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Rain fell in sheets on to the roof and in drops on to the audience during the Largo; this was perhaps the most satisfyingly structured movement in itself, but the work as a whole needed a greater stamp of authority than that given by Blomstedt.

Erica Jeal

Edinburgh: theatre

An Alphabet

Royal Lyceum Theatre,
Edinburgh

★★★★☆

John Cage's 1982 radio play summarises itself in a line from its narrator: "To illustrate modernism with

something like its own excitement." This is precisely what this stage adaptation does, bringing to life the audacious freedoms of modernism, its twists of time and space, the possibilities of art "freed from the baby talk of all ordinary languages".

The play gathers together James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp and Erik Satie (played by the choreographer Merce Cunningham in his first acting role) in an imaginary historical moment, and also features cameo appearances by luminaries such as Robert Rauschenberg, Buckminster Fuller and Mao Zedong. Their words — quoted from theories, lectures,

manifestos, Finnegans Wake — collide and run over each other, and are overlaid with scraps of sound fluttering and swooping around the auditorium.

The characters hardly interact: they remain seated on steps resembling a lecture theatre while the narrator, the only "fictional" character, moves between them, listening and describing other moments we don't see — Joseph Beuys trying to explain Finnegans Wake to pheasants, for instance. At one point Duchamp, Joyce and Satie all speak together from their seats arranged diagonally across the stage, each lit by a spotlight. It's like

something from a special high-modernism edition of *Celebrity Squares*.

Cage's fantastical alphabet of artists who have changed the way we think and see is stylish, assured and beautifully simple, for all the lofty ideas it contains. The play's limitations are those of all ground-breaking modernism — without narrative, conventional characters, any sense of a conclusion, it is hard to feel any emotional engagement. What you get instead is a production rich in boredom, magic, laughter, nonsense and revolution.

Elisabeth Mahoney

Ends tonight. Box office: 0131-473 2000.



TREADING THE BOARDS: guest actor Lord Provost Eric Milligan, narrator John Kelly and dance legend Merce Cunningham as Erik Satie during a scene from the John Cage work. Picture: Gordon Terris