

THE AMATEUR THEATR

QUESTORS IN
"MACBETH"An Unconvincing
Experiment

("Macbeth," presented by The Questors, at The Questors' Theatre, November 17-19).

CHARACTERISTICALLY, the Questors began their season in earnest by trying themselves as high as they possibly could. "Macbeth" is one of the most difficult of Shakespeare's plays to present convincingly, and has been the cause of many a famous producer's temporary eclipse. To add to their problems, the Questors had decided to present the play as a quiet—almost dispassionate—examination of the personal tragedy of Macbeth, and to exclude the tumultuous element of melodrama which plays so large a part in the play's structure.

On the evidence of this highly-imaginative, often beautiful, and always interesting production, I am now prepared to deny vehemently that "Macbeth" can never be anything but violent and angry. For the plain fact is that the Questors did not achieve what they boldly set out to do. Deliberately excluding the play's storming passion, they deprived it of excitement. Attempting to apply a clinical, twentieth century analysis to the character of Macbeth, they only succeeded in reminding us that this, of all Shakespeare's great tragedies, is the most Elizabethan in spirit.

Without passion, this play is nothing. Instead of being shaken by the profound emotion of pity, the play aroused in us merely a detached sense of sympathy.

Nevertheless, one is grateful to the Questors for giving us so consistently intelligent a show. Any company which can provoke many members of its audience to lengthy argument and discussion has achieved more, I think, than the company which does a conventional job soundly, and leaves little to the imagination.

Mr Alfred Emmet achieved wonders on his tiny stage. His sense of grouping seemed infallible throughout the play, which swung easily along as if his players had all Drury Lane's wide open spaces in which to manoeuvre. With his interpretation of the play's mood, I cannot agree. For instance, the famous scene of Duncan's murder was strangely cold and unexciting. But I recognise the skill and intelligence with which the play was shaped according to his conception of its mood.

AN ACTOR TO WATCH.

Mr Lionel Locke is a player who improves rapidly. But he has not, as yet, sufficient authority for so tremendous a part as Macbeth. Movement and verse-speaking in this player were both gracious and fluent, but in reading the part as if it were a Hamlet, in showing us little of the sheer masculine vigour of this man of action. Mr Locke lost the power to communicate the necessary sense of anguish and torment. But his performance does raise high hopes for this player's future. He is an actor to watch.

As Lady Macbeth, Gwendolen Thomas was magnificent. Had the production been pitched higher, her performance would have been the more memorable. Here we had a woman of steel, vicious and magnificently evil. On this player, the tragedy most satisfactorily turned. She was its creator and its driving power. Few of the Questors' audience will soon forget her beautiful reading of the hackneyed sleep-walking scene which, in her hands, came fresh to life.

It is impossible to do more than mention a few of the rest of a large cast. Mr. Phillip Allen is highly to be praised for his sturdy and honest interpretation of Banquo—a performance I liked as much as any. Mr Frank Wheeler gave dignity and nobility to Duncan; Mr Geoffrey Saunders was a sympathetic Lennox; and Mr T. S. Saunders gave a well-spoken, but somewhat colourless, interpretation of Macduff. The smaller parts were all competently played, and once again demonstrated above all that the Questors work admirably as a team—not as individuals.

HARMONY OF COLOUR.

The unqualified success of the evening was that shared by Daphne and Dudley Clark, who designed the costumes, and by Mrs Emmet, who executed them. The costuming was most sensitively done in shades of browns, dull reds, soft greens and blues. The designers gave us a harmony of colour which was continually a delight to the eye and a commentary of the characters who wore them. In particular, the vivid costumes designed for Lady Macbeth would have been remarkable even in a lavishly-mounted West End production.

W.R.B.

Amateur Stage**THE QUESTORS IN
"MACBETH":
WITCH SCENES CUT**By **PETER QUINCE**

The Questors: "Macbeth," by William Shakespeare: The Questors Theatre, Ealing; Thursday, November 17, 1938.

"I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but
only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps
itself,
And falls on the other."

APPROACH to an appreciation of Shakespeare's tragedies must be personal. There are no hard and fast rules to be laid down as to the conception how "Hamlet," "Macbeth," "Othello," "Lear" must be played. Shakespeare's great people are of such stuff that we little men must bow down meekly before them as giants that range the skies. They are the personification of thousands of men. They can be played from any one of their many-sided characterizations.

This is certainly true of "Macbeth." William Hazlitt, great critic, wrote that the tragedy stood "for the wildness of the imagination and the rapidity of the action . . . 'Macbeth' is like a record of a preternatural and tragical event." I realise the depths that are behind Hazlitt's following words: "We can conceive no one to play 'Macbeth' properly, or to look like a man that had encountered the Weird Sisters."

With these passages in the forefront of my mind—though I hope I am by no means biased in my judgment because of them—what can be said in critical perception of The Questors' production?

For an amateur society, the production and acting scaled the heights of magnificent endeavour. It would be easy to continue to praise, but yet it is only true to say in my opinion the production lacked in one important way.

WHY were the witches' scenes cut? Why were we not allowed to be spectators of those incantations to the fiends of darkness? "Macbeth" is essentially a play of the imagination, one that depends upon the fantastic introduction of the three hags of mischief as the background of the tragedy of a noble mind. But for the witches, Macbeth would never have had the wheels of his mind turning towards the realisation of his bounding ambition. But for the witches, he would have been strong enough to resist the blandishments and whispered wickednesses of his red-haired wife. Therefore, in my opinion, the witches' scenes should not have been cut. They are the seed that ripened into Macbeth's o'erleaping ambition.

Apart from this misfortune (almost a major one), I am grateful to The Questors for being iron-willed enough to prevent the tragedy from degenerating into mere noisy melodrama, with Macbeth storming and ranting on the stage, posturing with his sword. Macbeth's words are mostly utterances from his soul; the tragedy is foremost a tragedy of degeneration of character through

words are mostly utterances from his soul; the tragedy is foremost a tragedy of degeneration of character through wild lust for power, and secondly (far behind) a tragedy of incident, with murder and sudden death stalking the stage.

In the programme, The Questors stated that they hoped to "emphasise the play's human values and bring out its tragedy of a human spirit." In that, considerable success was achieved, yet, surely it will be admitted that the incantations of the witches do much to build up the atmosphere for the reception of Macbeth (both in Acts I and IV) and are the reasons for his subsequent behaviour?

I cannot say, too, that I liked the final scene, when Macbeth clashes words with Macduff. Should we not have been allowed to see Macduff on the stage, instead of having Mr. Saunders speak his lines from some hidden place in the wings?

On the other hand, much was brilliantly accomplished with the minimum of stage settings; the sleep-walking scene was eerily effective; the banquet scene expressive, and here I am glad that no attempt was made to introduce a ghostly Banquo that the audience could see. The figure was but a figment in Macbeth's canker-eaten brain, and must be imagined from the ear-reactions of Macbeth himself.

Mr. Lionel Locke's Macbeth needs much discussion. Has Mr. Locke the outward appearance, the voice, the vibrant personality, the capability to degenerate, against his own conscience, from a noble mind into a murderous villain, a villain imbued with much

a part that Hazlitt says no man can play properly?

Let proper appreciation be given to Mr. Locke for his high resolve of the part, for his success in keeping the ranting speeches under his control, for giving us a Macbeth of intelligence, if not so much of action.

Yet, Mr. Locke only succeeded in moving me on two occasions. Once was when he spoke the lines:

"I go, and it is done; the bell invites me."

Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven, or
to hell."

In their utterance, Mr. Locke spoke all the pent-up feelings of a man resolved on a deed of dreadful note against the knockings of his own conscience. I was immensely swayed, too, by Mr. Locke's quiet, yet vibrating, pronouncement of that great passage (one of the greatest Shakespeare wrote) beginning:

"To-morrow, and to-morrow, and
to-morrow."

Mr. Locke aimed high at the gigantic proportions of the man Macbeth, flower of Shakespeare's genius. It is good to be able to write thus, for Mr. Locke will realise as well as anyone that to portray Macbeth with necessary understanding is more difficult than to pull down the stars from the sky to earth.

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. . .

I CANNOT conceive any amateur being grander in every aspect of the part than was Gwendolen Thomas, as Lady Macbeth. It is an event in The Questors' history to have it recorded that one of their number was immensely on fire with the purpose of one of the greatest women in world drama.

Mrs. Thomas was the personification of tragedy; her words were moving to the blood; her actions were warm with ardour; her eyes flashed with intensity . . . but, forbear, this lyrical praise! Mrs. Thomas, I beg of you to accept my sincere appreciation for your superb acting. Your red hair showed your virago spirit, and well you tersely showed the Delilah that forms more than half of Lady Macbeth's character.

Your sleep-walking scene was as eerie as an apparition that haunts the moon-struck senses. All the tragedy that is in the part you said in the words, "What's done cannot be undone."

I agree with you that Lady Macbeth is easier to play than Macbeth; there are not the same qualities in it. You did not set your kite at a star; your part was on the earth, though sorely tempest tossed. That you were superb is due appreciation to the burning zeal and living, lashing reality with which you invested your part.

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There is little space left to report of Mr. Philip Allen's blunt, stalwart Banquo, as much a member of the common herd of men as Macbeth was not, of Mr. T. S. Saunders' dignified Macduff, of Mr. William Dann's earnest Malcolm, and of a rather hurriedly conceived and acted porter, played by Mr. Laurie Rivers. In comparison with the two giants of the play, the other parts are but of ordinary stature.

Of the witches I wish to say this. Had I been Macbeth I would not have called them "black and midnight hags." The subdued stage lighting revealed them to be three charming young women. Wherein lay their hideousness? The parts were played by Barbara Sharp, Mary Turner, and Mary Steele.

Other parts were played by: Ross, Clifford Foreman; Angus, Keith Hall; Duncan, Frank Wheeler; Donalbain, Eric Saunders; Lennox, Geoffrey Saunders; Fleance, Colin Godden; old man, Cyril Thomas; murderers, Dudley Clark, Frank Wheeler and Eric Saunders; doctor, Frank Cockburn; gentlewoman, Evelyn Vaughan; Men-teith, Cyril Thomas; Caithness, Eric Allen; Seyton, Eric Saunders; Siward, Laurie Rivers; Young Siward, Dudley Clark; ladies, Dorothy Allen, Muriel Curtis, Marjorie Morrison.

I have referred to Mr. Alfred Emmet's production. The excellent costumes were designed by Daphne and Dudley Clark. Mr. Gunter Heilbut designed the settings.

Next week, I hope to return to the production of this play after I have attended The Questors' discussion on Monday. I want to know what other people think about it.

THE QUESTORS' "MACBETH": A SECOND NOTICE

BY PETER QUINCE

The Questors: "Macbeth" by William Shakespeare; The Questors' Theatre, Ealing, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, November 17, 18 and 19, 1938.

SEVERAL points have occurred that make necessary a second notice of this important production. Last week I was more concerned to give first impressions both of production and acting, and it is right that a further notice be given now that I have had a chance of thinking over and assimilating the production.

To begin with I attended The Questors Theatre on Monday night. Producer, members of the cast, and members of the audience very frankly criticised all aspects of the play in an open discussion. No one is more pleased than myself to bear testimony to the way in which The Questors face up to their own shortcomings. This is the healthiest sign of a resolute society; I wish that all amateurs did it.

The discussion showed one thing. It corroborated what I said last week—that the approach to Shakespeare must, and can only be strictly personal.

The greatest battle of words raged round the question to which I have also previously referred—the shortening of the scenes introducing the three witches. My opinion remains firm on this point. I thought this was a misfortune in the production, for, in my opinion, these scenes build up the atmosphere which give rise to the mischievous working of Macbeth's mind.

THE arguments against this are: Shakespeare is not thought to have written the witch scenes; people nowadays do not believe in witchcraft and consequently are not influenced by the witches; a study of the play shows that Macbeth and his wife must have talked over at some previous time the prospect of his elevation to the throne of Scotland.

My answers are: I agree that very likely Shakespeare did not write the jingling doggerel, but he must have accepted it as part of his play when it was ready for production; I agree that people are no longer believers in witchcraft, but the play was Shakespeare's "Macbeth," not some edited version of it; I agree that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth had talked about the throne, but my argument is that it was the apparition of the witches that made Macbeth know there was only one way by which he could be king—murder.

I do not think that anything more need be written of the two chief parts, except to reiterate the high plane of acting and artistic endeavour of Mrs. Gwendolen Thomas and Mr. Lionel Locke. No amateurs could have done better.

Only a hurried reference was made last week to the secondary characters. Tribute must be paid.

Mr. Phillip Allen invested the role of Banquo with dignity and grace abounding. He was firm in purpose; his expression showed his growing suspicion of Macbeth and Mr. Allen spoke some most difficult lines with considerable spirit and understanding.

I LIKED immensely Mr. T. S. Saunders' Macduff—a by no means easy part. Mr. Saunders gave the role honesty and blunt characterisation; he could have let his spirits droop more when he heard of the slaughter of his wife and children. Those lines:

"He has no children. All my pretty ones?"

Did you say all? O, hell-kite all!

What, all my pretty chickens, and their dam.

At one fell swoop?"

must be wrung like a sob from the heart. Mr. Saunders did not succeed in getting as much feeling from the lines as they warrant.

Other parts in a distinguished cast that caught the eye were Mr. Frank Cockburn's doctor, Mr. Clifford Foreman's Ross, Mr. Frank Wheeler's graceful King Duncan, and Mr. Dudley Clark's First Murderer. Last week I hinted that Mr. Laurie Rivers as the porter acted rather hurriedly. I still think so. There was not enough bucolic humour in the scene to detract from all the horrors that had gone before.

It would be churlish not to speak in high praise of Mr. Alfred Emmet's production, though I continue to think he made a mistake to cut those witches. I am quite sure that no amateur producer could have presented a worthier "Macbeth," and one in which The Questors could have been more privileged to take part.

"MACBETH"—WITH CUTS

MR. ALFRED EMMET is not the first producer of imagination and sincerity who has failed in the gallant, but I believe hopeless, attempt to give a stage presentation of Shakespeare with all the subtleties and depths one gets from reading the text in the study.

Such an attempt was made by the Questors, of which Mr. Emmet is the director, when they produced "Macbeth" at their Ealing theatre.

What a mistake it was to cut the witch sequences to a minimum, to exclude the sergeant's speech and the

murder of Lady Macduff, and to fight the battle off-stage—all in the name of "restraint"!

The cast did not serve Mr. Emmet as well as such a production demanded. To add paraphrasing of immortal lines to these liberties with the text was enough to send any lover of the play weeping into Mattock-lane.

Philip Allen as Banquo, Clifford Foreman as Ross, and William Dann as Malcolm had, however, the necessary quiet, deep sincerity. As Macduff, T. S. Saunders dropped, by intent or error, a number of essential lines; and so, to a lesser degree, did Laurie Rivers as the porter.

Lionel Locke—a good actor who might in another production have been excellent—spoke the verse with ease, but there was no evil ambition obsessing the mind of this Macbeth.

"What 'fiend-like queen'?" one asked, on hearing the posthumous description of Gwendolen Thomas's Lady Macbeth.