

AMATEUR STAGE

# QUESTORS IN ROBUST DOCKLAND FARCE

LAST Saturday an enthusiastic first-night audience warmly welcomed Antony Brown's play "Paradise Street" at the Questors Theatre, and its success was none the less real for being partly caused by shock tactics.

The setting, cleverly designed by Beryl Anthony, was a wharf in the London Docks. The story, as old as Father Thames, was one of light matrimonial intrigue that, robbed of its setting and language, would become just another farce. As it stands it is a robust farce; and herein lies its finest quality which the author should aim to retain while turning his mind to more worthy subjects.

The language of the piece, though by no means strong enough to be realistic, was savoury enough to call forth a "tutting" chorus from some of the audience. Undoubtedly the author was faced with the problem of using sufficient oaths to make his dialogue "natural" without the tedious exaggeration of actual realism. Personally I felt he underdid it, thus making his recurring "bleeding" (there are many more expletives that might be used) appear superimposed and the cast slightly self-conscious.

The finest performance of the evening was given by Douglas Thomas as Bert Diamond, the little man whose only boast is his knowledge of the "hoccult"—a smallish part superbly realised. Richard Topps gave a good portrayal of Jack, the sailor, whose proposed marriage initiates the trouble, but he would improve considerably by not staring at the stage—a fault particularly noticeable during his rehearsal of the wedding speech—which, by the way, should be cut by at least half.

Denis Robinson, with a fine make-up gave a lovely comic study as "Parsnip Nose" Trotman, and Ruby Feast played his "Ma," with the first name of "Trafalgar," delightfully. Frank White's blustering bully Joe Burke was literally convulsively funny, and his attempts to dodge his Waterloo at the hands of Trafalgar were superbly done. Joe's daughter Stella, was nicely handled by Peggy Pope; and Francis W. Smith and David Eldridge completed the cast aptly.

Alfred Emmet's spirited production brought out all the play's humour, the scene of the "free-for-all" fight being perfectly managed. But I was not too happy about the odd business with Trotman at the final curtain, the purpose of which I must have missed, and I felt that possibly a few ship's sirens and other dockland noises might have made a better background than the grim silence suggestive of another strike.

PAUL BEDFORD.

STAGE 30.3.50.

## THE QUESTORS

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#### "Paradise Street."

If it had been possible for Ben Jonson and W. W. Jacobs to write a play in collaboration it would in all probability have borne a close resemblance to this play by Mr. Brown. "Paradise Street" has much of the robust quality of Elizabethan comedy, and conveys most vividly the misty atmosphere of London's dockside. It tells of the stratagems and devices by which Joe Burke, a

THE TIMES 3.4.50

## QUESTORS' THEATRE, EALING

### "PARADISE STREET"

By ANTONY BROWN

The professional theatre might do worse than inquire what other plays Mr. Antony Brown has in his drawer or in his head. In *Paradise Street* he has recounted an anecdote of the London waterside, after the style of W. W. Jacobs, and entered into its robust farcical fun with good humour and a nice ear for words.

The play is extremely simple in form. There is a villainous lighterman given to a little smuggling and dependent for comfort at home on a pretty and sensible daughter. When a sailor proposes to marry her, the father resorts to ruses to prevent him. They are absurd ruses, preposterous ruses, and the fun arises, as it does in the sub-plot of *Henry IV, Part Two*, from watching the incompetent plotter and his fantastic henchmen publicly confounded. Mr. Brown's technical devices are as straightforward and modest as his plot. We hear an intrigue planned, and then we watch it enacted. We are treated to rather too many descriptions of events that occur out of sight. But there are plenty of classical precedents, and what matters is that, simple as it is, modest as it is, it keeps us in a good humour.

Though the amateur actors are inclined to overplay the physical aspects of the farce, there are entertaining performances. Miss Ruby Feast makes an amiable and jolly widow in search of a husband, Mr. Francis W. Smith takes full advantage of the boxer turned evangelist who is Mr. Brown's richest creation, and Mr. Douglas Thomas is the most ingeniously ridiculous of the comic henchmen.

lighterman with a taste for smuggling and strong drink, attempts to prevent the marriage of his daughter Stella to a very able seaman, Jack. Successful counter plotting is carried on for the young couple by a delightful old character named Troop, an evangelical revivalist who is constantly getting into trouble with the Lord, and whose acts of reparation usually end in a free fight.

It is necessary for Jack to disappear over the side of a boat and return in the guise of a corpse, pointing an accusing finger at Joe Burke as the cause of his death, before the couple are finally united and Joe himself is ready to sign the pledge or beat the drum in Troop's Evangelical Band rather than marry the lady that Troop's Machiavellian strategy produces for him.

Mr. Brown has introduced many picturesque adjectives in what is presumably authentic dockside language. But he does not strike a happy balance by using only one or two of the more common expletives over and over again, and disguising one or two of the others by a change of the initial letter. It is, however, a play that is full of action, and great attention has been paid to the characters. Frank White is excellent as the dockside veteran Burke. He mouths his oaths with much relish, and in the opening acts swaggers around the stage like any Elizabethan bully. His two henchmen, Leonard Trotman and Bert Diamond, played by Denis Robinson and Douglas Thomas, are a little overdrawn. Bert's faithfulness to horoscopes and Trotman's leaning towards vulgar literature are not quite consistent with the type of man who is bred on the banks of the Thames. Nevertheless, they provide a further touch of comedy.

The prize character is undoubtedly Troop. Francis W. Smith makes him a crafty, tempestuous, good-natured old character—far from being a hypocrite but ready always to strike a blow as a means of emphasising his strong beliefs. Good acting also comes from Richard Topps as Jack, Peggy Pope as Stella, David Eldridge as an apprentice, Philip, and Ruby Feast as Burke's would-be wife, whose enthusiasm for matrimony is only exceeded by her taste for dress. The play is produced by Alfred Emmet.

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