

THE QUESTORS PRODUCE "THE JEALOUS WIFE"

AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY COMEDY

The Questors: "The Jealous Wife," a comedy by George Colman the Elder: The Questors Theatre, Mattuck Hall, Ealing; Saturday, May 1, 1937.

THIS eighteenth-century comedy is one of the first examples of the dramatization of a well-known novel. It was appropriate that in their development of the drama, The Questors should have chosen Colman's play, for it is founded on "Tom Jones," written by Henry Fielding, the Ealing novelist.

The characters have different names. Tom Jones is transposed into Charles Oakly. Sophia Western is Harriot Russet. Lady Bellaston is Lady Free-love. Lord Fellamar is Lord Trinket. Squire Western is Mr. Russet, and Blifil is Sir Harry Beagle. There is also this difference. Colman introduces a new set of characters, Mr. and Mrs. Oakly (the jealous wife), and Major Oakly, and to Sir Harry is transferred the fox hunting language and temperament of Squire Western.

Colman took advice from Garrick when making the novel into drama, and it was therefore to be expected that when "The Jealous Wife" was produced at Drury Lane on February 12, 1761, Garrick took the chief part.

LITTLE KNOWN

The play is little known nowadays. No one could boast that it is in the first flight of English dramatic works, and there is a cumbersome manner about it that tends to make an audience yawn.

Still, it is of genuine comic spirit, and is one of the best half-way houses between the witty spirit of the Restoration comedy writers and Sheridan's famous satirical comedies.

The Questors (as usual) are to be congratulated on choosing such an out of the way play to represent the third scene of the development of drama (which is to be continued next winter). Their previous plays have been Aristophanes' "The Birds," the Shepherds' Play from the Wakefield Cycle of Miracle Plays and an English version of "Der Jedermann" ("Everyman"). It needed bold courage to leave out all the golden era of Elizabethan drama and the brilliantly witty Restoration Period, and not even to go forward a few years and choose one of the well-known comedies of Sheridan and Goldsmith.

"The Jealous Wife" may be but a blind and halting member of the English drama, but it is composed of good stuff, and we who saw this revival are doubtless thankful to The Questors for spending their energies on it, though there may be some who will sigh when they ponder on what The Questors could have done in Congreve, Farquhar, Dryden, Sheridan or Goldsmith.

LEAST SUCCESSFUL

Although it is good to record our thanks for the production of this comedy, yet the truth must be stated that in many ways this was the least successful of The Questors' plays this season.

The fault is in the play. Characterization and stage situations in "The Jealous Wife" reveal that this is but a second class play, and however good The Questors may be, they are not proficient enough to prevent poor material from being made aware to the audience.

Harriot is as sentimentally foolish as Tom Jones's Sophia, Major Oakly seems a great deal filled with sawdust, and Capt. O'Cutter only pleases because he reminds one of his better-made Irish successor, Sir Lucius O'Trigger. Mr. Russet, too, has an infinite deal of doing nothing.

Under these circumstances, although The Questors were as robust as ever, and several of the performances were brilliantly acted, "The Jealous Wife" must, as I have said, be counted the poorest of the season's plays.

Judging how some members of the cast reacted to their parts, I feel sure that they would agree that they found difficulty in giving their flesh and blood reality.

Notable successes were made of their parts by Evelyn Skelton and Mr. Lionel Locke. As Mrs. Oakly—the jealous wife cured only in the best Petruchio manner—Evelyn Skelton had a comely way of expression; she acted with her hands, eyes and face, and all through one sensed that reluctance to decide whether Mrs. Oakly should be treated as realistically as possible or with deft touches of artificiality. In my opinion, Mrs. Oakly is one of those characters who hover on the border of realism and artificiality. Evelyn Skelton's acting was thoroughly commendable.

Mr. Lionel Locke, the hen-pecked husband who takes a hint from Petruchio, had many opportunities. He was

sound, if not more so in every respect, his facial gestures (if I may coin that phrase) brought out to the full the comedy that is in the part, and in the last act he acted with all the devil of a feigned shrew-tamer. Mr. Locke is one of the hardest-working members of The Questors, and his Mr. Oakly was the seal on a good season.

I liked the dazzling Lady Free-love of Betty Gray. Her costumes set her off as a fine lady, and her aristocratic voice and aristocratic manners brought out to the full this scheming person, who would, doubtless, have been more at home in the wit and wickedness of a Restoration comedy. Betty Gray had many superb moments, and she heightened the effectiveness of the part by holding it in a tight rein. Lady Free-love, in the person of many an amateur, could so easily have sprawled and stamped about the stage.

Mr. Cyril Thomas, as the affectations Lord Trinket, had the type of part in which he excels. He is always good in effecting stupid aristocrats (his Sir Andrew in "Twelfth Night" for instance), and his Lord Trinket was excellently handled. He wore his costumes with the appropriate nonchalance, and the French phrases tripped off his tongue in the appropriate style of the town-bred eighteenth-century aristocrat. It was a part deserving of everyone's praise.

Charles Oakly was acted by Mr. Arthur Peters. Charles is an ordinary type of young man, and Mr. Peters did not have a great deal to do except to look angry, surprised, love-lorn and happy by degrees, and these emotions he accomplished with a good deal of skill and satisfaction. His drunken scene was well done; he was just foolish enough to show that it was a gentleman who was drunk and not an habitual sot.

HANDICAPPED

Mildred Emmet was handicapped by her part of Harriot. There is not enough in it for anyone to excel in, and I thought that her voice dropped too much at the ends of the words, cutting off their understanding. Mildred Emmet was pert, and angry, happy and sad, by turn, and that was all that was in the part.

That fine actor, Mr. T. S. Saunders, also came up against a brick wall in his role of Mr. Russet. Mr. Saunders, except in the last few incidents, could make little headway to give reality to this most difficult part. Mr. Russet, for most of the play, is in a state of nerves as the jealous father, and there is not much that any actor could make of him. Mr. Saunders tried with all his skill, and had many good moments. That is all that can be said.

Mr. Clifford Foreman is The Questors' best comedy actor, and he ended an admirable season with a gusty portrayal of Sir Harry Beagle. He had the biggest laugh in the play, and the laugh came as the result of Mr. Foreman's effort as much as the words he spoke.

Major Oakly, to me, seems a creature stuffed with sawdust, a dramatic make-weight, and Mr. Philip Allen had nothing to do in the role except to look down his nose wisely, and to strut about the stage with that affected care that a soldier might show in a drawing room.

Mr. John Heron was a villainous-looking Capt. O'Cutter, and he said his words with a great deal of relish. It was a poor sort of part, and Mr. Heron did as well as anyone.

Mr. Laurie Rivers successfully doubled two small comedy roles, and parts of servants were played by Muriel Curtis, Iris Martin, Mr. Lister Beck, and Mr. Philip Elliott.

THE PRODUCER

Mr. Alfred Emmet spoke the prologue. He also produced, and is to be commended for the way in which he speeded up the action of the play, and the way in which he made his cast respond (as much as it was possible) to their parts. He will admit, I am sure, that "The Jealous Wife" was the most difficult play tackled this year—although it looked the easiest.

Heartiest congratulations of all are offered to Mr. Fred Robinson for some brilliant settings. I wondered how three totally different scenes were to follow each other quickly, and Mr. Robinson, by an adroit use of curtains, showed how. In many ways the settings were the best feature of "The Jealous Wife."

The costumes were excellent. Most of them had been loaned by Mr. J. Cyril Nairne from his private collection, and were genuine clothes of the period.

In conclusion, let me say as one who has thoroughly enjoyed The Questors' season, that it is almost a relief to be able to seize on points which can be criticised and argued about. The Questors are generally so critic-proof.

THE AMATEUR THEATRE

'THE JEALOUS WIFE'

Questors' Season Ends with Comedy

Apart from its historic value, as a revival of an eighteenth-century Drury Lane success, in which Garrick and Mrs. Pritchard "starred," and which endured as a stock comedy right into the nineteenth century, "The Jealous Wife," written by George Colman the Elder, is in itself a highly humorous, well-written play. It was presented by the Questors in Mattock Hall last Friday and Saturday evenings, and formed a pleasant finish to a season which had given a bird's-eye view of drama from 414 B.C. to 1760 A.D.

The author of this comedy knew his business as a playwright. "The Jealous Wife" contains as adroit juggling with dramatic situations as can be found in any of Sheridan's writings, but the play is far less hackneyed, and sets forth the thoughts and ways of the period in a more natural and less stylised manner. Each of the 16 characters is an illustration of clever dramatic portraiture, and Mr. Alfred Emmet, the producer, who also spoke the prologue, saw to it that all were clearly defined by the cast, and that a naturalistic atmosphere was preserved so far as truth to these somewhat artificial times allowed of it.

Most of the costumes worn actually belonged to the period, having been lent by Mr. J. Cyril Nairne from his own private collection. This added yet another element to the general rightness of the atmosphere, and Mr. Nairne, who is an authority on that period, had also advised Mr. Emmet in regard to some points of the production, so that historical accuracy was ensured.

It is not enough to wear an eighteenth century outfit with aplomb, as if the player had been always used to lace frills and plush coats or brocaded pannier skirts, wigs and canes. There is the temperament, opinions and behaviour that go with such clothes, and it was because, without exception, these were forthcoming that the play came over so well and was enjoyed on both sides of the footlights.

TANTRUMS AND SWAGGER.

For prodigious swaggering as to the manner born, the palm was won by Mr. Cyril Thomas as Lord Trinket. It would have been hard to better his performance in any way. Miss Betty Gray, as Lady Free love, gave an amazingly brilliant study of affected womanhood in high circles, boned and buckramed in mind as well as in body, by fashion's dictates. She seasoned her acting with just the right archness and diablerie. Miss Evelyn Skelton played the title part of Mrs. Oakley, the jealous wife, with spirit and conviction, flouncing about in a jealous frenzy, just as if she really were. Mr. Lionel Locke, who acted opposite her

wife's tantrums, presented the role of Mr. Oakly with good balance and sense of its comedy values, and Mr. Philip Allen, disguised as Major Oakly, always trying to string up his henpecked brother to revolting pitch, had a nice twinkle in his eye, and a gay-dog bearing that matched his regimentals.

Mrs. Mildred Emmet as Harriot Russet fitted well into her part as the rebellious and then frightened example of eighteenth-century maidenhood, and Mr. T. S. Saunders, as her doddering old father, and Mr. Clifford Foreman, as the horse-racing lover, played their parts on lines approaching, but, fortunately, never quite reaching the farcical. Mr. Arthur Peters made love in approved style to his eighteenth-century miss, and Mr. John Heron was blood-thirsty enough, even for those days, as the dashing Captain O'Cutter. All the remaining roles were those of servants, and they were well taken by Miss Muriel Curtis, Miss Iris Martin, and Messrs. Lister Beck, Philip Elliott, and Laurie Rivers, who doubled the parts of Tom and Paris.

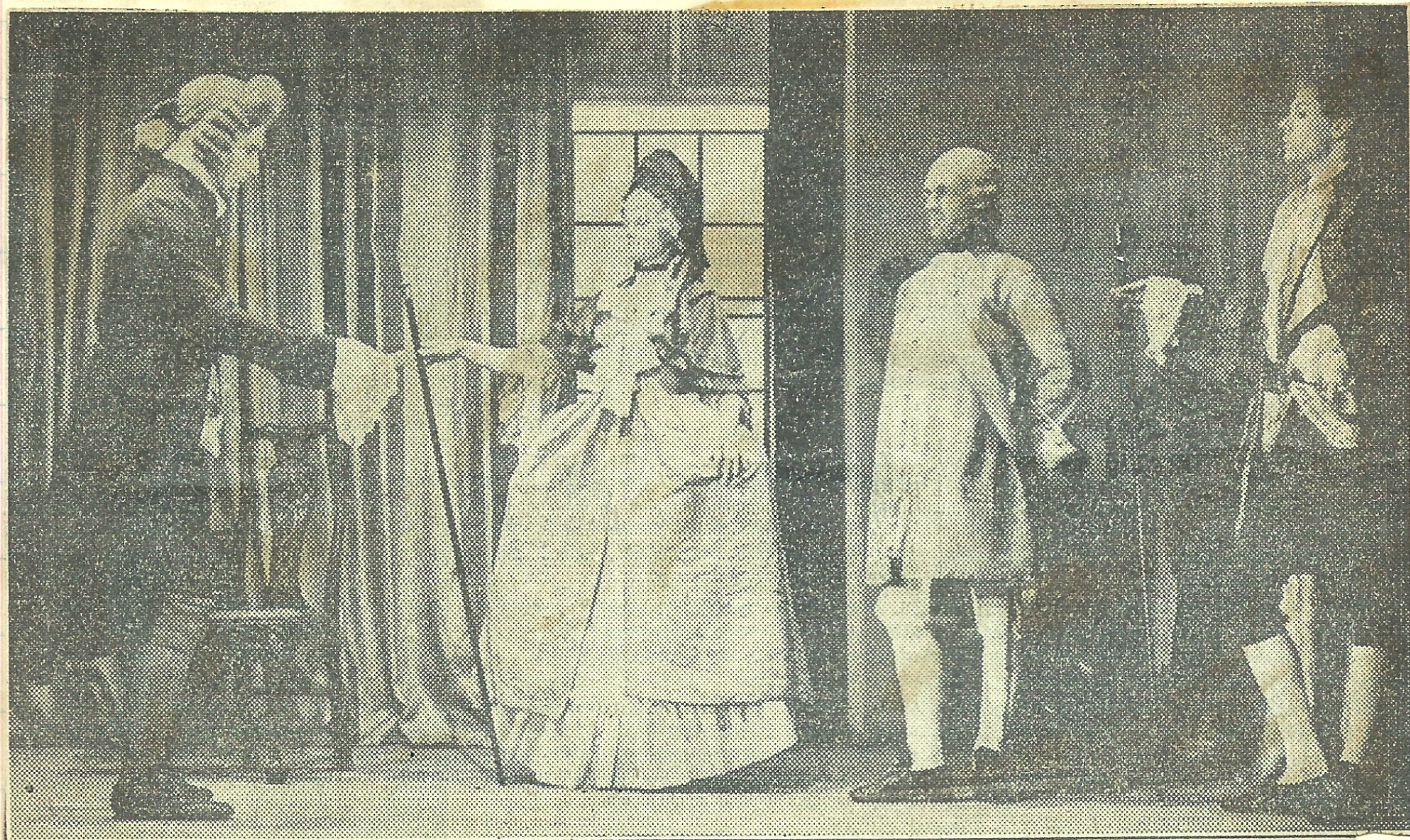
The best acting in the whole production was in the second scene of the second act, which went brilliantly.

The settings were designed by Mr. Fred Robinson, who was also stage-manager; Mrs. Emmet was wardrobe-mistress as well as playing Harriot, and Miss Marjorie Bywater designed Mrs. Oakly's effective costume in green-patterned silk and coffee-coloured lace.

C.C.



Betty Gray as Lady Free love and Arthur Peters as Charles Oakly in "The Jealous Wife," at the Questors Theatre, Ealing.



A scene from "The Jealous Wife," presented by the Questors at their theatre in Mattock-lane, Ealing, last Friday and Saturday.