Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance
Oxford Stage Company

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Critics and Leader writers have all hailed the OSC production of *Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance* as a case of life imitating art in that John Arden’s anti-imperialist play explores Empire and the price that imperial powers pay for their global ambitions. They all pointed out its especial contemporary relevance to the war in Iraq and its increasingly troubled peacekeeping. I saw the performance on Saturday 31 October at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh and thought that instant modern relevance had profoundly distorted what Arden was trying to say in the way that the text had been produced. This influenced how all the major characters were being performed. In particular it affected the playing of Serjeant Musgrave who is the central role.

In his introduction to the play John Arden states that his interest lies in examining the possible justification of violence to end violence:

> I think that many of us must at some time have felt an overpowering urge to match some particularly outrageous piece of violence with an even greater and more outrageous retaliation.

With this in mind he made his protagonist a Bible soldier in the mould of Stonewall Jackson or John Nicholson, the hero of the Siege of Delhi; as he said, Musgrave “could well have served under Cromwell.” Such men are dangerous, violent and inspired, possessed by the conviction that war is a means of realising God’s purposes. In carrying out a massacre amongst the striking miners of a northern coal town as a due and fit punishment for the atrocity carried out in a far-off and forgotten colony he will be an instrument of God’s purpose. Moreover God will make Himself apparent in the moment of punishment. Musgrave believes his testimony in killing will redeem the country and make it a fit nation for the Lord. So comments such as Jeremy Kingston’s in *The Times* that Musgrave is calling for a saner world ignore Musgrave’s demand that the world follows God’s laws which is not quite the same thing as a liberal dislike of violence.

Moreover this tamed Musgrave of the OSC production is supposed to be sufficiently attractive to make it credible that men would follow him all the way back from Cyprus, Iraq or wherever, which is how Edward Peake played him. The performance veered towards Victorian nanny: he was so affable and concerned about his men. It is more likely that Musgrave despises his followers who are the instruments of his mission but cannot survive without him. Not only in practical matters but also in his function as their moral mainspring. Without him their guilt—and this is a guilt that arises
from flaws in their personalities, just as much as from their complicity in the atrocity—would render them motionless. It is his vision and certainty that make them move. He projects their guilt and inadequacy back at them, which is the source of his power over them. This, in part, makes the play a study in how a man of seemingly unbreakable conviction can control the minds of lesser spirits; what the flaws are in their psychologies that allow him this supremacy and how weaker minds may find the inner resources to finally rebel as all his followers do by the end of the play. To Sparky, one of the deserters who has given himself up to Musgrave’s purpose, the Serjeant is God: “You see he’s like God, and it’s as if we were like angels.”

So if Edward Peel shifts his interpretation of Musgrave into something more modern and less godlike so it gives the actor playing Sparky room to provide a self-sufficient study in combat-fatigue which is what Billy Carter, the actor taking Sparky’s role did, endlessly twitching and fiddling with his hair. One commentator said he was feverish which is something of an understatement. But the drawback to this study in neurasthenia came when Sparky takes Annie, the barmaid in the pub where they’re lodged, to bed. In Carter’s interpretation this was an attempt to blot out the fear and horror of the past using sex but in Arden’s version Sparky was proposing a partnership which would create a new value which would wipe out the past and end the dominance of Musgrave’s vision:

**Sparky (his mind working).** Why,

**Annie.** I don’t understand.

**Sparky (following his thought in great disturbance of mind).** It wouldn’t be anarchy, you know; he can’t be right there! All it would be, is: you live and I live—we don’t need his duty, we don’t need his Word—a dead man’s a dead man! We could call it all paid for! Your life and my life—make our own road, we don’t follow nobody.

But in this production this rebellion of the angels never took place because Carter was committed by virtue of his interpretation to use the words as talking off the top of his head as a way of getting Annie to lie down with him. So he didn’t observe the pauses and the stage direction to show that at this moment the character is thinking up a totally revolutionary idea which will free him from the tyranny of the Serjeant. Consequently, this crucial idea for the play’s structure of ideas is not given the weight it requires at the end when Musgrave has failed to carry out his plan and God has not manifested himself to a newly cleansed and deserving people.

The Serjeant is standing with his back to the audience, and in the OSC production, standing in the light of a slide, projecting prison
bars upon him. Attercliffe, the last of his followers is lying on the ground downstage of Musgrave so he automatically invites our attention as more important than the Serjeant. Technically speaking, the Serjeant should have been central in the light with Attercliffe an inner voice as well as a character on the fringes of the light. Because Musgrave has had his faith shattered, everything that gave meaning has gone as he struggles to work out why it went wrong. At this moment Mrs. Hitchcock, the landlady, enters with a drink for the two men which the Serjeant at first refuses but then accepts. Without wishing to dispute Arden’s determination that this is not a symbolist play I do not think it is stretching matters too far to conclude that this is the first time that Musgrave has accepted a gift from someone else or given anything of his emotions to another. So that to present this moment on stage as sacramental, without overloading it with significance dramatically, would be appropriate since it represents a victory over him, which finally the Serjeant recognises. Then Attercliffe’s song, which concludes the play, becomes a projection of Musgrave’s inner state, as songs do in Brecht, rather than a piece of clunking stagecraft as several of the critics saw it. Not that there aren’t examples of clunking stagecraft: at the climax of the penultimate scene, Annie appears at an upstairs window and descends via a ladder to deliver her bombshell concerning how Sparky died. There is a difference between a *deus ex machina* who is lifted on to the roof of the skena by a crane and one who descends by ladder propped against a rickety flat, whilst trying to manage her skirts. The audience drops all attention from the point of the action to see if this risky piece of DIY theatre will succeed.

Nevertheless, *Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance* is a more interesting piece of theatre than this production or its critics give it credit for.