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THEATER

Rome has had a veritable festival of plays by Jean-Paul Sartre this season, all of which have aroused a certain amount of hostility—from vastly different quarters.

"Le Diable et le Bon Dieu" which the Genoa Teatro Stabile presented last fall at the Eliseo had difficulty getting on the stage in Rome and reportedly shocked Catholic audiences with its bald statement that "God does not exist."

"Les Mains Sales," which the Turin Teatro Stabile has just finished putting on at the Quirino, offended some Communists (and in earlier productions, Sartre himself) when it was taken as an attack on Communist double-think.

"La P... Respecteuse," which the Mantovani-Tarasco Company is presenting at the Teatro delle Arti, was disliked by Americans who did not approve of its black-and-white view of the American racial problem.

It is possible to attack these plays for a number of reasons but not for the ones given above. Sartre is neither anti-Catholic, anti-Communist nor anti-American; in all of the plays he has simply chosen a stress situation in which to propound his ideas about Existential "commitment." Or as he puts it, "Man is free to act but he must act to be free."

His philosophical ideas (mostly

borrowed) may still be valid though they are not as fashionable as they once were. His presentation of these ideas in these three plays, however, seems dreadfully old-fashioned. They are melodramas in naturalistic form which are often wooden, only rarely moving and sometimes just dull. The best of them, "Le Diable et le Bon Dieu," was redeemed by an exceptional performance by Alberto Lionello.

Has the theater come so far in the past 15 years that a playwright with the stature of Sartre can be left behind? As evidenced in these plays (though not in "Huis Clos"), yes. Brecht, the Theater of the Absurd, the new cinema directors have made us see differently, made us able to accept ideas without naturalistic padding.

"Les Mains Sales" (in Italian, "Le Mani Sporche") was perhaps the biggest disappointment. After all, the Turin company which put it on was responsible for "The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui," undoubtedly the best production seen in Rome last year. And it was preceded by great fanfare. Sartre was raising his ban on presentation of the play.

It started badly. The set was fine but the actors moved around like puppets reciting lines as if they were lines to be recited. Hugo, an "intellectual" member of the Communist Party in an unidentified country, is asked to kill Hoederer, whose policy cooperation with other parties is threatening to split the Communists. This he finally does

after some delay when he finds his wife in the arms of Hoederer. Problem for the Party after he is let out of jail: did he do it through jealousy or belief? Sartre's ambiguous answer: he did it through jealousy but because of his belief. And because the Party has now reversed its policy, Hugo's belief (read commitment) is therefore counter the Party and he must be killed because is unable to disown his own action.

The ideas in it are worth talking about but the play itself seemed Victorian. Hugo, as played by Giulio Bosetti, was less Hamlet deciding than Prufrock twittering and how Hoederer (Gianni Santuccio) could have the least confidence in him was difficult to see. Both Olga (Marina Bonfigli) who loves him and Jessica (Paola Quattrini) who is married to him seemed to see a different man than the audience. He was a man moved around by circumstance rather than his own volition and the problem stated in the play crumpled around the necessity to take him seriously.

In "The Respectable Prostitute," a white girl is persuaded to give false testimony about a Negro in order to save the life of a "respected" white man in a Southern U.S. community. The girl, Lizzie (Marisa Mantovani), thinks she is doing right after a senator (Enzo Tarascio) makes her believe she will be liked for what she is doing. Instead she loses both her own self-respect and the respect of the others. Only the Negro (Harold Bradley) is grateful to her, even though she has betrayed him.

Again the ideas are interesting and though the setting is the American South, the problems posed are not really about racial prejudice but again about commitment, the reasons for it and the results of it. In all three of these plays, in spite of the fact that Sartre says the individual must choose and then act on his belief (for he can only be judged by his acts), the person who commits himself turns out to be wrong. The soft-hearted prostitute loses even the gratitude she thought her betrayal would obtain. Hugo kills a man he admires because he believes it is "right" and finds that his action was not only useless but acted against the party he was trying to help. Goetz, in "The Devil and the Good Lord," decides to do good instead of evil and discovers that his good actions cause more suffering than ever his consciously evil ones had. Perhaps Sartre's famous dictum that "man can give meaning to his life only by choosing to do so" should have an addendum. "And that meaning will be suffering."

—KEN WLASCHIN



HAROLD BRADLEY and Marisa Mantovani in "La P.... Respecteuse"



JEAN-PAUL SARTRE