

The Ride Across Lake Constance - Theatre

Horseman, pass by.

Peter Handke's *The Ride Across Lake Constance* is directed by Michael Rudman with an almost miraculous understanding of the play's text and structure; its performance by Jenny Agutter, Faith Brook, Nigel Hawthorne, Nicky Henson, Alan Howard, Gayle Hunnicutt and Nicola Paget is the finest example of ensemble acting to be seen in London; and the production has been so great a success at the Hampstead Theatre Club that it is to be transferred next Wednesday, for a limited run, to the Mayfair.

When I saw it the first time *The Ride Across Lake Constance* seemed to be, theatrically speaking, a very simple play; and this impression was strengthened at a second visit, when I was more than ever struck by the sheer dazzling brilliance of the performance and the production. Nevertheless, I cannot deny that many people whose acuity of mind and theatrical judgement and experience are not to be questioned consider it to be almost incomprehensible. What is the reason for this enormous difference of opinion?

The villagers he met next morning, whom he questioned, told him that he had already crossed the lake's thin ice during the night. Realising the danger from which he had unwittingly escaped, the horseman fell dead from fright.

I think it has something to do with the fact that I take the author's programme note more seriously than others do. This note recalls the old legend of a horseman who lost his way in the darkness when trying to find Lake Constance.

Translating the legend into appropriate theatrical terms, Handke follows this scenario with extreme fidelity. The actors play characters who are given their own names. Three people, Faith Brook, Nicola Pagett and Alan Howard, schematically corresponding to the horseman, arrive at a house which, in its splendour, in its turn corresponds to the welcome comfort of the village. This house is inhabited by Nicky Henson and Nigel Hawthorne: and also, (this is very important) by a curious maid with a black face but white hands, who is played by Jenny Agutter. The main body of the play - its games, riddles, bets, bizarre actions and verbal inconsequences - are the counterpart of the horseman's anxious interrogations. This is at any rate how it seems to me.

Now in any ordinary play we should be able, by listening carefully to the dialogue, to be able to find out what it is that has frightened Miss Brook, Miss Pagett and Mr Howard. In *The Ride Across Lake Constance* this is not so. The words spoken by the characters are witty and exciting, but they are not related to any plot or story. Their sole function is to act as a cover for devastating anxiety. They are an effort to damp down panic. What corresponds to the revelation that Lake Constance has been crossed is the appearance of Miss Agutter with a healthily bawling baby. Like Henry James in *The Turn of the Screw* Mr Handke suggests, but does not state, the nature of the horror survived. It would appear to be sexual, but in what precise way the audience is left to guess for itself. At this point, two minutes from the end of the play,

Handke departs significantly from his anecdote. This is his climax, and it would be unfair of me to reveal it.

The main theatrical effect is suppressed terror. The rapid cross-fire of jokes between Mr Hawthorne and Mr Henson: the suave, disquieted calm of Mr Howard: the black-gowned dignity of Miss Brook: the perverse ingenue of Miss Pagett: the concerted entry of Miss Agutter (in a second part) and Gayle Hunicutt as two careless reminders that not everything in the universe is fear: the purposeful black servant of Miss Agutter: the treacherous stairs, the dusty glass, the red-tongued, yelling baby, the sudden accesses of panic, the drawer that sticks, the furniture that is jumped over convey a feeling of nightmare that is absorbing and exciting.

But, of course, it is possible to go further, and this is where the difficulties arise. Just as there is behind an El Greco crucifixion a complicated theological system, so it is argued that behind the word of Handke is Wittgenstein's formidable doctrine of Logical Positivism. Both men are interested in the power (or powerlessness) of language. Following Bertrand Russell's gloss on the baffling series of propositions 6.5 in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* ("There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical"), it would appear that in language no symbols exist capable of expressing ethics or mysticism, or presumably the mystical and ethical experience of vulnerability and pain in *The Ride Across Lake Constance*. Handke agrees with Wittgenstein in that he does not communicate the essence of his play by language; he does it by structure.

To those who understand the *Tractatus*, and the commentaries of Russell, Ayer, Ryle, and Anscombe, or a philosophy like that of Bradley (surely one of our greatest writers?) which is opposed to Wittgenstein's, *The Ride Across Lake Constance* clearly is a fascinating intellectual stimulus. It would be deeply interesting to know what a professional philosopher would think of it. But I do not believe that an acquaintance with Logical Positivism is necessary to a theatrical enjoyment of it. An accepting mind is sufficient to provide one with a most delightful evening.

Harold Hobson, *The Sunday Times*, 18.11.1973.



MainstreamSpanking writes:

The Ride Across Lake Constance

MAY 17, 2020 HARRY



The Austrian *avant garde* dramatist Peter Handke's experimental play *The Ride Across Lake Constance* (or, in the original German, *Der Ritt über den Bodensee*) has never been very popular with audiences. One could say that's because it has no story and nothing really happens, but that never stood in the way of *Waiting for Godot*. But what *Godot* has and *Lake Constance* doesn't is a principle of coherence that pulls its non-action together: *Godot* is the play about waiting for the man who never arrives, whereas *Lake Constance* is a play about... nothing very much. On the other hand, what *Lake Constance* has and *Godot* doesn't is a spanking scene.

Handke describes the play as 'an attempt to portray the forms of human behaviour dominant in our society': its characters, if that is what they are, go through 'forms of everyday behaviour' without the progressive, building relation of one action to the next that turns a series of random moments into a story. This was the very criticism made by the cast of the first production, which opened on January 21, 1971, at the Theatre am Halleschen Ufer, Berlin.



They were not interested in the play because, they argued, 'it was not politically practical':

'There is no continuous story line that will allow a linking up of all scenes to a common centre. The play contains countless fractions of beginnings and ends of fables with the centre missing.'

Handke also resists developing the people of the play into characters with the kind of personal continuity that might offer an alternative kind of recognizable coherence. He does not even give them names of their own: in any production, they are to be identified solely with the names of the particular actors playing the parts, so that, in the original Berlin production, the two figures of especial interest to us were called Otto Sander and Edith Clever, played by Otto Sander and Edith Clever:



In the published script, Handke considered simply giving them letters instead of names: 'Actor A', 'Actress C' and so on. In the end, he opted to use the names of well-known German actors of the early twentieth century, such as Elisabeth Bergner (who was spanked onstage in the 1922 Berlin production of *The Taming of the Shrew*) or Henny Porten, seen here bending over in the 1915 silent movie *Auf der Alm, da gibt's ka Sünd*:



This is of course almost totally irrelevant, because the characters in the play *aren't* Henny Porten and Emil Jannings (among others): they have just borrowed their names for convenience. Instead, we'll use names to match the pictures from the first British production, which opened at the Hampstead Theatre Club in November 1973 and later transferred to the Mayfair Theatre. So, imagine, if you will, [Elizabeth Bellamy from *Upstairs Downstairs*](#)



being spanked by a younger Sir Humphrey Appleby from *Yes, Minister*. Here's how it happens:

NICKY HENSON: *Let's bet on something else.*

NIGEL HAWTHORNE: *Fine, let's make a bet.*

NICKY HENSON (pointing to Nicola Pagett): *Put her over your knee and slap her.*

NIGEL HAWTHORNE: *And what's the bet?*

NICKY HENSON: First put her over your knee.

(Nigel Hawthorne puts Nicola Pagett over his knee.)

NICKY HENSON: You hit her with the riding whip as fast as you can for one minute. While doing so you keep your mouth shut. If you open it you lose.

NIGEL HAWTHORNE: The bet stands.

(Pause. He starts beating her vigorously, but after only a few slaps his lips part. Startled, he lets go of her and sits down, pinches his lips tight. He wipes his forehead.)



Though some enjoyed seeing Nicola Pagett get spanked, the play mainly baffled and irritated audiences and critics alike; but even so, for a while it had a certain curiosity value. As well as Berlin and London, there were productions in New York (at the Lincoln Centre's Beaumont Theatre, opening on January 13, 1972, with Stephen Elliott spanking Priscilla Pointer) and in Paris from January 9, 1974, at the Théâtre des Ambassadeurs, where Michael Lonsdale spanked Jeanne Moreau at the urging of Gérard Depardieu.



This production was notable for having costumes by Yves Saint Laurent, and for being televised the same year.

It's fair to say that it's not a play that attracted much long-term interest among local and amateur theatre groups, but it was revived in May 2013 at the Theatre Museum in Vienna, with Marie-Luise Stockinger getting the spanking.



This play was recorded and can be see on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/Z7JFgffXMeg>

And Peter Handke himself went on to write further challenging plays, including, decades later, *Storm Still*.