



FIRST NIGHT

by Nicholas de Jongh

Marat/Sade

The Olivier, National Theatre

JEREMY SAMS'S lily-livered revival of the Marat/Sade, by the more than half-forgotten German playwright Peter Weiss, might have been designed to prove this 1964 play, then branded sensational and "dirty", will today be unlikely to cause even the raising of respectable ladies' eyebrows.

But last night, although Sams had almost sanitised the play's abiding sense of danger out of existence, you could still gather what caused a brouhaha among Sixties moral purity campaigners — the Marquis de Sade after all looms large, not just in the play's title.

Titles come no longer and more revealing than Weiss's: The Persecution and Assassination of Marat as performed by the inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade. Have I given the whole game away? Not really. This piece, involving ritual, madhouse tableaux and Artaud's Theatre of cruelty that aspires to shake the audiences' nerves and heart to the core, has no truck with traditional notions of theatrical suspense.

Peter Brook, who directed the 1964 Marat/Sade, wrote that it was designed by the Marxist Weiss "to crack the spectator on the jaw... then give him a kick in the balls". Sadly, my jaw and my crotch were quite

Lily-livered revival fails to land the punches

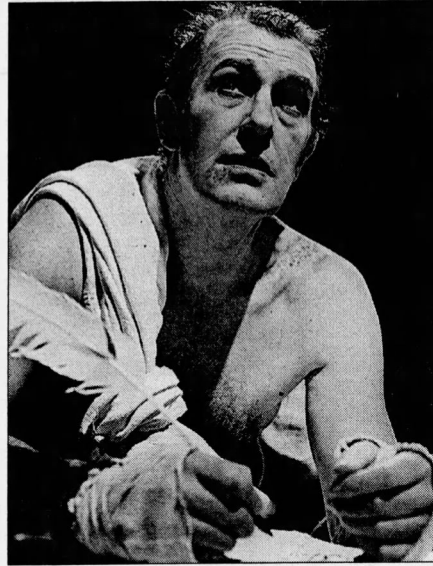
untouched by last night's goings-on.

The Olivier's temporary theatre-in-the round configuration is not ideal for a mad-house setting. Stephen Brimson Lewis's design hardly summons up the gruesome 19th century Charenton mad-house.

The hellish paraphernalia of below-floor cavities for punishment cells, sewers, guillotine pits and graves, are reduced to one underground space. Some actors are also often hard to hear.

There are worse directorial setbacks. The patients in an astonishingly modern dramatic therapy enact the assassination of the revolutionary Marat, as written for them by that very superior inmate de Sade.

They are supposed to behave both as amateur actors and their mentally afflicted selves. We are, in eerie Brechtian fashion, required never to lose sight of these afflicted people's manias. Here we often do, though there are exceptions. Anastasia Hille's mesmerisingly disturbed



"Over-rhetorical": Corin Redgrave as the revolutionary Marat

Charlotte Corday, with trembling voice and fingers, first totters murderously towards Corin Redgrave's Marat, collapsing in a narcoleptic stupor.

The crucial problem concerns the difficulty of following Weiss's narrative argument. A far too straggling debate is thrashed out between Redgrave's Scottish-sounding, over-rhetorical Marat and David Calder's imposing, lecherous de Sade.

The Marquis who steps into his own dramatic action, challenges Marat's revolutionary totalitarian-

ism, his cult of pure reason and social justice, with an obscure paean to hedonistic individualism and dark self-discovery.

When the inmates finally succumb to anarchic violence, with Philip Franks's superbly racked priest watching in despair, Weiss is mourning revolution's failure and human savagery. But Sams softens the play's own moral nightmare.

Ratings: No stars — adequate
★ good, ★★ very good
★★★ outstanding, ✗ poor

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Marat Sade de Jongh Standard



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