

The end of the world show

Karl Kraus's 'unperformable non-play' is being staged in the famous Fiat factory in Turin. **John Francis Lane** explains how

TWENTY years ago, Italian director Luca Ronconi was being acclaimed at European theatre festivals from Spoleto to Edinburgh, from Berlin to Madrid, for the wondrous inventions of his simultaneous action mobile performance of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. London never found a space large enough for it and in New York a courageous impresario lost a lot of money presenting it in a bubble hoisted just off 42nd Street where snooty Broadway firstnighters gave it thumbs down but enthusiastic Village buffs, catching up with it belatedly, turned it into a cult event that is still a legend.

Ronconi's genre of stand-up performance which requires the audience to be almost as athletic as the actors, has given him many disciples, including Mnouchkine. Ronconi himself has meanwhile succeeded in emptying the coffers of many an Italian public theatre company with extravagant stagings of plays and operas, without ever quite touching the creative summit reached by his Orlando. Now as director of the Teatro Stabile of Turin, he has staged his most costly production to date (the official figures are five

billion lire, £2½ million) which is only scheduled to play 20 performances in its one-off venue, itself a great "theatrical" invention, the Lingotto, the kilometric former engine shed where Fiat cars were assembled and tried out from the Twenties onwards.

Nothing could have been more appropriate for exploiting its potential as a performance area (it is to be turned into an arts and exhibition centre) than Karl Kraus's rambling 800 page non-play chronicling the horrors of the "Great" war which the author himself — who gave readings of it in Vienna in the early Twenties — avowed "could only be performed on Mars." There have been very few attempts to stage it on this planet. Robert David Macdonald made a memorable try at the Edinburgh Festival with the Glasgow Cits in 1983. He solved the problem by shortening it to four hours (but with intervals) and with his designer Terry Bartlett setting it, battlefield and all, in a Vienna coffee house. Ronconi's version (three hours 40 minutes but without intervals) thanks to the wide open spaces of the Lingotto can give us the whole Ring and throw in real train locomotives and car-

riages, cannons and trenches, and two rows of linotype printing machines which churn out the newspapers, excerpts from which make up 50 per cent of Kraus's original text.

The simultaneous action of Ronconi's production means that often the events from these pages are happening in different parts of the venue. Italian critics were invited — but not obliged — to see it twice so they could "see it all." This critic chose to see it only once, feeling that a performance should be able to communicate its "message" in one go — and indeed, this one does.

If you get tired of standing, you can sit briefly on benches under the printing machines or rail tracks and watch the action going on immediately in your vicinity.

AT one point, an irate stage manager was heard shouting into his walkie-talkie that a member of the audience had run off with one of the chairs needed "on stage."

It's true, I did miss seeing Pope Benedict XV making his plea for peace. I saw the white figure being wheeled away at the far end while I was listening to someone describing how fish in the world's oceans were getting fatter from eating the corpses of drowned sailors. But Ronconi makes sure that our attention is attracted to any scene that he considers essential, especially if ac-

tresses of his regular rep are in view, such as Anna Maria Guarnieri playing the war-crazed first women war correspondent Alice Schalek, or Marisa Fabbri playing Frau Wahnschaffe who is so sorry her children are too young to be drafted or too old for her to have named them Hindenburg and Zeppelina.

These are the only dramatic characters that emerge from the text, in reading or in performance, apart of course from the Grumbler chorus figure (in Macdonald's translation he was called Kraus the Grouse) who carries on his dialogue with the Optimist. Ronconi's two actors, both splendid, Massimo De Francovich and Luciano Virgilio, are brought together at various meeting places, sometimes with the Grumbler soaring over our heads in a reversible pulley chair. Whereas Giles Havergal's Kraus was a sardonic coffee house observer, De Francovich thunders forth as the prophet of doom.

It was too much to expect Ronconi to bring in lighter moments in this grim charade on the end of the world (which is far from confined to the horrors of the Great War but envisages the kind of bacteriological destruction which menaces us even today). One charming touch is when another of Ronconi's regular players Gabriella Zamparini wears a Spitting Image mask of the Emperor Franz Josef and sings an ambiguous nursery rhyme. Wisely, Ronconi avoids aping the Brecht-Weill cabaret style (Brecht after all learned from Kraus) or falling back on Viennese waltzes. The 60 actors and 40 technicians perform their marathon to perfection climaxing with a "coup de théâtre" that is unequalled in my memory: Kraus's epilogue, with the principal characters wheeled in on their trolleys through our midst to take their place on what at one end can now be identified as a traditional platform stage. After nearly four hours we seem to be back in a real theatre applauding.

Only afterwards did I consult my American published translation of Kraus's play, drastically abridged by Frederick Ungar. To Kraus's credit, his non-play is in fact much better in performance than on the printed page. He underestimated his own theatrical potential. Of course, he is lucky that a Macdonald or a Ronconi comes along every once in a while.