

THE THEATRE

Parisian Weekly. Paris. 10 Jan. 57

AT THE COMEDIE FRANÇAISE

LES CAVES DU VATICAN

By André GIDE

I will not hesitate to reply to the question, whether the virtues of a book which delighted a whole generation can be found in this adaptation: the answer must be in the negative.

Therefore some people may hesitate to see this play. Personally I refrain more often than not from seeing on the stage or screen characters out of books which I have enjoyed. I avoided the film of « The Three Musketeers ». I was too attached to the familiar faces of Athos, Aramis and d'Artagnan to let these lifelike fantasies of my childhood imagination be destroyed in a cinema.

But in the present instance Gide himself has decided to transfer his book to the stage. He wanted to see the colourful creatures of his imagination come to life before his eyes. He has taken an active part in the production, chosen fabrics himself, supervised lighting effects. After the dress rehearsal he revised the original version of the play and made heroic cuts. What reasons or motives led to his action (which surely is not the « gratuitous action » for which he has far so long had a weakness) ? They are unimportant. Even if this essay in drama is only a distraction for him, a mental exercise, we cannot demand an explanation, and he has not given one. We must just accept the « princely deed ».

After all, only one thing matters: the intrinsic value of the production. I will confine myself to expressing the pleasure I got from its magnificence, originality and daring. The Comédie-Française headed by Jean Meyer, has achieved a *tour de force*. The décor by Jean-Denis MacLès is a feast for the eyes; the acting is excellent, sometimes superb.

Seventeen scenes succeed each other, thanks to folding sets, about as fast as at the Châtelet with its revolving stage. And sometimes they are perfection. I am thinking of the compartment — so Italian — of the moving train from which Lafcadio, in obedience to an irrational impulse, throws the ill-starred Amédée out on to the line.

The colonnade of St Peter's; the magnificent stairway; the impressive grandeur of San Angelo castle — they are all perfect. So are those rooms which arouse the spectators' nostalgia for the charming villas of Italy.

Henri Rollan is a terrific figure as Julius de Baraglioul. A Charlus such as Van Dongen might have drawn. An aristocratic blockhead puffed up with vanity and hypocrisy, he has an astonishing range of expression in his voice. From beginning to end his performance is the highlight of the evening. Yonnel plays the part of a grandfather (who blesses his bastard child) in an impressive way worthy of the most anachronistic or hidebound scenes of family life. Alexandre shows what he is capable of in the part of a Lafcadio with plenty of breeding and youthful imagination. Chamarrat makes an appealing Amédée.

The feminine cast is no less brilliant with Berthe Bovy — enchanting —; Béatrice Brétty is a strong supporting comédienne; Germaine Rouer and de Chauveron are both excellent. Once more Renée Faure is warmly applauded for her grace and ease, and Jeanne Moreau for her highly individual sense of comedy.

A last word. I have not reread « Les caves du Vatican » for a very long time but if I wanted to amuse myself by reading of the strange people who haunt St. Peter's. I think I would open « Mission to Rome » again. This book by Jules Romains retains a reality which Gide's does not.