

## TALKING HEADS

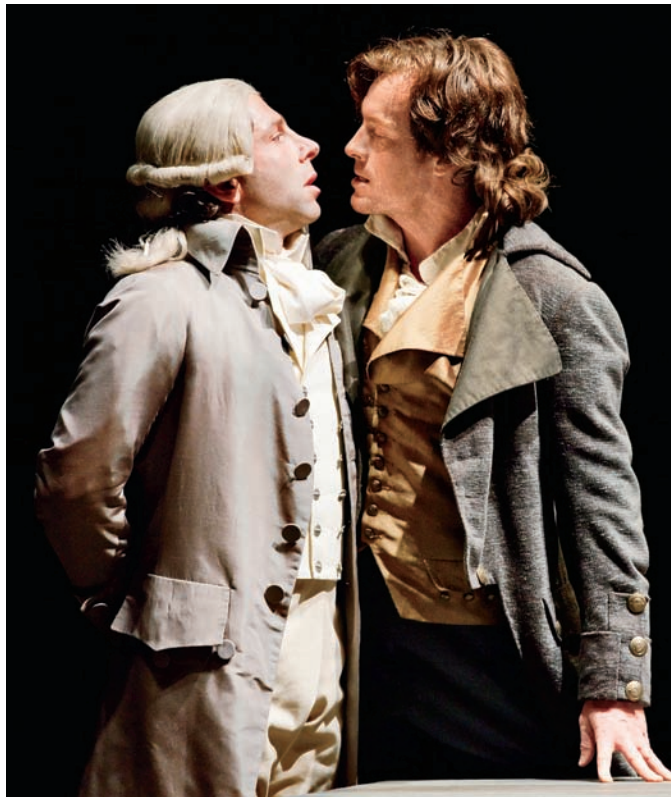
*"Danton's Death" in London.*

BY JOHN LAHR

Nowadays, you need a primer to tell the players in the French Revolution apart; in 1835, however, when the twenty-one-year-old Georg Büchner wrote his first play, "Danton's Death" (revived at London's National Theatre, in a new version by Howard Brenton, directed by Michael Grandage), the turmoil and the terror were still within living memory. Büchner knew by heart the legends of France's revolutionary leaders, and he incorporated many of their speeches verbatim into his drama. A brilliant student of anatomy from a family of doctors and a political activist with a strong sense of social justice, Büchner, before "Danton's Death," had published only one piece of writing, an 1834 pamphlet addressed to the local German peasantry, which began, "Peace to cottages! War to Palaces!" Two of his friends were arrested for trying to smuggle the pamphlet into another town; Büchner himself was on the run from a judicial inquiry into what the authorities called his "treasonable activities." Holed up in his father's laboratory, with a ladder ready to be propped against the garden wall for quick escape, Büchner wrote his play in five weeks. "The feeling that a created work has life . . . is the only criterion in artistic matters," he said. "We find it in Shakespeare, and . . . in folksongs. . . . All the rest you can throw in the fire."

Although Büchner didn't live to see his dramatic work staged—he died, of typhus, at the age of twenty-three—"Danton's Death," in its structure and its ambition, is an important precursor to modern drama. Büchner's talent for

clinical, clear-eyed observation gave him a privileged view of the rise of the citizen and the fall of the ancien régime. He saw beyond the propaganda of heroes and villains to the fatalistic patterns of history. "The individual is but froth on the crest of a wave," he wrote while researching the play. "Greatness but an in-



*Elliot Levey (left) as Robespierre and Toby Stephens as Danton.*

cident, the dominance of genius but a puppet show, an absurd wrestling match against an iron rule which we can, at best, perceive but which we cannot possibly master."

Büchner's sombre thoughtfulness finds its correlative onstage in Christopher Oram's spare, crepuscular, high-walled set, with large shuttered windows and a balustrade separating the top half of the back wall from five black doors on the bottom. Before the play even begins, two lights are positioned dramatically

above the towering forms, their thin, austere beams soaking the bare gray stage with the imminence of menace. (Oram and Grandage, who have worked together on many outstanding productions, including "Red," which won them both Tony Awards this year, have a particularly creative partnership.)

In real life, Büchner's hero, the revolutionary Georges Jacques Danton (Toby Stephens), was a bit of a pudding: portly, with a big head, a large sensual mouth, and an indolent manner. He had a lawyer's aggressiveness and a loud baritone, with which he held forth in an unpredictable and dramatic exhibition of both reason and ridicule. The play tries to exploit Danton's contradictory

nature: debauched and loyal, quick of mind and slow to act, an architect of terror and a moderate who sees "no reason that compels us to go on killing." Büchner's theory was that the successful playwright "gives us characters, not characteristics." In practice, however, he gave us more characteristics than character, in a play that is full of hubbub and hot air. Danton's psychological complexity is buried under a numbing cascade of revolutionary rhetoric. Büchner's structure is cinematic; his dialogue, unfortunately, is not. (My favorite lines: "The lava of revolution flows. Liberty will strangle in her embrace those weaklings who dreamt of impregnating her mighty womb.") Brenton's adaptation cuts some of the play's fat, but, with its flat Anglo-Saxon terseness, also loses

some of the original's Gallic flavor.

Any actor coming to the role of Danton must flesh out Büchner's minimally drawn psychological sketch with his own emotional baggage. Toby Stephens has charm, a fine voice, a heroic outline; however, he can't make the audience feel that anything much is going on inside Danton's handsome head. From his first speech, alone with his wife, Julie (Kirsty Bushell), Danton demonstrates a thoughtful, philosophical nature: qualities that help explain his inability,

throughout the play, to act quickly in the face of danger. "We're very much alone," Danton says. "We'd have to crack open our skulls to know each other, tear out each other's thoughts from the fibre of the brain." Behind his skepticism and his wit is an existential suffering; Stephens, who seems not to have a paradoxical bone in his body, can't locate this ambivalence in himself. As a result, Danton's mots—"Life is a whore who does it with all the world," or "Life isn't worth all the sweat and strain needed merely to hang on to it"—ring out but don't ring particularly true.

Stephens's Danton can't see a door without swaggering through it; he is a kind of bantam rooster of revolution. By contrast, Maximilien Robespierre (the excellent Elliot Levey), Danton's old friend and cohort on the Committee of Public Safety, is a puritan popinjay, a man of style who wraps barbarity in the punctilio of virtue. "Terror is a by-product of virtue, it is nothing less than swift, stern, and unbending justice," Robespierre, who was called the Incorruptible by his followers, says in a tight, clear voice at a meeting of the Jacobin Club, adding, "You have the right to use terror to crush the enemies of liberty." In life, Robespierre noted Danton's reply to his argument about virtue—"Virtue is what I do every night in bed with my wife"—and used it to send him to the guillotine.

The most fascinating part of "Danton's Death" is not what it chronicles about fanatics but what it teaches about the psychology of fanaticism. Robespierre's oratorical jujitsu—mercy is weakness, punishment is privilege, patriotism is murder—is an act of psychic as well as semantic denial. ("Something inside me, telling lies to all the rest of me," he says at one point.) Robespierre imposes an aggressive innocence on language and on himself, which disavows his violence and annihilates reality. (In fact, under his "virtuous" guidance, executions rose from three a week, in 1793, to a hundred and ninety-six a week, in the summer of 1794.) When Danton meets with Robespierre to discuss his fate, he at first tries to tease his friend out of his fantasy of purity ("I'd be disgusted with myself if I spent thirty years with such a self-righteous expression stuck on my face"), then to reason with him ("Purity needs

vice, if only for contrast"), and, finally, to draw his attention to the facts about which Robespierre has befogged his mind. Robespierre claims that only the guilty have been executed. "You hear that, Hérault?" Danton says to a friend. "No one innocent has died."

"The power of words," one character exclaims, ravished by Robespierre's rhetoric. In its revolutionary delirium, the public changes direction, like swarming fish, at each grandiloquent jolt from the main players, who speechify constantly, even to one another. Oratory is one of the era's great themes, which the play perhaps inadvertently but effectively dramatizes. At one point, as Danton argues for his life in front of the Revolutionary Tribunal, an official rings a clapper bell to interrupt him. "Don't you hear the bell?" the official says. "The voice of a man, defending his honor and his life, drowns your bell," Danton replies. The play works best when eloquence dukes it out with death. "For how long must the footprints of liberty be graves?" Danton argues. "You want bread, they throw you heads. You are thirsty, they make you lick the steps of the guillotine." "It does not seem too much to say that it was oratory that created 'The People,' not vice versa," the historian Simon Schama writes in "Citizens," his epic account of the French Revolution. No wonder that "a striking number" of the revolutionaries, according to Schama, had direct connections to the professional theatre. They knew how to make a spectacle of themselves and of their cause.

The instrument of silence—the emblematic guillotine—provides this production of "Danton's Death" with its most remarkable moment. The scaffold and the blade stand poised high above center stage as, one by one, Danton and his followers mount the stairs and put their heads on the block. The blade falls, and each head makes a satisfying thud as it hits the basket below. It's great fairgrounds stuff! At once awful and jaw-dropping, Grandage's wizardry inspires "the horror and admiration" that Büchner himself demanded of theatre. Danton's actual gallant, defiant last words to his executioner were far better than the ones the play gives him. "Don't forget to show my head to the people," he said. "It is well worth the trouble." ♦