

## Amateur Stage

# THE QUESTORS IN COSTUME DRAMA

## "CAPTAIN BANNER"

"Captain Banner" (George R. Preedy) by The Questors, at The Questors' Theatre, Friday and Saturday evenings.

The Questors are fashionable. Musing over their latest production, one cannot help noticing a similarity between these excellent amateurs and the world of the cinema.

The cinema has given us a spate of costume dramas; The Questors have produced one. The cinema is in the throes of transforming Shakespeare to celluloid and the sound track; The Questors are to appear in Shakespeare. Therefore, The Questors only need a G-man play, and they will be in the forefront of fashion.

Having duly noticed this, your deputy critic is bound to ask a question. The Questors, priding themselves on the fact that they are perched on a giddy pinnacle overlooking other local amateur dramatic societies, have produced some uncommon plays of recent years, and therefore in following the trail of the cinema, in "Captain Banner," were they disappointing?

Your deputy critic, in his callow ignorance, can only say that "Captain Banner" was a well acted drama of incidents in a lonely prison fortress in eighteenth century Denmark. It combined some of the problems of a Macbeth with the love story of a Queen Christina of Sweden. The audience greatly appreciated the play.

### THE CRITIC

Your deputy critic slyly points out that he has never been to an amateur production that was not well received; therefore an audience's praise goes for nothing. There remains the critic. His opinion is asked for, but is it wanted? Mr. Emmet, I know, will say yes, and yet your deputy critic refuses at the high hedge of a question, whether the play was disappointing or not.

In his heart he knows that he spent such a thoroughly enjoyable evening that whatever scruples of criticism he ever possessed went to sleep, and it was not until afterwards that he realized that he was expected to write a criticism and not a panegyric. Therefore he went out of his way to be childish and to write of the films and The Questors. As though The Questors had ever thought of following film fashions! Only a deputy critic would dare to think so, and he wrote as he did to make his notice fill more space and therefore be the more imposing. If he had his way your deputy critic would have written his notice of "Captain Banner" thus:

A well produced costume play, in which everyone acted d—— well.

That would be sufficient, but would not satisfy either editor or The Questors. So a longer notice has to be written to please both.

Christopher Spurrier was Captain Jarl Banner, the fortress governor, a man in conflict with himself and therefore needlessly cruel, who, like Macbeth, was not without ambition "but without the illness should attend it." Unlike Macbeth, when he had the sceptre of power within his grasp, he loosed it and let it fall. Mr. Spurrier was bold and self-willed, and yet all through the play one never had any doubts that so well-borne a man, so soft in his voice, would not do what he said he would do. It was a nice piece of acting, that never rose to any appreciable height.

### BEAUTIFUL ACTING

Gwendolen Thomas had the part to tear a cat in, that of the Queen, the prisoner of Wisberg. Gwendolen Thomas had moments of real, flashing fire, with regal mien and sparkling eyes. One had doubts as to her ultimate decision, but the power that was her's she did not let go. There were moments, too, of tenderness and high hopes, borne out by beautiful acting, that she would be noble and give up all for love. But was her feeling for Banner love? Gwendolen Thomas showed that it could not have been. The acting had no rough corners; it was smooth, of a high plane, and, at times, touching.

Winifred Giles had the most appealing part, that of Katrine, and her acting was appealing also. She did not stress her lines, but spoke them as woodenly and yet as pathetically, as one would expect of such a peasant girl. One was glad that she won the struggle in which she took part for the possession of Banner.

Cyril Thomas was the hypocrite Pastor Oder, but in the opinion of your deputy critic he out-Heeped Heep. His hypocrisy was a caricature; his was the only part that raised the semblance of a laugh. It really was not a satisfying part, but Mr. Thomas did not do as well as it allowed. At times he was difficult to understand, and his constant washing of hands in invisible water was a sad mistake; it was overdone.

Evelyn Skelton played Baroness Bernstorff with the dignity of a "noble" conspirator. Frederick Greenfield would have been a more imposing Baron Mölde, if he had not (on the Saturday at least) had to be prompted several times. Such lapses spoil even flawless acting. Paul Wilmot had the small part of Sergeant Ericsson.

Mr. Alec Payne was the producer. He had good acting material, good settings and good costumes; they went a good way towards a successful production.

Audrey Perkins deserves a word of praise, for she designed the settings and costumes.



## THE AMATEUR THEAT

# QUESTORS IN REAL DRAMA

## Two Performances of Preedy Play

### "CAPTAIN BANNER"

If versatility be the life-blood of a successful amateur dramatic society, then the Questors have furnished ample evidence of their abounding vitality already this season, for in the last few weeks they have provided their patrons with a delightful excursion into the realms of fantasy and a very amusing evening of burlesque. But, lest it should be forgotten that the theatre has its serious side—equally well worthy of the attention of actors and audiences alike—they followed their previous successes with an example of unrelieved drama on Friday and Saturday, when they produced George Preedy's play "Captain Banner."

It would, perhaps, be too much to expect that amateur actors should be equally at home whatever the part they are called upon to fill, or that the producer's technique should never falter whatever the effect he is called upon to produce. It is only by enterprise and experiment that experience can be gained, and without experience no progress is possible. Viewed from this angle the performance on Friday was deserving of every praise—but regarded from the point of view of the audience it must be conceded that it did not quite attain the high levels of previous productions. The play was partly to blame for this, for there are several sterile patches in which little action is possible and the dialogue itself is not so well written as to make up for this defect. On the other hand there are moments of real beauty and others latent with full-blooded drama, most of which the cast were quick to perceive and to turn to great advantage.

### PRODUCER'S SLIPS.

The producer, Mr. Alec Payne, was also guilty of one or two slight slips, which, while they were not in themselves sufficient to mar the production, were thrown into high relief by the extreme efficiency with which he controlled everything else. There were one or two occasions when noises off-stage were indicated—faint noises it is true, but loud enough to cause a break in the action on the stage and they should, therefore, have been heard by the audience. Either they were missed or they were so tentatively made that they were inaudible from the second row of the auditorium. Similarly, where the climax of the final scene depended upon a background of a menacing chorus from an angry group of men outside a barricaded door, all we were given was a rather sheepish and obviously unrehearsed duet. Finally, the producer had an irritating trick of positioning his actors with their backs to the audience. This is sometimes done with great effect on the professional stage, but it requires an actor of outstanding ability to convey his reactions with his back, and the cast on Friday did not include such an actor. Otherwise Mr. Payne's production was admirable. The tempo of the piece was skillfully controlled, and his settings were splendid. He showed a keen appreciation in his control of the lighting, of the sinister value of dark corners and dark curtains and the detail on the stage was all that could be desired.

### THE CENTRAL FIGURE.

Mr. Christopher Spurrier's portrait of Captain Banner, the central figure, was in general a fine piece of work. It is a long and testing part, calling for a wide emotional range, and it is made no easier by the author's delay in revealing the true nature of the character until the final act. The result was that for the first two acts we missed much of the expected severity and ferocity of this prison governor, who was the terror of prisoners and staff alike. Similarly there were few signs of the approaching insanity that the context had led us to expect, and what therefore seemed at first an excessive restraint on the actor's part, was seen ultimately to be a conscientious study in character building. Mr. Spurrier has one or two mannerisms of which he seems over fond and his eagerness to quicken the tempo led him to cut in on the other actors' lines at times, but these were minor blemishes in an otherwise wholehearted characterisation.

Gwendolen Thomas's study of the unfortunate Queen, sent to the prison of Wisberg to pay the penalty for her intriguing with death, was beautifully executed and strangely moving. She blended the hauteur of a born queen with the terror of a young girl for whom death was always lurking round the corner, managing the quick transitions from one to the other with great skill and adding, in the final love-scene a simple charm of manner that completely captured the sympathy of the audience.

Winifred Giles's portrait of Katrine had all the simple dignity and unimaginative sincerity of the peasant class and her restrained acting throughout contrasted well with the more emotional atmosphere created by the other characters. Evelyn Skelton made the Baroness a fittingly unpleasant figure, mingling solicitude and obsequiousness with a suggestion of cunning and evil, and maintaining throughout a notable elocutional control. Fred Greenfield's Baron Molde, was rather colourless and stiff. He handled the diplomatic exchanges with suavity and dexterity but there was little of the fawning which so enraged Banner. A little more light and shade would have made the scene between these two more dramatically effective.

### ACTING HONOURS.

It fell to Cyril Thomas to carry off the acting honours with a most convincing study of Pastor Oder. Here was a man in whom thwarted ambition and greed had so reacted upon a brilliant brain as to produce a condition of virtual insanity. Every action and every word spoken fitted closely with this conception of the part and so powerful was the effect produced that his evil influence seemed to encompass the stage after he had left it—and one of his exits was so exquisitely contrived as to send a shudder of relief through the entire audience.

Clifford Foreman filled the small part of Sargeant Ericsson with complete competence.

The dresses, designed by Audrey Perkins, were, with the exception of the Queen's in Acts I and II, generally pleasing.

The production may be set down as enterprise well rewarded, and was evidently to the taste of a large audience who greeted the final curtain with prolonged applause. P.B.W.



# Captain Banner



Period costumes in the historical play by the Questors helped to create a tense atmosphere.