

Heather Neill

More Than One Antoinette Young Vic Studio

MONSTROUS Regiment's latest production is not so much a play as a collage of parallels and contrasts. Its narrative structure follows that of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (the story of Antoinette, the first Mrs Rochester in *Jane Eyre*), with interpolations from Brontë's original, but it is not a dramatization of either novel.

Rather, playwright Debbie She-well (who also directs) takes these two characters and explores their dreams and aspirations, the need of each to find a place and an identity.

The Creole heiress Antoinette, passionately played by Geraldine Somerville, wears white muslin; Jane (Abigail Bond) is buttoned to the neck in black. Antoinette attempts to make Rochester forget himself and love her by using magic and seductive tricks; Jane swears to be sensible. Both talk of dying (though to Antoinette this means sex) and, antiphonally, of their longing for happiness.

A kind of unity is provided by repetitions of phrase and gesture, in particular the throwing down of a white sheet for Rochester — seductively by Antoinette, submissively by Jane. But some sections involving Jane are less well integrated: there are even knowing references to the play's origins ("I shall wear this old frock until the end of the chapter"), which are quite at odds with the intensity of earlier scenes.

Drawing on well-known material has its pitfalls. Should we be trying to remember or trying to forget Brontë and Rhys? Either way it comes as a shock to hear the romantic ending of *Jane Eyre* twisted, apparently logically, into self-punishment: obsessed by the sufferings of Antoinette, Jane condemns herself by marriage to Rochester's hatred.

Geraldine Pilgrim's excellent set, a gloomy Victorian gallery above a pebbled, shuttered evocation of hot Jamaica, contributes, with soft jazz, and music written by Joanna MacGregor, to a gripping, atmospheric production.

THE TIMES FRIDAY MARCH 30 1990

CHRIS TAYLOR
3rd Floor, 1/2 Alfred Place,
London WC1E 7EB
Tel: 01-580 0442
Fax: 01-436 1489

YOUNG VIC **More Than One Antoinette**

FOR BRONTE lovers Jane Eyre will never be quite the same again, courtesy of Debbie Shewell's *More Than One Antoinette*, a play which gives vent to the emotions of one of literature's most famous loonies, Mrs Rochester.

Shewell, who directs, contrasts Jane with the first Mrs Rochester (Antoinette) in a fascinating exploration which charts their struggle for an identity of their own. Each woman's fate has already been pre-determined by the fact that they were born female.

We were first given a picture of Antoinette as a child growing up in the West Indies, forsaken by her mother, insecure and wild. In the rather drawn out first half we see the foundations of her future neuroses as her black servants torment her with cries of 'white cockroach' and she suffers recurrent

nightmares. Antoinette (Geraldine) grows pale and morose while her secret fears are voiced and echoed by her alter-ego played by Natasha Williams. Her marriage to the strait-laced Mr Rochester (William Gaminara) is the catalyst for her madness and in the hands of Shewell the stoic hero is transformed into a stuffed shirt whose callous indifference to his wife's mental suffering is the reason for her decline.

Monstrous Regiment attack the subject with verve, only occasionally resorting to histrionics for dramatic effect. The altogether more satisfying second half in which the plain Jane becomes enraptured by Mr Rochester as Antoinette looks on is particularly effective, while the sight of the blinded and disfigured object of her desire finally shedding his pride to accept help is presented as the hard won triumph of women to persuade men to accept them on equal terms.

Lisa Rohumaa

THE STAGE and TELEVISION TODAY, April 12, 1990

CHRIS TAYLOR

3rd Floor, 1/2 Alfred Place,
London WC1E 7EB

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Fax: 01-436 1489

MONSTROUS REGIMENT



There's 'More Than One Antoinette' according to Monstrous Regiment (The Young Vic). See New Reviews.

MORE THAN ONE ANTOINETTE

written and directed by Debbie Shewell, designed by Geraldine Pilgrim, presented by Monstrous Regiment (Young Vic Studio)

It's good to see that intellectual inspiration hasn't quite been stifled in the gadarene rush to satisfy market forces. Debbie Shewell's re-examination of Jane Eyre and Mrs Rochester is an ambitious, if not yet fully realised, addition to the areas touched on in the past by Deborah Levy and April de Angelis. Mainly based on Jean Rhys' novel, 'Wide Sargasso Sea', this is a heady plunge into the gothic realms of sexually repressive Victorian England, seen through the contrasting eyes and attitudes of the Caribbean. There is much here to feast on: Geraldine Pilgrim's exquisitely conceived split-level design of swinging shutters and panelled balustrade; reverberating physical and visual images which beckon us to draw parallels between the mysteriously beguiling world of Antoinette, the first Mrs Rochester, and that of Jane Eyre, starchy but no less passionately falling prey to Mr Rochester's 'sad heart'. Shewell and Pilgrim juggle the various issues – the nature of love, hate, madness, female identity, cultural alien-

ation – with absorbing skill. If all of these somehow fail to coalesce – the 'mad woman in the attic', for example, remains unsatisfyingly un-reclaimed – this still adds up to the kind of intriguing, tantalising knot it's certainly worth spending time untying. Fine acting too, particularly by the two chatelaines Abigail Bond and Geraldine Somerville, and Antoinette's alter-ego, Natasha Williams. CAROLE WODDIS

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Monstrous Regiment Limited
190 Upper Street London N1 1RQ
Telephone: 01-359 9842

Registered in England number 1332483
Registered Office: 49 South Molton Street London W1Y 1HE
Charity number 274517
Directors: Ms C Bowler, Ms S J Bailey
Ms G L Hanna, Ms M McCusker

PRESS CUTTINGS



Young Vic

Betty Caplan

Marie Antoinette

CHARLOTTE Bronte's Jane Eyre and Jean Rhys' exploration of the first Mrs Rochester in Wide Sargasso Sea form the basis of Debbie Shewell's *More Than One Marie Antoinette*. All roads lead to Mr Rochester: in the first half, Antoinette is orphaned in the West Indies, and the handsome brute comes to deprive her of her estate and whisk her away to England, a place she refuses to believe in. She was right to be sceptical.

She becomes in the second half the closeted mad woman we all know but not quite so

mad that she can't taunt her jailer with "an attic — was that the best you could do?"

Jane Eyre is haunted by dreams and premonitions of disaster. She gets her man in the end, though, after his heroic attempt to rescue the woman he once drove to distraction by calling her Bertha. Reader, I married him even though he was maimed. Reader, if there'd been a sequel to Jane Eyre I too might well have ended up in that attic.

Although Antoinette's childhood in the West Indies is a far cry from Jane's in England, Shewell shows us that it isn't only the obsession with Mr Rochester that they share. Illuminating, and often highly atmospheric, the play remains stubbornly literary. Abigail Bond as Jane and Geraldine Somerville as Antoinette share a certain steeliness, while Nata-

sha Williams feelingly exposes Antoinette's more vulnerable underside.

● *Until April 14 (01-928-6363).*

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CHRIS TAYLOR

3rd Floor, 1/2 Alfred Place,
London WC1E 7EB

Tel: 01-580 0442

Fax: 01-436 1489

PRESS CUTTINGS

TAYLORS



'More Than One Antoinette' at the Young Vic is a gripping drama which presents Charlotte Bronte's story of 'Jane Eyre' from the viewpoint of Rochester's crazy wife. Beginning with her childhood, the play focuses on a woman who slowly goes insane after being forced to leave her native land; she is stripped of her sexuality and finally watches the one she loves grow to hate her. Geraldine Somerville's riveting performance in the title role keeps the play moving by adding depth and understanding to Antionette's struggle to find inner peace. Those unfamiliar with 'Jane Eyre' may find author Debbie Schewell's adaptation of the novel slightly hard to follow. However, the sympathy Schewell arouses in the audience for her characters more than compensates for the sometimes abstract dialogue.

Devin Sellers

This is London

6 APRIL 1990

CHRIS TAYLOR
3rd Floor, 1/2 Alfred Place,
London WC1E 7EB

Tel: 01-580 0442
Fax: 01-436 1489

More Than One Antoinette

YOUNG VIC STUDIO

The second of Monstrous Regiment's 15th anniversary productions conflates two novels and two continents into a bitter reflection of women's lot. From *Jane Eyre* comes the second wife, disconnected, poor and plain, brandishing her need to serve like a shield against the world. From Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* comes the first Mrs Rochester, a Creole with an inherited streak of madness which she fatally conceals from the young English fortune-hunter who comes knocking at her heart.

The result is a curious hybrid of moods and styles, which is morose, flagrant and as fragmentary as the experience it represents and with as many repetitions. Geraldine Pilgrim's set of gothic balcony jutting skyward above the cool, polished expanses of a colonial mansion kept shining by the sweated labour of slaves, creates a strong visual unity which is certainly needed by Debbie Shewell's tortuous, and

densely directed, dramatisation.

The bridally decked bed of the over-passionate Antoinette holds centrestage in the first act but recedes in the second, to evoke the prosaic living quarters of a humble English governess. While Antoinette moons at her reflection in a pool, Jane shudders at herself in a great gilt mirror which dominates her bedroom. Appearance, of course, is an abiding issue, merging with identity most obviously through the disfigurement of Rochester, but gaining a new dimension through the confusion of Antoinette, a white woman whose alter ego is black and whose imprisonment in a cold English attic is therefore doubly cruel.

Geraldine Somerville, thin and peaky beneath her titian tresses, becomes physically and mentally engulfed by the bulky inquisitorial presence of Natasha Williams' Tia, her childhood friend, tormentor and her other self who emerges

to enflame the colonial prejudices of William Gaminara's starchy Rochester with the donning of a bright scarlet dress. He meets his match in the alabaster edifice of Abigail Bond's Jane, whose primly self-conscious references to the "dear reader" make the point that she is written in a different style, while allowing her to fan the play's first and only flicker of humour.

In doing so she illuminates the disappointment of the piece, that its parts outweigh – in both senses – the whole in originality and penetration. There is some clever knitting of narratives, yielding a scattering of insights, particularly about cultural identity. But Jane's final moan about the boring ubiquity of the happy ending forces her dear reader to differ: the breast-beating tradition to which this play belongs permits only unhappy ones.

Claire Armitstead

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