



For the Arkansas Traveler

ARKADELPHIA, ARK.

EN ROUTE to the dedication of Ouachita Baptist University's handsome new Verser Theatre here, this writer had the opportunity to observe several interesting productions. One was in Little Rock, where a staging by the Arkansas Arts Center of Peter 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* is both superbly disciplined and original.

Under the direction of Dugald MacArthur, the Arkansas Arts Center Players are less macabre and more lyrical than was either the Royal Shakespeare Company or the National Players Company. As a result the text of the play emerges more clearly, and Richard Peaslee's songs, which originally had seemed background music, here become almost musical comedy numbers. While this makes for a merrier evening than the playwright may have intended, it also makes the audience receptive to material it might otherwise reject. Robert Barnes's settings, constructed out of iron pipe, are poetic and unoppressive, and a wonderful invention is the tossing in the air of decapitated dolls' heads to suggest the riotous mood of the French Revolution.

Danny Davis as de Sade, Mickey Cottrell as Marat, and Ginger Valone as Charlotte Corday all give capable performances, and both they and the large supporting cast achieve a clarity of speech and singing not found in many professional companies. If this production is typical, the Arkansas Arts Center, with its fine recently built facilities for instruction and performance, would seem to be making a splendid contribution to the entire state, which it services by means of local chapters.

In Columbia, Missouri, Stephens College unfurled a new play by Jack Lazebnik called *Kate Chase*. Against the background of offstage historical events from 1860 to 1899 we watch the obsessed daughter of statesman Salmon P. Chase as she ruins the lives of those around her by her eagerness to do absolutely anything to get her father elected President. As one victim comments, "We'll have to chop off your head to make your jaws let go."

There are some other memorable lines, of which perhaps the best is, "We should live backwards; start at death and face what brought us to it." The form of the play, however, leads to a too-repetitive demonstration of what is

quickly obvious and not very subtle. And, although a cast made up of a combination of drama faculty actors and undergraduate actresses brings conviction and vitality to their roles, they make the play only fitfully interesting.

In New Orleans the Players Theatre of Le Petit Théâtre du Vieux Carré, and its producer, Jill Young, are presenting the New Orleans Group production of *Victims of Duty*. Taking Ionesco's play, a triumvirate of directors made up of Franklin Adams, Paul Epstein, and Richard Schechner have fashioned a wildly inventive evening of theatrical embroidery intended to enrich the imagery and to take the audience into a greater degree of participation and involvement than would be possible in a traditional production.

We enter the theater through a lobby filled with wall displays, moving pictures, and tape recordings related to the production. Inside there is a semidarkened room with steps and platforms, but no seats. In various parts of the room there are areas in which action will occur, but none of these is forbidden to audience members, except that on occasion during the production they may be asked temporarily to move in order that the actor may proceed.

Following a preperformance period when the actors improvise conversation as they eat their supper—which they even share with some of the audience—Ionesco's text is permitted to take over. Simultaneous with the performing of the play, however, are motion picture projections against each wall, and an accompaniment of music and sound effects. The most amusing of these



special effects is the showing of a motorcyclist en route to the theater. Just as the film shows him reaching the playhouse, the door opens and the motorcyclist rides into the middle of the room.

Lyla Hay, Gerald Hoke, Arthur Wagner, and Bronislav Radakovich perform well and strenuously amid the taxing conditions posed by this sort of experimentation. And there is no gainsaying the uniqueness of the event. Yet it does make the play much more difficult to follow, as well as compelling the theatergoer to sit on the floor for two hours.

Since this form of environmental "intermedia" theater is in its early stages, one is inclined to forgive its imperfections and distractions. For one can visualize a master playwright using these devices to full and penetrating effect. Until one shows up, the New Orleans Group can continue to improve its techniques and exercise its inventiveness in the interpretation of scripts by others, and audiences agile in mind and body may find even these exploratory trips rewarding.

BACK in New York, the National Repertory Theater production of Noel Coward's *Tonight at 8:30* provides a nostalgic and modestly entertaining evening. The first of the three short plays, *Ways and Means*, is a thin spoof of 1927 frivolity as an extravagant young couple solve their financial problems by letting an unemployed chauffeur steal for them.

The second play, *Still Life*, will be remembered by those who saw the movie *Brief Encounter*, which came from it. The National Repertory Theater production is made memorable mostly by designer Will Steven Armstrong, whose setting of a drab British railway café is made enchanting and atmospheric by the use of a gay row of lamps visible in the background. While much of the 1937 sentimentality is rather badly dated and plagues Denholm Elliott and Priscilla Morrill, who must play the middle-aged lovers, the play still catches the flavor of Britain rather effectively.

The third play, *Fumed Oak*, is moved up to 1947, and it is Noel Coward at his antisentimental best. He begins by drawing a comic portrait of a lower-class household in which the meek breadwinner, nicely played by Geoff Garland, is utterly dominated by his wife, his mother-in-law, and even by his spoiled, simpering daughter. Then Coward turns the suddenly revitalized husband loose on his whole messed-up life, which he faces more tough-mindedly and realistically than most men ever come to do. It is stinging theater under the guise of comedy, and director G. Wood has kept the fun and the seriousness in balance.

—HENRY HEWES.

SR/ May 20, 1967



Too Many Bonds

WITH SEAN CONNERY, the original James Bond, tied contractually to another studio, the producers of *Casino Royale* seized upon a bold and impertinent device. The womanizing, gadget-fancying super-sleuth of the previous films, they declare in so many words, was an "imposter" who had merely taken over the name and number of the real James Bond (David Niven) on his retirement. But with SMERSH once more on the rampage, representatives of England, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union descend upon Bond's hideaway and urge him once more into the breach.

That much of *Casino Royale*, at least, is clear. After that, it's pretty much every man for himself, since Bond's strategy to smash SMERSH involves identifying a number of operatives—among them Peter Sellers, Ursula Andress, and Daliah Lavi—also as Bond 007. Although designed to confuse the enemy, it is far more confusing to the audience. In this broad parody of earlier James Bond epics, even Ian Fleming would have got lost in the plot's inane convolutions.

The big trouble with *Casino Royale*, however, is not too many Bonds, but too many cooks. No less than five directors are listed—John Huston (who also makes a guest appearance), Ken Hughes, Val Guest, Robert Parrish, and Joe McGrath—not to mention additional sequences by second unit directors Richard Talmadge and Anthony Squire. Three writers—Wolf Mankowitz, John Law, and Michael Sayers—share the script credit, with probable unbilled assists from such irrepressibles as Woody Allen and Peter Sellers. There is nothing within the picture to suggest that any of these gentlemen ever met. The action tumbles from one sequence to the next with a minimum of preparation, and the mood switches from satire to slapstick with even less. And while, in all likelihood, they thoroughly enjoyed spending the \$12,000,000 that *Casino Royale* is reputed to have cost, precious little of that enjoyment turns up on the screen. As more than one critic has observed, it is rather difficult to parody something that is already a parody. In this case, the defeat is overwhelming.

By contrast, simply because it keeps its utterly fantastic story under tight rein at all times, a relatively modest British effort, *The Jokers*, comes off as both thoroughly absorbing and constantly amusing. In it, two well-born brothers, self-confessed dropouts from a

society that bores and ignores them, decide to demonstrate their true ability by prankishly making off with the crown jewels in the Tower of London. And, in a sequence as brilliantly devised and executed as the memorable "heists" in *Rififi* and *Topkapi*, they successfully carry out their caper. What began as an elaborate prank, however, with every intention of restoring the gems after the boys have made their point, suddenly misfires when the jewels mysteriously disappear. Brother turns on brother—and the film rather warily suggests that perhaps the take-over generation is not quite ready to perform its self-appointed mission—not, at least, until it has acquired some sense of responsibility both to itself and to society.

As for the cast, Michael Crawford (of *The Knack*) and Oliver Reed (of *The Girl Getters*) are delightful and convincing in the leading roles; Ken Hodges's color photography of London's public buildings and private bistros is agreeably unconventional; and director Michael Winner has paced his own script without a moment's lull for ex-

traneous exposition or nonessential sightseeing. It is more than possible that here his surname will prove prophetic.

But, as we are often reminded, truth is stranger than fiction; and Warner Brothers is currently intent on proving the axiom in Terence Young's *Triple Cross*, based on the incredible wartime exploits of an ingenious, insouciant crook named Eddie Chapman. Jailed on the Island of Jersey shortly before the outbreak of World War II, Eddie succeeds in contacting the prison commandant once the Nazis have occupied the premises and urges that he be trained for espionage. Dropped into England as a saboteur, he promptly contacts British Intelligence and promises to work as a counterspy in return for a full pardon.

Eddie's intention, the film makes clear, is to be on the winning side, no matter which that might be—although, in a rather coy wrap-up, there is a strong implication that he is particularly pleased that the final victory went to the British. Perhaps that is because Mr. Chapman is still very much alive and residing in London today. Incidentally, he can only be delighted with Christopher Plummer's adroit impersonation of himself as a young man. Yul Brynner, Gert Froebe, Trevor Howard, and Romy Schneider are among his understandably apprehensive collaborators.

—ARTHUR KNIGHT.



"You just have to accept the fact that people may agree with your unorthodox opinions."