



Anouilh's *L'Arrestation*

From: *The Paris Post* 17 October, 1975.

Melinda Camber Porter

"The theatre is both marvelous and terrible in that you cannot survive in it without success. A play is rendered by the actors and, whether you like it or not, one of the actors is the public," wrote a young Jean Anouilh. His latest play, *L'Arrestation*, now showing at the Atelier, exemplifies the outcome of this admission.

The initiate certainly knew their lines and reveled in their feeling of complicity with a familiar dramatist. But Anouilh's proven mastery of good plots, suspense and caricature allows him to amuse and succeed without needing to go any further.

The play is based in an idea taken from a Borges short story in which a man relives his life in the minutes before his death. Anouilh modifies the theme in order to present a more reassuring and pragmatic answer the problem of death.

A retired police chief posits that a man relives the important memories of this life in the moment before death. If they are happy memories he will continue to live them and attain heaven. And vice versa.

This statement is dropped rather ponderously in the first half hour of the play and we being to wonder whether the ashen Claude Dauphin, the central character, is in fact watching a live drama or, is in fantasy and in his death agony, reliving the principal incidents of his life. This uncertainty makes full play of the possibilities of suspense, and more important, continues to question (though in a hackneyed fashion) the dividing line between reality and fiction.

Anouilh does not ask his audience to agonise or question too long. By the end of the first act, we know that the characters are the ghosts of the dying man's imagination, and that we are witnessing a secular day of judgement. The second act destroys all ambiguity and uncertainty.

But this failing is characteristic of the play: it is too intentionally reassuring. It poses important questions only to dismiss them with palatable answers. Man's greatest fears – of death and judgement, his sense of the fragile division between fantasy and life – are raised and silenced.



Anouilh's desire to enlist the support of the actor/audience is achieved by a compromise. In 1943, when he opposed the conflicting principles of compromise and rebellion in *Antigone* we were left uncertain which path he would choose. In 1975, he has left us without any doubts.

© 2015 Melinda Camber Porter Archive

Ref: The Paris Post, 1975

