

Theatre Michael Coveney

Many headed monster

BY TURNS strange, unwicdly, trite, compelling and bizarre, Peter Shaffer's first new play for five years is nothing if not unusual. *The Gift of the Gorgon*, directed by Peter Hall and designed by John Guntet in the RSC's Pit in the Barbican, ranges Judi Dench as Helen Damson, an obstreperous literary widow, against Michael Pennington as Edward Damson, her dead playwright husband.

Their relationship in flashback is the meat of a proposed biography by the author's son, Philip, who has inherited his father's debilitating disease of 'a worship of theatre'. Philip (Jeremy Northam) has flown in from Illinois, where he is a theatre academic. He encounters his stepmother on a Greek island, ancient grey stones behind a translucent screen.

Across his father's sacred desk materialise the strange dancing rituals of Perseus capturing the head of Medusa, of Clytemnestra wreaking bloody revenge, of figures in masks similar to those spotted in the Hall/Harrison *Orestia*. The dispute between Helen and Edward is to do with the essence of drama. Edward had a big hit with 'Icons' but his last play, 'I.R.E.', which traced political terrorism to Cromwell, has unfortunately, in every sense of the word, bombed.

The Enniskillen Remembrance Day bomb of 1987, an explosion in a department store, the disconcertingly familiar Radio 4 voice of announcer Brian Perkins; the actuality of killing is embraced by Pennington's ecstatic author while Dench's furious muse, the modern Athena on whose shield the gorgon blazes, recoils from theatrical advocacy of violent revenge followed by a little dance.

It is a brave, bold scheme that has not been properly worked out, and the drama evaporates in bathos at those moments where it tries to play its strongest hand: the moments of savage drama and immolation. The fact that Edward has 50 unperformed plays in his bottom drawer is hardly surprising; this lunatic must have driven any literary manager he had dealings with to an early grave.

The odd tension between the contemporary and the mytho-



He nose you know: Robert Lindsay as Cyrano de Bergerac in a bi-

logical is never properly released and the debate becomes at once repetitious and confused. First night critics and academics anxiously scanned the basket of theatrical treatises finally consigned to oblivion and breathed a collective sigh of relief at identifying only a minor tome of Martin Esslin.

Edward Damson's emporium speeches undermine the case for theatre the more he bangs on about violence and beauty and atavistic verities. Just as Lettice Douffet, in Shaffer's last play, was an enemy of 'the mere', so Ted Damson, a sort of berserk heterosexual reconstruction of 'Dadie' Rylands and L. C. ('Elsie') Knights, is a connoisseur of 'the glint'. He responds to the glint in your eye, the glint of a colleague, the glint of an idea. Being such a star-struck old ham, his favourite actor is probably Clint Eastwood, though his bloody excursions to the bathroom — finally returning with a distended belly-full of Kensington Gore under his bath towel — suggest he is the Hon Life President of the Katina Paxinou memorial society.

Good drama is its own best advocate, and this strange and ranting concection is an illustra-

tion of the point, not a proof. The biographical excavation is only sporadically maintained; a lot of the show's spurious excitement emanates from a score by Judith Weir, who has obviously exchanged her clear-cut *Night at the Chinese Opera* for a muddled evening at the Greek takeaway.

Cyrano de Bergerac at the Haymarket is a perfectly respectable revival by Elijah Moshinsky, acutely translated by John Wells with little attempt at Rostand's rhyming alexandrines, and picturesquely designed by Michael Yeargan as a baroque fantasia in crepuscular light. The shadows and silhouettes of Paris yield to the smoke-filled siege of Arras and the falling red leaves in the convent garden where Cyrano expires on the long-postponed declaration of his love for Stella Gonet's stately Roxane.

The opening is best, with Robert Lindsay's ebullient and vocally clipped Cyrano swinging down to knock Montfleury off his performing pedestal. But whereas Derek Jacobi could stop your heart, and Gerard Depardieu's mixture of brutality and refinement took us into the very soul of a soldier poet, Lindsay never progresses

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Lovely Lotto
I'M GLAD to hear that the Arts Council is to be in charge of

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Gift of the Gorgon Coveney

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