

An Introduction to *The Madwoman of Chaillot*

By David Edney

Jean Giraudoux (1882–1944) had an established career as a novelist before writing for the theatre. For his first play, *Siegfried*, staged in 1928, he worked extensively with director Louis Jouvet, who helped him reduce his sprawling manuscript to playable length. All sixteen of his plays (four of them in one act) were written for Jouvet, who directed the first performance of most of them and played the leading male role in many of them, including the Ragman in *The Madwoman of Chaillot*. The playwright unabashedly writes in a literary style. The conciseness required by the stage curbs somewhat his penchant for verbosity, which makes his novels difficult reading, and he is known today primarily as a dramatist rather than as a novelist.

Giraudoux's works are often centred on a young woman who has special insight and an intimate relationship with the supernatural or some form of transcendence. In *Amphitryon 38* (1929), Alcmena is pursued by the god Jupiter. In *Intermezzo* (1933), Isabelle has rendezvous with a ghost. Other plays feature Judith, the biblical character who slew Holofernes; Electra, whose principled stand against her tyrannical uncle led to her death, and Ondine, a mermaid, who crosses into the human world for love. Aurélie shows us one of these perceptive, sensitive women in old age.

The Madwoman of Chaillot is based on a 1935 British play, *The Old Ladies*, by Rodney Ackland, which in turn is based on a 1924 novel of the same name by Hugh Walpole. Jouvet mentioned it to Giraudoux, who probably began thinking about it in 1939, after seeing the real madwoman on the street. He wrote the play in 1941–42 and revised it extensively in 1943, sending the galley proofs to the publisher just two weeks before his sudden death in January 1944. Jouvet, who spent most of the war in exile in the Americas, used it to reopen his theatre on his return in 1945. It was a huge success. Until the script recently entered the free domain, the first English translation, an Americanized adaptation by Maurice Valency, was the only English version available. In this form, the work had great success on Broadway (1948-50), and the 1969 film, starring Katherine Hepburn, and the musical *Dear World* (1969) are based on it.

The Madwoman of Chaillot reflects Giraudoux's concern about the deterioration of France and the city of Paris, a concern which he expressed in a series of essays from the 30s, published in 1939 under the title *Pleins Pouvoirs* (Full Powers). He laments the poor state of cities, the attitudes of the people, and the actions of certain unscrupulous individuals who pursue their private interests at the expense of the public good. The crisis that France faces is not financial or economic, as some think, but moral, the author argues. Mediocrity has become all-pervasive in a world of substitutes.

Along with education, health care, and security, every city-dweller has a right to good air and beautiful surroundings, according to Giraudoux. Gardens and historical monuments promote politeness and respect for others, qualities which are disappearing in the over-crowded French cities of the 1930s. In principle, public spaces are protected in Paris. In fact, however, private entrepreneurs and speculators are given a free hand to

demolish whatever stands in the way of their development projects, since no elected official wants to risk offending a potential voter. The result is "*un sac général de nos richesses nationales et urbaines*" (wholesale pillaging of our national and urban treasures). The Ragman's description of "the invasion" in Act I of *The Madwoman* is a more picturesque presentation of the argument presented in *Pleins Pouvoirs*. In his essay, the author writes that fortune hunters band together, forming a kind of mafia that plots in secret to develop projects, to evade laws, and to make huge profits at the expense of the common good. Governments are complicit; there is a law for the powerful and a different law for the others (p. 139). The people believe that these "*puissances occultes et néfastes*" (secret, malevolent powers) are all-powerful, manipulating everyone and everything. Consequently, there is widespread suspicion, a loss of respect for the law, and a feeling of helplessness in the face of uncontrollable forces.

In *The Madwoman*, the president's description of the "faces" linking up with each other corresponds closely to what is presented in *Pleins Pouvoirs*, and the Ragman and the little band of common people have the feeling of impotence that the essays attribute to the French people. The four developers' accounts of their lives constitute a list of nefarious activities to earn money illegitimately, from the Baron's helping high school students cheat to the President's setting up a marine disaster. The victory of Aurélie over the exploiters shows the writer's belief that positive action is possible, that life can be beautiful again for the French, if human values prevail over mechanization and materialism. The French nation has traditionally been rich in these human values: individual freedom, rule of law, rationality, imagination, respect for others and for the common good, and civility. With his play, the author is no doubt trying to help the people recover these national traits. Aurélie exemplifies a traditional French virtue which is very important: "*l'affabilité avec la vie*" (affability with life), enjoying life, feeling at ease in the world, happiness.

Giraudoux's ingenuity in *The Madwoman of Chaillot* is to express his serious world view in a delightful kind of theatre of the absurd. The four madwomen are unlikely candidates to deal with the problems of the world. Aurélie appears to be from an aristocratic family, Constance and Joséphine pride themselves on their association with presidents and the court system, and Gabrielle has a kind of a relationship with a former senator. The four ladies may, then, consider themselves *grandes dames*, but their grandeur is in their heads; it is cultural and moral; it would not be recognized as in any way real by those who think in social, political, and economic terms. The ladies see each other's delusions but not their own, and their conversations are masterpieces of incoherence and self-contradiction. The combination of implausibility and fantasy with a bitter view of contemporary reality, which is eerily similar to our own world, makes the play a rich and distinctive work.

David Edney is the translator of this production of The Madwoman of Chaillot.