

## Millennial drama -- from the 1890s to the 1990s

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We have recently passed the canonical year 2,000; and for anyone living in North America in 1999 the fact that they were in the last decade of the millennium was glaringly obvious. The siege and slaughter at Waco, Texas, was both fuelled (and in a sense fulfilled) by the belief that the Kingdom of God awaited those of the faithful, who had the firepower to survive a coming Armageddon. The rhetoric of apocalyptic utopianism filled US radio talk shows, animated the rough-neck leaders of the armed militias, surfaced in the public statements of the National Rifle Association, and lay behind the headlines of the Oklahoma bombing. And even if this all seemed outlandish to European eyes, they shouldn't have been too complacent in light of the Botho Strauss affair, with the most widely produced German playwright of the past decade, accompanied by the head of the East Berlin Volksbühne, announcing an imminent apocalypse and calling for a "cultural shock" to return society to neo-fascist values. So, as it might have been expected, the stage was filled with plays that tackled millennial themes.

These can be defined as being a combination of utopianism with apocalyptic beliefs, associated through symbolic numerology with the turn-of-a-century. In the Western world at least, such significant dates are widely linked with the end of one era and the birth of a new world, while adding an additional zero tends to exaggerate such perceptions to an extreme: the ending of the world itself and spiritual salvation. And drama being not only the most direct literary reflection of society, but also a primary way of testing ideas in terms of human behaviour, if consciousness of the looming millennium were widespread and conditioning our lives then, in the mid-1990s, we would expect to see it reflected on the stage. Certainly a connection could be seen at the LAST millennium (in the medieval period) with the emergence of liturgical drama in Europe; and it can hardly be coincidence that Easter tropes announcing resurrection were first developed into miniature playlets right at the close of the Ninth Century.

Of course, depending how you count, 1900 could be seen as the turn of the millennium, just as much as the year 2000. Ant it is clear, looking back to that more recent analogue, that the whole notion of *fin de siecle*, and the term itself, gained a particular resonance in the 1890s. The French symbolists under Mallarmé, together with followers from other countries such as Hofmannsthal, Maeterlinck and Yeats, proclaimed a poetic drama of the mind that rejected the bourgeois and boulevard mainstream theatre of the nineteenth century, along with the

naturalism that was replacing it, as equally materialistic. Ethereal, visionary and anti-rational, the form as well as the themes of the symbolists' plays assumed the inauthenticity of the old social order and its replacement by a purely spiritual mode of being, in effect signaling the end of ordinary existence. At the same time, this withdrawal from the crude world of the senses into an interior drama of abstraction and stasis was paradoxically sensual. Associated with the religious revivalism that swept France as the century drew to a close; the symbolists attempts to create "correspondences" between colours and sounds, and atmospheric evocation of subliminal images reached their apogee in the esoteric and occult Babylonian spectacles of Josephin Peladan's Théâtre de la Rose Croix. Such qualities associated the *fin de siècle* with decadence.

The icon of the decade was Salome, whose erotic dance of the seven veils and perverse passion emblemized in kissing John the Baptist's severed head was given its fullest expression in Oscar Wilde's play. First performed in 1896 by the leading symbolist director, Lugné Poë, its archaism, artificiality, elaborate language and opulent imagery celebrates a death-wish as the driving force of a decaying civilization, embodied in the grotesque corruption of Herod and his monstrous Queen. In this hallucinatory transposition of the late Victorian era, the ritualistic self-sacrifice of the pale princess, identified with the moon and surrounded by blasphemous Pentecostal imagery, becomes the only possible apotheosis. It should be remembered that in The Soul of Man Under Socialism Wilde had revealed the true utopian vision that underpins even his comedies in declaring that "A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of utopias"<sup>1</sup> -- yet in the prism of Salome, the achievement of the ideal is death. And the same formula of neo-romanticism and poetic excess extolling annihilation can be found in other dramas of the time, notably Hofmannsthal's Death and the Fool. Utopian reverie is closely linked with apocalyptic awareness, as Yeats unwillingly recognized in watching the first performance of *Ubu roi* (also produced by Lugné Poë in the same year as Salome), Jarry's scatological demolition of European culture: "After Stéphane Mallarmé, after Paul Verlaine, after Gustav Moreau [all of whom had employed the Salome image], after Puvis de Chavannes, after our own verse, our subtle colours and nervous rhythms, after the faint mixed tints of Conder, what more is possible? After us the Savage God".<sup>2</sup>

These preoccupations were not limited to the avant-garde of the 1890s. The three major dramatists of the time, whose influence has shaped twentieth-century theatre, show an equal sensitivity to the *fin de siècle* atmosphere. Even Ibsen turned from social and political issues

to psychic realities and transcendental questioning with The Masterbuilder in 1892, and though this can be seen as a logical development from the previous phase of his work initiated by The Wild Duck, or even a return to the more poetic and existential themes of early plays such as Brand and Peer Gynt, in paralleling the focus of the symbolists it emphasized, and added to the tone of the period. His expressed wish to have "torpedoed the ark" has clear apocalyptic overtones; and the primacy of a spiritual plane (both sinister and utopian) in Ibsen's work, along with imagistic abstraction, increased as the decade advanced, culminating in the final year of the century with When We Dead Awaken: a title which is characteristic of millennialism. Still more obviously, Strindberg -- the naturalism of whose plays in the late 1880s had already been underpinned by mythic references -- became obsessed by the occult, and emerging from the psychological crisis of his "Inferno" period with the aid of Swedenborgian mysticism, moved to dream-like and interiorized dramas of spiritual pilgrimage with the first part of his To Damascus trilogy in 1898. As for Chekhov, while his plays preserve a naturalistic surface, the increasingly elegiac perspective that appeared with The Seagull in 1896 is far from Zolaesque social optimism. Although more in the position of a detached observer than Ibsen or Strindberg, his drama documents the disintegration of a long-established society, from Masha "in mourning for [her] life" to the echoing sound of a breaking violin-string in The Cherry Orchard. The thud of Lopahkin's axes as the ancient servant Firs breathes his last, abandoned by the family he has served, heralds the coming of a new type of society -- however uncultured and despicable -- but the plangent twang that fills the sky is the sound of a world breaking apart. Quite distinct from his farces ten years earlier, the overall theme of Chekhov's major plays is literally the end of an era that coincides with the end of the century. Even if The Cherry Orchard was only written four years into the new century, time and social process duplicate each other.

Like most generalizations, such an overview of the 1890s implies more homogeneity than would have been apparent at the time, when Shaw was just beginning to establish his brand of rhetorical and paradoxical naturalism, based on Ibsen. Antoine was promoting the earlier naturalism of Ibsen and Strindberg in France by productions of Ghosts in 1898 and Miss Julie in 1899 (and marked the turn of the century by being inducted into the Establishment with the award of the Legion of Honour in 1900), while in Germany Otto Brahm's Freie Bühne, with Gerhardt Hauptmann as its major voice, was proclaiming the unbroken continuity of the naturalist movement and its Darwinian notion of progress. Yet even Hauptmann was infected by the turn-of-the-century malaise, writing a poetic fantasy in which apocalyptic forebodings are transformed into utopian affirmation in 1896, The Sunken Bell. At least in hindsight, the overall intellectual climate of the time was utopian and apocalyptic -- a conjunction that, according to some historians fed directly into the cataclysm of the First World War <sup>3</sup>, as well

as finding expression in the communist Revolution that swept Russia and Germany.

At the end of the first millennium, with religion dominating European society, Biblical prophecy alone was sufficient to foster belief in the end of the world and the transfiguration of humanity. By contrast, the Victorian era was one of increasing secularism; and although many *fin de siecle* artists sought a religious alternative, they were forced to turn to marginal cults such as Rosicrucianism. Arguably, what made millennialism such a strong force in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century (though, significantly, not in America where the social context was different and apocalyptic urges had been sated by the Civil War just over a generation earlier) was the long peace after the defeat of Napoleon, and the growing sense of social stability, which made the established order seem unchallengeable, even claustrophobic. For over 80 years -- four generations -- with the exception of a brief Prussian invasion of France, armies had been largely decorative; Darwinian progress seemed unstoppable; and the major political changes were towards greater centralization of power, as with the nation-building in Germany and Italy, or imperial expansion. Even if there were strong dissenting currents, which rose to a head at 30-year intervals in revolutions, these were limited in scope and easily put down. Yet the ideas and movements that were to shatter this stability were already widespread by 1890 (the date of the sixth edition of the Communist Party Manifesto); and the whole system appeared increasingly brittle, ready for radical transformation beneath its rigidifying surface. Bomb-throwing Russian anarchists were a sign of the times, while the Boer War that erupted in the last year of the century signaled the first break in the worldwide British Empire.

By contrast the present century has been marked by continuous revolutions in every sphere of human activity, and worldwide seismic upheavals in society in which each generation experienced a major war up to the mid 1970s. In a sense apocalypse became commonplace: Passchendael, Dresden and Hiroshima, the Fall of Saigon. The nuclear clock remained set just minutes before midnight for almost forty years. During the same period the rapid pace of scientific advance increasingly changed almost every detail of everyday life in the industrialized countries. Instability became the norm of experience. Particularly relevant to the *fin de siecle* theme, millennial movements dominated large sections of society as well as the mind-sets of many major dramatists through the earlier part of the century -- and by 1990 the last vestiges of credibility in their beliefs had been completely eroded. The most explicitly millennial, the Nazi's 1,000 year Reich, had not only been revealed as a hideous and genocidal tyranny, but lasted barely a decade, with even Hitler's *Gotterdammerung* vanishing in suicide. Nothing could have been more utopian than the principles proclaimed by the Russian Revolution of 1917 (a cliché among enthusiasts in the early 1920s claimed that

Communism was the Sermon on the Mount in economic terms); and even though its ideals were repeatedly violated in practice -- Kronstadt, pogroms, Stalin's show-trials, the gulag, the suppression of the Prague "spring" -- it continued to fill the hopes of left-wing activists (at least outside its rule). However, when the whole communist system imploded in 1989, exposing its economics as bankrupt as its ideology and its promised Utopia an empty delusion, socialist ideals seemed discredited. In the same way, the proclamation of a conservative millennium in Francis Fukayama's announcement of "the end of history" and the "new world order" of the first President Bush was almost immediately shown up as false, and subjected to ridicule. Even the possibility of imminent apocalypse receded with the dismantling of the superpowers' nuclear arsenals.

All this was reflected on the stage; and the net effect was to deprive dramatists of *fin de siecle* themes just as the present century drew to its close. Played up prematurely (from a millennialist viewpoint), such ideas were played out. Even Botho Strauss's call for Armageddon was pamphleteering, not dramatic, with its climax occurring in Theater Heute rather than in the theatre.

On one hand the vision of a nuclear Armageddon preoccupied many playwrights, given its most imaginative treatment in Dürrenmatt's metaphoric depiction of scientists as madhouse inmates imprisoned by power-politics in The Physicists. This had a wide resonance in the early Sixties, while another recurrent facet of the apocalyptic theme surfaced in plays predicting the inevitable self-destruction of capitalist society -- even if this was often disguised in their focus on the violence or oppression of the present (as in Edward Bond's Saved or Peter Weiss' The Investigation). Behind this social version of apocalypse lies the second aspect of millennialism, the demise of the existing order being a precondition for achieving any New Jerusalem, which has formed a major theme of twentieth century drama, with Ernst Toller's Transfiguration setting its defining image in 1919. From Mayakovsky through Odets and the agitprop theatre of the Thirties, to the whole Seventies movement represented in Britain by David Hare's Fanshen or John Arden's Non-Stop Connolly Show, the coming socialist utopia was proclaimed, while the underlying subtext of the most influential voice in mid-twentieth century theatre -- that of Bertolt Brecht -- is everywhere deeply utopian, as much in "provisional" acting techniques and structures that refuse closure, as in moral simplification or the changeability of his characters. In America the anarchistic side of millennialism became more evident, as the theatrical scene became dominated by avant-garde groups that rejected all existing social order and celebrated alternative value in primal / spiritual ecstasy. In announcing Paradise Now! in 1968, embodying the ideals of total liberation through drugs and sex in a quasi-religious ritual, structured on "the transformation

of the demonic forces into the celestial" ("*apokatastis*"),<sup>4</sup> the Living Theatre epitomized the counter-culture decade. The millennial impulse found expression in all sorts of ways, from Jerzy Grotowski's agon of spiritual transcendence in The Constant Prince, which had an immense influence on American theatre groups after its Paris presentation in 1966, to the Performance Group's synthetic combination of ritual, ordeal and ecstasy with Dionysus in 69. These themes, mixed with expropriated facets of Eastern religions, reached an apogee in a 1970 performance by one of the Los Angeles groups of the time, the Floating Lotus Magic Opera Company. Their Bliss Apocalypse -- a title compounding the contradictory essentials of millennialism -- was performed as a "vision...on a hillside after civilizations all blow their plugs".<sup>5</sup>

Even at the time, such eschatological dramas seemed pretentious. Performances of Paradise Now ! during their U.S. tour of 1969 were broken up by spectators who already found the Living Theatre's vision behind the times, and one occasion the play was brought to an abrupt halt when their climactic appeal to "free the theatre" led to the stage being invaded by members of the audience who, stripping off their clothes, held a public discussion on the political (ir)relevance of the Living Theatre. Although the Living Theatre broke up in 1970, and the Performance Group finally dissolved in 1980, the millennial line of the Sixties could still be found in Peter Brook's 1985 adaptation of The Mahabharata: a "poetical history of mankind" in which humanity has to destroy itself (the foretold "age of destruction" being associated with the devastation of nuclear war) in order to reach paradise, the "hell" of death being only "the last illusion".<sup>6</sup> However, despite the sheer theatrical brilliance of Brook's work, flower-power and Woodstock, together with the apocalyptic utopianism of the drama that expressed the radical hopes of the period, have been reduced to nostalgic memory with the youthful hippies of the time now transformed into today's establishment.

In Britain, although the chronology was slightly different, the effect has been much the same. As early as 1922 Shaw promoted an evolutionary utopia in Back to Methuselah -- but the vision of his ambitious five part, eight hour "metabiological pentateuch", generally dismissed from the first as unconvincing, was outdated in its forecasts even within its author's lifetime. The least-performed of all Shaw's plays, if Back to Methuselah has had any effect at all, it is to make Garden-of-Eden themes suspect on the English-speaking stage. Still, utopian visions, coupled with varieties of social Armageddon did appear in the British theatre from Priestley's post-war retrospective, An Inspector Calls (recently revived in London as very much an apocalyptic *fin de siecle* statement), and particularly his Summer Day's Dream in 1949 -- a reaction to the opening of the Cold War, which imagined a nuclear holocaust leading to world-wide dictatorship redeemed by a Rousseauesque return to nature -- up to The War Plays by

Edward Bond in 1985, or Howard Brenton's explicitly "Utopian" plays from Sore Throats in 1978 to Greenland in 1987. In a sense, Bond's The Woman is a typical example of the theme, with the first part projecting the destruction of (the present) violent and oppressive civilization through the fall of Troy, while the second part celebrates the achievement of liberty and a just society in a mythic island idyll: cities are corrupt and the male ego sets up repressive systems / a simple existence close to nature produces bucolic communities in which women are the redemptive force. Brenton's Greenland, nine years after The Woman and just two years before the collapse of Communism, effectively marks the end of this utopian line in British drama. Again divided into two halves -- though here the depiction of the present as a self-destructive utopia is direct: "US", explicitly set on the date of the play's opening -- the visionary paradise of Part Two is a curious echo of Back to Methuselah. Displaced 700 years into the future, its inhabitants -- "THEM" -- have evolved into telepaths, able to shape the material world (and reform the harmful traits in the human psyche responsible for the malaise of the present) through purely mental powers. In addition to this reversion, taking refuge in quasi-Shavian fantasy, the New Jerusalem is achieved through "A mass defection" from politics: in particular, we are told, "Humanity defected" from the ideology of the Left and "all the struggles, the revolutions, the human cost, the mulch, the bodies, the great ideas".<sup>7</sup>

The growing disenchantment of the British playwrights, who were radicalized by the student revolution of 1968, with communist ideology -- already signaled in 1983 with David Edgar's Maydays -- is evident in Brenton's despairing picture of a fragmented Labour party, and in the future's condemnation of the Russian triumph over the West that Brenton posits as a worst-possible-outcome. Anticipating Fukayama's optimistic "end of history" by contrast, in the forecast of Greenland, "History died" under "interminable decades, brutish, censored, authoritarian".<sup>8</sup> By the standpoint of barely two years later, as the Berlin wall came tumbling down together with all it symbolized, Brenton's vision already looked dated, invalidated by events. Similarly, Bond's dystopian future in The War Plays is no longer applicable. The fear of a coming nuclear war that he played on in order to gain credence for his attack on capitalism -- of the poisoned wasteland "when the rockets destroyed the world"<sup>9</sup> and the subsequent descent into barbarism of scavengers (the "tin can people" of Part 2) -- has ceased to be an urgent concern; and consequently his depiction of society ("Red Black and Ignorant") also seems unjustifiable. Since Bond's argument is that its inherent violence and mercenary inhumanity inevitably lead to this, the present diminution of the nuclear threat undermines the whole premise of the play. The immediate future he described, in which "there were so many rockets the world looked like a hedgehog", and "Security was so great all were suspected / Even as they lay in their silos the rockets destroyed the societies they were

said to protect" <sup>10</sup>, now looks historical, having lost any prophetic viability it once might have had.

Apocalypse Now was the lesson Coppola drew from Vietnam, but the apocalypse appears to have passed us by. Much of the dystopian rhetoric of drama in the 1980s was fuelled by rejection of the conservative politics that dominated the decade: Thatcher in Britain, matched by Reagan in America. For instance the election that returned Mrs. Thatcher to her third term as Prime Minister occurred just weeks before the opening of Greenland, and forms the context for Brenton's play. Similarly in Tony Kushner's Angels in America Roy Cohn, a notorious figure from the Reagan era, embodies all the evil in society. However, even that pressure has been removed with the forcible retirement of Mrs. Thatcher from active political life and the defeat of Reaganite policies -- at least for the moment -- in the election of a Democratic President. With that shift, the last catalyst for millennial drama at this point in the 1990s has been removed.

Indeed, the subtitle for Part One of Angels in America (begun in 1988 and first performed in 1991) is "Millennium Approaches". But the apocalyptic vision and the angel are already both rejected in Part Two, "Perestroika", premiered in 1992. The archetypal millennial vision is summed up by a woman on valium, whose one desire is to escape from her unauthentic life: "Maybe Christ will come again... maybe new life... maybe... the end will come, and the sky will collapse". <sup>11</sup> Set between 1985 and 1986, the characters are full of apocalyptic forebodings, seeing "beautiful systems dying, fixed orders spiraling apart... everywhere, things are collapsing, lies surfacing, systems of defense giving way", both in society and the environment where, with "holes in the ozone layer... Skin burns, birds go blind, icebergs melt. It's the end of the world", while utopia has been expropriated by the forces of evil, making "Children of the new morning, criminal minds. Selfish and greedy and loveless and blind. Reagan's children". <sup>12</sup> A different utopian possibility is intimated in the Angel herself, present only as a voice or a single feather floating down from her wing until breaking through the ceiling in the final moment of the play. And even if some reservation is indicated by the "camp" quality of this apparition ("*very* Steven Spielberg"), the play substantiates it both through the appearance of dead figures from the past -- whose assertion that "History... is about to crack wide open. Millennium approaches" is given particular validity by their status as ghosts -- and through the title of the last Act: "NOT-YET-CONSCIOUS FORWARD DAWNING". <sup>13</sup> However, in Part Two, despite being hailed as "a true millennial work of art" (by Frank Rich in the New York Times), <sup>14</sup> the Angel of apocalypse is defeated by the protagonist, who is the "vessel" chosen to usher in the millennium. Despite the message of "STASIS ! The END" -- identified with AIDS -- that the Angel tells him is written "On you

in you in your blood", he rejects the role of prophet that has been imposed on him. The Angel stands as a death principle, which is shown as intrinsically alien to humanity. Even in heaven, the spirits of the saved subvert the fatalism of the angelic vision by playing cards: "a game of chance... *Indeterminacy!* Because, mister, with the Angels... it's all gloom and doom and give up already. But still is there Accident, in this pack of playing-cards, still is there the Unknown, the Future".<sup>15</sup> And the protagonist -- shown as surviving AIDS -- chooses life. Apocalypse may still be a possibility (the Angels forecast "multitudes" of Chernobyl disasters); certainly "the whole world is changing! Overnight!", yet this is specifically the opposite of stasis: "The Berlin Wall has fallen... we were feeling everything everywhere was stuck, while in Russia! Look! Perestroika! The Thaw! It's the end of the Cold War!". The Epilogue explicitly denies that "the Capital M Millennium" has anything to do with "the year two thousand"; and the final lines reverse the message of the Angel into a statement of continuity. "The world only spins forward. We will be citizens... And I bless you: *More Life*. The Great Work begins", which become "the words that will reorder the world" demanded at the beginning of the play.<sup>16</sup> Judgement Day has been indefinitely postponed.

Similar themes appear in other playwrights whose earlier work was millennial. For instance in Brenton's 1992 play, Berlin Bertie which also takes the fall of the Berlin wall as a defining reference point, the characters reject a mime symbolizing "the nuclear holocaust". They are clearly expressing Brenton's own position, when they remark, "I'll miss The Bomb, now the Russians have given up. Having Armageddon just a second away, for all those years... it concentrated the mind. What have we got to replace it? AIDS doesn't really do the job, does it, as an inspiring apocalypse".<sup>17</sup> And although the conditions of their lives remain unendurable, even after Perestroika, when they escape by becoming itinerant performers, their mime-act is simply one of (illusory) female liberation: flying nuns. Faint echoes of *fin de siecle* consciousness can perhaps be traced in Caryl Churchill's The Skriker -- where mythical folklore figures break into everyday life against a background of "Earthquakes. Volcanoes. Drought. Apocalyptic meteorological phenomena" -- or in Pinter's Moonlight, where society has become reduced to the emptiness of self-contradicting verbiage, while for characters whose lives are coming to an end, "Death is your new horizon". Indeed the daughter, associated with the moon and remembering getting "dressed in something old" for a dance,<sup>18</sup> could possibly be seen as an attenuated image of Salome. But typical of Pinter's limbo, she never reached the dance and the moon does not go down.

1. The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, London 1988, p.270
2. The Autobiographies of W.B.Yeats, New York 1958, 234
3. Cf. Bernard Bergonzi, Heroes Twilight, London 1965, pp.27f
4. Judith Malina and Julian Beck, Paradise Now, New York 1971, p17
5. The Drama Review, 14, 4, p.54
6. Jean-Claude Carriere, The Mahabharata, New York 1987, pp.3 & 238
7. Greenland, Methuen 1988, pp.54 & 53
8. Ibid, p.53
9. The War Plays, Methuen 1985, p.5
10. Ibid, pp.14-15
11. Angels in America, Part One, London 1992, p.8
12. Ibid, pp.6-7, 17, 54
13. Ibid, pp.90, 86, 64
14. Cited on the back-cover of the American edition, Perestroika, New York 1994
15. Perestroika, pp.54, 136
16. Ibid, 129, 145, 148, 14
17. Berlin Bertie, London 1992, p.13
18. The Skriker, London 1994, p.43; Moonlight, London 1993, pp. 46, 79