

When it was first produced on Broadway in 1965, Peter Weiss' *The Persecution and Assassination Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis De Sade* was hailed as a brilliantly conceived and acted piece of theater.

Some critics then weren't sure how good the script itself was; yet *Marat/Sade* (as it's called for short) won both the Tony Award and the New York Critics Award for Best Play. Some 35 years later, I'm not sure how good a script it is, either. But **Fred Newman's unabridged production at the Castillo Theatre is overwhelmingly engrossing and exciting.**

At the start of Act One, we see 11 inmates of the asylum literally climbing a red-brick wall which extends more than halfway into the audience from stage right of the Castillo's postage-stamp-size stage, as the Herald—a sort of master of ceremonies—introduces the performers in a soon to be presented play-within-a-play. The time is 1808, the place the bath hall of a French asylum where the erstwhile revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat is incarcerated. The “players” are mostly wretched, fearful, frightening inmates who've been assembled to enact the murder of Marat at the behest of the Marquis

De Sade, one of their own. Center stage, the invalid Marat sits in a bathtub—just as I'm told he did at Broadway's Martin Beck Theater—bathing his body sores, lamenting the failed French Revolution at one moment and dreaming of another chance for glory the next. De Sade himself recounts some of the more gruesome aspects of the Revolution. He says at one point: “A little while ago I saw my tailor—a gentle, cultured man who likes to talk philosophy—I saw him foam at the mouth and, raging and screaming, attack with a cudgel...a large man, heavily armed...tear open the breast of the defeated man, saw him take out the still beating heart....”

Newman, artistic director of the Castillo, has staged *Marat/Sade* as a comment on 1960s America, though he sticks to Weiss' text word for word. In a program note, Newman writes that the play is “an unusual reflection on a revolution that, in many respects, failed...At the beginning of the 21st century, there has been an enormous amount of reflection on the 1960s, which many identify as a period of ‘failed revolution.’ I see the play, itself a product of the 1960s, as a vehicle for reflection on that extraordinary decade, its promise and its

failure.” To this end, Marat—one of the French Revolution's most incendiary rebels—is played by Emmitt H. Thrower, a black actor who won acclaim as Satchel Paige in Castillo's recent production of *Satchel*.

Each performer in the play-within-a-play has a tortured story to tell through words, movement, and emotion. There's the narcoleptic, melancholy Charlotte Corday—originally played in 1965 by the then relatively unknown Glenda Jackson, here by Gabrielle Kurlander. The Herald is expertly characterized by David Nackman, and Dave DeChristopher is properly cold and heartless as De Sade. Describing atrocities comparable to those of Hitler's death camps, this De Sade sounds like he's reeling off a grocery list.

Newman presents Marat as a thinly disguised Huey Newton—who also died violently, nearly 200 years after the events depicted in the play. But this interpretation is incidental to the success of the revival in exploring the mesmerizing depths of sheer human despair and the soaring heights of Weiss' language. The story itself, as seen through the eyes of Newman and production designer Sheila Goloborotko, is by far the most powerful aspect of the production. **Despite the play's primal darkness**

and its death-laden subject, I sincerely doubt there's a more alive theatrical offering to be seen in New York at the moment. Newman has shaped the movements of the writhing, slithering, red-clad inmates into living-art images—so much so that, despite the play's length, I sometimes wished the action would come to a full stop, the better to appreciate the production's exquisite stage pictures.

Although the music composed by Richard Peaslee for the original Broadway production of *Marat/Sade* is for the most part faithfully recreated here, sounds of more recent vintage are occasionally interjected—e.g., a rap-like tempo accompanies one of Marat's mad tirades. A problem I did have with this otherwise wonderful production is that the Castillo's stage is too small for the 21-member cast; at times, the action downstage obscures what's happening upstage. But this much can be said for the company's cramped space: As an audience member, you feel that you are truly a part of the weird, complex goings-on of *Marat/Sade*.

The revolutions may have failed, but this production is a resounding success.

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Marat/Sade

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