Rescued from the clutches of the Gothic

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VIOLLET-LE-DUC
Les visions d'un architecte
Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine, Palais Chaillot, Paris, until March 9

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VIOLLET-LE-DUC
Les visions d'un architecte
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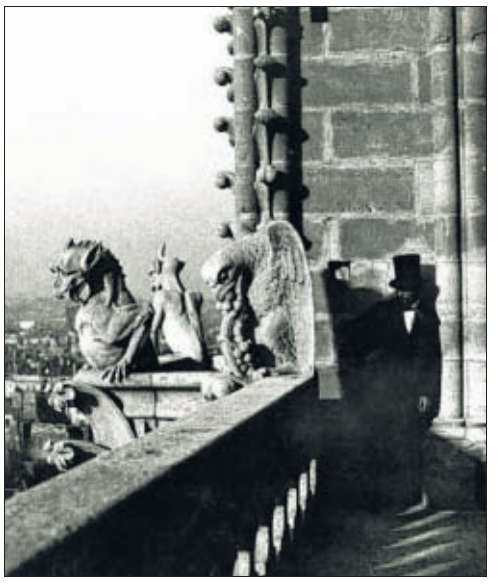
Forthright in outline, buccaneering by temperament, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc juts out from the profile of French architecture like one of his gargoyles from the face of Notre-Dame. Elsewhere in Europe the nineteenth-century revival of Gothic became something of a collective aspiration. But in France the whole movement seems to converge on this single extraordinary enthusiast – romantic designer, encyclopedist, ornamentalist, scientist, educator, controversialist and restorer all rolled into one.

This excellent exhibition at the Cité de l'Architecture, commemorating the bicentenary of Viollet-le-Duc's birth, is the first major show on the architect since 1980. It was then still just possible to present him as a precursor of Modernism, by highlighting his analyses of French Gothic structure in the great *Encyclopédie d'architecture* and connecting them with the agenda for a structure-based architecture which Viollet-le-Duc developed in later lectures. That was always dry textbook stuff, unjust to the diversity and artistry of the man. This present show conveys his breadth, avoiding the illusion of consistency or, as Jean-Michel Leniaud, the leading Viollet-le-Duc scholar, has called it, "les délires du système", the hankering after systematization which so easily bewitches French cultural life and often beguiled Viollet-le-Duc himself.

The upshot is to rescue him from the clutches of the Gothic Revival, appropriating him to a far wider range of human curiosity and endeavour than architecture. That breadth is apparent from the start of the show, in a series of panoramic landscapes. A nephew of the artist Étienne-Jean Delécluze, Viollet-le-Duc was no mean painter and no slouch as a mountaineer and geographer either. The exhibition begins with some breathtaking studies of the Alps, Ruskinian in their blend of passion with precision (yet more outward-looking than Ruskin's mountain studies tend to be), colourful and analytic at the same time. There are human panoramas too; from a watercolour of a ladies' ball at the Tuileries in 1835 to a bird's-eye recreation of the ancient theatre at Taormina in Sicily, thronged with spectators – among the fruits of the young architect's grand tour.

Viollet-le-Duc was the kind of individualist who relished collaboration so long as he was in charge. Born to Parisian bourgeois privilege, he decided early on to follow his grandfather Jean-Baptiste Delécluze into architecture, but went his own way about it. He declined to go to the École des Beaux-Arts and remained a lifelong thorn in the flesh of the French academic establishment. At the height of his influence and power under Napoleon III, he tried to reform the whole Beaux-Arts system of teaching, only to suffer a bruising rejection by students and staff.

Over and above his thrust and talents, his rise to eminence relied on his attunement to the unique blend of Romanticism and Saint-Simonian positivism that animated the intellectual life of Orleanist Paris. Victor Hugo laid down



Notre-Dame Cathedral, *c*.1853

the poetics of French medieval revivalism in the 1830s, as Walter Scott did in Britain. But the practical impetus to Viollet-le-Duc's career came from his intimacy with Prosper Mérimée, the novelist who was also France's first inspector of ancient monuments and a crafty cultural politician. Through Mérimée, he bagged the job of junior architect on the first of the great scholarly French church restorations, at the Sainte Chapelle. The ever-symbolic Notre-Dame followed, then a host of other major churches and cathedrals, all refashioned to a stringent vision of neo-medieval glory.

As it was the state that financed and directed these restoration campaigns, Viollet-le-Duc's agnosticism and liberalism hardly mattered. He and Mérimée saw them not as boosters of faith but as patriotic and artistic projects, even down to their embellishment with the gold-encrusted chalices and reliquaries that stud the exhibition. That tallied, too, with the subsequent programmes of Napoleon III, for whose regime Viollet-le-Duc became a kind of architectural stage manager. But he was wily enough to survive the Second Empire, emerging in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian defeat as an anti-clericalist and republican. Successful architects are seldom scrupulous about whom they work for.

This is essentially a Parisian show. Notre Dame and the Sainte Chapelle appear strongly, but there is very little about Viollet-le-Duc's important early work at Vézelay, or about his imaginative recircumvallation of Carcassonne, which was influential on the English royal restorations of the Tower of London and Windsor Castle. Nor is there much on that mighty prototype of fantasy royal castles, Pierrefonds, left incomplete after Napoleon III fell. Instead, aspects of his intellectual indefatigability are explored, ranging from two whole encyclopedias on medieval art to charming histories of houses and castles and books for children. His work as an educator also features, including a forgotten comparative museum of sculpture, lost when the modernists cleared the casts out of the art schools.

Here, then, is an exhibition about something of a universal man. What about Viollet-le-Duc's quality as a designer? If truth be told, his few original buildings are a disappointment. Like many architects, he was at his imaginative best when he had something to start from. A superb ornamentalist, he could be coarse, as some of the items on display reveal. In Britain he has always had the reputation as an indelicate restorer, keener to recreate a unified work of art than to hallow the authentic, the accidentally beautiful or the picturesque. But without the verve and authority of his restorations, our idea of French Gothic would be utterly different.

Demon-lover

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

Zinnie Harris

HOW TO HOLD YOUR BREATH
Royal Court Theatre, until March 21

Civilizations in crisis preoccupy the dramatist Zinnie Harris. Her trilogy of plays – *Solstice* (2005), *Midwinter* (2004) and *Fall* (2008) – traces the irreversible impact of a recent war on people's lives, while the woman and child in *The Wheel* (2011) desperately negotiate survival through conflict-ridden landscapes. Harris's bold new play, *How To Hold Your Breath*, also looks at a modern dystopian Europe. In the opening scene, two adults in their late twenties are affectionately intertwined under bed-sheets the morning after a one-night stand. Dana (Maxine Peake) is an academic researcher in customer relations and lives in a stylish Berlin flat – a faded, peeling photograph from an interior design magazine provides the first of many clever billboard backdrops that suggest the fragility of a consumer-led society. Jarron (Michael Shaeffer) works for "the UN". Mistaking her for a prostitute (he claims she propositioned him wearing a suggestive dress), Jarron wants to pay her forty-five euros to complete the transaction. Dana indignantly refuses; they argue; we find out that Jarron has only ever paid for sex. So far, so well-worn. But then Harris's text sharply turns away from what is expected.

Jarron is a demon, a devil, a thunderclap, the unloved, a god – in his own words, "a really fucking powerful person". "I thought you would notice that my semen is black", he says to Dana. And the scar on his chest – "that's where they ripped out my soul". Once dressed, his slick suit, shirt and shoes are black, too. We are never certain who he really is, however – if he exists at all. (A look at the published script is far from revealing: as well as "a man", the stage directions give him various dark nomenclatures.) In any case, angered that he has not got his way, Jarron leaves, asserting that Dana will beg him for the money in the end. She shrugs off his omen ("I'm not scared of you . . . what power have you got? We used a condom"), though a red barbed-wire-shaped mark has appeared on her chest, a physical "IOU".

This enforced Faustian pact leads into a surreal apocalyptic parable, as Dana is drawn on an epic journey to Alexandria, accompanied by her pregnant sister Jasmine (Christine Bottomley), for a job interview. It is no coincidence that Europe's economy soon collapses, its civilization crumbles and, with unabashed topicality, masses of Europeans now brave disastrous and illegal boat trips to Africa across closed borders. Even the tweed-clad librarian, who eerily pops up whenever Dana needs guidance, eschews giving her Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Proust or Goethe in favour of "How to" self-help books (*How To Live with No Money*, *How To Make Sure You Don't Get Strangled* etc): symbolic of the decline of literary culture and, we soon realize, a warning to Dana about what "the demon" will engineer next.

Maxine Peake as Dana and Michael Shaeffer as Jarron in *How To Hold Your Breath*

The play is largely unsuccessful in tackling all these "generational" issues at once, and we're left confused about what the moral really is. Yet the dialogue – well-judged and amusing – sustains a thrilling energy, helped along by the first-rate acting and by the director Vicky Featherstone's experimental staging. After having a miscarriage, Jasmine gives a dizzy soliloquy enhanced by chiaroscuro spotlights, its wrenching climax marked with an amplified discordant string note. Dana is there, in the barely lit background, standing beside a gaping (hell)-hole in the now vertically sloped stage floor, fraught with the knowledge that she is the reason her sister suffers. The devil, whatever his guise, always wins in the end.