

# Theater



Jean-Lucé Hurt



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## The Return of Fernando Arrabal

By RICHARD EDER

PARIS

It cannot, literally, be the turn of Fernando Arrabal's mind that converts the procession of visitors in his Paris apartment into an anarcho-absurdist frieze. People come because they have errands, after all, or appointments, or the wrong address. But it does seem, this particular mushroom-gray morning, that the playwright's button eyes, round, frizzy beard and air of childlike eagerness incite his circumstances.

Two Korean women are making notes for a translation of his collected plays. Mr. Arrabal regards them benevolently, and opens one of the books they have brought along. The pictograms run from the bottom up, and from right to left. He muses. . . "Now if I were to write my next play backward, we should all be able to read it comfortably in the Korean version."

Mr. Arrabal has long been one of the most active and fiery representatives of the theatrical avant-garde in Paris. In the late 50's and early 60's his work

shocked the established literary world and won him a host of followers. Jean-Jacques Gautier, who worked for Figaro and was the leading theater critic of the time, wrote that his work should be prohibited. Gabriel Marcel, the Catholic Existentialist, was almost equally disapproving.

"Marcel had a bad time," Mr. Arrabal recalled. "He went to a production of 'The Automobile Cemetery,' and one of the actresses, who was wearing no clothes, tripped and fell into his lap. He had to go to confession afterward."

He begins to talk about his new play that will open shortly in New York: "The Extravagant Triumph of Jesus Christ, Karl Marx and William Shakespeare." (It has a dozen other titles as well, among them, "The Man in the Porcelain Hat," "The Curly Horse" and "Three Parks in the Tropics.") But a scholar from Cambridge, who has been sitting behind the Koreans, breaks in. He does not interrupt, exactly; he has been talking all the while, but so quietly that only a sudden break in the other conversations allows him to be heard. "Do I understand that in the ending of the film version of 'The Automobile Graveyard'

you intended that the Christ figure . . ."

The question is submerged by the arrival of a boisterous Provençal printmaker carrying two prints. He deposits them gently on a daybed and announces that he is carrying Mr. Arrabal off to his house where 12 people are waiting to have lunch with him. "I'll be right there, my dear," Mr. Arrabal assures him, "say in about three hours." The printmaker and a young man who, for some reason, is wearing carpet slippers, shake hands all around and leave.

Mr. Arrabal, wearing a black Rasputin jacket with frogged buttons, pours coffee, and bends his attention, for a moment or two, to the subject of

"The Extravagant Triumph." The first major stage work of his to be seen in New York since "The Architect and the Emperor of Assyria," it will be performed at the INTAR Theater in a production directed by the Cuban Eduardo Manet.

Like most of Mr. Arrabal's work, it turns its weapon of unhinged absurdity against oppression: against its pretentiousness as much as its cruelty. This time he sets himself against Latin American despotism but — and this will likely startle, at the very least — the left wing rather than the right wing variety. It does for Castro roughly what "Guernica" and "They Put Handcuffs on the Flowers" did for

Franco.

Considering the headlines these days about El Salvador, Nicaragua and Cuba, it is undoubtedly timely. And considering the subject's inherent anguish — conservative or liberal but all of it grave — Mr. Arrabal's treatment should fulfill his object of managing to turn his literary backside simultaneously to the right, the left and the center. "The Extravagant Triumph" displays in full measure Mr. Arrabal's demented, fanged frivolity.

His epicene bearded dictator, retreating into infantilism; his woman C.I.A. agent working on Washington's orders to implant Communist governments around the world; a French intellectual who thinks she is in Chile

The Spanish playwright Fernando Arrabal, far left, whose new work, "The Extravagant Triumph of Jesus Christ, Karl Marx and William Shakespeare," with Doris Castellanos and Ron Faber, opens April 5 at INTAR, 420 West 42d Street — "We must look again for words after so much wordless theater."

when she is really in Cuba — the difference is not apparent to her; his assorted transsexual provocateurs, ideologues and orgiasts, plus a collection of snakes and birds — all this intended much in the spirit of the book dedication that landed him in jail in Spain, in which he made a scatological reference to "God, my country and everything else."

Armed silliness, in a way; obscene gestures at the surveillance camera in the jail cell; graffiti. "Why is it thought that victims have everything but humor?" Mr. Arrabal asked. His point is that humor — permanently out of control — is a salute to anguish, not a denial of it. "All I am talking about is the politics of power — in life, in love," he continued. He conceded that most of his work has been directed against the oppressiveness of the right rather than the left, "But you know that I am an anarchist."

The word, and the work, and above all the reputation are belied by this gentle-mannered man. "People imagine that I am constantly conducting

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orgies," he said, a reference to the shock effect of the nudity, scatology and sexual scenes in his stage work, particularly that of the 60's. "I live perfectly quietly here with my wife and children.

"I would like to make orgies. If I were Gary Cooper" — he is about 5 feet tall and looks like an affectionate hedgehog — "that's what I'd be doing. But my only orgies are writing. When I write, I laugh, cry, I get excited."

Mr. Arrabal has lived in Paris ever since he left Spain some 30 years ago. His father, an army officer under the republic, was jailed by Franco, and sent to the prison at Burgos. His mother moved there to be close, though the only communication they had was letters. One day the father escaped, disappeared and was never heard of again. Mr. Arrabal has tried to trace him, and the image of this invisible father, who drew strange and comical rebuses in his prison letters and then vanished, is the goad for the son's lifelong tragicomic literary assault upon anything that resembles a prison bar — manners, morals or whatever.

He refused to return to Spain until the dictatorship was lifted. He was there the other week, as the object of a week-long homage held in Granada.

"I am profoundly Spanish," he said, "but I couldn't live there. The Spaniards think I am not genuinely a Spaniard because I left, even though the

most profoundly Spanish characteristic is to leave. The writers there have been kind to me, but I make them uneasy, coming from Paris after all this time. It is like cats: when a new one comes along there is a little nervous tremor. After all this time, I am rooted here, I have my friends. The Spain I love is here, with me. Spain, after all, is like Atlantis: It's a myth."

Mr. Arrabal has not turned his back

He recalled that in the 60's, Antoine Vitez, one of the leading French directors, had criticized his theater work — known at the time as the Theater of Panic — as pandering to a public titillated by nudity. "And now here is Vitez, doing Faust at the Chaillot, and climbing naked out of a box each evening. Only when we did it we were desperate, and we swept the theater, and put up the handbills and traveled

boulevard theater: light comedies. They are very moralizing. People are sick of going to the theater and being terrified.'

Mr. Arrabal may talk boulevard, but he is still a long way from practicing it, at least judging by his new play, or by the film he has just made of "The Automobile Cemetery" — a version of the life of Christ as a wandering rock star after the world has been devastated by nuclear warfare. The notion is not unfamiliar, but the original was written years before "Jesus Christ Superstar" and "Godspell."

On the other hand, one of his current enterprises is a decided departure. "I am about to be 50," he said, looking astonished. He has just made a children's movie in Canada. It is called "Odyssey of the Pacific" and it is about three children who discover an abandoned steam locomotive and an old hermit who used to be a locomotive engineer. They learn to run it, and drive it off — to Cambodia. Never mind why Cambodia. The intriguing point is that the role of the engineer is played by Mickey Rooney. Andy Hardy meets the Theater of Panic?

Mr. Arrabal is immensely pleased with his star's performance. He recounts the meeting of the two titans, as it were (both short).

"He said to me, 'Mr. Arrabal, I am so glad to meet you at last.' And I think to myself, 'Oh, he knows my work.' Not at all. At last I have met a director who is of human size," he said. ■

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**'Like most of Mr. Arrabal's work, his new play turns its weapon of unhinged absurdity against oppression.'**

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on the avant-garde — his new play could hardly be called anything else — but he senses that it is imitating itself.

"Whenever we run out of money, my wife sends me to lecture at universities in the United States. Now, a dozen years ago I would get there and I would ask about the avant-garde, and they would say, yes, we do avant-garde: we do Giraudoux and Tennessee Williams. Last year, I went there and everyone was throwing themselves around the floor, and every theater faculty had somebody who had worked with Grotowski or been Grotowski's secretary."

by the metro. And Vitez rolls up in a Cadillac each night to take off his clothes. Well, maybe it isn't really a Cadillac, but you see the point.

"I think this is the best moment for the theater. Simply because it is in a desperate situation. It has to go somewhere. As for me — and I find that other writers, Bond, Ionesco, Terayama, are thinking the same thing — we must look again for words, after so much wordless theater. The wordless theater, the theater of Grotowski, was a theater for rich times.

"Now we need a different kind of theater. I've been looking a lot at

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