

The French have a word for it

INTERNATIONAL theatre festivals are wonderful, aren't they? Instead of watching rubbish from your own country you can, after the organisers have gone to great expense and effort, watch rubbish from someone else's.

These cynical thoughts sprang to mind during the long, unbearable hours of Michel Vinaver's *Overboard*, the second offering of the ambitious French Theatre Season. It's one of those occasions that leaves you feeling physically ill with boredom when you're not sweating with acute embarrassment.

I've a high regard for the Orange Tree's enterprising director, Sam Walters, but his long-term championship of Vinaver is beyond comprehension. With the help of grants from all over the place he has put together a cast of 20 for this lame-brained three-and-a-half-hour satire on the workings of big business. There is one small source of consolation as time drags by. Apparently there exists a seven-hour version of

Theatre

Overboard

Orange Tree Theatre,
Richmond

this play, which was written in the late Sixties and is full of the worst excesses of that decade: Walters has at least spared us the full monty in this English translation.

Vinaver, who was born in 1927, was for many years a managing director for Gillette in Europe. So you might think that he would have had an interesting play to write about a struggling French lavatory-paper firm which finds itself threatened with take-over by an American multi-national.

In fact, the narrative veers from limp satire to pathetically passé avant-gardism. The firm's travails are repeatedly compared with ancient Norse mythology. The play's structure apparently reflects Aristophanic comedy. There are ghastly outbreaks not only of free-form jazz but also of contem-

porary dance *in masks*.

Worst of all, a character called Passemar (Robert Benfield) keeps popping up, based on Vinaver himself. An employee of the loo-roll firm, Passemar is also trying to write a play on the subject, and is continually commenting on his progress.

Though the tone is frivolous, real laughter is in short supply. The satire on fatuous marketing is just about bearable, if stale. What is unforgivable is the way the show bums a lift on the Holocaust through the character of a jazz pianist who spent his childhood in Auschwitz. I have never seen the subject treated with such glibness.

Sam Walters directs with a rib-nudging jollity that grates increasingly on the nerves. The 40-odd characters never develop beyond one-dimensional stereotypes. Only one word will do for this French lavatory paper fiasco: *merde*.

Tickets: 0181 940 3633

CHARLES SPENCER

Overboard Spencer Telegraph



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ianlharris

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