

When argument is unequal to theatricality

First night

Michael Billington

Marat/Sade

Olivier

PETER Weiss's play Marat/Sade became a post-war landmark largely because of a legendary production by Peter Brook at the Aldwych in 1964: an unforgettable essay in violence and study of madness.

Now it is decently revived by Jeremy Sams at the in-the-round Olivier, but one wonders if this is the ideal space

for a production that puts the emphasis on dialectical argument rather than profligate theatricality.

Division and debate lie at the heart of the play: Jean-Paul Marat as against the Marquis de Sade, social revolution as against anarchic individualism, Brecht as against Artaud.

Even the form is oppositional, for what we are watching is a group of asylum inmates in Charenton in 1808 performing a play about the French Revolution in 1793, written by de Sade and acted out under the censorious eye of the asylum director and his club-wielding guards.

Sams's production puts the

spotlight squarely on Weiss's argument. De Sade stands for the reality of the imagination, the purity of doubt, the danger of unchecked idealism; Marat, lying in his bathtub awaiting the fatal blow from Charlotte Corday, meanwhile argues for popular revolution as against the sanctity of monarchs, priests and privilege. But who in the end is right?

Weiss opens up a fascinating debate, but gives us no clear answer; except, of course, that because de Sade is author and director of the event, it is impossible not to see him as the controlling figure.

And I suspect that what really intrigues Weiss is the

form as much as the content: the notion of lunatics enacting an historical event and thereby demonstrating that violent revolution is inseparable from madness.

In short, the play is a mixture of argument and happening. But, in the large circular space of the Olivier, it is not always easy to follow the details of the debate.

And, where Brook treated the inmates as individually haunted obsessives, in Sams's production they become a largely unthreatening ensemble who never seem in great danger of turning either on the authorities or on us.

The result is a perfectly honourable revival, but one

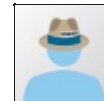
that never ignites into a sensory experience. David Calder as de Sade persuasively puts the case for fantasy and imagination, Corin Redgrave is an eloquently militant Marat, but the performance of the evening comes from Anastasia Hille as Charlotte Corday.

There is something astonishingly trance-like about Hille, as if every movement required a vast effort of will.

I suspect in the end it takes a director of genius to combine Weiss's peculiar blend of polemic and passion.

What we get at the Olivier is a carefully controlled experiment in which the intellectual argument wins out over the underlying anarchy.

Marat Sade Billington Guardian



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Sun, Oct 2, 2022