

The Amateur Theatre

QUESTORS DO A GREEK PLAY

Political Comedy of
414 B.C.

FUN STILL MODERN

Aristophanes' comedy, "The Birds," which was written in Athens in 414 B.C., was presented by the Questors at their theatre in Mattock-lane, Ealing, on Friday and Saturday in last week. It was the first production of a programme to occupy the society's next two seasons which is designed to give a bird's eye view of the history of the drama from the earliest times until the present day.

The presentation of a Greek play in a proscenium theatre is always a ticklish job. There is the difficulty of deciding whether to adopt the play to the proscenium stage, to try to create the atmosphere of an arena performance on the stage, or to compromise by playing partly in the auditorium. In the Questors' production a fore-stage at a lower level than the main stage was used, establishing an intimacy between the chorus and the audience, but yet keeping cast and chorus on the stage.

TOPICAL DIALOGUE.

In this play Aristophanes satirises political and social life, and to most of those who saw it, the biggest surprise was the topicality of the dialogue. While some of the allusions took time to strike home, and some were lost, there were many that had a ready appeal. It was the more delicate points of satire that were appreciated by the Friday night audience, while the Saturday crowd preferred the broader comedy!

Unfortunately, the chorus, which has such an important part in Greek plays, was in some respects weak. The sung parts needed at least two weeks' more rehearsal; as it was, the play would have been better without any singing. Spoken choruses can be perfectly effective—"Murder in the Cathedral" provides an instance—and, what is more, can be intelligible. The satirical comments in "The Birds" were lost whenever the chorus sang, whereas, when the words were spoken, there was rarely any difficulty in following. The device of ringing the changes on groups of twos and three to speak the lines, which was used successfully once or twice, should have been more employed.

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W. H. G.
13-XI-36.

UNUSUAL TRANSLATION.

W. H. Frere's translation was used instead of the more usual one by Rogers. Frere's is a translation that Rogers praised, but Rogers' translation would have helped if all the choruses had been spoken. He wrote in the time of Gilbert and Sullivan, and frequently caught their lilt, which, for chorus work, is extremely effective.

Apart from the singing, the chorus deserved praise. Its action, particularly the birdlike flutterings, was good, and, when it had nothing to do, it stood still and did not intrude upon the action. On occasions it was not lively enough, perhaps, because the small stage precluded any really frenzied junketings.

ARMY OF CHARACTERS.

There are 26 characters in the cast besides the chorus, and I shall not deal with everyone. While all were not flawless, there was none that was not good. It was upon Mr. T. S. Saunders, as Peisthetairus, that the brunt of the play fell; by far the greater number of lines are his. With his companion, Euelpides (Mr. C. Foreman), he quickly established the spirit of the play, and then carried on with a nice air of whimsical gravity and a secret wicked twinkle in his eye.

A memorable array of characters, parasites all—most of whom have their counterparts today—appear in the scene of the interrupted sacrifice, a very comic affair, which throws much light on how the Greeks regarded their gods. These people include a poet, a greasy, importuning fellow, gorgeously played by Mr. Christopher Spurrier; a battenng soothsayer, played by Mr. Laurence Rivers; an equally bogus astronomer, excellently done by Mr. Francis Williams, with a touch of Bottom about him; a hawker, prototype of today's suburban canvasser, glibly acted by Mr. P. Eardley-Wilmot; and a suave and parasitical commissioner, played by Mr. Roy Burbank.

I liked immensely Mr. Christopher Spurrier, as Prometheus, come to tell tales to Peisthetaurus about his fellow gods, and also Mr. John Heron, as a vast uncouth Hercules.

SOME CHARMING BIRDS.

Mr. Richard Ellis, as one of the slave birds, although he had but a small part, impressed me with the way he speaks poetry, and I liked also Mr. Lionel Locke's supercilious little portrait as the sycophant, and that quaint creature, the hoopoe, the man bird, played by Mr. Dudley Clark. Nor must I forget the charming nightingale, conceived by Miss Marjorie Lees (who also appeared as the Queen of Olympus), and the imperious goddess Iris, played by Miss Audrey Perkins.

Then much good work was done by Mr. L. Rivers, as Neptune; Mr. P. Allen, as a poet and musician; Mr. C. Foreman, as the Triballian envoy; Mr. L. Beck, as a watchman; Mr. R. Burbank, as herald of the birds; Miss M. Bywater, as a crow; Mr. L. Locke, as the priest of the birds; and Mr. J. Baily, as another slave bird. The leaders of the chorus were Miss Betty Mercy and Miss Lillie Elliott.

Mr. Alfred Emmett, who produced the play, also designed the setting. This was modern and simple, and the dresses were conventional Greek costumes, but, for some reason, the two did not clash. The music, specially composed by Mr. E. N. H. Evenden, was well-suited to the words, but would have been more suitable for the chorus if played on the harp instead of a flute.

The performance was well worth seeing.

R.E.S.W.

THE QUESTORS PRESENT "THE BIRDS"

AN ADMIRABLE PRODUCTION

The Questors: Aristophanes, "The Birds"; Questors' Theatre, Ealing; Saturday, November 7, 1936.

IT is to classical Greek drama that we are indebted for our word comedy. Their highly skilful plays arose out of processions held in honour of Dionysus or Pan, in which those taking part, the Komoi, were allowed by privileged custom to mock and insult the spectators. These clowns developed into the actors and chorus who took part in a Komoidia or comedy.

Aristophanes is the best of these Greek comic writers whose works have been preserved for our delectation, and he is said to have written fifty-six plays, of which we know but eleven. *The Birds* is adjudged to be his best comedy. It was written at a time when Athens was in a war-fever, and it was intended as a sedative, to take the minds of the populace away from the subjects nearest their minds. It was produced at the Dionysic Festivals at Athens in 414 B.C., and it took second prize. First prize went to a play called the *Comastæ* or *Drunken Rioters*. It is strange that one of the world's greatest plays was only judged to be a second rate affair by the judges of the day. There are hopes for many dramatists of to-day.

HEARTINESS

The Questors' production was admirably conceived, and executed, and it was acted with a heartiness that must have led many people into the idea that *The Birds* is a farce. It is a satire, and was written to tickle the ribs of the clamorous populace. Then, as now, mankind dearly loves to see a fool and a sycophant whipped soundly off the stage. The Athenians of the 4th century B.C., could not have laughed more appreciatively than the Ealing-ians of the twentieth century, A.D.

It is a nice thought for other local societies to take to heart—those who prefer comedies to please their attendants and who shudder at classical "stuff"—that there is no greater comedy than in the world's great comedies. *The Birds* is a good illustration of this. People are so inclined to think that only their own generation appreciates comedy.

To return to The Questors. Criticism pales before the glamour of this production. I am supposed to write a stony-hearted criticism, but if my heart prevails over my head, do not be surprised. I had always known The Questors to be good, but this time they were very good—I might even say (let it be whispered) excellent, but that is a word that all honest critics abhor in their hearts. This was the first step in their intentions to give a "bird's-eye view" of the history of drama during the next two seasons.

DOUBTS DISAPPEAR

I had carefully read through my edition of *The Birds*—W. H. Frere's translation that The Questors chose, before I went to see the production, and I kept thinking "I hope they do not leave in all the funny bits and leave out all that lyrical poetry, especially that parabasis beginning:

*"Ye children of man! whose life is a span,
Protracted with sorrow from day to day,
Naked and featherless, feeble and querulous,
Sickly, calamitous, creatures of clay!"*

"I hope," ran on my doubts, "that they do not play it entirely as a farce. That is the danger."

Away have gone my doubts. The Questors played *The Birds* in just that necessary style as we are told on high authority, that it should be played—the satire predominating, and the farce being leavened by the poetic beauty.

Mr. Alfred Emmet produced thus—carefully, soundly, and yet with a dash that gave rise to gusts of mirth. I humbly suggest that should Mr. Emmet ever broadcast again he should tell the

world at large how amateurs can produce classical comedy. It is to his work that all praise is due. At the fall of the curtain he referred to the Society's "difficulties." Whatever these were they had been well surmounted.

Not that the cast was lacking. There was team work here, each playing up to and helping the other. Each, I am sure, lived o'er again that happy hour when they surely must have played *The Birds* in a sun-drenched amphitheatre, twenty-four hundred years ago. Rot, you say? Then blame my mood of the moment.

Mr. T. S. Saunders receives a wreath of laurels for his part of Peisthetairus. Not only is this a part of many, many lines but it needs sustained characterization to carry it off with a swing. Mr. Saunders was memory perfect, his acting was sound, and his diction was a joy to hear—after the many gabbles it is my lot to be witness unto.

DOUBLE ROLES

Mr. Clifford Foreman had a double role, and one is in doubts whether his Euelpides or his Triballian envoy was the better. Both were admirably acted comic roles—well spoken, too. I should like to ask Mr. Foreman if he did really chew at his leek, or whether it was pretence? Once or twice I thought he was carried away with the exuberance of his own volition, and did bite that scented vegetable.

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Middlesex Council

13. XI. 36

As King Hoopoe, Mr. Dudley Clark turned in a lively portrait, as lively as his beak and his wings would allow him. He also played the part of a young man.

Mr. Christopher Spurrier doubled two more amusing roles, the poet and Prometheus, with a wealth of detail and make-up.

Thus I could go through the lengthy cast, ladling out praise to all, but there is a limit to space and readers' patience. Mr. Philip Allen caused as many laughs as anyone with his Kinesias—a rare satire on poets and musicians this, and Mr. John Heron as Hercules, and Mr. Francis Williams as an astronomer made their parts stand out above the general excellence (that word at last!).

What of the chorus, that detail of classical plays that seems so unnecessary to our modern minds? The Ten Questors' Young Ladies sang, spoke, danced, and chattered as well as all nice young ladies should do, and with a comely grace. They had been well drilled, and their leaders, Betty Mercv and Lillie Elliot, spoke the lyrical poetry delightfully.

OTHERS IN CAST

Others taking part (alas! that there is no space to hail each one individually) were: Marjorie Bywater, Audrey Perkins, Marjorie Lees, Richard Ellis, Roy Burbank, Lionel Locke, John Bailly, Laurie Rivers, Paul Eardley-Wilmot, and Lister Beck, and the chorus was: Judy Bunbury, Margaret Catesby, Peggy Copper, Muriel Curtis, Judy Lee, Iris Martin, Barbara Sharp, and Rosalie van der Gucht.

Mr. E. N. H. Evenden's special music was catchy and tuneful. All hail, too, to Audrey Perkins for designing the costumes, to Mildred Emmet and Winifred Giles, the wardrobe mistresses, and to Audrey Perkins and Christopher Spurrier for designing the masks and beaks. Mr. Emmet's setting deserves another salutation to his prowess.

You, who read this, may say, "This is no criticism. It is a panegyric." What of that? The production was worth it, and even a black-browed "disliker of amateur theatricals" had to say "Well done."

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THE QUESTORS' AMBITIOUS PROGRAMME

ARISTOPHANES' "THE BIRDS"

THE QUESTORS are to live up to their name. This season they are to be real questors in the strange world of dramatic art, and the productions they announce are sufficient answer to such cavilling critics as myself, who, a short time ago, wrote: "If amateurs wish to be taken seriously, both by their audiences and by newspaper critics, let them give something that is worth their while."

This week the Questors announce, in one fell swoop, that they are to present Aristophanes' "The Birds," the Wakefield Second Nativity Play and "Everyman," and "The Jealous Wife," by George Colman, the Elder. Brilliant choice!

This ambitious and worthy society has planned to present a short history of the theatre, from Greek times to the present day, during the next two seasons.

"Museum pieces have been avoided," say the Questors, "and each play has been carefully chosen for its appeal to an audience of to-day."

Just as Lamb's Bo-Bo anticipated his first taste of roast crackling, so am I anticipating the Questors' plays this season.

ARISTOPHANES (448?—385 B.C.) was the greatest Greek comic writer, and he is known equally as being among the first six poets of the world. His plays are satires on contemporary Athenian social problems, interleaved with noble passages of lyrical writing.

Altogether 54 plays are ascribed to him, of which eleven are extant. They are a commentary on the life of Athens during the 36 years he was writing.

"The Birds" was written in 414 B.C., and is a great poetical comedy. Different critics have different meanings for its lesson. Some say it is an allegory of an Athenian expedition to Sicily; others that it is a satire against the Athenian prejudice against law and order; and others, that it is a comic protest against religious fanaticism.

The story tells how the birds are persuaded to build a "Cloud-Cuckoo-Borough" half-way between the gods and mankind by an Athenian named Peisthataerus and his friend Euelpides. The gods send messages to entreat with the birds, and Peisthataerus marries the daughter of Zeus.

"The Birds" will be produced on November 6 and 7.

THE Second Wakefield Nativity Play and "Everyman" will be given on December 18 and 19.

Here are two medieval English plays of great contrast. The Wakefield Cycle is ascribed to the fifteenth century, and was intended to be played by the craftsmen of Wakefield on fixed platforms along the route of a religious procession.

Their anonymous and forgotten author has made the best of any morality plays by the introduction of robust fun and boisterous humour.

By some the plays are known as the Towneley Mysteries, from the family in whose possession the manuscript was for many years.

"Everyman" was presented in All Saints' Church, Ealing Common, early this year. It deals allegorically with the subject of death, a subject much under discussion in the Middle Ages.

It differs from the Wakefield Play inasmuch as it contains no humour.

"THE JEALOUS WIFE" is a dramatisation of Fielding's novel "Tom Jones," and it is appropriate that it should be given by The Questors because Fielding lived in Ealing.

George Colman the Elder (1732-1794)

is the best of the mid-eighteenth century dramatists, and "The Jealous Wife" was a great success when produced at Covent Garden in 1761. He gave different names to the characters in the book and Tom Jones is renamed Charles Oakly.

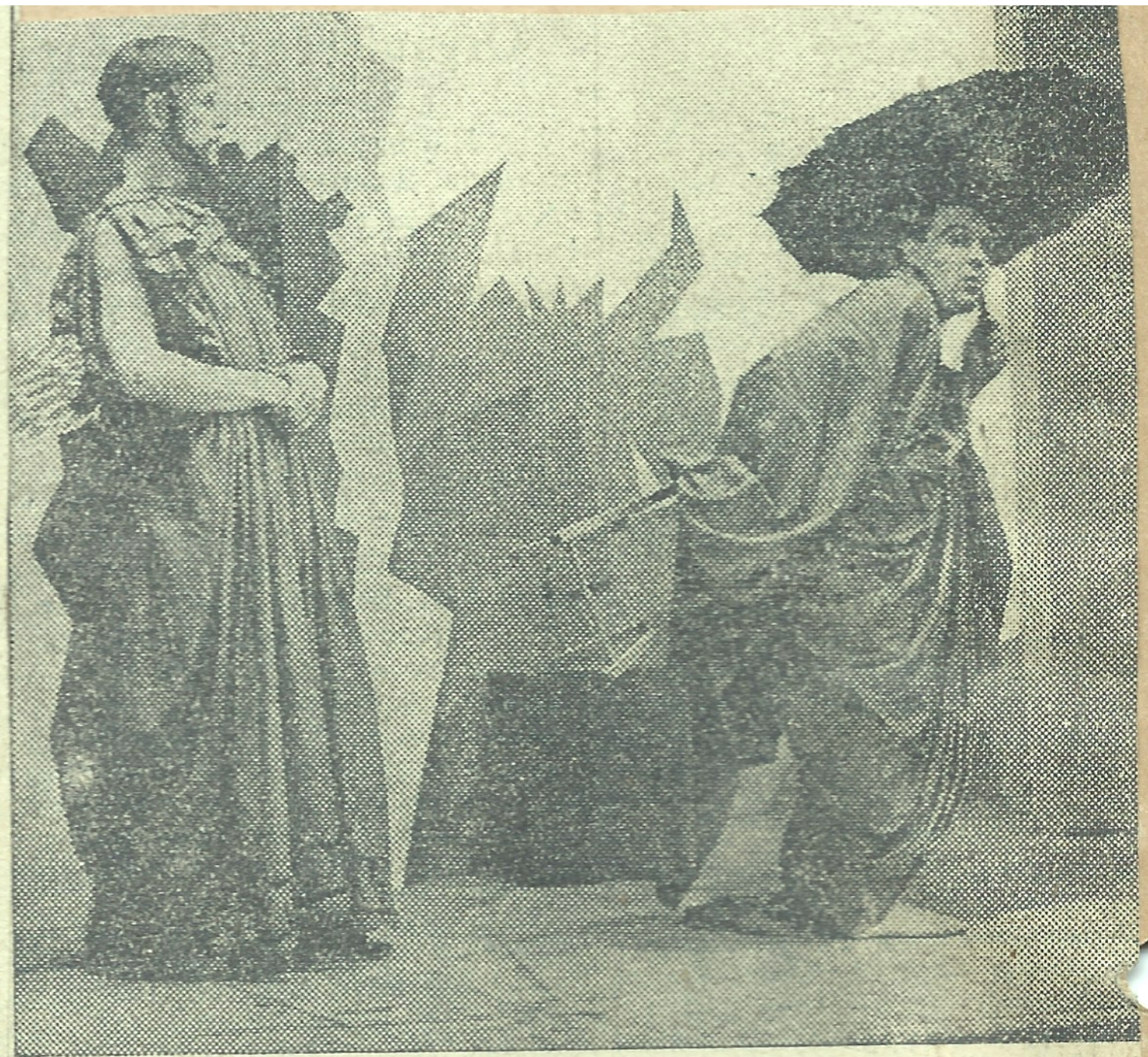
Colman introduced the true spirit of comedy into his plays, and was the forerunner of the great comic writer, R. B. Sheridan.

It is being produced on April 30 and May 1, 1937.

During the season, the Questors are to read Marlowe's "Edward II," Massinger's "A New Way to Pay Old Debts" and Farquhar's "The Beaux' Stratagem." The annual drama festival is on March 5 and 6, and there is an "experiment night" on March 15.

The Questors announce that for a yearly subscription of 7s. 6d., a member receives a 3s. 6d. ticket free for four productions, he can attend all play readings and other events, and has full use of the club's dramatic library. That is excellent value.

Success to the Questors; they help to make life pleasant.



Mr. T. S. Saunders as "Peisthetairus" and Mr. Christopher Spurrier as "Prometheus," in a scene from "The Birds," presented by the Questors at their theatre in Mattock-lane, on Friday and Saturday.