

REVIEWS

Sadistic nonsense

Theatre

Marat/Sade  
National Theatre

THERE are times when you wish you were sitting anywhere other than in a theatre and this was one of them. Peter Weiss's play is described as legendary, following Peter Brook's famous RSC production in 1964. Yet it has never received a major London outing since. Watching Jeremy Sams's grimly uninvolved revival, one understands why.

*Marat/Sade* sounds intriguing. The play's full title is *The Persecution and Assassination of Marat as performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the direction of the Marquis de Sade*, and the historical background is fascinating. De Sade was indeed banged up in the Charenton lunatic asylum and, under the dispensation of an enlightened governor, staged plays with the inmates which became popular with fashionable French society.

The dramatic fancy of Weiss, a German Marxist who died in 1982, is that in 1808 de Sade devised a play about Charlotte Corday's assassination of the hardline revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat. De Sade appears in his own drama, engaging in endless debates with the paranoiac patient playing Marat. Corday is impersonated by a distressed, distracted victim of narcolepsy, who keeps nodding off. It was a condition with which your reviewer sympathised as the dialectic ground on.

A play performed by lunatics ought to be dramatically potent, but Sams's underpowered in-the-round production on the Olivier stage fails to create an atmosphere of nightmarish intensity. The loonies groan and shout, and sing terrible Brechtian songs,

but tedious political debate takes up far more time.

The play's main argument is simply put. Marat still believes that men are equal and justice is possible, though his way of realising these ideals is unspeakable brutality. De Sade, who knows a good deal about the darkness of his own heart, believes that improvement is impossible and men are doomed victims of their own vile nature.

The fact that many of the speeches are written in infantile doggerel by Adrian Mitchell doesn't add to the enjoyment. There are a few tired theatrical shock tactics — a pig is eviscerated and there's a grotesque childbirth sequence. But we've supped full with theatrical horror since 1964 and it all seems pretty tame today.

Corin Redgrave seems unhappy as Marat. You might have thought that long speeches of revolutionary fervour would be right up his alley, but his oddly accented, disjointed delivery packs little punch, and there is no sense of the paranoia of the patient supposedly playing the role. David Calder is far more impressive as de Sade, who emerges as a humane figure, appalled by the Terror of the revolution, yet unable to deny that it matches the perverse promptings of his own corrupt imagination. Anastasia Hille is excellent as the Ophelia-like Corday. Her harrowing performance, with snatches of song and disconcerting silences, is the only one that conveys the terrible distress of mental illness.

No one could possibly expect *Marat/Sade* to be an enjoyable night out. I was, though, hoping for an extreme and compelling experience; in fact both play and production dismally fail to deliver the goods.

Tickets: 0171 928 2252

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