



ILLUSTRATIONS BY SARAH ADINA

SIMON CRITCHLEY

## Theatre is Narcissism – On Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Narcisse*<sup>1</sup>



I WANT TO try and answer the question ‘*Was bringt die Klassik auf die Bühne*’ by talking about a theatrical experience I had last year with an unapologetically contemporary staging of a classical play. From April 7-10, 2005, in the Theatre for the New City, in the East Village in Lower Manhattan, the newly-formed Eyeball Planet Company staged the American première of a little known play by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, called *Narcisse, ou l’amant de lui-même* (Narcissus, or the self-admirer). The production was directed by Anne Deneys-Tunney, Professor of French Literature at New York University and the idea for the production came about by chance during some conversations that Anne and I were having about our plans for a one-day symposium at the Maison Française of New York University to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, the famous Second Discourse.

<sup>1</sup> This is the text of a talk prepared as part of a series of events to mark the bicentenary of Schiller’s death entitled *Spieltrieb. Was bringt die Klassik auf die Bühne? (Playdrive. What Brings the Classics to the Stage?)*, held in Weimar in November 2005. It was originally published in German as ‘Theater ist Narzissmus. Über Jean-Jacques Rousseaus Drama “Narziss”’, *Theater der Zeit*, October 2005, Heft nr.10, pp.40-43.

What is the connection between narcissism and inequality? For Rousseau, the great sea change in the history of inequality is the institution of private property, where someone said “this is mine” and found people simple enough to believe him’. Yet, even prior to the establishment of private property,

when human beings first gathered together, socialized and looked at one another – Rousseau imagines this taking place around a tree in a purported state of nature, and the notion of the look, the narcissistic *regard*, is essential - there was engendered a desire for distinction, to be distinct and different from the others. It is with this desire for distinction that the healthy *amour de soi* or self-love that defines human beings in a natural state begins to be transformed into a narcissistic *amour propre* or pride. For Rousseau, the origin of narcissism consists in this desire for social distinction, from a sense of one's own importance. Thus, inequality and narcissism derive from the same source.

This is the kernel of the drama that is played out in *Narcisse*. I don't know how many people know of or have read Rousseau's plays, as they are fairly obscure. There are seven in all, in various stages of completion or incompleteness. *Narcisse* was the only play to be performed publicly. This was in 1752, where it lasted for just one performance by *Les comédiens du Roi* on December 18th. *Narcisse* found its way to the stage because of the considerable success of *Le devin du village*, Rousseau's pastoral opera, which was performed before the French King, Queen and court at Fontainebleau in October 1752. Louis XV was so impressed by *Le devin du village* that he requested to have an audience with Rousseau, but the latter was so neurotically plagued by a weak bladder that he was terrified that he would wet himself during the audience and therefore he declined, complaining of his '*infirmités*'.

*Narcisse* was described by Rousseau's sometime friend Grimm as '*une mauvaise comédie*', and although one might expect more loyalty from a friend, he is not incorrect in his judgement. The play is in the style of Marivaux, who read, commented and even made some changes to the text. Sadly, *Narcisse* is not of the quality of Marivaux, which is perhaps explained by the fact that Rousseau claimed

to have written the play when he was just 18 years old. Although this is not untrue, it is certainly not the whole truth, and it is clear that Rousseau periodically and significantly redrafted the play between his youth and the time of the only performance, when Rousseau was about 40 years old. Indeed, he admits this in his *Confessions*, writing that, '...when I stated in the preface to that play that I had written it at eighteen I lied to the extent of some years'. Nonetheless, it is probable that *Narcisse* was Rousseau's first extended piece of literary composition.

The action of *Narcisse* is very simple: it is about a man who falls in love with a painting of himself dressed as a woman. The drama begins with Narcisse's sister, Lucinda, devising a plan to trick the incurably vain protagonist, who is engaged to be married to Angelica<sup>2</sup>. It is a test of his love, which backfires horribly as Narcisse falls completely in love with his own feminized portrait, his objectified self-image. There is much playful, if predictable, dramatic irony, where Narcisse sends off his man, Frontin, in search all over Paris for his new beloved, who is in fact himself.

2. In Rousseau's text, the male protagonist is called Valère, but for the New York production Anne decided to call him Narcisse, which is the name I will use in this presentation.

**Lucinda:** Frontin, where is your master?

**Frontin:** Gone in search of himself.

**Lucinda:** In search of himself?

**Frontin:** Ay, to be married to himself.

Eventually Narcisse realizes his mistake and the error of his ways, is scolded by his father, and decides to marry Angelica after all. There is also a second love story in *Narcisse*, which is curiously unresolved and unsatisfactorily presented in the play, between Lucinda and Leander, which is intended to mirror the main dramatic relationship. So, the play is a little lesson in the failings of narcissism that ends with the moral, 'when we truly love another, we cease to be fond of