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Stoppard and Savary by GARRY O'CONNOR

The lightning speed with which *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* crossed the Channel has resulted in disaster. It has been reported, though perhaps without foundation, that Claude Regy, who has put *Rosencrantz* on in Paris, as well as directing it, acquired an option the day the London reviews appeared. Indeed Tom Stoppard's play would seem to have all the elements to make it immensely popular in France—metaphysical frivolity, irreverent logic, and an absurd love of playing games round a subject of towering literary pretension (the blurb in *Semaine de Paris* describes it as "Hamlet vu par deux de ses compagnons").

Yet from the beginning it goes wrong. The French text of Lisbeth Schaudinn and Eric Delorme is not funny enough to match the original. It is either too literal, so that the audience cannot follow it clearly, or too simplified, so that Stoppard's ambiguous dexterity is trod underfoot. It loses the rhythm of the original and the way it recapitulates and develops its wily melodies. The transpositions of key (for instance, at the end of Act 2, through the rehearsal to Shakespeare's text, then on to the death imitations) are much too sudden—above all, they are the wrong keys.

The theatrical in-joke of the play, the confusion of the bit-part mentality of the attendant lords, with the bit-part mentality of two actors who would normally be playing *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern*, is lost, or instead not even recognised. The pirandellesque exploitation of the players with their cart and props works quite well (Jean-Pierre Marielle as the Player gives us the finest piece of acting in the play, omitting Delphine Seyrig's few lines as Gertrude), but otherwise there is discord between the various levels.

The Shakespearean (real) level is poorly acted and instead of being the overwhelming fact of the play, its inescapable fate, the Hamlet characters are only a succession of diminished puppets, without that dreadful authority of principal performers. There is no contrast between their exaggerated egotisms and the poor shifting identities of *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern* struggling in the foreground. There is no set, so no Elsinore—it takes place in a void (perhaps Regy should not be blamed for what might have been a necessary cut in cost).

Most important of all, the emphasis on *Rosencrantz* and

Guildenstern is wrong. In Regy's production they are the main characters. But they are not the main characters in the play, or they shouldn't be. Bernard Frisson and Michel Lonsdale disport themselves as principals, and uneasy with the deliberate lack of identity in their roles, try too hard to bring something to them. Neither has that necessary extreme confidence of comic virtuosity, or the supreme defencelessness of good technique. They banter with the nervousness of actors who want to get on to the next bit of business in the hope that the audience might wake up: the coin-tossing has no reality because neither believes in it (only with the Player does the heads and tails motif register).

Both appear tired with their parts—after the shatteringly bad Press reaction, performances ceased for three nights with one of the cast reported "blessé"—but now some salvaging is in progress, and the production seems very likely to improve.

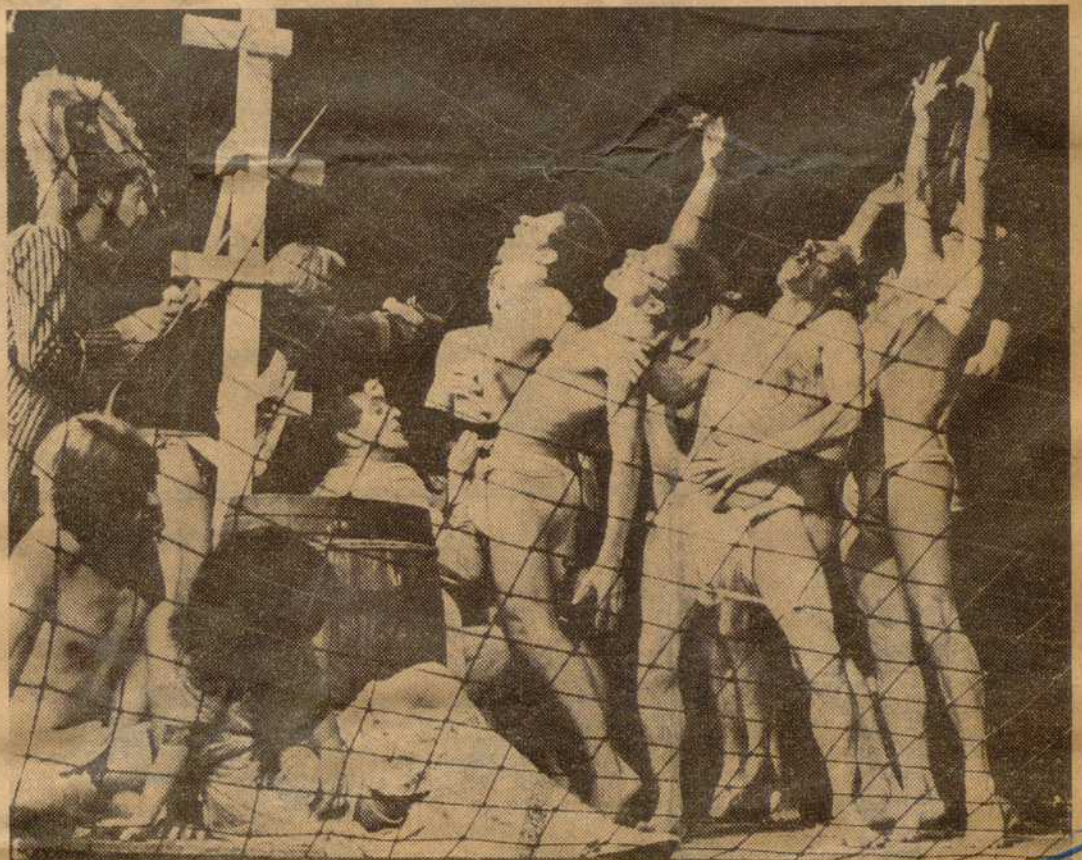
The first theatrical event of the

5th Biennale of Paris, which has opened at the Studio des Champs Elysées, follows right in Artaud's footsteps. A brain-child of Jerome Savary, an unconventional director who specialises, for want of money, in a certain kind of half-amateur experimental "fringe" theatre the like of which doesn't exist in London, it is called *Oratorio macabre du radeau de la Méduse*. It is a grotesque and stunning spectacle, tracing the chronicle of the raft, subject of Gericault's famous and obscene picture.

Author-producer Savary, who also plays drums in the front row of the circle, conducts the *Oratorio*, which is performed by twenty almost naked men, one deep-voiced whore, one beautiful woman, one five-year-old child (Savary's own), and a front-row chorus of girls wearing huge seaweed hats. A net is spread over the stalls to represent the sea, and in it the ship-wrecked unfortunates topple or plunge to their deaths (within inches of the audience.)

Savary's text is an uneven collage of wit, anguish, and completely uninhibited obscenity. The ghastly parable is a progress through orgy, pure love, to cannibalism, and the complete death of hope. The orgy scene, mimed with shattering frankness, has a contrapuntal effect in the ship's officers' singing hymns. The holocaust is sickening enough (the dying exchange cups of urine and hang up intestines on string tied to the mast). It is redeemed at the very end by a fine image on the backcloth of huge white insects with moving wings, while the whore totters towards the mast with her arms spread.

Overall it works; a little on the rough side (all the cast are unpaid), it has a valuable conception—that of activating a painting in a kind of developing parable—and as a promiscuous mélange of sound, vision, text, horror, action painting, happening and pantomime, it succeeds where others better nourished by fame and wealth have failed.



Oratorio macabre