

THEATRE

Overboard*Orange Tree, London*

There is, apparently, a seven hours-plus version of *Overboard*, the Michel Vinaver play now staged as part of London's French Theatre Season. Sam Walters' production at the Orange Tree, Richmond, detains us for a mere three-and-a-half hours. Have we been scandalously short changed? Well, I heard a punter on the way out saying that that had sure felt like the seven-hour version and I think she spoke for England. I had gone to this piece in high hopes, having greatly admired *Portrait of a Woman* (same author, same director, same venue) two years ago. A kind of cubist jigsaw rather than a portrait, that 1984 play offers a deliberately fragmentary unchronological take on a character who may have been a cold blooded murderer, or her own worse victim, or neither or both. Vinaver's trademark technique of juxtaposition, crosscutting and making disparate environments share the same floor space helped hammer home the play's point visually – that none of her rival social networks nor the legal mesh were capable of capturing her elusive complexity.

The same techniques are in evidence in *Overboard* (written between 1967 and 1969) but instead of focus, they produce flabbiness and fudge. The piece is like some sprawling authorial identity crisis badly in need of an editor. Vinaver's powerful parallel career was as managing director of Gilette in a number of European countries. True, one may experience the play as an endlessly protracted, heavy-handed, desperately unfunny attempt to relate the competing myths peddled by big business (seen in the struggle between an old-fashioned French toilet paper manufacturer and an American multinational) to other orders of mythic conflict.

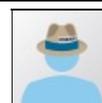
In congested crosscut scenes that here often seem about as Gallic as Alan Ayckbourn, bullish American image consultants brow beat their French clients into projecting soft toilet paper as the doorway to a guiltless world of self-pampering anal eroticism; the Jewish owner of a jazz night club, *The Clinic*, compares and contrasts avant-garde Sixties "happenings" with the sick stunts or "Aktionen" of the Nazis. I ended up beating my head against the air in front of me. The Norse legends relayed to us throughout the play are full of people with names like Aesir and Vanir. A pity Vinaver hasn't heard of their underappreciated big sister – Shortir.

Booking: 0181-940 3633. To 1 Nov

Paul Taylor

MUSICAL

Overboard Taylor Independent



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ianlharris

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