`Marat-Sade' hailed successful insult to western culture

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Without a doubt "The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum at Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis De Sade" is everything that its monstrous title indicates.

By turns it is compelling, terrifying, insulting, overly long, a crashing bore, and incredibly effective.

In short, and perhaps not without a good deal of design on the part of the author (Peter Weiss) it is an exercise in theatrical, psychological, and social paradox which cannot help but impress even the casual viewer.

Insults Entire West

Plots for this play are irrelevant. The story is exactly what the title says it is. More germane and interesting is the fact that Weiss has succeeded in insulting the cultural patterns of the entire western world and got them standing on their feet clapping.

The Marquis De Sade puts it admirably at the end of the show in describing the marital unrest which will result from a couple's varying reactions. “He'll think it filthy,” he chortles, “She'll think it moral.”

Indeed, the judgment is a hard one to make.

Immoral and Obscene

Considering that (1) we are confronted with a blanket condemnation of Christianity as a means of oppression of the poor, (2) we are told that the only meaningful relationship between people is intensely sexual and nothing more, (3) we are told that war is barbaric and that any soldiers fighting anywhere in the world are hence barbarians (i.e., Viet-Nam), it is not surprising that many should be offended.

Further, Weiss pulls no punches in his technique. Using the lunatics as an excuse for immoral (if not obscene) exhibitions, the audience is treated to the irony of a sex-crazed maniac and a catatonic woman acting a tender platonic love scene while he uses her to fullest advantage.

And then of course, there's always the "nude" scene where Marat rises naked from his bath (and, yes, friends, he is naked).

Sit Up and Think!

All this is not mere sensationalism — but rather clear signposts from the author which scream "God damn it, world, sit up, take notice, and think!"

And think we must. This is the most unpalatable pill of all. Thoroughly intellectually shaken, we leave the theatre to reconsider a few old views (or maybe, simply offended, we stalk out and re-affirm our prejudices). In either case, Weiss has succeeded.

The only unsuccessful reaction is total boredom and apathy, and if you have any perceptive faculty at all, this will not occur.

Three Wrong Sides

As far as this production is concerned, it was not originally and should not now be designed for arena staging. For one thing there are just too many people (25) to handle focus and sightlines effectively.

As a result, if you sit on any of the three wrong sides (and there are only four in all) you will curse both yourself and the director. It is more the director's fault than anything else.

But we nit-pick. The performances are generally excellent. The troupe is well co-ordinated and there is hardly a rough spot in the show (with the single glaring exception, unfortunately, of the "copulation round" which didn't come off at all).

Drools and Giggles

It is a constant joy to sit and watch each lunatic, who has picked his own neurosis and has stuck with it. This one has a nervous twitch, that one drools and giggles from time to time. But all of them are internally consistent.

Naturally De Sade (Ralph Clanton) and Marat (John Devlin) dominate the show and their performances were consummate with the demands of their roles — they cannot be anything less than excellent or the show falls apart.

Jerry Terheyden as the Herald is also top-notch and betrays the ease of a man who has played this role many times before.

Spellbinding Insults

Aside from that, special lunacy awards go to Carol Peeace (the "Idiot Girl"), Barbara Stanton (Simonne Evrard), and Jack Erthal (The Abbot), for performances which never allowed eyes to leave them.

The effect is spellbinding. The polemics, insulting. The experience is worth all the effort to get out to Houston Music Theatre.

It is possibly the finest thing Houston will see for a long time to come.