Seven** West on the veranda of a colonial bungalow visiting Major Brigg, listening to a scratchy recording of Gilbert and Sullivan, and reminiscing about England and the Major's former work for the Indian Preservation Society. The Major concludes that there's no hope for the Indians, the extermination may as well be got over with as quickly as possible, and so save everyone a lot of bother.

**Scene Eight** Indians decorate the funeral posts while West, spotlight downstage, tells the legend of the origin of music.

**Scene Nine** Guerrilla hideout. Carlos and West playing chess. West asks about the revolutionaries' policy for the Indians – to be told it's the same as for the rest of the workers and peasants. Carlos has composed a poem, 'The New Beatitudes' ('Blessed are the Corporations,' etc.), to show the dilettante West that poetry should be political, not just intellectual.

**Scene Ten** West visiting the American missionary, Rev. Elmer Penn, who describes the success of his Indian mission, explaining why and how the lives of the savages are being changed – with God, barbed wire, a work ethic, Western sexual mores. Scene ends with a performance by prize pupil Indians of a Christian hymn on the harmonium.

### ACT TWO

**Scene Eleven** Indian ceremony, with West telling the legend of the coming of Death.

**Scene Twelve** Guerrilla hideout. Carlos and West discuss the American involvement in Brazilian politics – exploitation of the peasants so that somebody in Detroit can have a third car. West tells of a distant acquaintance of his,

mistakenly shot by the Death Squad. Carlos rejoins with the story of a seventeen-year-old girl-friend of his who was tortured for her suspected involvement with the guerrillas. Scene ends with West describing Brazilian children torturing animals on a beach and Carlos' reply: 'Well, what else is there for them to do, comrade?'

**Scene Thirteen** The confession of Pereira to an Investigator of his part in the brutal massacre of a village of Indians, the last remaining of that tribe – including the hanging upside down and chopping in half of a girl. The company refused to pay him because they'd taken too long, so Pereira didn't get his fifteen dollars.

**Scene Fourteen** Indian ceremony with West spotlight downstage, telling the legend of life after death.

**Scene Fifteen** Guerrilla hideout. West, still handcuffed, Carlos cutting his hair, preparing him for his release. Carlos is being sent to Cuba to rethink his ideology after an organizational disagreement on the counter-productivity of violent guerrilla tactics. They chat about women and marriage and Carlos's attraction to American girls. Carlos facetiously defines Capitalism as the process whereby American girls turn into American women. Carlos amiably accuses West of being Romantic and Liberal.

**Scene Sixteen** As Scene Five. Anthropologist Crawshaw describes the methods of exterminating Indians – introducing flu and measles epidemics, for example – and tells of an incident he's witnessed of the transporting of Indians by air under conditions that killed most of them.

**Scene Seventeen** Guerrilla hideout. Carlos tells West of a hitch in the kidnap release negotiations, ending in their first angry discussion about ideology. They settle down, however, to play chess.

**Scene Eighteen** The Indian ceremony during which a plane passes overhead, dropping bombs which kills the villagers in the middle of the ritual.

**Scene Nineteen** Carlos enters the hideout, shoots West abruptly, and apologizes as he pulls the trigger. The play ends with world-wide news announcements and newspaper headlines about the kidnapping and death of West.

**Scene Twenty** The screen flies out to reveal a pile of unheadlined Indian corpses.



horrified by what I'd said, so a lady was appointed to go around with me to make sure I didn't say anything too ludicrous. As I trekked from appointment to appointment I said to her, 'Well this is all rather boring,' because they all asked the same questions, and they were not really interested in the play. Whereupon the lady became irate and said I didn't realize how lucky I had been and how people had worked for years and years to be able to arrive at this position. And I hadn't thought about that at all.

*If you'd had to wait all those years yourself – sitting in the out tray – do you think you would have gone on writing?*

It's very difficult to say. Quite possibly not. I'd probably have stayed at Oxford and done research.

### Towards 'Total Eclipse'

*What happened after When Did You Last See My Mother?*

I'd done nothing in my second year at Oxford except go to London for rehearsals, so they gave me a year off to go to Germany to speak the language, which I was conspicuously unable to do at that stage of my Oxford career. A place was found for me at this huge municipal theatre in Hamburg, the Deutsche Schauspielhaus. For six weeks I was put in a very small room at the back of this elephantine theatre. This tiny room – which used to take twenty minutes to find every day – piled to the ceiling with English plays of the sort you would normally never read. I wrote reports in very bad German on the complete plays of Swinburne, or all the Jacobean plays, or all the modern plays that were opening in London.

After six weeks there were some problems as to whether they were going to pay me. I didn't have any money and was living on credit at a student hostel. During the Easter holidays there was a putsch and the man who ran the theatre suddenly vanished. When I went in after Easter the whole staff seemed to have changed and no one was really interested in reading reports in my German on the plays of Swinburne. It was decided that I was redundant and not eligible for any pay. Needless to say, I was lonely and miserable.

At school I'd been obsessed with Rimbaud because he'd written all his work between the ages of fifteen and twenty. In fact, I'd always wanted to write something about Rimbaud and Verlaine – even before I'd written my first play. So, having got the sack in Hamburg, I settled down to read all the books I could get hold of on Rimbaud and Verlaine, while I was waiting for some money to be sent from Oxford. When it arrived I decided to

go to Munich where I had a couple of friends. It's a long story, but I was given a lift by this Belgian fellow who said he was going to Munich and then the Italian Riviera. But when we were about a hundred miles out of Hamburg he changed his mind and decided to go to Brussels. So I found myself in Brussels, which seemed a good place to start work on the play, because it was actually the place where Verlaine shot Rimbaud, and was put in gaol for many years. I hung around going to their old haunts and jotting down a few notes, and then I went to Paris to do some more research at the Bibliothèque Nationale.

*You'd decided by this time to write a play about them?*

Yes. I'd been thinking about it for a couple of years in fact. I did some research for a couple of weeks and then by a fortuitous twist of circumstance I got a job in Paris, translating lectures about James Joyce for a French novelist who was going to do a year at the University of Buffalo. He paid me enough to live, so I wrote that second play, *Total Eclipse*, in Paris: by the time I went back to Oxford for my last year I'd finished the play.

*You said When Did You Last See My Mother? wrote itself, as it were: writing Total Eclipse must have been a much more conscious process . . .*

It was a different process altogether. *When Did You Last See My Mother?* was written in six weeks, in the evenings – no hangups about it. *Total Eclipse* was written over six months after a long period of research, and the whole process was more painful. A lot more cutting and changing and re-arranging went on. Choosing historical subjects for plays makes the lead-up into the play much easier, but actually writing the play more difficult. Creating completely fictional situations is a very difficult process because obviously possibilities are more or less infinite, and you have to sift around deciding what's going to happen to your characters and when, and how many characters and all that sort of thing. With an historical subject, that's given, but then you're faced with the problem of 'losing it' in a different way – because you're limited by your knowledge of the characters and you don't have the freedom you have with a creative subject.

*How do you work?*

There is a long period in which more or less nothing happens, except that I brood about the subject. I'm a very slow worker, and once I have the idea I don't like to start the play until I have five or six moments or images around which the play can be built. Once I have that, then I start

to plan in a more specific way. With *Total Eclipse* I remember I devised about sixteen scenes into which the play would be divided. Then I did an enormous number of notes, fragments of dialogue, bits and pieces, and decided that a quarter of the scenes I'd planned were redundant. When I start to write I write fairly quickly, and I never, or rarely, change the script once I finish it.

*I thought Total Eclipse was very good, but it didn't receive much critical notice.*

That was interesting. Robert Kidd, with whom I've worked ever since he directed *When Did You Last See My Mother?* and I were both very surprised that *Total Eclipse* didn't do any better – in fact, we both prefer it to *The Philanthropist*. But it had a

*How has your author-director relationship developed? Is it now just assumed that you're going to do the next Christopher Hampton?*

Kidd: No, we never assume that at the Royal Court – a place which breeds paranoia. Christopher's one of my best friends, so even when he's not writing or I'm not doing one of his plays (which is most of the time) we still see a lot of each other. I suppose I'd be hurt if I didn't read one of his plays before someone else. And yes, I'd like to go on doing his plays. We went through a funny phase when *The Philanthropist* was written, because I was working for Granada Television at the time – I'd got pissed off with the theatre, and the work I was being offered I didn't particularly want to do. It's very depressing trying to earn a living as a theatre director – doing productions you don't want to do for very little money. So I went to Granada and worked in current affairs for six months. It was in that period Christopher sent in *The Philanthropist*. I read it early on, and liked it, but didn't have as strong a reaction to it as I did to *Total Eclipse*, which was the one production I've gone into completely confident that I had a wonderful play, that I was going to do it rather brilliantly, and that it would be a huge success. And of course it wasn't. Looking back now, I can see why. I can think of half a dozen reasons why it didn't go. The difficulty about an episodic play is that scene by scene it may be magnificent, but to make it work as a unit is much harder than doing a one-set play.

very short rehearsal period, and it's a fairly complicated play. We offered the part of Verlaine to every actor we could think of. All turned it down. We were forced in fact to cast somebody as Verlaine who'd had less professional experience and who, indeed, was younger than the man who was playing Rimbaud.

*Why didn't anyone want to play the part of Verlaine, do you think?*

Since then, I've got to know two actors who've said to me they had just read *Total Eclipse* and enjoyed it. In fact, both of them had been offered the part and professed complete ignorance of having ever heard of the play before. Good actors get so many offers that they leaf through and read a page here and there and think, well, I don't think this is the moment to go to the Royal Court, I think I'll do something else. I always think it's remarkable how many actors are prepared to work at the Court for derisory salaries.

*Critics objected to the end of Total Eclipse . . .*

Yes, there's a scene in the middle of the play in which Rimbaud asked Verlaine to put his hands on a café table as a test of love, and Rimbaud ran a knife through both of them. In the scene at the end, which takes place after Rimbaud's death, the same incident is repeated, except instead of stabbing Verlaine's hands, he kissed them. This was a difficult thing to make work, and people were repelled by it – they felt it was a sentimental device. Yet this scene was meant to show the false and sentimental way in which Verlaine remembered the relationship. Verlaine's statements about Rimbaud towards the end of his life were completely unconnected with any aspect of their actual relationship; he romanced the whole affair to such an extent that he gave rise to the legend, which was squalid, and caused a great deal of damage to both their lives – ruining Verlaine's marriage and making Rimbaud decide he didn't want to write poetry any more.

### Dramatist in Residence

*Having written Total Eclipse before leaving Oxford, what happened when the time came to go down?*

I still had no idea what I was going to do when I left. I vaguely thought, I suppose, I would stay on and do research or do a 'B' film. A few weeks before finals I went to London to see Osborne's *Time Present* at the Court. I was having a drink afterwards with Bill Gaskill and he asked what I was going to do. When I said I had no idea, he asked if I would like to go to the Court as their



Resident Dramatist – an idea thought up on the spur of the moment to help me, I suppose. I accepted, not really knowing what the job involved, and in fact, we evolved the job during the two years I was there.

At first I just read plays in the Script Department, and was amazed how many people write plays. The Royal Court receives at least a thousand plays a year, all of which are read by a team of readers (most of whom are writers), reported on, discussed, and then sent back again – usually. That's the most discouraging thing about it, really. While I was there we had, maybe, three or four writers who sent plays through the post unsolicited which were then done. Most people write not very good plays because they don't really understand the problems of staging a play and they don't approach the thing in a practical or professional way – they simply write what they feel inclined to write and, as often as not, it is absolutely unstageable. I met dozens of writers, young writers, at the time I was at the Court, and talked to them about their plays. Some of them were talented, you know, but for one reason or another their plays were not done anywhere. I don't know if there's any solution to the problem – though I do think eventually, if people have enough talent and enough application, they will emerge.

*What were the plays like that you read at the Royal Court?*

They fell into three groups. At least half of them were just hopeless. Another third or so were fitfully interesting – that's to say, they had things in them which were good and things that weren't so good, but you could see the people had some idea of how to do it. And there were a handful that were really interesting. Another part of my job for the Royal Court was to go and see all the new plays that went on in all the theatres around the country. When I left I'd had my fill and didn't go to the theatre for months, though now I go quite a bit again – to see most things I think might interest me.

### A Relaxed Success

*Having created all this work for yourself as Resident Dramatist, when did you get round to writing again?*

I'd been at the Court about six months when I realized I'd not done anything else but read plays. So we had a discussion and it was decided that if I were going to write, we'd have to take on another writer – David Hare, whom I'd known before – to do the work I was doing, with the

understanding he'd take over as Resident Dramatist when I left. When I left, Ted Whitehead came to take his job, and so it's gone on. Then I got down to writing *The Philanthropist*.

*How did that play come about?*

Molière was my special subject at Oxford and I became particularly interested in two plays – *The Misanthrope* and *Don Juan*. I got the idea one day of writing a riposte to *Le Misanthrope* in which the central character would be completely opposite, yet the same things would happen to him. As I worked on it, I wanted to find a segment of society which was equivalent to the kind of society that Molière was writing about – where intelligent men who had nothing very much to do could sit about and chat to each other – so obviously I decided to set the play in the University.

After that a lot of changing took place as I worked on the play, and in fact the final version was quite different from my first set of ideas. It was quite difficult to write and, funnily enough, the first half was most difficult. Looking back, trying to be objective, the bits that are hardest to write are usually the bits that don't work very well. One passage in *The Philanthropist* I rewrote six times and every single rewrite was worse than the original.

When I got to the second scene I was completely filled with despair. I could not see that it had any kind of merit or interest and tore it up and was very depressed for about two weeks. Then I got the idea, which was the end of the first scene, of the character blowing his head off for some reason I can't actually account for – and that solved all the problems. I started again and went straight through.

I think the problem is that there are two separate operations: one is to write the play, which concerns yourself and the piece of paper, and the other is to put the play on, which is completely different. When you see the play on the stage you realize it doesn't mean half of what you meant it to mean, although there are certain things which will work that you never quite imagined could work.

*It's ironic that both you and Robert Kidd thought Total Eclipse a better play than The Philanthropist....*

*The Philanthropist* is a more shapely play, a better constructed play, a more professional play: but it was written in fact as a sort of relaxation. I wanted to write a comedy, and that's what I set out to do. It was never planned on the scale of *Total Eclipse*. The things one's reputation rests

on – a play running for three years in the West End – are often just fortuitous. Had we not been able to get Alec McCowen for *The Philanthropist*, and had a number of circumstances not worked

out in the way they did – for example, getting the Mayfair, which was a last desperate move – I might be in a different position today. The fact that it transferred and is still running amazes me.

## HAMPTON, KIDD, SCOFIELD ON 'SAVAGES'

*How did you come to write Savages?*

There was an article in the *Sunday Times* colour magazine which contained a paragraph describing the extermination of the Cintas Largas tribe in Brazil. The organization which was trying to get rid of them hired an expert who discovered that on one particular day in the year the tribe gathered together in a village to perform a ritual play. They hired a pilot who bombed them during the play. That was the starting image for *Savages*.

The article appeared about the beginning of 1969, and I knew I was going to write *Savages* while I was writing *The Philanthropist*. I began my research in the British Museum as soon as *The Philanthropist* was on. I wanted to find out about the legends of the Indians because I knew I wanted to include them in the play. From the very beginning the legends were an integral part of the idea. I had decided that I wanted to have the Indians on stage, but I had also decided I didn't want them to speak. I'd read books by Levi-Strauss about the myths of the Indians which I found very interesting, and I wanted to get something along those lines, though I wasn't quite sure what. What happened was that I wrote about half the play, all the bits concerning the Indians, before I went to Brazil, and the rest, the Carlos section, when I got back.

*Why did you go to Brazil?*

It was basically a trip for local colour, to meet as many people as I could, and to see the Indians. In the British Museum I'd gone through all the newspapers since 1964, when the coup took place.

The second day I was there I saw a man who arranged for me to go to Brazilia to meet another man about going into the Xingu. Then some other people I was talking to said, if I did this and wrote the play I was describing to them, then the people who had helped me would very likely be in trouble. After this warning I decided I couldn't go to the Xingu. I was with my wife, and we went to Brazilia, got on a small plane, and got off at an airport about 100 kilometres from the Xingu and near another Indian reservation called Bananal which had a particularly bad reputation.

I actually saw very little of it. I'd found my way to the Funai headquarters, the headquarters of

the Indian Foundation. They cleared out a room for us and talked quite freely. But about 3.30 in the afternoon a boat arrived with the army colonel in charge of supervizing the island. He

*Did you know anything about Brazil and the Indians – any more than the average person?*

**Kidd:** No.

*You had to do some independent research?*

**Kidd:** A lot of the inspiration came from the anthropologist. Then we had to decide with the Indians whether to go for actors or dancers. We decided on actors. I didn't want a ballet, and also, they had to be semi-naked. I ended up with a complete cross-section – one Fijian, a couple of English, one African and so on. I put an advert in *The Stage*. A lot turned up, but they all fled when I said they'd have to take their clothes off.

We decided the Indians should look as much as possible like the real Indians and the lighting was adjusted to create an atmosphere in which they looked right. I decided from the word go that the interiors would be hard, bright and very clear-cut, and that the Indian scenes would be much more flexible and atmospheric.

made the most terrible row and said, 'You have to go down and get in the boat now and leave at once.' He asked if I'd taken any photographs.

*Who did you manage to talk to?*

I talked to the people who were running the Reservation and we saw the Indians who were around our buildings, but we didn't actually get to the village. The man who supervised the Indian village was going to take us at four o'clock, but before he could, the colonel arrived, and we were packed in the boat, taken across the river and dumped in this town. It was quite a terrifying situation. We went into a hotel (I say hotel but it was a one-storey house with a few compartments, almost out in the open), where the man who'd been so sympathetic to us when we arrived began to talk to us about the problems he was



having. How difficult it all was, how he wished he was working in the Xingu because that was the only place where the Indians had any hope. He said what was happening to them in this place was nobody's business. We were talking in Portuguese which was a bit tricky, but I understood most of what he was saying.

About 10.30 there was a rap on the door, and the colonel and his men came into the room. The men went away and the colonel sat down. We made uneasy conversation about whether or not God existed! You see, the man who'd been so helpful was very upset when the colonel arrived, the first thing he said when the colonel walked into the room was, 'Good evening, Colonel. God does not exist.' Which upset the colonel. So they argued about it, and they both went away. The colonel said, 'Tomorrow morning you can see the Indians. I'm very sorry, but one has to be careful. We'll send a boat for you at nine o'clock.'

In any case I had to get back on the island because that's where the airport was. Then nobody turned up the next morning – as I'd suspected – and I had to go round banging on doors asking for someone to take me across. Finally I produced a large wad of money and a youth took us. We wandered about the island until the afternoon when the plane was due back. We didn't see very much. The colonel was at the airport with the man who'd been so nice to us. What really frightened me was that this man wouldn't speak to us at all. He just looked away and didn't say anything. That was my only taste of what it was like there. It gave one a feel of the power of the Police State. I also went to the North East, where the situation is at its most desperate – famine, poverty, drought.

### Background and Sources

*What did you get in Brazil that directly mattered to finishing the play?*

More than anything else was how relatively insignificant the Indian problem is... compared to other things. I began rather in the way West does in the play, by having an interest in the Indians for various sentimental and anthropological reasons. But having been in Brazil, what became clear was that though the Indians are an awful problem, it's not anything like as serious as what's happening to the country as a whole – which is truly dreadful.

*At what point did you feel that the kidnapping framework was going to be necessary?*

Before I went to Brazil – though in the first place

I was just going to write a play about Indians. But the more I researched, the more I thought it was all really caused by the system – of which the Indians are just a symptom. The Indian problem is a result of the economic policies of capitalism – a simple statement, but true. The more I went into it the more I realized it would be absolutely necessary to put in something about

*Did you yourself do any further research into the Brazilian situation once you'd read the play?*

**Paul Scofield:** I read a book about the political structure in Brazil which mentioned the Indians hardly at all. But Christopher's own research had naturally been considerable and he was always most willing to discuss any point. Robert Kidd had worked closely with Christopher for months before rehearsals began, and he was also able to fill in background points which might illuminate the play. But for the actor that kind of research is not very relevant, except as a matter of personal interest and curiosity, and there's not much time for it during a four-week rehearsal period. A play must be absorbed and absorbed by an actor until it becomes part of his day-by-day consciousness, and he cannot and should not attempt to absorb a wider canvass than that constituted by the play itself. At least, that has been my experience.

the political situation in Brazil. Then I read various books by revolutionaries and became aware that in 1970 – more or less the time I wanted to set the play – they were doing all these kidnappings. They'd kidnapped an American and a West German and a Swiss and a Japanese, so I just added an Englishman. I thought it would solve a lot of dramatic difficulties in the play as well.

*Where did you come by the scene with the old major?*

I went to a meeting, in 1969 I think, somewhere in Soho, to discuss what was happening to the Indians. This old party was there, who told a story about sitting up in a tree and shooting the exterminators as they came down the river. How that was the only solution, nowadays there was too much interference from the officers of the law. He was a very interesting old boy who went rambling on. I buttonholed him afterwards and talked to him – and then put that scene in the play.

*And the American missionary?*

The American missionary is the most 'fictional' character, but a lot of him is based on a book I read called *The Defeat of the Bird God*, the memoirs of a missionary in Brazil or Bolivia or somewhere. Some of the phrases came from it, like 'stepping on cultural toes.'

*And that powerful scene of the murderer's confession to the priest?*

Which has now been cut in the West End transfer.

*Why?*

I don't know. People didn't like it and felt it added nothing to the play. Michael Codron, for example, and Lindsay Anderson who was the

*Hampton felt more than a little ambivalent about the cutting of the murder confession scene. What were the reasons you cut it?*

**Kidd:** It didn't lend anything to the play. I liked the scene enormously. I liked the way it was written. I liked the way the two actors played it. And I almost cut it at the Court, but left it. Since the play was transferring, and I was re-rehearsing it, I took that opportunity to cut. I'd made up my mind before the run had finished at the Court that the play would be better off without it.

*Can you explain why?*

**Kidd:** The play isn't too long, but it's repetitive. The Indian element is tautological – to the detriment of the impact of the play as a whole. The other difficulty was a lack of dynamic action. And this seemed to be one of the scenes we could do without. I felt one didn't want it at the point it came in the play either – one couldn't tolerate two new characters talking about the Indians, again, and in reported speech. It was a descriptive passage. I think the play's better without it, but, yes, Christopher was loathe to lose it. The BBC want to record the play, and we're talking about putting the scene back, somehow differently. I don't know whether we will or not.

most violently convincing. The scene was actually created from the mass of evidence about the Indians being exterminated. After the bombing started, there were still some left of one particular tribe who were 'causing trouble.' So they hired an expedition of six men to go up the river to find the



Top: Equity Indians perform one of the rituals. Middle: The Brazilian Attorney-General submits his report on the corruption of the I.P.S. to the General. Bottom: Pereira confesses the details of the massacre to the Investigator, in the scene cut after the transfer to the Comedy



village and kill everybody in it. These men got a girl, hung her upside down and cut her in half. They took photographs which were in the papers in Brazil. When the scandal broke in 1968 this was one of the cases that got the most publicity, and one of the men involved made a confession.

There were originally two scenes in the play, one in the first act and one in the second – just bald restatements of the evidence, of what he'd said to the priest who was interrogating him. I didn't feel it worked, though, because the first half of the scene, which came in the first act, was confusing – right in the middle of nowhere. So I cut it and put it into one scene which was played in the second act. Lindsay Anderson felt it was unnecessary to have that scene because we saw what happened to the Indians: we didn't need to have a man sitting there, telling us what he'd done to them.

*Is it general with your work, or special for this play, transferring literary raw material into drama?*

It depends. I'm obsessed by fact. When I'm doing an historical play, I try to make sure that everything is based on recognizable fact. You find that facts are much more bizarre than anything you could imagine. With a strictly fictional play like *The Philanthropist*, it's a different process altogether. *Savages* evolved over about three years in direct relation to the actual experiences I was having, and the reading I was doing.

### Structure and Development

*Savages seemed to have three distinct parts – the kidnapping framework with the revolutionary, the Indians and their myths, and the scenes showing different people and their attitudes. Were you conscious of these as separate elements? Do you feel you welded them together?*

I do, though I was aware from the start it was a hell of a job. It would have been more practical, I imagine, to concentrate on one aspect. On the other hand, insofar as the play says anything, it's that individuals have no way of influencing the situation. Each of the characters in the play is a fanatic in one sense or another – the missionary and the revolutionary and the anthropologist – and each feels, some with more justification than others, that they have the right view.

*You didn't attempt to show the capitalists, the American industrialists?*

I did have a scene which was taken out of the second half. It was a very simple scene, an advert offering for sale Amazon adventure estates. 'You

too can join Prince Rainier of Monaco and a host of Hollywood celebrities, staking out your very own piece of El Dorado.' The ad was to be

*When you first read the finished version, were you conscious that you were going to have a job reconciling the 'private' kidnapping element with the 'public' Indian element?*

**Kidd:** I always saw the play as being about a man who's kidnapped.

*Did you, in rehearsal, confront these as separate threads to be first of all separated out, then woven together?*

**Kidd:** At rehearsals, my assistant and the anthropologist worked with the Indians – there was a lot of groundwork to be done in movement and exercises, and getting them fit. For the first two or three weeks I saw little of them, though I used to go at the end of the day and see what had been done. I spent all my time with the rest of the cast to begin with. The whole thing didn't come together really until the last week. When we got it together, it gelled very well. The difficulty was keeping it together and making it move into another stage.

read out and to be played against a bar setting, with a lot of Indians drinking Coshassa.

*Never an actual scene with American capitalists?*

I felt West fulfilled that function.

*On the evidence of the earlier plays, one felt you were a playwright who was mainly concerned with personal relationships rather than with politics or 'wider issues' – except insofar as they reflect on people.*

Yes, that's true. On the other hand, I feel in some ways that *The Philanthropist* is a political play – at least it reflects politics as I observed them then.

*In that respect it's transitional?*

With *The Philanthropist* critics didn't understand about the Cabinet being gunned down, the various catastrophes which happen around the place. But that was an important part of the play to me – when Don says, 'It's not going to make any difference to us what happens.'

I felt involved politically at Oxford where very few people were, and those that were, were not impressive. In 1968 I thought everything seemed to be happening in all the other Universities in Europe, but not Oxford. I remember one evening coming home and seeing a protest march in the Broad Street, and I thought, 'Hello, at last

something's happening.' But when I got close I saw their placards read, 'Away with Proctors' and 'Away with Midnight Gate Times' – that was a very strong image of Oxford for me.

I find it difficult to write about big issues – I didn't find it easy to write *Savages*. The difficulty was not to propose any easy solutions. I wanted everything to be implicit; I wanted the people to be believable; and I wanted the situation to emerge by implication.

*Although you said the starting point for Savages was the Indian ritual, did you ever consider showing their way of life in a more documentary way? Using film, perhaps.*

Yes, we did think about that. Then we thought that if we used film it would be very difficult for the actors playing the Indians to have any conviction in the end. During rehearsals we tried various scenes with them, just sitting around and eating, but they didn't seem to be effective. And as the fact was that they were bombed during the ritual, we decided in the end to stick to that. We had a silent member of the directorial triumvirate, an anthropologist who took the actors through the ritual as he'd observed it. He maintained anonymity because he goes to Brazil often and didn't want to create difficulties.

*Did you discuss how the play was developing with Robert Kidd before you presented him with the finished script?*

I showed him what I'd done before I went to Brazil and explained to him what I was going to do, and to a few other people, and everyone was rather alarmed by the shapelessness of it. I think

*What was your reaction when you read the unfinished part of Savages Hampton gave you before he went to Brazil?*

**Kidd:** Mild frustration. I would think, this is rather good, I like this, and then I'd turn the page and read, 'There now follows Scene 18 which will be the main and central scene of the play' – but which wasn't there. You could only read it in fragmentary bits.

now it's a mistake to show people things before they're finished, because they don't see how the construction of the play's going to work. Actually I think *Savages* is quite successful: I think the various disparate elements are rather carefully put together. Once I started to write, as always, I wrote pretty quickly. Each of the scenes took me a day probably.

I write in longhand – usually from ten to six, and the most difficult thing, I find, is getting myself

## Plays by Christopher Hampton

### Savages

'This is the best kind of political play. It hits at the audience rather than at some hypothetical third person villain.' – *Harold Hobson, Sunday Times*. To be published Spring 1974. Paper covers

### The Philanthropist: A Bourgeois Comedy

'Hampton brings to his theme a sharp, new perception which should leave most people in his audience feeling got at.' – *Ronald Bryden, The Observer*. £1.25; paper covers 75p

### Total Eclipse

'A most intelligent dramatic treatment of the relationship between Rimbaud and Verlaine. . . . A compelling evening in the theatre.' – *Philip French, New Statesman*. Paper covers 40p

### When Did You Last See My Mother?

'Unlike such sentimental works as *Tea and Sympathy*, Mr. Hampton's play does not pretend that homosexuality is a boyish affliction like acne which can be cured by a night in the arms of a nice lady.' – *Alan Brien, Sunday Telegraph*. Paper covers 40p

### Molière's Don Juan

A translation by Christopher Hampton. Broadcast on Radio 3 in 1970. The first stage production was at the Bristol Old Vic in 1972. 'Christopher Hampton's text seems highly speakable and . . . a usefully straight rendering of Molière's play.' – *Charles Lewsen, The Times*. To be published this Autumn. Paper covers. 80p

**Faber and Faber**



into a state to begin. Once I've begun I keep going until it stops working. I don't write in an autobiographical way at all, and I can't write about anything unless I feel intensely, emotionally involved with it. Then the process is to write as if I *wasn't* emotionally involved.

*You just sat down and wrote?*

Yes. The anthropologist I modelled on 'our anthropologist,' because he spoke with such passion and refused any interruption. In fact the story he tells about seeing the remnants of the tribe being flown in and unloaded off the plane was from his diary. I know pretty well before I start to write a scene what's going to be in it, though sometimes I have a surprise in the middle.

*Does there come a point where you have to check back to your factual notes and adjust what you've written?*

No, really not. If it's a matter of statistics, then I write pretty carefully from whatever source notes I've got.

## From Page to Stage

*Do you do any re-writing during rehearsals?*

No, hardly any.

*No suggestions from the actors?*

The odd line they don't feel happy about, but that's all.

*And the original wasn't a lot longer than what appeared on stage?*

No. The two confession scenes have been cut, and the scene with the Indians in the bar. A pity I think, because I also wanted to show what the Indians were like once they got off their own territory.

*You didn't attempt to show the poor, except through the eyes of the revolutionary Carlos?*

No, because I don't think I could have done that very convincingly. I don't know enough about it. The other cuts involved the intended beginning and the end of the play – because of fire regulations. The first legend is called 'The Origin of Fire,' and the play was meant to begin with the Indians lighting torches in the fire. And it was supposed to end with the pilot of the aeroplane who had done the bombing, and his co-pilot, pouring kerosene over the bodies and lighting a torch – so that the same image opened and closed the play. We obviously couldn't do it.

*When did you decide to give West the legends?*

The first idea was to have the legends spoken by a voice over, and we probably would have done that, only Paul Scofield was very anxious to say them. He didn't like the idea of recording his

*In the written play, the legends were meant to be a voice on tape...*

**Kidd:** . . . which would have been a disaster. Scofield had the first strong reaction to that – he just thought they would be much better spoken. And he wanted to speak them. I think he was absolutely right. There was something worrying me about them that I couldn't put my finger on. There are certain things one knows won't work in the theatre – and an audience sitting for six scenes and listening to a tape-recorded voice reading obscure legends is one of them. They wouldn't have taken it. There was absolutely no theatricality in it at all.

voice and listening to it every night. He likes to do them, and I think it works better actually.

*One could imagine either a completely independent voice over, as you say, or the anthropologist, or one of the Indians – if you hadn't intended them not to speak.*

Yes, except they are West's poems, and that's a comment on them in a way.

*But that's very sophisticated, an intellectual distancing. Isn't this something that's caused a critical confusion over the play, that there is a separateness between the gut reaction and the slightly distanced, witty technique. One doesn't know where one stands.*

That's funny, because a lot of the critics said it was a piece of propaganda and that's why they didn't like it.

*There seems to have been a clear division between those who said it should be more propagandist, less witty, and those who said it should all have been nice and witty and Wildean, and you should have chopped the propaganda.*

Ronald Bryden in *Plays and Players* for one. His was a sophisticated review, that said when he went to see it he didn't know what to expect. Half the critics had said it was a 'witty' play about kidnapping, and the other half said it was a propaganda piece. He agreed with that, though he thought the propaganda side was hopelessly weak and naive. At the centre, which he said was the best part, was the play about West and Carlos. What he really objected to was that it was this way round, and he would really rather have seen an all-out propaganda piece that would have lit

the skies over Rio de Janeiro, and his heart sank at all the civilized, British witticisms. I think it's very hard to say that one part of the play was better written and then attack it for that reason! And he said that the scene with the missionary was sub-undergraduate, which I think is ludicrous. The way I feel (and this applies to Brustein too), is that the critics just didn't know anything about it. Actually there are people like the missionary, and they are locking Indians up and giving them bubblegum philosophy.

*Does the critical reaction depress you?*

Always, yes. I was very depressed by Ronald Bryden's review. Especially because he said how wonderful *The Philanthropist* was. I kept thinking of his review of *The Philanthropist* – which was not in fact all that enthusiastic.

*Do you feel that critics could in any way provide useful feedback to writers?*

There's no doubt they influence people. If they

*Can you describe the way you started thinking about the script?*

**Kidd:** The biggest problem was dealing with the Indians. I had to make the decision whether to have them or not. Christopher and I spent a long long time talking about that – there was some disagreement. The play is thematically about Indians, certainly, but the actual play is about an English diplomat who is kidnapped. You could – and I did – argue for doing the play without the Indians. I knew nothing about them and Christopher didn't know that much. Fortunately, we eventually found an anthropologist who did.

*Savages* wasn't meant to be like *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* and there was also the economic factor – how many Indians could you afford and how many could you have on a stage the size of the Royal Court. Christopher always wanted hundreds: we finally settled for eight. Also there was a big problem in the text, in that there was nothing written for the Indians. A ritual takes place, but there's nothing on the page that says what the actual ritual is. There was nothing except – 'Another part of the Indian ceremony' – I think that was the phrase. So the anthropologist became invaluable: he became my choreographer. I couldn't have done the play, as it's done, without him.

give bad notices, people don't go and see the play. It's as simple as that. They have a position of great power, and I don't think they exercise it very carefully. It's not to say one expects good reviews – in fact there were one or two really 'bad' reviews for *Savages* which I thought were well-argued and well put-together. Jeremy Kingston, who said in *Punch* the play was a total

*Do you attach importance to getting the blocking fixed at an early stage?*

**Kidd:** If a play is tightly designed, it has to be blocked early. Take the hideout – there's not much you can invent. With a bed in a room to which West is shackled, the blocking evolved easily: there weren't many choices. And our anthropologist choreographed the Indians.

*How do you work with the designer?*

**Kidd:** When I read a play, I tend to react to one or two little bits of it – it's hard to describe. There were certain things I knew I wanted in *Savages* – like a bare stage for the Indians. And I didn't want to use a revolve. I wanted the other things, like the hideout scenes, to be as realistic as possible. We started off with that, and Jocelyn evolved several alternatives around that. And we worked very closely on how to do the scene changing.

*In fact Jocelyn Herbert came up with a relatively orthodox solution to the design problem. Did you ever think of using film clips, or slides?*

**Kidd:** Yes, we did. And I would have liked to do without blackouts. But that was impossible – unless we did a stylized scene change. But that was another factor which killed *Total Eclipse*, so I was a bit wary. If West had to get up, undo the handcuffs and walk across to another set, the play would have been dead. If one scene ends with West saying a line and the next scene begins with him in a different location, in a different costume, how do you do it? Hampton's technique is filmic – you keep wanting to cut, cut, cut all the time.

failure, did seem to have some grounds. But mostly critics are so mindless. They don't seem to have concentrated on the play at all. They might just as well not have been there. You know, some even got the plot wrong.



*Do you think the play can achieve anything except make a few more people think about the situation?*

No, not really. I don't have much faith in the power of writers to change society, except in a very minimal way, in the very long run. Theatre reflects society and very, very occasionally changes the way people think. But then at no stage in the history of the theatre have there been more than a tiny handful of people whose work is ultimately significant. We ought to come to terms with that fact – we who work in the theatre. I could very well imagine a society infinitely better than the one we live in at the moment, in which there was no theatre – and I feel that the people who bemoan the fact that their work isn't reaching

*How important do you feel the play is as propaganda for a political cause?*

**Kidd:** I know that every single thing in the play was true. The more one worked, the more one learned about things that weren't in the play. I did become increasingly conscious of the political situation, but I tried to make the play work on its own level – in purely theatrical terms. I didn't want to get carried away with the fact that it is documented material. So what – terrible things happen all the time. We know there are people who kill babies – it's happening now at this minute in England and America. It seemed to me, however, that that was not the point of the play.

*How much were you conscious of the need to integrate episodes – or of their separate value?*

**Kidd:** I wasn't. There was a lot, however, in the play to be integrated at various emotional and even intellectual levels. Yet all the scenes have their own theatrical value. That's one of the main reasons why I think the play is so good. We know the failure of this country to make any kind of political theatre work. It's partly because audiences aren't interested – but also for other reasons. This play was unique because it was a political play, it was heavily documented, it *did* say, very clearly, certain relevant things. And at the same time it was an entertaining evening in the theatre.

wider audiences, or that they aren't achieving what they want to achieve, should perhaps question the absolute value they give to the theatre as an institution. I see no special reason why

people should go to the theatre. I go because I like it, and I work in it because I like working in it, but I don't think it's sacred in any way.

*But you thought it important to convey the information in *Savages*?*

Yes, though that was another thing Bryden took up. I said in an interview for *The Guardian* – because I was asked what I thought about W. H. Auden saying none of his poems ever saved any Jews – 'Why should Auden have expected his poems to save any Jews?' That doesn't mean he shouldn't write them – of course he should. Bryden said it was this kind of feeling which spoilt my play, that I should have been much more passionate and condemnatory. I don't see how I could have been more passionate. I feel the facts are very, very clear, and what I'm trying to say in the play could hardly be clearer.

### Problems in Production

*Would you rather have seen the play done in different types of theatres, or different situations?*

When I wrote it, I thought, well, three weeks at the Court – you know.

*Do you think the audience that needs to see this play is the one who might see it in a West End theatre?*

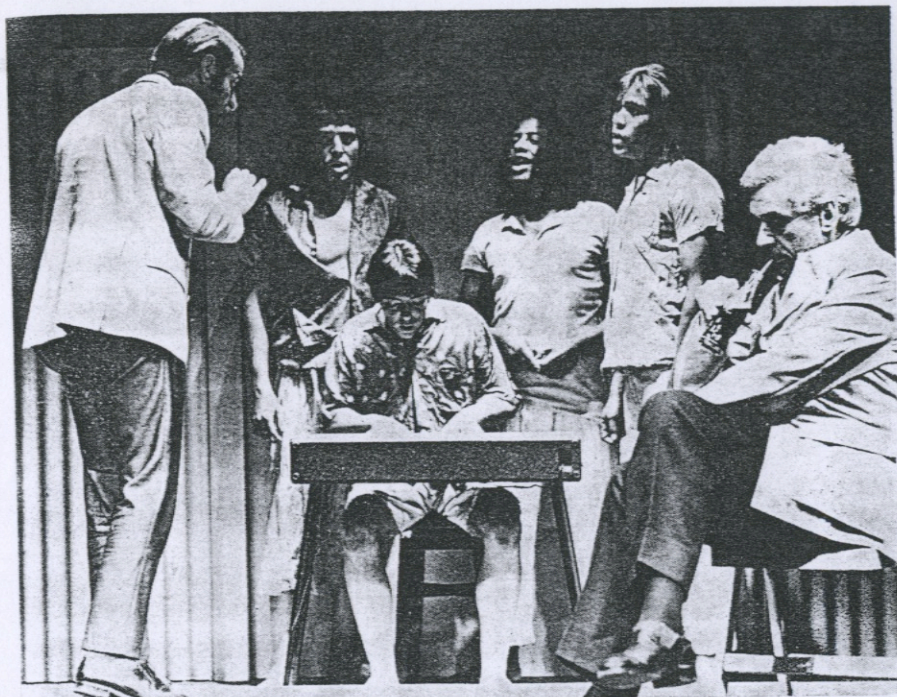
In an ironic way, yes. You can sense the alarm

*How did you feel about tackling, within the confessedly limited resources of the Royal Court, a play like *Savages*, scaled to something more ambitious?*

**Kidd:** The main thing was to get a good designer. I spent a lot of energy and effort – more than I ever had before – persuading Jocelyn Herbert to do it. I think she's the best designer in the country, and she also knows the Court inside out. I spent three months wooing her, because she was very busy and wouldn't do it. I think the whole production would have been up shit creek without her. I had Scofield by then, and he wanted Jocelyn as well.

*What's happened to the production between the Court and the Comedy?*

**Kidd:** Very little. Because it so happens that, though the theatre's much bigger, the stage is almost identical. One would have liked a bigger stage, so the trucks could have gone straight off. I could have lost a few black outs that way.



West sips coke at the American mission while he listens to the Indians perform under the direction of the Rev. Elmer Penn.

in the audience when the play begins – especially now, in the American tourist season. After ten minutes people are either settling down to accept it or are in an absolutely mutinous mood and hate it. It's not at all what they expect. The fact that Paul Scofield said he would do it is very important. Because that's the reason people are going to see it, and I'm very grateful to him.

*Critics have said the part of West is pretty thin. Does Scofield feel that? Is this a fair critical reaction?*

But you see the part's not written as a bravura part, he's totally committed to it, and I think that's what he likes about it.

*Is his interest also one of commitment to the subject matter?*

Absolutely. He made it fairly clear at the end of Royal Court run that he wasn't going to do anything else for a bit, that he wanted to hang about until it was absolutely certain the play couldn't go on again. Had he not made that clear then the play wouldn't be running at the Comedy now. Throughout, he's been totally committed to the play, he's never had any reservations, and he hasn't wanted to turn the part into anything it isn't.

*You didn't intend West to be slightly harder, or more cynical?*

No, I think that what Scofield does very well is to get over the weakness of the man. He was very

*Do you think it was necessary to the play to have a star in the part of West?*

**Kidd:** I think the play would work with an unknown, but good, actor in the part. But Scofield was my first choice, I felt he was right for the part, and he happens to be one of the best actors in the world. And he said yes.

*How do you go about working with an actor on a large part?*

**Kidd:** I never worked with Tom Conti or Paul Scofield on their own. The three of us always worked together.

*Do you take the script apart line by line?*

**Kidd:** We talked about it a lot – not in general terms, in specific terms. Yes, line by line. Trying to understand what each one meant.



upset about one line that was cut: 'That may be what happens, but I'm sure it's not the Government's intention.' He said he missed it in the characterization – the sort of feeble, spineless reaction of the man.

*How closely involved were you with the choice of cast?*

Very. We sent it first to Paul Scofield, so West is perfect casting from our point of view.

*And the rest fell into place fairly readily?*

No, it was very difficult casting the rest. We held a great number of auditions before we found Tom Conti for Carlos – and he's very, very good.

*How involved were you in the rehearsals?*

There was a period of about ten days when I was asked not to come. But I have to be told not to come, otherwise I'm there all the time. I sit and mutter. I've been trained not to speak to the actors.

*Obviously you must feel Robert Kidd has a sympathy with your work?*

Yes, I do. He doesn't have an intellectual approach to a play, which I like very much. He

*You seem to work pragmatically . . .*

**Kidd:** Actors, I'm told, say the opposite.

*You don't approach the play by telling the actors your conception of it?*

**Kidd:** No, not at all. I'm very 'Royal Court' – what is on the page is what we do. So I don't make a big Royal Shakespearian kind of speech about it being done in pink wigs and wellington boots. In the same way, I don't tolerate an actor saying, 'I see the character this way.' If the play's well written, it's on the page – there's only one interpretation, and that's as writ. For example, there's the aggressive heterosexual loud-mouthed, perfectly real and energetic American missionary – there's no point in someone saying he wants to play him as a queer English vicar. There's only one way of playing it, and that's the right way.

*Do you see yourself as being influenced by any particular director?*

**Kidd:** Bill Gaskill, I suppose. I came up through the Royal Court and I've not been at it that long. I'm thirty, and I've been directing for six years, but nearly all my work's been at the Court.

*What attracted you to Savages and to the role of West? Did you feel a personal commitment to its subject matter?*

**Scofield:** It would really be misleading to say that my acceptance – enthusiastic acceptance – of the part was motivated by any previous knowledge of the play's subject-matter, or by any matured conclusions as to the predicament of the Brazilian Indians. I was rather in the position of Carlos, the young revolutionary, whose response to a question was, 'Indians? What Indians?' Although, of course, I knew, as he did, that they existed. I knew something of the sad demoralization of the North American Indian – indeed who cannot feel sympathy towards a race to which a whole land has belonged, yet which finds itself left with nothing, purposeless and redundant? But that was the extent of my knowledge of the general issues at the moment of reading the play, and beyond that point the two questions that you've asked cannot be answered separately. The sense of conviction that I felt about the play came from Christopher Hampton's writing and my practical commitment to playing West could only arise from sympathetic recognition of what Christopher was writing about – which, if I am to be involved at all, becomes for me commitment. I am now very close indeed to the play, and I still feel the same acute sense of concern that I did when I first read it. The character of West was of course important to me, and we see much of the background through his perceptions – the play is really about that background. The background is really the foreground!

sees it simply in terms of how it can be made effective and how it will work for an audience. He doesn't bother to go into the ins and outs of the intellectual line. If he did I think he would find himself with problems. I think rigidly intellectual approaches to plays are not very good from a director's point of view.

*Do you see yourself as going on writing for, say, the Royal Court three-week audience, or have you any ambitions to reach other kind of audience, perhaps through television?*

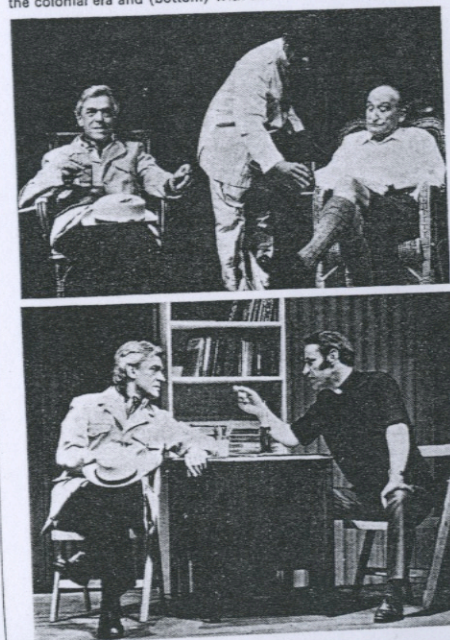
I haven't done any television plays because I feel they come and go so quickly, and the fact that



Above: West and Carlos begin their game of chess in the guerrilla hideout. Below: West chats with Major Brigg about the colonial era and (bottom) with the American missionary.

*How did you build the character of West – his voice, mannerisms, and so on?*

**Scofield:** It varies with me. Sometimes I build hopefully from one or two clues in the script. Sometimes I see the character clearly when I first read the play, and find that nothing emerges from rehearsal to make me change that first impression – this way sounds very easy, but isn't. And sometimes I begin in a total vacuum and work on day-to-day discoveries. It cannot be said that I saw West as a 'fascinating' character, because in a way the point is that he is not – he is fallible and human, and throughout the play he seems to be struggling to apprehend his own sense of humanity, which he only really grasps when speaking the legends to the audience. In his relations with the other characters he is always 'trying to see.' I feel his potential manhood is greater than his experience, and what he sees cannot catch up with what he senses. As Christopher has written him, he is an amusing man, and I hope that I sometimes make him quite funny – but this is essential to his dramatic purpose. It is his faint absurdity which makes us see him as a fallible man, and not as an instrument of moral judgment.





*Did you draw on any models, real or fictional?*

**Scofield:** Of course, I have known Wests, and they have helped to model my performance. But I think that what applies to writers also applies to actors in this – you don't have a specific model, it is rather an accumulation of conscious and unconscious experience of people.

*How much and what kind of work did you do away from the director?*

**Scofield:** Rehearsal is all day and every day for four weeks, remember, and at home during that period the actor is memorizing his lines – so that while I do not actually rehearse at home, at the same time I am constantly occupied with the play. We are now in the middle of a run, and the play's shape and balance are fairly securely established, but I'm still working on it. I'm rarely free of it. Apart from the director's interpretation of the play, and sharing and matching my interpretation with that, the director is also a one-man audience through whom I prepare for a real audience. He is the focal point at which, during rehearsal, I aim my performance.

*Are there special problems in West spending so much of his time just listening? Or in communicating information, which has to be made theatrically interesting?*

**Scofield:** There are no problems in the 'listening' aspects of the character, because during much of the play West is in fact being educated. His function is that of the learner and listener and watcher, and it is as important to listen as to speak, and demands equal vitality. The 'information' content of the play is I think treated quite honestly as such, and if this is put across with conviction and animation the problem is only whether the audience takes it or leaves it. The evidence points to the fact that they take it.

*Has your performance changed during the run in response to audience reactions and to other actors' performances?*

**Scofield:** I think that question answers itself. This is what happens. A performance is influenced by every different audience. It changes every night. The effect that actors have on each other's performances is incalculable. We really do work co-operatively.

six million people watch means nothing, really. I prefer the sensation of people actually coming along and sitting there and watching. *Total Eclipse* was done on television a few months ago – rather well done, and I enjoyed working on it. It was nice to think that a lot of people were watching, but there was no feedback at all. There was one review, otherwise it might just as well never have happened.

*Are you working on another play?*

I'm writing a play. At least I haven't started writing yet, but I'm working on a play of a more personal nature – with three characters. The pattern I've fallen into, for various reasons, is to write a 'small' play followed by a 'large' play, a fictional play followed by a play based on some documentary incident.

*Do you see any kind of development in your work – in retrospect?*

No. People have often asked, but I see no connection between my plays whatsoever, except for the fact that I wrote them. I try to approach each subject in a way appropriate to it. I have no particular style, I don't think.

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Martin Esslin

## In Search of 'Savages'

*Martin Esslin reviewed the reviews of the Royal Shakespeare Company's revival of Gorky's The Lower Depths in 1999. Here, he considers the rather different problems posed for the critic (and for a critic of the critics) by a new play, of controversial content and innovative form – Christopher Hampton's Savages, which opened in April at the Royal Court Theatre, London, and is the subject of the Production Casebook in this issue. Martin Esslin, Head of BBC Radio Drama, is also author of major studies of Brecht and Pinter, and of the seminal Theatre of the Absurd.*

CRITICIZING the critics may be quite a useful exercise once in a while; but why return to it so soon after my piece on the reaction to the RSC's *Lower Depths* in 1999? Because there is a profound difference between the critical response to an established classic, with its own history, its own background literature behind it, on the one hand, and a brand new play on the other. In the former case what is at issue is the degree of background knowledge, of professional expertise the critics reveal or fail to reveal; in the latter the situation is far more difficult and complex: here the critic of critics cannot put himself onto a pinnacle of superior background knowledge or research; his own response to the play is as valid or invalid as that of all the other critics. So how can he judge the relative validity of their judgements?

Yet such an analysis seems to me well worth while, not only to show how differently different people react to the same experience, but also because the sheer quantity of different reactions set side by side with each other should reveal different, typical and stereotyped attitudes, and thus lead to a greater understanding of some of the basic assumptions – and perhaps prejudices, or blind spots – behind our daily and weekly drama reviewing.

Christopher Hampton's *Savages* is a good starting point for such a survey: a new play by an established but still young author on an unusual and unhackneyed subject with an original formal structure, a big star in the lead – an intriguing mixture of ingredients, unusual enough to challenge the critics' sensibilities.

The play had, to put it mildly, a mixed reception. A number of critics thought it just plain bad, a failure:

'an almost total failure as a play . . . ' (Jeremy Kingston, *Punch*)

' . . . ineptitude . . . ' (John Barber, *Daily Telegraph*)

' . . . a long and tortured route to arrive at the

play's bleak truism' (Jack Tinker, *Daily Mail*)  
(*Tortuous* or *tortured*?)

' . . . a disappointment . . . Too many scenes went by with long explanatory speeches and no action, but Paul Scofield . . . managed to inject some stimulant into dying lines.' (John Elsom, *The Listener*)

' . . . a well-meaning mess . . . ' (Milton Shulman, *Evening Standard*)

About an equal number of reviewers found the play very good, a considerable success:

'a rare play: one that passionately pleads a specific cause but undermines all the romantic sentiment surrounding it.' (Michael Billington, *The Guardian*)

' . . . overwhelming admiration for Mr. Hampton's work . . . ' (Frank Marcus, *Sunday Telegraph*)

' . . . splendid eloquence . . . ' (Kenneth Hurren, *Spectator*)

' . . . delicately and with cumulative power . . . ' (Harold Hobson, *Sunday Times*)

' . . . an offering to be seen and admired . . . ' (Herbert Kretzmer, *Daily Express*)

### Perils of Instant Reviewing

The rest of the notices came down neither on one side nor the other. For them the play was a curate's egg – only good in parts. In some cases the impression one has is of caution – not wanting to be committed, in case one's opinion turns out to have been wrong. B. A. Young in the *Financial Times*, for example, gave an extremely accurate and fair account of the play's content without clearly indicating whether he thought it good, bad or indifferent. That was on 13 April. After the transfer of *Savages* to the West End, however, Mr. Young published a second notice, on 30 June in which he had come to the conclusion that –

*Savages is far and away the best play now in the West*



End . . . it also contains far and away the best performance by an actor in the West End . . .

I am quoting this not to score a point against B. A. Young. Quite the contrary: it underlines, to my mind, the weaknesses of instant reviewing. Why should Mr. Young be expected to come to a mature conclusion about the play's merits and literary value half an hour after the curtain came down on the first night? After all, a really valuable work of art shows its true power by the very fact that it lingers in the mind, that it makes one think long and thoroughly about it, that it contains so much that new facets only come to light after long reflection, that it stimulates trends of thought which may continue for days, months, even a lifetime. This, after all, is what Brecht meant by his distinction between 'culinary art,' which merely passes through one's mind like food passes through one's body, and true art, which changes one's habits of thought. By this token it should in fact be impossible for a really original, great work of art to be judged instantly. The history of theatre from Richard Wagner to Beckett confirms this. The instant critic who refuses to be drawn into a value judgment may thus be the wisest and the most honest of them all.

What characterizes many of the reviews, however, is the glibness of their instant value judgments. Indeed, more than that, the glibness with which the motives of the author are proclaimed, as though the reviewer had first-hand information on them. Irving Wardle in *The Times* is a good example:

*Savages is a documentary polemic, written in a white heat of outrage, and far more intent on clarity of statement than on formal neatness . . . The formal tasks he sets himself are two: to devise a scheme that will incorporate as much material as possible and to adopt a stance proper to a national outsider.*

How did Irving Wardle know that Christopher Hampton was more intent on clarity of statement than on formal neatness? If Hampton had told him so himself, surely he could have given his source. If not, he had no justification in making that assertion. In fact, what struck me on seeing the play was its formal neatness, the subtle contrapuntal interplay of Indian myth, flashbacks, and the dialogues between the kidnapper and his victim. And how did Wardle, and many of the other critics who used the same cliché, know that the play was written in 'a white heat of passion?' What struck me was the coolness and rationality with which Hampton had tackled his explosive material.

The pitfalls of Wardle's method (if method comes into this muddle) are shown in the subsequent portions of his review. Having decided that the author was intent on clarity above all, he then berates him for not living up to his supposed intention:

*The dialogues between West and Carlos the guerrilla occupy a large proportion of the evening, but they offer little more than factual illumination. The positions of the two characters are insufficiently clarified . . .*

But what if the intention of the author was not mainly to impart factual information but to present two complex characters, each with a mixture of motives? Having decided — in my opinion quite wrongly — that Hampton was writing no more than an arid documentary tract, Wardle has totally closed his mind to any other possibility, and therefore misses the main dramatic point and delight of the evening. Ronald Bryden, in *Plays and Players*, who has reservations on other points, clearly saw that element in the play:

*The dialogue between the imprisoned diplomat . . . and his young captor is in [Hampton's] finest vein. Extracted from the mass of material round it, it would make a brilliant short play. The Englishman, tetchy and middle-aged, can't resist baiting the young enthusiast who guards him. But he prides himself on his liberalism and envies the boy's passion too much not to sympathize with him. Over their bored games of chess a genuine affection grows between them. The diplomat hints at his own detestation of the military junta which rules Brazil. The boy admits his own revolutionary heresy — a weakness for American girls. Both in fact are romantics. What divides them fatally is the older man's belief that action is futile, the younger's insistence that it is necessary. The dialogue and detail of all this half of the play crackles with intelligence . . .*

Precisely. The 'insufficient clarification' of the stance of these two characters to which Wardle — and some other critics — objected is in fact the human core of the play, the ambiguities of their position, the life-blood of their drama, which, after all, ends with one of them killing the other. The cliché about the 'white heat of passion' in which Hampton is supposed to have conceived the play and which convinced so many of the reviewers that he was above all making propaganda at the expense of everything else, blinded them to the actual merit of the play as drama.

### Your Political Slip is Showing

Benedict Nightingale in the *New Statesman* starts from the same false promise and solemnly admonishes the author:

### What the Critics Said

In order to give readers the opportunity of contrasting their own reactions with those of Martin Esslin's in his survey of reviews of *Savages*, we reproduce here in full, by kind permission of the journals concerned, four of the reviews he analyzes in most detail — those of Irving Wardle in *The Times*, Robert Brustein in *The Observer*, Harold Hobson in *The Sunday Times*, and Catherine Itzin in *Tribune*.

### Savages Royal Court

#### Irving Wardle

The black record of the European rape of Brazil occupies one page of the Royal Court programme. The Portuguese arrive in 1500, after which the indigenous Indian population starts dying out at a rate of a million a century. Forced labour is introduced. The Indian Protection Service is implicated in wholesale tribal extirpations. Indians are deprived of any rights to land. A branch of the Trans-Amazon Highway is diverted to cut through their last surviving reservation, the Xingu Park. The Indian population is now estimated at 80,000 in a total population of 90 millions.

Emerging from this sickening compilation and from other accounts which suggest modern Brazil to be one of the worst places on earth, the question is, what Christopher Hampton (or any other visiting dramatist) can add to the facts.

*Savages* is a documentary polemic, written in a white heat of outrage, and far more intent on clarity of statement than on formal neatness. Hampton is not solely concerned with the Indians but also with the plight of Brazil's destitute 70 per cent and the tactics of military government. The formal tasks he sets himself are two: to devise a scheme that will incorporate as much material as possible, and to adopt a stance proper to a national outsider.

Both, to a degree, are solved by his decision to thread the action on to a kidnapping. A British diplomat, labelled rather than named Alastair West, is picked up by a group of guerrillas and held in exchange for the release of political prisoners and safe-conduct to Cuba. Scenes of his captivity alternate with flashbacks to his previous Brazilian encounters. By making him also a minor poet, Hampton is able to spread the net and show West collecting scraps of Indian mythology which are introduced as parables between the scenes.

I assume these are authentic. As Paul Scofield speaks them they are certainly intensely moving, from a prologue on the birth of fire ("What you take from people, they will never find again") to a last statement on masks as a protection from invading demons. What one would like to know is whether this material originated before or after the arrival of the Portuguese. In other words, does it represent the beauty of a spoiled Indian culture (in which case, why should the myths of a supposedly happy people be inextricably tragic)? Or does it represent their attitude towards colonial barbarities? As they stand, they are too much like what West himself was looking for: beautiful poems divorced from their social origins.

The play develops by following the course of West's Brazilian education: starting as a detached diplomat, full of cynical stories about land speculation, getting an introduction to the Indian question from a disillusioned young anthropologist whose tribe is likely to be slaughtered by the time his thesis is out; trekking off to the interior to discuss the past with a Naughtamesque old major who talks about the rough justice of the old days to a background of

Gilbert and Sullivan on a wind-up gramophone; and visiting a scarifying American missionary (Geoffrey Palmer, uttering bursts of laughter through clenched teeth).

By the time the guerrillas collect him, he is no longer quite the same detached liberal. But where his feelings are focused on the Indian question, his captor—an amiable young intellectual—regards this as quite marginal to the real political crisis. No doubt it is; but the play is not large enough to take on the larger subject at this stage. The dialogues between West and Carlos the guerrilla focus on a large proposition as the evening, but they offer little more than factual illumination. The positions of the two characters are insufficiently clarified. West remains an uncommitted outsider whose allegiances remain romantically ambiguous.

Tom Conti's Carlos is simply glamorized; a charming young man out of the social top drawer, who hates shedding blood, and acts simply from a sense of social outrage than any particular ideology (quoting Che and Fanon is as far as he gets).

The role of West offers variety but not much assertion; even when not chained to a bed, it is largely passive. And one senses Scofield chafing against its limits and doing all in his power to expand and enrich the lines. Sitting over a game of chess he does amazing things with a remark like "I have a feeling I'm going to win", drawing it out with pauses and hand gestures, leading one to expect something momentous, and concluding on a comic anti-climax.

Ridiculed as there has been such a brilliant display of listening as in this performance, the posture and response precisely gauged to the occasion and the other speaker, and to the development of his own character. Robert Scofield's production, interwoven with Indian rituals and one cataclysmic bomb attack (fully authenticated), carries its documentary fluidity with the somewhat lunging exposition. You leave the show primed with well-presented information and many excellent lines. But theoretically what will linger are Scofield's solos which recall the liberal epigram that culture is what remains when everything else is forgotten.

### ROBERT BRUSTEIN

At the Royal Court, Christopher Hampton's *Savages* opens with two promising scenes. In the first, Paul Scofield—playing a liberal English diplomat in Brazil—lugubriously intones a myth about the origin of fire against the background of an Indian ritual; in the second, he is confronted by Tupamaro-style guerrillas, wearing grotesque masks, and kidnapped. After this, the play settles into a monotonous series of flashbacks and conversations, where the opening scenes of ritual, narration and confrontation are repeated in one form or another throughout the evening, and little is added to the action except the execution of the diplomat.

Much is added, however, to our knowledge of Brazilian politics and practices, for it is the author's thesis that while capitalism and revolution are locked in a struggle for power, the

Brazilian Indians are being systematically tortured and slaughtered (ironic projections at the end show the whole world aroused over the death of the diplomat, while wholly indifferent to the massacre of an entire Indian tribe).

The author's indignation over this is fierce—to fierce that it has muddled his play. The diplomat is a kind of sympathetic cipher, limited, largely to responses like "Extraordinary!" and "Oh!"; the guerrilla leader spouts revolutionary platitudes; and the others are caricatures, particularly a moralistic, Coca-Cola-drinking American missionary who seems to have wandered in out of a road-show version of 'Rain' (today such missionaries would be much more likely to share Mr Hampton's humanitarian views).

Since 'Savages' is unformulated, Robert Kidd's production seems tentative (the ochreous East certain that, morally, innocence could never be again either. But the "liberal dilemma" begins after the fall with wondering what is to be done about what you know to be wrong. Obviously, remedial action is not readily available to the Royal Court audience; perhaps we are expected only to share the author's outrage. This I am perfectly willing to do, but I wish he had not felt obliged to idealise the moral qualities of his Indians. One should be prepared to protest against cruelty even when the victims are as ordinary as everyone else, for it is precisely this kind of selective outrage that is responsible to justify cruelty in the first place.

### Harold Hobson

A TRULY living subsidised theatre should give us not only classics, freshly thought out, but also new works of quality. This is what the Royal Court is doing with Christopher Hampton's *Savages*, which offers us an arresting performance by Paul Scofield as a kidnapped British diplomat in Brazil in a play that delicately, and with a cumulative power, transcribes Mr Hampton's sorrow and indignation at the gradual extinction of the Brazilian Indians, and his reluctant but inexorable disillusionment with freedom fighters and liberal champions of good causes. For while the diplomat discovers in his prison cell with his eloquent captor (all these scenes tingle with life and thought) and in flashbacks at home with his wife, friends and his colleagues, it is that people care passionately (and that they do care passionately is never in doubt) only for those good causes they can espouse without loss to themselves.

The anthropologist sees the wrongs of the Indians, but will not publicly mention them. The colonist concludes complacently that nothing can be done. The idealistic revolutionary, who will wade through slaughter to paradise, emotionally argues that, compared with the welfare of underpaid white workers, the deaths of a mere 50,000 Indians is an inconceivable trifle. Even Mr Scofield's elegant, baffled diplomat is more concerned with Indian legends than with Indian lives.

This is the best kind of political play. It hits at the audience rather than at some hypothetical third person villain. This is a lesson that is badly needed. Royal Court audiences come from liberal-minded, well-heeled intellectuals, many of them from Westminster and Chelsea. They are in favour, like Mr Hampton's equivocal revolutionary, of higher wages for the lower-paid. Yet when these result in increased rents one has only to read the Westminster and Pimlico News (which this week informs me that my own rent is probably going up) to hear their howls of rage.

### Catherine Itzin

A LONG-FORGOTTEN memory came to mind while watching Christopher Hampton's *Savages* (Royal Court) — which seemed to underpin the "liberal dilemma" point of the play — of an exciting excursion when I was a child in Iowa to the Indian reservation at Tama to see real Indians. The anticipation was tinged by scarifying images of ferocious Apaches on the warpath (across the cinema-masque screen, of course) against wagon-train innocents forging new frontiers.

What I saw was a squaw squatting outside her tepee weaving baskets, while the braves performed a pathetic imitation of my idea of a war dance. To my innocent mind, the Sac tribe at Tama were worse than disappointing — they were frauds. It never occurred to me then that they were people.

Legally, ignorance of the law is no defence; watching *Savages*, I was certain that, morally, innocence could never be again either. But the "liberal dilemma" begins after the fall with wondering what is to be done about what you know to be wrong.

Hampton's play (structural and dramatic weaknesses aside) is packed with information about Brazilian society — the statistics of starvation and genocide charted with figures on profits and exploitation and the facts of political dictatorship.

His episodic treatment juxtaposed "liberal" British diplomat (Paul Scofield, as usual splendidly poising on his consonants to leap soaring into his vowels) with a dilettante's passion for Indian legend; an intensely sincere young anthropologist researching the tribe that would be dead before he submitted his thesis; a retired relic of British imperialism, with a passion for Gilbert and Sullivan and his Indian servant; a Coca-Cola guzzling American missionary keeping his Indian sheep behind barbed wire for their own welfare; the general and his attorney, sweeping the corruption of the Indian Preservation Commission (embarrassingly discovered to be more concerned with elimination than integration) under the carpet; one of the hired extirpators, confessing to My Lai type tortures; and Carlos (Tom Conti), the amiable urban guerrilla, discussing ideology over a game of chess with the kidnapped British diplomat; all interspersed with the Indians performing their "charming" rituals of death and rebirth, looking uncomfortably like the Indians I saw at Tama.

The play's strength (again, despite structural and dramatic weaknesses) lies in the fact that the crucial characters in the Brazilian story the capitalists are not represented. But, as in life, their presence is implicit behind the scenes, where they pull the strings on their unwitting puppets who are Hampton's characters.

The play incredibly manages to present a cross-section of points of view, so that they are seen to be sympathetically valid in their own "innocently" selfish contexts — even the butchers who hang young Indians up upside down to chop her in half — contexts, after all, dictated by a system in which the motives (for good or evil) are irrelevant. Make no mistake — capitalism is resilient enough to embrace the liberal dilemma — along with genocide and worse.

Capitalism is, in fact, rarely directly mentioned by Hampton (except in witty Wildean definition of it as the process by which American girls become American women). But the play leaves no doubt that the magnitude of evil represented is the result of capitalism — without making the mistake of attributing the guerrilla into any sort of solution. Because the "simple" answer to Brazil's problems (and the world's) is short: NONE within the capitalist system, which, by more serious definition, depends in the long-term on the exploitation of some for the benefit of others (whatever the short-term lies, self-deceptions or sops.



... [it] left me ... wishing that Hampton would tackle his theme like a good propagandist or like an artist and not from some indecisive stance in between. Either he should be more wholeheartedly didactic, building his case with more crusading zeal and imaginative verve ... or he should explore the attitudes of West and the other 'civilized' savages with more insight and irony. Or conceivably both.

So the either/or alternative doesn't really hold good. All Nightingale is saying is that, while there is no objection against a play which is both a piece of political argument and a human drama, he didn't find either of these objectives well enough executed. Why then bring in the preconceived idea of a necessary alternative between these two possibilities? Frank Marcus in the *Sunday Telegraph* found precisely the avoidance of an either/or attitude, the absence of polemics and propaganda, the absence of a 'white heat of passion,' admirable:

... the true value of *Savages* ... lies in the fact that his play is not polemical. What other author could have resisted the assumption of a mien of self-righteous moral indignation, in the face of such atrocities? Mr. Hampton asserts by his example that true comedies are profoundly serious. The play bristles with epigrammatic wit, and the arguments attain a Shavian level of lucidity and daring. He is endowed with the ability to explode that most dangerously fashionable form of sentimentality: the cult of violence. He does not incite hate but invites understanding.

These (to declare my own interest) are opinions with which I entirely agree. *Savages* seems to me a play which is exceptionally well balanced between the pleading of a cause and an insight into the tragic ineffectiveness of political remedies. It is interesting to see how such a balance escapes critics with strongly preconceived political opinions. Harold Hobson, for example, sees the merits of *Savages* in the manner in which, he imagines, it attacks liberal left-wing opinions:

[It] transcribes Mr. Hampton's sorrow and indignation at the gradual extinction of the Brazilian Indians and his reluctant but inexorable disillusionment with freedom fighters and champions of good causes ... This is the best kind of political play. It hits at the audience rather than at some hypothetical third person villain. This is a lesson that is badly needed. Royal Court audiences come from well-heeled intellectuals, many of them from Westminster and Chelsea. They are in favour, like Mr. Hampton's equivocal revolutionary, of higher wages for the lower paid. Yet when these result in increased rents one has only to read the Westminster and Pimlico News (which this week informs me that my own rent is probably going up) to hear their howls of rage ...

In other words, don't be for higher wages for the lower paid! And congratulations to Christopher Hampton for hitting those who are! Does Mr. Hobson admire Christopher Hampton because he also, like the authors of *Lloyd George Knew My Father* and *A Sense of Detachment* (who currently occupy the highest rungs in Mr. Hobson's hierarchy of great dramatists), has a bash at well-heeled intellectuals who are in favour of higher wages for the lower paid? He should compare notes with Catherine Itzin, who in *Tribune* comes to a diametrically different conclusion about the message of *Savages*:

Capitalism is ... rarely directly mentioned by Hampton. ... But the play leaves no doubt that the magnitude of evil represented is the result of capitalism - without making the mistake of simplifying the guerrilla into any sort of solution. Because the 'simple' answer to Brazil's problems (and the world's) is short: NONE within the capitalist system, which, by more serious definition, depends in the long term on the exploitation of some for the benefit of others ...

As Miss Itzin admits that the anti-capitalist guerrillas would also do nothing to save the Indians from extermination and as Miss Itzin does not seem to know any alternative solution, the conclusion inevitably must be that capitalism (whatever that term is supposed to mean nowadays, when even the aims of Communist guerrillas are subsumed under it) is not the source of all the Indians' evils.

In fact, if Miss Itzin knew the rudiments of Marxist thought, she would know that what threatens the Indians is industrialization, the advance of forms of production with which the Indians can neither compete nor live in peaceful co-existence, and that therefore - as the guerrilla, and Mr. Hampton, know - there really is nothing that can be done to save these Indians without integrating them in a system which would destroy their culture. That is a truly tragic situation and that is what Hampton had put his finger on and what makes the play a true tragedy.

Curiously enough, there are those on the right who agree with Miss Itzin that the play is an attack on capitalism. J. W. Lambert, also of the *Sunday Times*, but here writing his quarterly review of London theatre in *Drama*, finds it less than fair:

Surely Mr. Hampton did not expect us not to notice that his baddies - the agents, either innately vicious or remotely indifferent of human greed as expressed through the capitalist system, - were not represented at all, even to condemn themselves out of their own mouths ...

The mistake here is exactly the same - and equally based on an ignorance of basic economics and sociology - as Miss Itzin's. It is not necessary to prove that industrialization, which is irreversible and at this stage inevitable, must lead, in one form or another, to the disappearance of the Indians' civilization and way of life.

In fact, Christopher Hampton has put the spokesman for the inevitability of this process onto the stage at length, as the guerrilla, who confirms that in their concern for the welfare of the millions of oppressed industrial and agricultural workers in Brazil, the revolutionaries would do less than nothing to save the Indians' way of life. The debates between West (the British diplomat) and the guerrilla are, in fact, the debates between the ineffectual defender of the Indians (a representative of a 'capitalist' power, if one still wants to use that obsolete term) and the Marxist revolutionary, who stands for the exterminators of the Indian way of life.

### Back to Aristotle?

The preconception, that a play which has a political theme pursues a propagandist aim and must fail if it does not produce a clear-cut villain, is matched in many of the notices under review by another and even more hoary myth, a survival of a remnant of school-room dramatic theory which still lingers in some of our dramatic critics' brains - the hoary myth about the unities. Again and again the fact that the play is a structure consisting of three distinct basic formal elements is singled out as a flaw. Ronald Bryden, the most perceptive and critically acute to make this case, has reduced the elements to two:

*Savages* is two plays, one trying to get out of the other. One is good, the other rather bad ... It's the documentary about the Amazon Indians, I'd say, which is poor and disjointed. The play about the kidnapped diplomat, which contains it, like an embryo in a bottle, seems to me on the same level of brilliance and sophistication as [Hampton's] comedy *The Philanthropist*.

Jeremy Kingston in *Punch* makes the same division of the play (into three parts in this case) the reason for his considering it a total failure. But to him:

... the failure lies in the determinately banal, not to say inept, treatment of the fact-spouting dialogues ...

In other words, just that portion of the play which Bryden found brilliant.

Robert Brustein, in a review in *The Observer*, which I found one of the worst written and argued

in the whole sample, seems to agree:

... the play settles into a monotonous series of flashbacks and conversations where the opening scenes of ritual, narration and confrontation are repeated in one form or another through the evening. ... The diplomat is a kind of sympathetic cypher, limited largely to responses like 'Extraordinary!' and 'Oh!', the guerrilla leader spouts revolutionary platitudes and the others are caricatures ...

An excellent example this of an American's inability to tune in to a British wavelength. He mistakes the British diplomat's brilliantly written habit of understatement, his ability to put worlds of meaning into a single syllable, for what they would be in an American-inarticulateness. And he completely misses the double-edged quality of the revolutionary's spoutings by failing to hear the ironies in the subtext.

### The Structure Justified

In fact, if at the end I might be permitted to supply my own interpretation of the play (no more valid than that of any other critic), I feel that all the reviewers missed not only the final irony but the ultimate message of the play. The play, to my mind, is about the extermination of the Amazonian Indians, but it is also about something much nearer home: the British, also threatened with extinction by an advancing industrial civilization with which they seem unable to cope. West, the British diplomat, who discovers his deep affinity with the dying Indian tribe, who collects their myths and ineffectually tries to help them, is surely a representative figure who stands for the forlorn ineptitude, the inability to cope with the ruthless, computerized, efficiency-mad world of his own civilization, that of the gentleman-ideal with its love of minor poets and minor poetry and dreadful dilettantism in the realm of practical affairs.

This, to my mind, justifies the tripartite, contrapuntal structure of the play - in reciting the Indians' myths which he has collected against a background of carefully reconstructed ritual (I admit that the ochre-painted extras, however well drilled by an anthropologist, demanded a certain degree of willing suspension of disbelief!) the British diplomat becomes not only their spokesman but also the spokesman of a civilized way of life which still finds insight and pleasure in poetic myth. It is the theme of many plays of recent years, the theme, for example, of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*. Hampton's treatment of it strikes me as one of the most subtle, most intelligent and most moving statements of this tragic twentieth century dilemma.





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