

Playwrights Yasmina Reza and Christopher Hampton discuss 'God of Carnage'

by David Ng

The barbed insults that fly fast and deadly in "God of Carnage" come from the pen of Yasmina Reza, the celebrated French playwright and winner of two Tony Awards. Working once again with British playwright Christopher Hampton as translator, she has written an acidic exploration of middle-class savagery and liberal hypocrisy.

Reza, who was born in Paris and is of Hungarian and Persian heritage, stands virtually alone as a foreign-language playwright able to break into the contemporary Broadway scene. Her comedy "Art" won the Tony for best play in 1998 and went on to become one of the most performed plays in regional theaters across the U.S. Her other plays include "Life x3," "The Unexpected Man" and "Conversations After a Burial."

Hampton has translated most of Reza's plays to English. The London-based writer won a screenplay Oscar in 1989 for "Dangerous Liaisons," adapted from his own play, and two Tonys in 1995 for the book and lyrics to the musical "Sunset Boulevard."

Recently, Reza and Hampton sat down to discuss "God of Carnage." Reza conducted her interview via email from France, and her responses have been translated from French to English. Hampton was in L.A. recently and spoke at his hotel in Beverly Hills.

Can you explain the inspiration for "God of Carnage"?

Reza: Yes. In the street, while returning from school with my son, I was talking to the mother of one of his classmates. Her son had suffered a broken tooth following a fight on the playground, and she said this to me:

"Do you realize: the parents haven't even called to apologize!" I immediately thought that there was an interesting theme here.

How did you create the four characters in the play? Did you put yourself in any of them?

Reza: I always put myself in the characters that I write. I spread myself out and hide myself in each of them.

Your plays often deal with characters who are middle class, cultivated, but sometimes hypocritical. What attracts you to this social milieu?

Reza: I would say that above all, my plays are about people who are well-raised but who lose control of themselves. My characters are for the most part impulsive by nature. You could describe my plays as being a theater of nerves.

Have you discovered anything different in the play with each staging in different cities?

Reza: I first saw the play in Zurich [in 2006 at the Schauspielhaus], for which the play had been written. Each country brings its own culture, aesthetic, and I would also say its own moral standards. You're always learning about what you've written for the theater. The best actors are always inventive and unpredictable. I'm very aware of the generosity of craft that English-speaking actors bring.

Hampton: What strikes me is how flexible [Yasmina's] plays are to fit quite a wide range of actors. We had 21 casts in "Art" in London, who ranged in age from their 20s to 70s. Her plays bend themselves to the actors -- this is also true of Pinter -- which is quite rare. With other plays, mine included, you have to be specific in the casting.

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For the London production of “God of Carnage,” the play was set in France. For the U.S. version, the setting has shifted to Brooklyn. Why the change?

Hampton: Yasmina and I sat down with the actors a few days before rehearsals [on Broadway] to translate the play into “American.” We listened to the actors and talked about each line and wound up with quite a lot of changes, several to the page.... English and American English are really two separate languages, and it's an enjoyable game. In the course of this, it was mooted that we might change the setting. I had resisted changing the setting with “Art.” But there's something about “God of Carnage” that is less specific and more universal. Yasmina, who had to be convinced, finally said yes, try it.

Did you make any changes to the story?

Hampton: In terms of the content of the play, no. Yasmina is very specific about everything. She doesn't really want anything to appear in front of the audience that she didn't write. Sometimes she gets exasperated. Once, she took me aside, and in an exasperated way said, “English is such a poor language!”

People who saw the Paris production of the play (which was directed by Reza) said that it was more serious and less comic than the English-language stagings. Is the play funnier in English or French?

Reza: Or Spanish? Honestly, I don't know. I'm not sure that humor is a distinct criterion.

Hampton: I would say the play had a rather somber tone in Paris. Yasmina is ambivalent about the audience's laughter. I embrace it. I don't think it compromises the seriousness of the play in the least to have the audience laughing.

Is it harder to translate a play by a living writer?

Hampton: Yes and no. Yasmina is very exacting. With “Art,” she didn't really speak English. But she speaks it now. I told her that she taught herself English to make my life a misery! I studied languages at Oxford, French and German, and I'm very passionate about rendering accurately the intention of the author. There are some writers I couldn't translate -- I've been offered Pirandello and Lorca, but I can't convince myself of what their intentions are. Those I do choose, I feel a kinship and affinity.