



Chéreau, Patrice (1944-2013)

by Luca Prono

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Award-winning French director, screenwriter, and actor Patrice Chéreau earned international renown for his visionary, often controversial, productions of opera, theater, and film.

Chéreau first captured attention for his daring work as a director of operas and plays. The film adaptation of Alexandre Dumas's historical novel *Queen Margot* (*La Reine Margot*, 1994) established Chéreau as a leading cinema director as well, though his first film was *La Chair de l'Orchidée* (*The Flesh of the Orchid*, 1975), which earned him two César (French Academy Award) nominations.

Chéreau was born in Lézigné, in the western French region of Maine-et-Loire, on November 2, 1944. His parents were both artists. He attended school in Paris at lycée Louis-le-Grand.

As a teenager he was discovered by Paris theater critics as a result of his work as director, actor, and stage-manager of his high school theater.

He directed his first professional play when he was 19; it was so successful that he abandoned his studies at the Sorbonne to pursue a career in theater. He was celebrated as a theater prodigy and soon became associated with important European theaters.

He became the director of Sartrouville Theater in the outskirts of Paris in 1966 and worked for the Piccolo Teatro in Milan in the early 1970s. From 1971 to 1977 he co-directed with Roger Planchon the National Popular Theatre in Villeurbanne, near Lyon, where he revived classic French plays by Labiche, Molière, Marivaux, and Genet.

Although he directed his first opera in 1966, the operatic productions that established him as an international opera director were his interpretations of Wagner's *Ring* tetralogy for the one hundredth anniversary of the Bayreuth Festival, 1976-1980. Recruited by conductor Pierre Boulez, Chéreau's version of the operas moved the action to the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century, framing realistic details within an hyperrealist context that challenged their verisimilitude and made them part of a psychic landscape.

Although the productions angered Wagner purists—there were near riots at Bayreuth—they are now regarded as classics. Chéreau's *mise-en-scène* became an important point of reference for directors interested less in literal adaptations than in avant-garde transpositions in an attempt to render dated operas relevant to modern sensibility.

In 1979, Chéreau again worked with Boulez, this time on a Paris production of Alban Berg's opera *Lulu*. Since then he has directed operas at most of the leading European houses, most recently a 2007 production of *Tristan und Isolde* at Teatro alla Scala.



Patrice Chéreau.
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In 1982 Chéreau became Director of the Théâtre des Amandiers at Nanterre, which he developed into one of France's leading theaters despite its rather remote location. Among his notable productions there were Genet's *Les Paravents* (1983) and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1989).

In his films, which include *Wounded Man* (*L'homme blessé*, 1983), *Those Who Love Me Can Take the Train* (*Ceux qui m'aiment prendront le train*, 1998), *Intimacy* (2001), *His Brother* (*Son Frère*, 2003), *Gabrielle* (2005), and *Persecution* (2009), Chéreau often features intense portrayals of gay men and homosexual relationships.

Chéreau's films reveal a particular concern for the representation of human bodies, not as idealized objects of beauty, but as graphically mired in their imperfect physicality and sexuality. Writing in the film magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Jean Michel Frodon has argued that the body has been central to Chéreau's cinema since *L'Homme Blessé* and that it is the site of intersection between love and death.

This concern for the body has also been read as a potentially queer subtext in films where homosexuality is not a main theme. For example, the focus on the bodily imagery of blood, death, and sexuality in Chéreau's rendering of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in *Queen Margot* has been associated with the AIDS crisis.

Similarly, the graphic sex scenes in *Intimacy* challenge the alluring and enticing images of straight pornography as the bodies of actors Mark Rylance and Kerry Fox are lit in a semi-darkness that almost distorts them like the bodies in Lucien Freud's or Francis Bacon's paintings.

Chéreau repeatedly said that being gay affected him as an artist, though he failed to specify exactly in what ways. He also stressed that he never wanted to specialize in gay stories. Instead, he claimed to be interested in the general theme of desire and how it affects people. The experience of desire, Chéreau insisted, is strikingly similar for heterosexuals and homosexuals.

Still, most of his films feature gay themes and characters, and many of them seem to incorporate aspects of his own experience. The coming out story *The Wounded Man*, for example, interweaves elements from Jean Genet's *The Thief* with the director's own memories as a gay adolescent.

Those Who Love Me Can Take the Train focuses on the train journey made by a group of relatives and friends from Paris to Limoges to attend the wake and funeral of their common acquaintance, the manipulative bisexual painter Jean Baptiste Emmerich.

In its analysis of human relationships, *Those Who Love Me* contrasts biological and elective families, and examines the networks into which we are born and those to which we choose to belong.

His Brother also deals with family relationships, as two estranged brothers--the terminally-ill heterosexual Thomas who suffers from a mysterious blood disease and the homosexual Luc--are reunited. The film challenges conventional AIDS narratives where the healthy brother is usually the heterosexual who looks after his dying gay sibling. The film was to some extent influenced by Chéreau's broken relationship with his own brother.

Finally, the lunatic gay stalker in *Persecution* initially shocks the object of his desire, the dark and handsome Daniel, who violently rejects him, but eventually he becomes a sort of confidant for Daniel's problems with his fiancée Sonia.

Chéreau was also an actor. Perhaps his best-known role is that of General Montcalm in Michael Mann's adaptation of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992).

In 2010, Chéreau curated a multi-media show at the Louvre called "Les Visages et les Corps" ("Faces and Bodies"), which juxtaposed images from paintings, dance, opera, theater, and film.

Although his work in film came to eclipse his work in theater, in 2011 Chéreau made his English theatrical debut with a production of *I Am the Wind* by Norwegian playwright Jan Fosse.

Chéreau was awarded the Berlin Film Festival's Silver Bear as Best Director for *His Brother* in 2003, while *Intimacy* won the Golden Bear as Best Film two years earlier. *Queen Margot* was awarded the Special Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1994.

Chéreau has also won two César Awards: best screenplay for *The Wounded Man* and best director for *Those Who Love Me*. He received the Career Achievement Award at the 2009 Chicago International Film Festival.

For many years, Chéreau maintained a romantic relationship with actor Pascal Greggory, whom he directed in several films and plays.

Chéreau died on October 7, 2013 of complications from lung cancer.

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About the Author

Luca Prono holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Nottingham, where he taught courses in American culture and Film Studies. He has published articles on Pier Vittorio Tondelli, Italian Neo-Realism, and American Radical Literature, as well as on contemporary representations of homosexuality in Italian films.