

13th May, 1939

Amateur Stage Review

THE QUESTORS END THE SEASON WITH A PLAY OF THE FLOOD

By Peter Quince

The Questors: "Noah" by Andre Obey, English text by Arthur Wilmurt: The Questors Theatre, Ealing: Saturday, May 6, 1939.

IF it be true that one of the purposes of the theatre is to hammer home to us several truths, to make us feel, think, sympathise, and understand, then it is certainly true that M. Obey's grand comedy, "Noah," has in it sufficient for half a dozen sermons.

I call it a comedy in the classical sense—that is, it is not a tragedy—though it often plumbs to the depths the criss-cross, shifting emotions that differentiate mankind from the beasts of the fields, and the fowls of the air, and the fish of the waters.

Here are some of the things that crossed my mind during the performance of this play:

I thought how closely allied the tale of Noah and the Flood is to the problems that shake this world; the wicked men of Noah's day were drowned by Divine judgment; how often to-day is Divine judgment being asked to intervene against the wicked men of our generation?

THERE occurred to me how much superior to man is the whole animal world.

The beasts do not pretend to be civilised, kind, religious, loving; there is no hypocrisy about them; their actions do not plunge the nations into the shambles of war.

How fitting would it have been, therefore, if only the animals had been saved at the Flood, and the whole race of mankind cut off short in the midst of its stupidities, wickednesses, and shallow greed.

I am not apologetic for this prosy introduction to *The Questors'* last play of the present season.

I think that "Noah" is so splendid a play, one so packed with the arts and crafts of theatrical guile, that it is necessary to introduce it with personal opinions as to its effect.

What was the reaction of "Noah" on other members of the audience? In what directions did it set their brains turning?

These are questions I hope were debated at the usual critical discussion after the production—a feature of *The Questors* that all local societies would do well to copy.

In "Noah" we had the story of the faithful, simple soul in direct touch with God, whom he addressed as a loving father.

The forty days of flood were days of trial. Tempers became short, man's patience limited, but God was true to his promise.

And as Noah's children set out to colonise the world, and the glory of the rainbow studded the sky, Noah was left, still speaking to his God, still somewhat puzzled at the glory and the abundance of life.

MR. ALFRED EMMET'S production was graced by the touch of the skill we know he possesses in abundance.

His characters were well "spaced"—that is, both in look and actions they represented varying aspects of the human race.

The chorus of Mrs. Noah, the three

sons, and the three girls had been trained to give both dramatic effect and stage beauty; the difficult parts of the animals were taken easily, and their grouping was excellent.

Stage effects and lighting were all that could be desired.

The steady drumming of rain on the roof of the ark was realistic, but one is inclined to wish (if a point of criticism may be permitted in so craftsmanlike a production) that the rain could have drummed all the time; loudly in the moments of tension (which was done, and very well done, too), and quietly, like the background of music when the action was swift and the voices raised (which did not seem to be done at all).

The rain was falling all the time; we of the audience should have been kept informed of the fact.

The effects of glorious sunshine, the raising of the wind, and the coming to beauty of the rainbow were excellently conceived.

Scenery, too, was of that high class that is always associated with *The Questors*. Costumes were good, and were suited to the various characters of the play.

The animals were well covered, though with regard to the monkey and the cow, one was of the opinion that their masks were somewhat futuristic in design for so plainly fashioned a piece.

NOW to the players. Mr. T. S. Saunders as Noah strode the play with the giant stride and intellect of a Colossus.

How excellent an opening he gave us, his words to God so simple, so faithful, so expectant; how pregnant an end he gave us, forehead creased in a frown, his question to God, his realisation of life's miracle.

By now it has become quite evident that Mr. Saunders, as with many members of *The Questors*, is so critic proof (at least as far as persevering students of the art, as myself, are concerned) that the majority of the audiences can only applaud his work.

Mr. Saunders is always good in a part in which humanity is added to humour. I think his Noah had a lot in common with his Peisthetairus of two seasons ago in Euripides' "The Birds." His Noah was a brilliant, pointed, persuasive, honest piece of work that rode the play as easily as an eagle cleaves the heavens.

Bravo, Mr. Saunders—but, you know, I have a sneaking feeling that maybe you once ought to do something that will show us you can be criticised. So far, you baffle us—and we try our best, too! (that is if *The Questors'* audiences try to be as honestly critical as I do myself).

Rosalie Van Der Gucht's performance as Mrs. Noah was a thing of simple realism.

Many are the lessons that the amateur could have learned from this performance—how to have stage presence and repose, what to do with the hands, how to give tension to the acting merely by standing still and looking, how to speak to and yet not at the audience.

I know that this accomplished woman has brilliantly produced several of *The Questors'* plays, but until her Mrs. Noah I had not realised that she is equally as brilliant an actress.

THERE was much fire in Mr. Cyril Thomas' performance of the restless, scoffing Ham, a part to which he gave as capable an understanding and realism as he has done to any of his previous roles.

As Japheth and Shem, Noah's other sons, Messrs. Philip Allen and Laurie Rivers were more youthful both in appearance and manner. Their performances, pitched on a less higher key than the three main parts, were skilful and entertaining.

The parts of the three girls were taken by Joyce Gapp as Ada, Winifred Giles as Sella and Peggy Cooper as Naomi.

Both individually and considered as a group, they were good, doing what the parts asked of them with natural beauty, charm of manner, and complete understanding.

Mr. Lionel Locke was seen in the first act in a part after his boisterous heart. He was the Man, the personification of the wicked men and women of the world condemned to Divine vengeance.

Helped by first-rate make up, that gave him a broken nose, and which enabled him to display a somewhat frightening torso, Mr. Locke was as dynamic and as restlessly powerful as he has the art of portraying. It was a part superbly well acted.

There were the animals. The players, hidden beneath their masks, roared, moo'd and grunted in unison.

Mr. Clifford Foreman was the Bear, Mr. Geoffrey Saunders the Lion, Mrs. Mildred Emmet, the Monkey, Mr. Frank Wheeler the Elephant, Miss Barbara Sharp the Cow, Mr. Eric Saunders the Wolf, Miss Jean Mackrory the Lamb (didn't I see her in "Autumn Crocus" by Lyons' Club quite recently?), and Miss Judy Vaughan the Tiger.

MESSRS. PHILIP ALLEN and Lionel Locke designed the stage settings, and Mr. Locke devised the sound effects. The costumes had been designed by Daphne Clark, and the animal masks and costumes were by the Tavistock Little Theatre.

Behind the scenes, Messrs. George Benn and Fred Robinson were the stage managers, assisted by Messrs. Geoffrey and Eric Saunders.

Messrs. Roy Bennett and Fred Greenfield were the lighting managers, and Mrs. Mildred Emmet the wardrobe mistress, assisted by Winifred Giles.

So *The Questors* end another season. Their plays have been "Macbeth," Eugene O'Neill's "Days Without End" and "Noah"—three artistic dramas of giant scope and excellent entertainment.

What of the next season? Only the gods and *The Questors* know, but we can be quite sure that they will continue their quests into the adventure-land of the theatre, and will be attracted only by what is the best.

A bad play by *The Questors* would be as unthinkable as a sharp criticism by myself of any one of their plays.

"THE MIDDLESEX COUNTY TIMES."

13th May, 1939.

'NOAH' PRESENTED BY QUESTORS

End of Season Production

"Interesting" is, perhaps, the most appropriate word to express the feeling uppermost in my mind after seeing one of three performances of Andre Obey's play, "Noah" (as translated by Arthur Wilmurt), given by members of the Questors in their theatre at Mattock-lane, Ealing, on Saturday, Monday and Tuesday evenings. This was the Questors' last production for the present season.

Frankly I was puzzled as to whether the play was intended to be light French satire—a form of dramatic art which the French handle so much more deftly than Britons—or whether it was meant to be taken more or less seriously. Mrs. Noah's modern needlework early in the scenes when the ark was setting forth on its maiden voyage, and the same lady's grouse that she had not neighbours to call on her when it "moored" on Mount Ararat lent colour to the view that it was satire. So did some of Noah's flippant conversations with his "pal," God. On the other hand, when Mr. T. S. Saunders (in the title role) was planning for the best conditions for his friends (the animals aboard), or cogitating sadly about his domestic difficulties and, more especially, in his loneliness on Mount Ararat, with no earthly help but his faith in God still intact, there was an occasional dignity about the central figure in this play that was patriarchal.

Mr. Cyril Thomas gave a vigorous and altogether excellent study of Noah's second son, Ham, ever rebellious against things as they are, wanting to push progress before him as a ball under his foot, and sure that alteration must definitely make for progress. This character—and there are many of the type in the world to-day—could scarcely have been more effectively played.

MRS. NOAH

In portraying Mrs. Noah, Miss Rosalie Van Der Gucht had a role to act that was psychologically complex, though seemingly simple. At first a faithful, cheerful spouse, believing in her adored husband, she had to become later in the play, under Ham's influence, a sour and fretful woman, no fit helpmeet for her husband. As the character had been drawn the interpretation was satisfactory, especially in its simple and maternal moods.

Mr. Philip Allen as the patriarch's youngest son, Japheth, and Mr. Laurie Rivers as Shem, the eldest, had less important roles than the rebellious Ham, but they cleverly differentiated their characters, and made the most of the few chances that came their way to emerge individually from Noah's family circle. The Misses Joyce Gapp, Winifred Giles and Peggy Cooper made a becoming trio of wives for Shem, Ham and Japheth, and jumped about the deck of the ark or leaned over its sides rather as if it was a modern liner. Mr. Lionel Locke completed the cast as "a man."

THE ANIMAL CARGO

Masks, of course, had to be worn by all the eight specimens of the animal creation taken aboard the ark, and personated by Mr. Clifford Foreman (the bear), Mr. Geoffrey Saunders (the philosophic lion), Mrs. Mildred Emmet (the agile monkey), Mr. Frank Wheeler (the elephant), Miss Barbara Sharp (the ruminating cow), Mr. Eric Saunders (the wolf), Miss Jean Mackrory (the lamb) and Miss Judy Vaughan (the tiger).

The most definite of the animal characters as well as the one with the most to do was old Bruin, whom one almost got to like with his dog-like qualities. His exuberant embrace of Noah in the last act left both the patriarch and the audience a little breathless.

This hybrid play, an ill-defined cross between a morality and a burlesque, was produced by Mr. Alfred Emmet with his usual care to detailed stage effects, and he received cordial rounds of applause for his efforts, as did the cast for theirs. Messrs. George Benn and Fred Robinson, and Messrs. G. and E. Saunders as, respectively, stage managers and their assistants, and Messrs. R. Bennett and F. Greenfield, as lighting managers, got through their tasks deftly, and Miss Mildred Emmet (with Miss Winifred Giles to assist her) took charge of the not very elaborate wardrobes of the Noah family. The scenery, all different parts of the ark itself, gave quite a good impression. Mr. Philip Allen and Mr. Lionel Locke designed it and Miss Daphne Clark was responsible for designing the costumes.

A discussion upon this play and production, held in the theatre on Thursday evening, proved almost as animated as that following one of the society's previous productions, "A Bride for the Unicorn."

G.C.

"THE EVENING NEWS".

10th May, 1939

IF there is one thing more than any other which makes the work of the amateur theatre interesting it is the unexpected.

At the end of another season, during which I have seen something like 120 productions in and around London, I know that it has been this quality especially which has kept my interest so constantly alive.

There may have been a few nights of very ordinary performances of very ordinary plays. But always, just when one was beginning to despair, the unexpected turned up. Suddenly one was all attention, bolt upright in one's seat.

No rules, I have found, exist for the location of enterprise. Ability, courage and knowledge of the theatre have flourished in strange places.

Of a winter's night I have sometimes resented journeys to uncomfortable halls in inaccessible suburbs. But, over and over again, such halls in such suburbs have produced first-rate work.

The past week has provided me with three intensely interesting evenings in the amateur theatre, two of which were completely unforeseen. The third, a beautiful production of Obey's "Noah" in a converted scout hut at Ealing, would have been surprising to anyone unfamiliar with the company acting it . . .

Noah in Modern Idiom

MR. ALFRED EMMET'S extraordinarily good production of "Noah," the last of the Ealing Questors' plays this season, raised the whole problem of how best to convey powerful emotion in an expressionistic way.

This is an old morality play beautifully written in a modern idiom. But, because of its simplicity, its understatement, and its broad outline, it seems to demand the superimposed technical methods of "expressionism."

Mr. Emmet, whose grouping was superb, tried some choral tricks, and one was often left a little doubtful if these were sufficiently effective to transcend their artificiality.

Would he not have been better advised to demand absolute sincerity of feeling from his cast and never to have strained after effect?

This, be it quite understood, is the sort of artistic point which could not be raised were it not for the very high standard of accomplishment.

For the first time I have seen that painstaking actor, T. S. Saunders, completely happy in a part; his Noah, played with reverence and great strength, was something of which he may be proud.

Cyril Thomas conveyed all the heavy, bullying malignancy of Ham; somehow Lionel Locke contrived to be totally unreal as the barbarian; Peggy Cooper, Joyce Gap and Rosalie Van Der Gucht were good. Among the "animals," one noticed the slinking tiger of Judy Vaughan.