

THEATER: 'KINGDOMS' AT THE CORT

By FRANK RICH

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EDWARD SHEEHAN'S "Kingdoms," which opened at the Cort last night, has loftier ambitions than many Broadway plays. An account of the confrontation between Napoleon Bonaparte and Pope Pius VII, it wants to be a drama of ideas, of history, of larger-than-life emotions. But ambitions, however worthy, are meaningless if a writer can't deliver on them. The author of "Kingdoms" never comes close.

Mr. Sheehan is a novice playwright, and his inexperience is apparent everywhere in this painstaking, tedious effort. His episodic script is constructed like a dot-to-dot puzzle: it zigzags from predictable point to predictable point without ever providing a telling detail, a bit of shading or any depth. While "Kingdoms" might like to be "A Man for All Seasons," "The Royal Hunt of the Sun" or "Becket," it at best could pass for a parody of such plays. Indeed, as directed with leaden, empty pomp and circumstance by Paul Giovanni, "Kingdoms" sometimes does cross over the line into unintentional farce.

The story concerns Napoleon I's attempt to consolidate his power over Rome by holding Pius prisoner - first in Italy, then in France - during the years 1809-14. In this struggle between two headstrong, powerful men, Mr. Sheehan sees an archetypal battle between state and church, between temporal might and religious conscience. He also believes that, for all their fierce differences, Napoleon and Pius were in some ways blood brothers. This is established in the two men's first meeting in Paris in 1804, during which they immediately take to proclaiming that they have a father-son relationship. The bond is consummated when Napoleon (**Armand Assante**) grabs the Pontiff (Roy Dotrice) and kisses him on the mouth.

All of Mr. Sheehan's points - whether to establish character, plot or theme - are announced, not dramatized. And they're repeated over and over. Napoleon is forever marching forward to say "I am the new Charlemagne" or "I am France" or "I am unique" or "I am the new Prometheus." Pius, meanwhile, never tires of telling us that he is the Emperor's opposite - a simple monk who's unwillingly come to power. "We gaze at the stars and gasp," he tells his adversary. "You jump up and try to grab them."

Once its central issue is established, "Kingdoms" goes nowhere. Every confrontation is the same dialectical logjam until the very end, at which point the two now-chastened heroes reaffirm their mutual affection. The play's climactic payoff - the vindication of the Kingdom of God over the Kingdom of Man - always seems inevitable, and when it arrives, it's far from earthshaking. There is, however, a lot of padding along the way. During his cruel imprisonment, the Pope has a few banal mad scenes. The playwright also drags Josephine (Maria Tucci) on stage at odd moments, so that he can kill time by recounting the dissolution of Napoleon's first marriage.

There are some misbegotten flights of humor as well. In what appears to be an attempt to evoke "Amadeus," Napoleon and Josephine start to roll amorously about the floor of their boudoir - only to be interrupted by the entrance of His Holiness. Worse still, Mr. Sheehan at first tries to make light of the Pope's chronic digestive ailments. "A monk must mortify his flesh, but must he eat French food?" asks Mr. Dotrice in the opening scene, before exclaiming, "Ah, for a plate of pasta!" The author's high-flown speeches are no better; they cry out to be delivered by Charlton Heston. Napoleon's teary final oration, in which he recounts his grueling retreat from Russia, seems a desperate last-ditch effort to transform "Kingdoms" into an antiwar play.

The action unfolds in a black void, designed by David Hays, that is somewhat enlivened by Patricia Zipprodt's costumes and Paul Gallo's lighting. It's impossible for actors to do much with declamatory roles that exist only on the surface, but it must be said that some of the supporting players, including two portentous Cardinals (George Morfogen and Thomas Barbour) and a burlesque quack doctor (Charles White), make a bad situation worse. So does Mr. Dotrice. This actor, a compelling protagonist in Hugh Leonard's "A Life," is so inanimate and chilly in this play's first act that we never care, as we must, whether Pius rots in captivity or not. Wearing unkempt gray locks and ashen makeup for his Fontainebleau martyrdom of Act II, he often looks and acts like an extra in a provincial Christmas pageant.

Miss Tucci, who triumphed in "A Lesson from Aloes" last season, has little to do but deliver a few would-be scathing witticisms about Napoleon's mistresses. As written here, Josephine seems to have dropped in from a Noel Coward play, and the actress gamely fulfills the author's intentions. Mr. Assante, who was so effective as Goldie Hawn's putative fiance in the film "Private Benjamin," is limited by the writing to a few familiar Napoleonic poses - idealism, arrogance, crude childishness - that he shuffles like cards in a deck. It's a noble effort, but it can't save "Kingdoms" from its inexorable slide toward a theatrical Waterloo. Historic Struggle KINGDOMS, by Edward Sheehan; directed by Paul Giovanni; set design by David Hays; costume design by Patricia Zipprodt; lighting design by Paul Gallo; sound design by Chuck London; production stage manager, Tom Aberger. Presented by Elliot Martin. At the Cort Theater, 138 West 48th Street. Domestic Joe Zaloom and Ralph Drischell Cardinal Consalvi Thomas Barbour Cardinal Fesch George Morfogen Papal Chamberlain Donald Linahan Pope Pius VII Roy Dotrice Soldiers John Martinuzzi, Alex Hyde-White, Ralph Drischell, Stephen Stout and Joe Zaloom Tailor Arthur Burns Badet Michael Tolaydo Emperor Napoleon I **Armand Assante** Empress Josephine Maria Tucci Monks Stephen Stout, Arthur Burns and Joe Zaloom Dr. Porta Charles White Maurice Alex Hyde-White Javel Ralph Drischell DuBois Stephen Stout