

Bold, Visual, Spectacular

At the Olympic Arts Festival, drama from home and abroad



The curtain rose June 7 and will not descend until July 22. In the interim, 30 theatrical companies, representing 13 countries and ranging from the four-square traditional to the cryptically avant-garde, will have shown their wares at Los Angeles' Olympic Arts Festival. By last week the offerings already had a definite, almost made-in-California stamp: bold, even daring, with an emphasis on the visual and spectacular.

Predictably good was the curtain raiser, England's Royal Shakespeare Company in a production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, which ran through last week. The witty lovers Benedick and Beatrice are delightfully played by Derek Jacobi (Claudius in PBS's 1977 series *I, Claudius*) and Sinead Cusack. Directed by Terry Hands, this *Much Ado* is helium powered: it bounces, it soars, it never comes to ground. What it misses, though, is the play's darker dimension, Shakespeare's grim message that love and honor are forever prey to rumor and malice.

A good company of an entirely different nature is the Groundlings, a home-grown group that does improvisational comedy in a tiny Hollywood theater. Their zany *Olympic Trials*, a *Chick Hazard Mystery* is set in the other Los Angeles Olympics, the Games of 1932, and revolves around a murder. The details change with each night's audience, which is expected to furnish not only the name of the victim but the clues as well. The dexterous company provides the rest in an outrageously low and dippy style.

Laura Farabough's *Nightfire*, also a California group, provides another low, but without style. Previous productions of this Sausalito company have included *Locker Room*, which took place in a high school locker room, with the audience seated atop the lockers, and *Surface Tension*, a water work that toured swimming pools up and down the West Coast. For the festival, Farabough has created another aqueous drama, *Liquid Distance/Timed Approach*, which she has staged, so to speak, in the swimming pool of the Beverly Hills High School. Unfortunately, the chlorinated blue water is clearer than her plot, which covers everything from the sinking of the *Titanic* to high school pool parties. Although the ten cast

Théâtre du Soleil's "Asian" Richard II



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members are skillful backstrokers, they show little evidence of dramatic ability. But then how could they?

Perhaps the most unusual company that will appear at the festival all summer is the *Théâtre du Soleil* (Theater of the Sun) from France. Founded in 1964 by Oxford-educated Director Ariane Mnouchkine, the troupe attempts to create a theater of pure metaphor, stripped of the last trace of realism. Believing that all Westerners are too close to Shakespeare to really see him, Mnouchkine borrows from the traditions of the Orient to seek the dramatic core of his plays. French, from her own translation, is the language coming from her actors' mouths, but the dramatic idiom in the three productions she brought to Los Angeles is Asian: Japanese for *Richard II*, Indian for *Twelfth Night* and a mixture of both for *Henry IV, Part I*. The actors either paint their faces white or hide them with masks; they wear Oriental dress and usually run rather than walk across the vast, bare performance area. No ordinary stage was large enough for Mnouchkine's requirements, so the festival put her company in a TV production studio.

The troupe's performances are a spectacle for the eye and a challenge to the mind. But brilliant as they frequently are, they are more Mnouchkine than Shakespeare, and in their excessive length—*Henry IV* is more than five hours—seem to be testing the audience's endurance as much as its intelligence. Nevertheless, what Mnouchkine and her company have conceived is odd, provoking, and just what Festival Director Robert Fitzpatrick hoped for when he chose the festival's dramatic presentations. "Usually people come out of the theater in Los Angeles, get in their cars and go home," Fitzpatrick says. "Last night they came out and talked about what they had seen. That's wonderful."

—By Gerald Clarke