



Judgement on Paris

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ONE reviewer thought the chairs, in Ionesco's play of that name, were empty because the production saved money that way. Another wrote of "Waiting for Godot" that "this unusual work by the American novelist seems to be inspired by the miserable condition of famished tramps hunted down by farmers, who abound in the South of the United States." A good deal of risk has always been involved in the criticism of the arts, especially with the avant-garde.

Two new books may seem to have ducked the risk. Ruby Cohn's FROM DE. SIRE TO GODOT. POCKET THEATRE OF Post WAR PARIS* confines her study of what the French still call New Theatre to the years between 1944 and 1953. Melinda Camber Porter's THROUGH PARISIAN EYES: REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY FRENCH ARTS AND CULTURE** contains 30 or so interviews recorded between 1975 and 1985, each of them star-struck and breathless.

Miss Cohn writes elegantly and excitingly about plays that have entered the repertory and been seen by millions. One such, Ionesco's "The Bald Soprano", has enjoyed a run at the Théâtre de la Huchette to rival Agatha Christie's "The Mousetrap", although today's audience is largely made up of foreign students. It is a pleasant irony, as Miss Cohn remarks, that "the play that started with a language primer finally serves as a language primer."

The most interesting part of her book, however, deals with plays and playwrights who are now almost forgotten, or at the least rarely performed outside France. The well known theatre of the absurd was above all a subversion of traditional theatrical language; the little known Audiberti and Jean Vauthier ran to the baroque, not the deliberately banal. In the battle of theatrical influence, they lost, and it is difficult, in spite of Miss Cohn's sympathetic treatment of their theatre, not to feel that they deserved to.

Miss Porter's publishers advertise that her interviews were conducted with "French artists and thinkers at the cutting-edge of international culture and intellectual life". This makes for some confusion. Much the most interesting interview, for example, is with Françoise Sagan, who would never claim such eminence.

Confusion is compounded by some of the author's notions about her subjects. It is surprising, for example, to find Jean Anouilh, the darling of the French boulevard theatre of the 1940s and 1950s, treated as a representative of what "the theatrical establishment in renewal". It is equally surprising to find Françoise Giroud, a journalist and briefly and disastrously France's first Minister for Women, taken as an example of "decisive women". The greatest surprise of all, however, is to find the much-married film director, Roger Vadim, bracketed with these amazons.

Miss Porter is not uncritical when it comes to details. But she is less interested in criticism than in eschatology, and swallows French intellectual pretensions whole. Like the man in Ben Jonson's play "Eastward Ho!", who thought that in the promised land, Virginia, even the chamber pots were made of gold.

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