



COMÉDIE
FRANÇAISE



PATHÉ LIVE

EDUCATIONAL KIT



RACINE

BRITANNICUS

DIRECTED BY **STÉPHANE BRAUNSCHWEIG**

"Rome wants a master, not a mistress" (Nero, Act IV, scene 2)

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RODUCTION CREDITS

BRITANNICUS

Racine

Director and set designer Stéphane Braunschweig
 Costumes Thibault Vancraenenbroeck
 Film director Don Kent
 Lighting design Marion Hewlett
 Sound design Xavier Jacquot
 Artistic collaboration Anne-Françoise Benhamou
 Assistant set designer Alexandre de Dardel
 Make-up Karine Guillem
 Assistant director Laurence Kélépikis

With

Clotilde de Bayser Albina
 Laurent Stocker Nero
 Hervé Pierre Burrhus
 Stéphane Varupenne Britannicus
 Georgia Scalliet Junia
 Benjamin Lavernhe Narcisse
 Dominique Blanc Agrippina

and the student-actors of the Comédie-Française
 Théo Comby Lemaitre guard
 Hugues Duchêne guard
 Laurent Robert guard

A Comédie-Française production

I. PRESENTATION OF THE PRODUCTION

PLOT SITUATION

The action of *Britannicus* is set in a long and complex series of clashes over imperial power, which Racine draws from the *Annals* of Tacitus and Suetonius' "Life of Nero". Agrippina the Younger, a descendant of Augustus, married her cousin Claudius, then emperor, becoming his fourth and last wife, and managed to have her son Domitius adopted by him. Claudius died, probably poisoned by Agrippina. Domitius then came to power under the name of Nero while Britannicus, son of Claudius and legitimate heir to the throne, was pushed aside. Britannicus was in love with Junia, also a descendant of Augustus by another line.

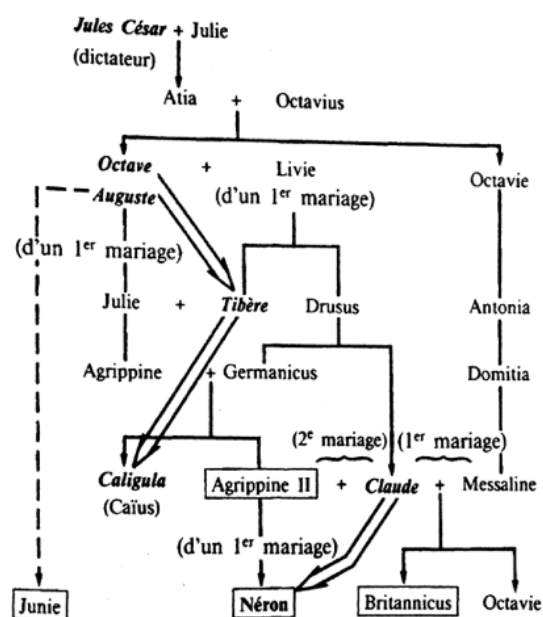
The first two years of Nero's reign were tranquil but were marked by behind-the-scenes influences: Nero's advisers, Burrhus and Seneca, persuaded him to remove his mother from power, while Narcissus, encouraging the emperor's tyranny, played the role of spy on Britannicus. The politically astute Agrippina, on the other hand, worked to strengthen the bond between Britannicus and Junia, so that Nero would not feel sufficiently free to rule without his mother's support. The play opens with a crisis, an "act of aggression": anxious to protect his power, Nero had Junia kidnapped during the night and is holding her in his palace. The "surprise" is that he falls in love with her: the political rivalry between Nero and Britannicus is thus coupled with a romantic rivalry that will only be resolved in violence.

After the success of *Andromaque* and the more mixed success of his comedy *Les Plaideurs* (The Litigants), Racine sought to compete with Corneille in the field of Roman tragedy in order to make his name as a writer recognised not only by the court but also by the critics. While readings of the play in salons drew appreciation, the opening performance at the Hôtel de Bourgogne on 13 December 1669 was not very auspicious: the play was targeted by a cabal and the theatre is said to have been largely deserted by a public more curious about a beheading taking place that same evening on the Place de Grève. Racine's position was therefore still fragile at the time, but his strategy subsequently bore fruit: the following plays (from *Bérénice* in 1670 to *Phèdre* in 1677) won him royal favour along with public and critical success. He entered the Académie Française in 1672 and became the king's historiographer in 1677.



Racine © Coll. Comédie-Française

TABLEAU GÉNÉALOGIQUE



Claude empereurs

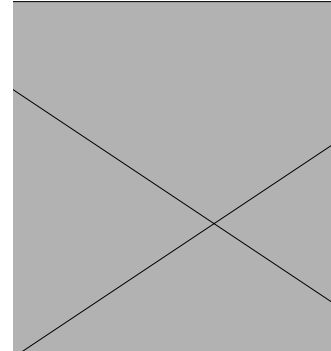
Junie Personnages de la pièce de Racine

relation d'adoption

Genealogy of power struggles: source Racine, *Britannicus*, Livre de Poche, 1986.

STÉPHANE BRAUNSCHWEIG

After studying philosophy at the École normale supérieure, he entered Antoine Vitez's school at the Théâtre national de Chaillot. Since 1988, he has directed and designed scenographies for about 60 theatre and opera productions. His favourite authors are Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, Chekhov, Pirandello, and the contemporary Arne Lygre. His opera work features several Mozarts and Janáček, as well as a Wagner Ring cycle at the Aix-en-Provence festival. After being artistic director of the Orléans National Drama Centre (1993-1998), the Théâtre national de Strasbourg (2000-2008) and the Théâtre national de la Colline (2010-2015), in January 2016 he was called upon to succeed Luc Bondy as head of the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe. He is also a translator (Kleist, Büchner, Brecht, Pirandello, Lygra) and has published a collection of texts and interviews on theatre: *Petites portes, grands paysages* (Small Doors, Large Landscapes) (Actes Sud, 2007). *Britannicus* is his first staging at the Comédie-Française.

**DON KENT**

A film and television director of Scottish origin, Don Kent studied cinema in France, at the Idhec (now Fémis), where he enrolled in 1968. He directed many television programmes in the 1980s and 1990s (*Droit de réponse*, *Les Enfants du rock*, *Le Cercle de minuit*), becoming a specialist of live broadcasts. He is also a documentary filmmaker (*De Serge Gainsbourg à Gainsbarre*, 1994, *Jeff Buckley, Fall in Light*, 1999) and has become one of the most renowned directors for live films of stage productions. He has filmed numerous concerts, operas (*Il Seraglio* conducted by Marc Minkowski in 2003 in Aix-en-Provence), theatre productions (Jacques Lassalle's *Medea*, 2000, Bob Wilson's *Les Fables de La Fontaine*, 2006, and Ivo van Hove's *Les Damnés*, 2016). He has directed the live films of *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Misanthrope* and *Le Petit-Maître corrigé* for the Comédie-Française as part of Pathé Live! programme (see educational resources on the Pathé Live website: www.pathelive.com/education) and has already worked with Stéphane Braunschweig (Richard Wagner's *The Valkyrie* conducted by Simon Rattle).

**II. “IN THESE HALLS HIS POWER HOLDS SWAY” (II, 6):
SZENOGRAFIE DER MACHT**

Around the table. The stage direction at the beginning of Racine's tragedy, in keeping with the rule of the three units, which recommends that the action take place in only one place, indicates that “the setting is Rome, in a room of Nero's palace” (more precisely the antechamber in which he receives his visitors). The scenography could have opted for the generic palace background of tragedies (referred to as *palais à volonté*): a unique setting that depicts power and leaves the audience free to concentrate on a theatre of language, nobly expressed through the alexandrine meter. On the



Benjamin Lavernhe © coll. Comédie-Française

contrary, Stéphane Braunschweig has designed a scenography that looks simple and stark, but which in reality is endowed with a complexity that brings out the ambivalences of the play. The set is highly architectural but based on a series of dualities: it is both rigid and modular, concrete and abstract, closed and open.

Once the exposition has taken place, the large white door closing the stage gives way to reveal what it was concealing: a large oval table surrounded by chairs whose modern design immediately evokes a ministerial cabinet or board room. The sobriety and minimalism of the set evokes the coldness of places where power is exercised, places usually hidden from view and to which the theatre gives us access: "*Britannicus* is about everything that we don't see. I didn't want to make the space really realistic, rather I wanted it to resemble a real place of modern power, where discussions to which the people do not have access to are held and where decisions are made. The play talks about very concrete political issues. I had in mind the great meeting tables of the Elysée, the White House or the Kremlin..." (interview with Anne-Françoise Benhamou).

It is around this table that the opinions of the advisors are heard (Burrhus, the state servant, at first blind to Nero's manipulations, Narcissus who pretends to serve Nero in order to serve only himself). It is also around this table that the power struggles of the tragedy are played out through great rhetorical confrontations (Agrippina and Burrhus' dialogue in Act I, Scene 2, Agrippina and Nero's dialogue in Act IV, Scene 2, which begins with one of the rare stage directions in the text "sitting down"). To sit is to dream of preserving or conquering power: Narcissus' ambition prompts him sit for a very brief moment in his central chair, without anyone knowing.

From political space to mental space

This table is surrounded by windows and doors, in a play between closed and open spaces. Daylight filters through the windows, connecting exterior and interior: on the outside, the people of Rome whose opinion is important to Nero and his entourage and who, although absent from the scene, are not passive (cf. Narcissus' lynching by the crowd at the end of the play). The windows and doors compose a scenography in which the question of seeing and hearing is central: the gaze that we direct at the people from the windows, Agrippina's gaze, blocked by the doors that separate her from her son, the gaze of Nero who, behind a door, can hear without being seen. The interior of the palace is bared to the audience's gaze, while alternately maintaining and abolishing the fourth wall: at precise moments, entrances from the stalls (*Britannicus* and *Narcissus*' entrance in Act III, Scene 3) vividly establish the link between the auditorium and the stage so that the audience fictitiously become the people whose favor all political stratagems aim to win.

This set, particularly from Act II, Scene 2, when it expands to more distant spaces, and the closing and opening



Georgia Scalliet, Stéphane Varupenne © Coll. Comédie-Française



View of the stage (Act II) © Coll. Comédie-Française



Stanley Kubrick, , *Dr. Seltsam*, 1964

Stéphane Braunschweig says he was influenced by the *House of Cards* series when he was working on the staging of *Britannicus*. He also points out the highly cinematographic nature of the table, the central object of famous films that raise the question of power and its exercise. This “cinegenic” quality of the object is particularly well captured by Don Kent’s film of the play.

of doors multiply, is also a more psychological space, charged with the thoughts, desires and even impulses of this tyrant in the making, Nero.



Kevin Spacey in der von David Fincher produzierten Serie *House of Cards* (2013–2016)

- **Reading: “I will understand your silent looks”**

Scene III
Nero, Junia

[...]

NERO: I could deny him access to these halls,
But would rather avoid the dangerous course
On which his anger might set him then.
I have no desire to see him: this decree
Will prove easier to hear from the lips he loves.
If his days are dear to you, send him away,
without giving him reason to believe me jealous.
Take upon yourself the blame for this banishment,
By your speech, or by your silence
At least by your coldness, make him understand
That his vows and hopes are not welcome here.

JUNIA: How could I pronounce so cruel a decree?
A thousand times I have sworn the contrary.
If even I could betray myself so utterly,
My eyes will still tell him not to obey me.

NERO: Hidden close by, I will watch as you confer.
Lock your love away in the depths of your soul
Your language will have no secrets for me:
I will understand your silent looks,
And his ruin will be assured should I detect
A single gesture or sigh intended to soothe his pain.

JUNIA: Alas! If I dare make one request,
Then grant, Sire, that I never see him again!

Scene IV
Nero, Junia, Narcissus

NARCISSUS: Britannicus would see the princess,
Sire: He approaches.

NERO: Let him come.

JUNIA: My Lord!

NERO: I will leave you now.
His fate depends on you more than on me:
Remember, when you see him, I will also see.

Scene VI
Junia, Narcissus

JUNIA: Ah! Dear Narcissus, run after your master:
Tell him... I am lost, he is here!

Scene VI
Junia, Britannicus, Narcissus

BRITANNICUS: Madame, what happy chance brings
me to your side?
Am I to be blessed with a moment in your company?
But amidst such pleasure, I am devoured by pain!
Can I even hope to see you again?
Must I now steal, through elaborate strategy,
The joy your eyes once gave me every day?
What a night! What a morning! Could your tears, your
presence
Not have disarmed such cruel insolence?
Where was your lover? What envious demon's spite
Denied me the honour of dying in your sight?
Alas! When held in the tight grip of fear,
did you secretly call out my name?
My princess, did you deign to make some appeal?
Did you take pity on the pain I would feel?
Have you nothing to say? What welcome is this! How
cold!
Is this how your eyes comfort my dismay?
Speak: we are alone. Our deceived enemy
Is at this moment occupied elsewhere.
Let us make the most of this fortunate absence.

JUNIA: You are in these halls where his power holds
sway.
These very walls, Lord, may have eyes, and the
emperor is never far away.

BRITANNICUS : Since when, Madame, have you
been so afraid?
Does your love fade no sooner than it is held captive?
What happened to the heart that always used to
swear
To make even Nero envy our love?
Madame, dismiss an unnecessary fear.
Faith in all hearts is not yet quenched;

In everyone's eyes I read the approval of my cause,
We have the support of Nero's mother,
Even Rome is offended by his deeds....

JUNIA: My Lord, you speak against your own mind.
You yourself told me a thousand times
That Rome praised him with a common voice;
Always finding some praise for his goodness.
Surely it is your pain that inspires these words.

BRITANNICUS : You surprise me, I must confess.
I did not expect to hear you sing his praises.
What? I confide in you my soul's torment,
I barely steal a moment to be alone,
And this precious time, Madame, is to be spent
Praising the enemy who caused my distress?
Who has made you so different to yourself, in one day?
What! Even your eyes have nothing to say?
What's this? Are you afraid to meet my gaze?
Nero has won your affections? And I am despised?
Ah, if I believed that... In the name of the gods, Madame,
Explain and end this dark confusion of my soul.
Speak. Am I already forgotten?

JUNIA: Leave, my Lord; the emperor will come.

(Act II, scenes 3, 4, 5 and 6)

- **A closer look: Stéphane Braunschweig and scenography: “A visual narrative in parallel with the textual narrative”**

[...] I belong to a generation of directors who discovered theatre through the stagings of Vitez, Chéreau, Grüber, Stein, Sobel, Planchon and Vincent. Productions that often had spectacular sets, as was the way in the late 1970s and early 1980s, designed by scenographers who, thanks to a long-term working relationship with the director, strongly influenced the latter's style and identity. I am of course thinking above all of Yannis Kokkos with Antoine Vitez and Richard Peduzzi with Patrice Chéreau, but I could also mention Nicky Rieti with André Engel or Bernard

Sobel, Gilles Aillaud with Klaus Michael Grüber, and many others. It was clear to me that the acting styles varied considerably from one director to another, but for the very young spectator that I was, it was the scenography that offered me a way into these productions, the scenography that impressed and fascinated me, heightening my pleasure as a spectator, it was the scenography that kindled my nascent desire to become a director. I loved these large, spectacular sets. And the taste for the spectacular, which, in my case at least, I trace back to the childish pleasure of being overawed, has never left me, even in my work as a set designer, which is much more minimalist.

The economy of the stage

I am also part of a generation of directors that started off at a time when the reign of the director (and the scenographers who accompanied them) was coming to an end. At a time when the actor was returning to the centre of theatre, and asserting his role in the staging (this was a legacy of Vitez: it is probably no coincidence that at his school, where there were only two directors for about forty students, a good



Tartuffe, directed by Stéphane Braunschweig at the TNS in 2008.

fifteen later became directors, some of whom are renowned today). At a time also when there was more money overall for theatre in France, but spread among more people. Hence there was a possibility of working with means that many young people had not access to before then, but means that were nonetheless much more limited than those of our elders. It is at that moment that an ideological discourse critical of expensive scenographies flourished, as if in resonance with the worsening social and economic crisis. This criticism brought about a questioning of the spectacular, of the very notion of spectacle – the word became almost pejorative. The terms “theatre” and “show” were commonly opposed, it was the period (the 1990s) during which the old master Régy triumphed, becoming a leading figure for many young directors. This rejection of the spectacular ushered a certain minimalism into fashion, and at the same time, the forms of what has

been called “post-dramatic” theatre were exploding. A theatre that had emerged from the 1970s avant-garde (Wilson, Kantor), often initiated by visual artists who questioned the primacy of the text, and with it the notions of fiction, narrative and character, to favour a theatre of installation, performance and shared experience pushed to the limits of representation, and, generally speaking, of deconstruction. This explosion was naturally linked to the rapid development of new technologies from the mid-1990s onwards. You had to work your way through this context and find your place. Reintroducing scenographic design into the staging, as a number of us did, was undoubtedly a way of renewing forms and practices, while taking a stance both in relation to the great predecessors and to the visual artists who were invading the theatre. My work as a director and set designer has been marked by all these questions and trends, sometimes in a contradictory way, and it is perhaps these contradictions that have enabled me to find a way forward. On the one hand, I feel close to a certain minimalism (I have always admired Daniel Jeanneteau’s work, for example), to the idea of an economy of the stage based on the principle of less is more, to a theatre that empties the stages of all that is superfluous to heighten the figure of the actor. But at the same time, as I said, I have never renounced the spectacular: so I do spectacular minimalism so to speak. I have always defended (as a director but also when I programme shows as the artistic director of a theatre) the idea that a staging, even with limited means (financially and/or semantically), must have a scenographic ambition. Despite having preoccupations that are sometimes close to those of post-dramatic theatre, I have always maintained the primacy of the text: this does not mean that the other components of the staging slavishly follow it, rather that the primary choice of the text federates the other elements. For me, each scenography is inspired by the text, created for it, even if in general it does not seek to represent the spaces it describes. It is more about seeking out the underground, more or less visible structures of the text, the construction of mental, psychological spaces, allowing me to engage an imaginary dialogue with the author. And just as I like to tell stories as a director, I also like the scenographies to tell a story, even if it is an abstract, visual story. Hence the use of evolving, moving scenographies that propose a visual narrative in parallel with the textual narrative...[...]

Stéphane Braunschweig, “Ouverture”, in *Études théâtrales* 2012/2 no.54-55, Paris, L’Harmattan.

QUESTIONS

1. The hidden witness device used by Racine in Act II is more common in comedies than in tragedies. Name a famous comedy by Molière that uses it. Here, to what extent does this configuration reinforce the pathos of Junia’s situation?
2. “When Racine writes *Britannicus*, he takes a story from antiquity, which he interprets in his own way. We do the same thing today. At the time, they performed in seventeenth-century costumes, not Roman costumes. We perform in contemporary costumes and in a setting that recalls contemporary places of power.” (Stéphane Braunschweig, Pathé interview). What effects on the viewer do these modern staging choices have?
3. Look up the meaning of the word “scenography” and carefully read through Stéphane Braunschweig’s text “Ouverture”. Taking a play of your choice, propose a scenographic design that reflects both a taste for the spectacular and a concern to highlight the actor’s performance.

III. “I WOULD SOON FEAR HIM IF HE NO LONGER FEARED ME”: MOTHER AGAINST SON



Dominique Blanc, Hervé Pierre, Clotilde de Bayser © Coll. Comédie-Française

Although she is not the eponymous character, Agrippina occupies a central place in the play (indeed, it is one of the peculiarities of the play that the title uses the name of a character of lesser importance, but more likely to arouse the audience's pity and appeal to the sensibilities of the time.) Nonetheless, one of the stakes of this tragedy, as Racine himself points out in his second preface, is the fall of this woman who devoted her life to power: “I took greatest care to portray her correctly, and my tragedy is no less about the fall from grace of Agrippina than the death of Britannicus.” Nero's mother, as we know, has stopped at nothing to put her son on the throne and when the play begins, she is already on her way to being removed from power and fears her son's ingratitude:

“Britannicus troubles him, Albina, and every day/I feel that I too am becoming an intruder.” (I, 1). Stéphane Braunschweig is less interested in the figure of the mother, her possessiveness or even the oedipal nature of the relationship she maintains with her son than in the political animal Agrippina represents. As played by Dominique Blanc in a black suit, she is a true woman of power, a woman who has devoted her life to a political career she fears will end, and whom we see fighting to keep her place beside the throne at all costs. Mother and son are in reality enemies here and deploy strategies of alliances and lies against each other.

- “Your perception of the play breaks with a traditional reading in which Agrippina’s frustrated love for Nero is seen as a central issue.
- “We often imagine there being a strong bond between them, with a possessive mother and a son who must try to free himself from her authority. I see it differently: I think she never loved him, and she always used him to gain power. The prophecy that was announced to her at Nero’s birth that her son would kill her is mentioned several times during the play. As if Nero had always been an enemy to Agrippina... For his part, the impossibility of obtaining his mother’s love may be what turns him to hate – this is often the case with Racine...” (Stéphane Braunschweig, interview with Anne-Françoise Benhamou)



Dominique Blanc, Laurent Stocker © Coll. Comédie-Française

For Nero, it is not a question of escaping his mother’s castrating love but of fighting against the power she means to continue imposing on him. Nero is not straight away the bloodthirsty tyrant we know from legend. He is a young emperor appreciated by the people, who has not yet burned Rome, killed his wife or his mother. But he no longer wants to be mistaken for Agrippina’s instrument, which makes him appear weak. He is obsessed by public opinion (“Did she have him crowned him merely to obey? Does he hold power only in name?” IV,2) and to quote Racine’s words in the second preface: “He is beginning to show his desire to shake off the yoke; he hates these people, and hides his hatred from them under false caresses [...] In a word, what we have here is a nascent monster, but one who still doesn’t dare to reveal his nature, and who seeks pretexts for his wicked actions.” Nero thus appears as a duplicitous and manipulative being, capable of lies, in particular in front of his mother, to whom he makes it seem like he is reconciled with Britannicus when in fact he has decided to kill him (“I embrace my rival, all the better to smother him” IV, 3).

The play therefore lets us witness his transformation into a bloodthirsty and perverse ruler. The staging and Laurent Stocker’s performance reveal the contradictions of the character, both child and emperor, naive and terrible, in love and cruel. The possibility of madness lurks within him, and his black suit, his anger, his childish outbursts are not unlike those of some of our current heads of state....

“When you make an actor who has a form of innocence play a bloody tyrant, you let all the facets of the character exist. You can imagine what it’s like for this boy to not have been loved by his mother.” (Stéphane Braunschweig, Pathé interview).



Dominique Blanc, Laurent Stocker © Coll. Comédie-Française

- **Interview: Dominique Blanc: “Agrippina’s great modernity”**

What does it mean to you to be a *pensionnaire* of the Comédie-Française today?

I was very moved when I signed my contract. I was welcomed by the whole team. It brought me happiness, honour and pride. I wanted to make it a celebration so we had some champagne. It is much more than an invitation to act, I am joining a troupe and a theatre that is more than three centuries old. Entering the Comédie-Française is one of the ambitions that young actresses have after graduating from the Conservatoire. It's all the more significant to me because it is happening at a time in my life and career when I never thought I would be part of this family.

What was your reaction when Éric Ruf offered you the role of Agrippina with Stéphane Braunschweig directing?

It was incredible for me to know that both the administrator of the Comédie-Française and this director wanted me... Two men for whom I have the greatest respect. I was surprised they offered me the role of Agrippina. I couldn't see myself in it at all, but I think this type of role is even more interesting when at the outset you don't know where it will lead you. Knowing that I was going to be acting alongside Clotilde de Bayser, Laurent Stocker, Hervé Pierre, Stéphane Varupenne, Georgia Scalliet and Benjamin Lavernhe was also the promise of a great adventure. I said “yes” to it all... And it was only then that I started picturing myself in the role.

How would you describe your theatre career?

Since the very beginning, it has been off the beaten track and against the grain of tradition. I wanted to do theatre, but neither the Conservatoire nor the Rue Blanche school wanted me. I always wanted to be part of a school, a tribe, a clan. I quickly realised that it wouldn't work that way for me, that my path would be less straightforward and that it would be a lonely one. It was thanks to Patrice Chéreau that things changed for me. He spotted me when I presented a small piece in a workshop with Pierre Romans at the Cours Florent and offered me a small role in his production of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. For a year I observed, from the inside, the rehearsal process of the magnificent troupe he had assembled. The only way for me to learn my profession was through this school of example. But Patrice Chéreau left his theatre in Nanterre and, as is often the case in this profession, I went back to square one.

The last time you performed Racine was *Phèdre* under the direction of Patrice Chéreau. Éric Ruf played Hippolyte.

I still look back in it with a lot of emotion. At that time Patrice Chéreau told me: “You've never done a tragedy, neither have I, perhaps that's our greatest advantage.” With him, you had to demystify tradition. Let there be blood and tears.... When we managed to achieve that, it was euphoric and it felt like we had access to an extraordinary freedom in our acting. Hippolyte has often been cast as an immature teenager. However, Éric Ruf gave him the stature of a man. It changed the nature of our dialogues and I had total confidence in him as a partner

What are rehearsals like with Stéphane Braunschweig?

He often gets up on stage. He doesn't act but tells us very precisely what he would like us to do. Stéphane Braunschweig is capable of great concentration in his work, but he also knows how to have fun. He has a great sense of humour. He is a particularly happy man at this time after being appointed head of the Odeon-Theatre of Europe, and he is a fulfilled as an artist. As was the case with Patrice Chéreau, *Britannicus* marks his first time taking on a tragedy.

What is Stéphane Braunschweig's point of view on the play?

Each director has his or her own opinion about how to pronounce the Racinian verse. The important thing is that the actors comply with this rule so that the text breathes in harmony. It is through our collective performance that the play will find its unity, its rhythm and its phrasing. *Britannicus* is based on the intrigues of power. Stéphane Braunschweig places it in a present-day setting to suggest potential parallels with political battles taking place in our time. His premise is very contemporary. Embodying a female politician of our century enables me to be consistent with the great modernity that exists in the character of Agrippina.

Interview with Patrick Sourd, *M le magazine du Monde*, May 2016.

• **Reading: “I have not forgotten that I owe you my reign”**

AGRIPPINA, , sitting down: [...]

Today I promised Junia to your brother,
 Both are pleased by the choice of your mother:
 And what do you do? Junia, kidnapped from the court,
 Becomes overnight the object of your love;
 From your heart Octavia I see erased,
 Deposed from the bed where I had her placed;
 I see Pallas banished, your brother arrested;
 My own freedom from me wrested
 By Burrhus, who dares to lay his hands on me.
 Of such perfidy you stand accused,
 Yet it is you who order my justification
 When you should be coming to me in expiation.

NERO: : I have not forgotten that I owe you my reign,
 Do not tire yourself with the same refrain,
 Your kindness, Madame, could most tranquilly
 Rest upon my fidelity.

These suspicions, these constant remonstrations,
 Have made all who've heard your protestations
 Believe (this I can tell you here between us two)
 Your past deeds though in my name, were only for
 you.

“So many honours, they said, and so much deference,
 are these for her efforts such low recompense?
 Of what crime does this condemned son stand
 accused?

Did she have him crowned him merely to obey?

Does he hold power only in name?”

Had I been able to do as you wished,

I would have gladly placed in your hand

This power that your cries seemed to demand;

But Rome wants a master, not a mistress.

You heard the clamour that my action stirs.

The senate and the people take it ill

To hear me every day command at your will,
 Claiming that Claudius in his dying hour,
 Entrusted to me his obedience along with his power.
 A hundred times you have seen our soldiers angrily
 object
 To parade their eagles for you to inspect,
 Ashamed by a use so unworthy
 To insult the heroes whose image they still carry.
 To anyone else their grievance was plain,
 But you would not heed it and still you complain.
 With Britannicus, you have united against me,
 You strengthen his cause and with him Junia,
 And everywhere Pallas' hand is in these machinations.
 Then when I seek to protect my own position,
 You respond with hatred and unleash your fury.
 You intend now to present my rival to the army:
 Already the rumours to the camp do fly.

AGRIPPINA: Me, make him emperor? Ungrateful!
 How could I?

To what end? What would be my claim?

For what honours in his court and what rank could I
 aim?

(Act IV, Scene 2)

QUESTIONS

1. According to Stéphane Braunschweig, the strength of *Britannicus* is that it gives expression to the dark side of human passions in the noble form of the alexandrine meter. Which parts of the play do you think are particularly dark?
2. Dominique Blanc is a great theatre and film actress. What roles have you seen her in? Which directors has she worked with? How would you describe her acting style?
3. Do some research into other productions of *Britannicus*. How does Stéphane Braunschweig's reading of the relationship between Nero and Agrippina differ from a certain tradition of interpretation? Refer to specific details.

APPENDICES

Roland Barthes, *Sur Racine, "Britannicus"*

This problem remains one of a birth, or, if you will, of a passage, of an initiation: Nero wants to become a man, he cannot and suffers. This suffering, in accordance with the Racinian principle, is, if not quite physical, coenaesthetic, it is the suffering of the bond. There is not so much a Neronian being as a Neronian situation, that of a paralyzed body desperately striving for autonomous mobility. As with Pyrrhus, Nero is essentially held in the grip¹ of the past, his childhood, parents and even the marriage decided by the Mother², a past that has not been able to provide Nero with a paternal status, in short with morality. But the Racinian tragedy is never the direct contestation of a morality; the tragic world is a world of substance; Nero does not deal with concepts, or even people, but forms, to which he tries to oppose other forms. Since his Mother obliges him to reveal his secrets to her, Nero will try to create a new, solitary secret for himself, from which his Mother is excluded; such is the meaning of the formidable Door Agrippina attempts to force open³, and of the Sleep that Nero insists on, as if it were primarily a matter of dissolving the biological bond between the mother and child. What he seeks is an autonomous space, and he sees the throne as such a space in which to assert his vital dimension. [...] Once again we see how ambiguous the concept of Nature is in Racine: Agrippina is the natural mother, but Nature is only suffocation: Agrippina besieges⁴: this is how this Racinian Anti-Physis is defined, which will explode in an openly blasphemous mode in *Athalie*. At the outset Nero is therefore an undifferentiated organism. The problem for him is one of secession: the Emperor must be separated from the Son⁵. This disjunction, according to Racinian mechanics, can only be a tremor that takes its impetus in a completely pure, vital sense, a raw feeling of expansion, which I have already called dogmatism (the refusal to inherit), which Racine calls impatience, and which is the absolute rejection by an organism of that which contains it excessively. Physical paralysis and moral obligation are carried away in the same burst. The sublimated form of the bond being recognition, Nero is above all ungrateful; he decides that he owes nothing to his mother; just like those little boys who insolently blame their parents for bringing them into the world, he defines Agrippina's gifts as acts of pure self-interest⁶. His immoralism is truly adolescent.

¹ One cannot fail to relish the onomastic coincidence that makes Agrippina the symbol of gripping and Narcissus that of narcissism.

² My heart cannot rest, already I see Agrippina bringing Octavia to me, her eye aflame
Reciting the holy rights of a bond she made. (II, 2.)

³ Left to wander through the palace with no escort,
Caesar's mother should watch over his door alone? (I, 1.)

⁴ ... I will besiege Nero on all sides. (III, 5.)
At the beginning of the play, Agrippina was already besieging Nero's door.

When she curses him, she takes on a fury-like function in advance:
Rome, this sky, this life you received from me,
Everywhere, at all time, will offer me before you.

Your remorse will follow you like so many furies... (V, 6.)

⁵ He wishes by this affront for the whole world to learn to its terror/
Not to confuse my son with the Emperor (I, 2.)

⁶ IV, 2.

Lucien Goldmann, *Le Dieu caché*, "Britannicus"

Two characters occupy the stage: in the centre is the world, made up of wild beasts – Nero and Agrippina, criminals – Narcissus, people who do not want to see and understand reality, who try desperately to resolve everything through half-conscious illusions – Burrhus, and people who are pure and passive victims with no moral or intellectual strength – Britannicus. On the periphery is Junia, the tragic character, standing out against the world and rejecting the very idea of the slightest compromise. Finally, there is the third character of any tragedy, someone who is absent and present but who is yet more real than all the others: God. [...]

Racinian tragedy takes place in a world where the human community has become so distant that it no longer exists even as a memory.

The complete and absolute loneliness of the tragic man, and the impossibility for him to enter really into contact with the world, constitute the whole subject matter of this type of tragedy. In Western Europe, from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onwards, society was increasingly composed of doorless and windowless monads. If a real tragedy were to take place on the first floor of a house no one on the ground floor would even notice it. An unbridgeable gulf now separates the tragic hero from the rest of the world [...] His tragedies have no place for a chorus surrounding the tragic characters, since the presence of a chorus – that is to say, the presence of a community – presupposes the existence of God, the end of loneliness and a movement beyond tragedy. This is why God and the people are strictly concomitant (I am tempted to say strictly identical) in Racinian tragedy. And, from this point of view, the people are capable of everything, and Junia's withdrawal from the world into the ranks of the Vestal Virgins is perfectly in keeping with the rest of the tragedy. It is not only the logical and necessary ending of *Britannicus*, but the first indication of the final movement beyond tragedy in the two last plays, *Esther* and *Athalie*.

[...]

if the presence of God and of the people constitutes a movement beyond tragedy, can we still give the name of "tragedy" to a play where the principal character is protected by the people and seeks refuge in the temple of the Gods? Is Britannicus still a tragedy, or it is already a sacred drama? I think it is a tragedy, for God's universe does not yet replace on stage, as it does in *Esther* and *Athalie*, the world of Nero and Agrippina, it is there somewhere behind stage, hidden like the Jansenist God and yet always present as a hope and possibility of refuge. On the actual stage we see only the fierce and barbarous world of wild beasts, the world of politics and love, and the world that, in its encounter with Junia, comes into conflict with the human being who resists and rejects it because this being has gone beyond man and is living in the sight of God.

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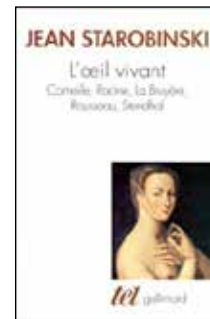
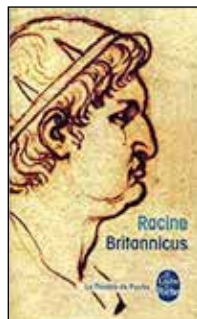
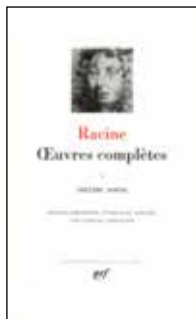
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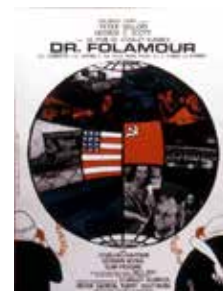
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