



TRANSLATION IN ACTION

The Koltès Mystique

Making his metaphysical French dramas suited to American ears requires actors, not literary translators

By Randy Gener



The French dramatist Bernard-Marie Koltès was the Sarah Kane of his day. A white, homosexual European dying of AIDS, he was the uncompromising dark angel who led audiences along the unlit back alleyways of alterity. He was a stage poet of estrangement; his bleak, elliptical, formally rhetorical works—a blend of casual-brutal vernacular and shards of highly stylized monologues—display sympathy for characters on the periphery of conventional society. Koltès did not commit suicide (as Kane did), but the coincidence of his youthful promise and his early death in 1989, at the height of the plague (AIDS claimed him at a Paris hospital at age 41), raised a certain curiosity about him as a lone wolf, a guardian of the underdog.

A cult-like reverence has also formed around his work. Touted as the true spiritual heir of Samuel Beckett, Jean Cocteau and Jean Genet, Koltès is today phenomenally popular in continental Europe—he is, according to *Le Monde*, "a classic of our time, who since 1990 is the French author most performed abroad." Paradoxically, America has never quite cottoned to Koltès, who remains virtually unknown even in the British theatre, where

several English translations of his major plays have surfaced. Save for rare U.S. outings and a 2003 Koltès Festival in downtown New York, this Anglo-American neglect is doubly ironic, because in 1988 Koltès adapted into French Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, and he was completely enamored with American pop culture, particularly its charismatic, usually anti-heroic icons, such as Bob Marley, Bruce Lee and Robert De Niro. His Paris studio was plastered with posters of James Dean, the young Marlon Brando and the New York City piers, and he professed a love for Faulkner.

Audiences in other cultures and foreign languages were, in fact, the first to embrace Koltès during his life. Three of his major plays debuted in translation in New York City, Berlin and Holland before ever being presented in France, beginning in 1982 when Françoise Kourilsky of the now-defunct Ubu Repertory Theatre staged *Black Battles with Dogs* (*Combat de nègre et de chiens*) at the La MaMa Annex under the title *Come Dog, Come Night*. Near the end of his days, Koltès received a few significant French productions—notably with director Patrice Chéreau, who staged *Combat* in 1983 and *Dans la solitude des champs de coton* (*In the Loneliness of the Cotton Fields*) in 1987 in the industrial city of Nanterre—but France was largely impervious to Koltès until after he had already received international recognition.

Deemed irreclaimably French, Koltès's works remain bottled inside the peculiarly American politics of Otherness: rhapsodic but oblique, obtuse or enigmatic in their resolute anti-naturalism, teeming with crystal-clear talk but putting forward impenetrable thoughts. Fortunately not everybody has fully sworn in on the bible of Koltèsian strangeness. Reeling from the recent international successes of its own *Black Battles*, staged by young and gifted Frenchman Arthur Nauzyciel, Atlanta's **7 Stages** is working closely with Koltès's older brother François, who manages the writer's estate, to create new American translations of six of Koltès's plays: *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*; *Le jour des meurtres dans l'histoire d'Hamlet* (*The Day of the Deaths in the History of Hamlet*); *Sallinger*; a double bill of *La nuit juste avant les forêts* (*The Night Just Before the Forests*) and *Tabataba*; and *Quai oust* (*West Key*). Over a 10-year period, one will be mounted every other year in Atlanta by a notable French director.

According to 7 Stages artistic director **Del Hamilton**, the U.S. Koltès Project hopes to spur "renewed interest and genuine understanding" in Koltès by creating new American-tempered versions of his texts, as opposed to using existing translations which "sound too British to American ears." In an intriguing twist, the translation team does not follow the template of engaging a writer who doesn't know the original language and a linguist (usually an academic) who does. Instead, the project is led by an actor, **Isma'il ibn Conner**, who speaks French and has been consulting with François Koltès for the express purpose of adhering to the dramatist's singular writing style. Both men intend to publish these new American-English translations, in cooperation with the Cultural Services of the French Embassy, and the elder Koltès is going to produce a documentary film chronicling the entire artistic process.

The U.S. Koltès Project took root this past summer when 7 Stages revived its searing 2001 *Black Battles*, which it had co-produced with CDDB/Théâtre de Lorient. The European tour of the play—Koltès's dissection of an encounter between colonial French engineers and a black man claiming the body of his brother in a West African construction site—landed at the Festival d'Avignon in France and at the Hellenic Festival in Athens.

"During the first production, Arthur Nauzyciel cast Isma'il and me in two roles," says Hamilton. "We suddenly found ourselves intrigued by Koltès. It kept getting deeper and deeper." Hamilton was struck by the play's Western frontier undertones. "A stage direction in *Black Battles* describes a large tumbleweed blowing down the street," he says. "It's an image from America that Koltès recalled from his visits here. It's an impossible stage direction, but it's intended to inspire actors into thinking beyond the confines of naturalism."

Conner, a 7 Stages artistic associate who portrayed the mysterious black man in *Black Battles*, became entranced by the process of translating Koltès not as a literary endeavor but as an acting challenge. "Bernard-Marie prefers his lines to be spoken lightly and quickly, as if the actor had to pee," Conner posits. "It's a very rapid way of going through the line instead of adding emotional or psychological values to sentences or the entire piece. Bernard-Marie's theatre is like a train barreling through, keeping its emphasis on language, and yet it haunts you."

Koltès's protagonists, the French critic Patrice Pavis rightly states, "are not concrete characters engaged in dramatic situations but logical abstractions whose role it is to mark the progression of a line of argument." So by insisting on a play-by-play approach, 7 Stages's translation project seeks to uncover the layers of enigma that wrap Koltès's metaphysical dramatic strategies and unravel, through practical application, how the American landscape, particularly New York, haunts and infuses his works with its liminal presence.

Says Hamilton: "Two of the plays he wrote, *Quai oust* and *Sallinger*, are both set in America and speak to the American situation right now. *Cotton Fields* speaks philosophically about how capitalism informs every aspect of our American existence." Adds Conner: "Through this experiment, we want to come to a richer understanding of Bernard-Marie's American influence."

Koltès felt deeply at odds with himself about being white and French. This disposition is made stranger by a rough-hewn dialectical style that sounds peculiar even to French ears. "A French language which has been re-written and corrected—colonized—by a foreign culture," Koltès said, "would gain a new dimension and richness of expression in the same way that a classical statue without a head or limbs is made beautiful by their very absence." He may be the *dramaturge français* par excellence, but in a profound way—as this 7 Stages initiative may ultimately show—Koltès has never truly belonged to France.