

"Neighbours"
**Scope on the
horse-shoe
stage**

By ERIC SHORTER

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Colour question

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Allegorical hotel

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Two Plays Destined for Berlin

Questors Theatre: *No Quarter* and *Neighbours*

It can sometimes happen that an insipid production, or an efficient production which by-passes the author's intention and substitutes that of the director, can mask the true stature of a writer to such an extent that a later work appears immature and an earlier one more satisfactory. Mr. Barry Bermange's wry nuclear allegory, *The Cloud*, was less than impressive last year in Hampstead: the superlative production of his earlier one-act play, *No Quarter*, by Mr. Alan Clarke in Ealing on Saturday reveals him as a playwright of real importance, working in this instance in the attractive short-hand idiom of the so-called comedy of menace.

No Quarter was in fact written before much of Mr. Harold Pinter's best known work, and can thus be acquitted of plagiarism: it simply furnishes another proof that dissimilar artists are apt to speak the same language at the same time. But we are unmistakably in the Pinter country, on the seventh floor of a crumbling hotel whose lift is out of order, whose hot water system has ceased to function, and whose lights are all fused. Two anonymous travellers grope their way round the "charming square room" whose outlines they can imperfectly reconstruct by touch but which we, the audience, see as a naked parallelogram furnished with a black bed and wing tables in the conformation of a requiem bier. The wake-like atmosphere is heightened by the one candle at the bedhead, which—after a deal of fumbling and the reckless expenditure of their remaining matches—the travellers light, when a third, more active, guest joins them. The eldest among them, a selfish neurotic clutching a bundle of empty suitcases to his breast, sleeps on the bed: the other two dispose themselves diagonally at the foot, in a crucifixion parody that suddenly and sharply suggests an allegory of a mindless God whose purposeful children fear to go in the dark.

VISUAL METAPHYSICS

Morning brings no change: the room is windowless. But the structural collapse of the hotel and the disclaimer by the proprietor of all responsibility for any of the accumulation of disasters leave the principals as irresolute as before in their certainty that nothing is certain in an invisible and terrible universe. Mr. Paul Imbusch and Mr. Kenneth Ratcliffe carry off the principal parts in this extremely difficult mime with astonishing conviction: tactful direction and the use of white, impersonal masks make it a piece of visual metaphysics.

Mr. James Saunders's *Neighbours*, which completes the bill, is unusually

explicit in so questioning a writer. The problem comes straight out of a women's magazine: how should a nicely brought up, "liberal" white girl acquit her human responsibilities to the cultured West Indian in the bedsitter downstairs? Predictably he is angry, not so much at his colour as at the way in which the implications of colour are constantly thrust upon him: a second-class citizen *malgré lui*, he likes Scarlatti, she Brahms: he can beat her trick for trick at the culture game, in conversation, and indeed everywhere but in her own bed, to which she summons him when the chips are down and the poker faces discarded. One is led to expect a superior novelette: but such is the power and economy of Mr. Saunders's writing, and so faithful his dialogue, that you end by wondering if you have not been shown a miniature masterpiece in sentimentality that is wholly unsentimental.

This double bill, which is to run at the Questors until October 17, has been booked for transfer to a west Berlin theatre in the near future.

I COULD make neither head nor tail of the companion piece, "No Quarter," that made up the programme. Already heard on radio, this one-act by Barry Bermange was so full of symbolism that a number of meanings could be drawn from it.

The setting this time was an hotel. Ned Gethings played the proprietor who apologised to two of his late-night guests, Paul Imbusch and Kenneth Ratcliffe, for the hotel being without heating or lighting and for the lift being out of order, making it necessary for the men to climb a thousand stairs to reach their room.

The elder of the two men complains of the cold, the darkness and the climb, but refuses the younger man's offer to carry his bags. An amiable stranger, played by Harry Ives, is put into the same room which in the end crashes into limbo, leaving the men on the edge of the chasm, twixt heaven and earth as it were.

The proprietor talks of having to contact a man at Hornsey to repair the lift, recalling Harold Pinter's tramp of "The Caretaker" who wanted to get to Sidcup. There is also mention at the end of Bethlehem, as if there were some allegory to the inn where Christ was born.

Both plays were directed by Alan Clarke with settings designed by Mary Anderson.

NO QUARTER, by Barry Bermange. 4m. NEIGHBOURS, by James Saunders. 1m., 1f. Questors Th., London, W.5.

It is ironic that both plays in this double bill take place within the confines of a room, yet are presented on a large open stage. Both work surprisingly well, but one cannot help feeling the atmosphere would have been better conveyed within the three walls of the room, behind the proscenium arch, with at least a functional door, so important a factor in each.

No Quarter is a darkly symbolic excursion into one of those crumbling "hotels" with interminable stairs, corridors and rooms full of no one, with a sinisterly ingratiating proprietor, whose woes (and presumably those of the world) are due to "external forces". Three men are compelled to share the room for the night, until the final collapse of the West wing, and the play seems primarily concerned with their different reactions to the terrors of darkness and the

unknown. But this is one of those symbol-loaded, portentous pieces, in which commonplace and repetitive dialogue can be made to signify nothing or anything, according to personal fancy and interpretation.

James Saunders is far too subtle to make a black-and-white issue of *Neighbours*; he approaches the subject of colour prejudice from the unusual and unexpected angle of the liberal-minded white woman, who sincerely believes she makes no discrimination on account of skin pigmentation. An argumentative, provocative, coloured sub-tenant of the flat above shatters her complacent illusions in an intriguing bout of verbal fencing and mental flagellation, the only weakness of which is length. If suitably pruned this could become quite a gem amongst duologues.

Both plays are excellently acted, and cleverly directed by Alan Clarke for this very workable arena stage—though one suspects the radio is perhaps their most suitable medium.

"NEIGHBOURS" (finishing at the Questors Theatre tonight) is James Saunders's best play I have seen. It has the human concern of "Double, Double": but expressed with far richer complexity. Yet this complexity never lapses into pedantic complacency or obscurity, as often in "Next Time I'll Sing To You" and "A Scent of Flowers."

True, the plot is schematic and catchpenny. Negro with colour-chip on shoulder makes pass at self-consciously liberal white girl. Yet the result is neither tract nor sentimental problem-piece. Still less is it a repellently commercialized shocker.

That it does sometimes shock and repel is, however, high praise. Because it possesses the shock and repellency of life. And it possesses the poignancy, cynicism, intellect, frailty, passion, ambiguity and fundamental mystery of life also.

It is never just about a black man and a white woman. It is about any two people in conflict.

Further, it contains the secret of every worthwhile drama, tragedy or comedy (though not melodrama or farce): it divides our sympathy between its characters. The boy makes a pass: the girl rejects it, and we accept her statement that the rejection has nothing to do

with racial prejudice. But even were this statement false, the boy's subsequent bitter pestering of her would remain wrong.

Decent, likeable

Yet when, under his probing, she does indeed reveal a kind of race-prejudice (in her indirectly patronizing habit of "making allowances" for Negro misbehaviour), and is additionally revealed to have lied to the boy to get rid of him, her conduct is equally wrong.

But despite their faults, they are essentially decent and likeable, and so we are painfully moved by the way that they tear at each other.

When the boy deliberately, savagely damages one of the girl's cherished L.P.s, I could hardly bear to look: I wanted to cry out, to weep for them both.

But then, when the girl suddenly, almost triumphantly, agrees to yield to him, does she do so through awakened desire: liberal patronage: the wish to gain subtle revenge by playing the martyr: or all these? Mr. Saunders doesn't blemish his achievement by ending with a facile explanation.

Immaculate

"Neighbours" is immaculately acted, under Alan Clarke's direction, by Wylie Longmore (arguably the company's most promising young talent), and Ffrangcon Whelan, who (perfectly cast, dressed and hair-styled) hasn't been seen to such advantage since "The Living Room."

As her feminine vulnerability meets Mr. Longmore's masculine equivalent, we gradually cease to be audience members, and become uncomfortably riveted caves-droppers. This is how the serious theatre should be.

DOUGLAS McVAY

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JAMES SAUNDERS, the Ealing playwright who, in "A Scent of Flowers" now in the West End, has so beautifully evoked a girl's life, tackles the colour problem from a new angle in "Neighbours," an hour-long duologue which the Questors tried out last week on an open stage.

Set in a bed-sitter, the play introduces a coloured boy and a sincerely liberal-minded white girl. In seemingly inconsequential conversation the boy provokes the girl into revealing her complacency towards coloured people. The treatment of the subject has the same delicacy and skill that has distinguished "A Scent of Flowers" and the author's other work.

Often the dialogue is so inconsequential as to seem meaningless, yet it is extraordinarily revealing of character. There is the difficulty each of the two characters has of communicating with the other and the consequent misunderstandings that arise.

The play opens with the boy calling on the girl ostensibly to seek her advice. But conversation drifts from one subject to another, from her rocking chair to an old woman who is always boiling bones for her dog, from Scarlatti records to coffee and biscuits with the boy always needling the girl with his seemingly aimless questions.

The piece was most convincingly played by Ffrangcon Whelan and Wylie Longmore.