

Daily Telegraph
8 March 1952

PLAY IN VERSE BY EALING AMATEURS

A FIERCE TEST

By W. A. DARLINGTON

The Questors Theatre at Ealing has long been known as one of the leading amateur theatres in this country. Recently its members had to face a take-it-or-leave-it ultimatum about their playhouse. Boldly, they bought it. But they still need over £5,000 to complete the purchase.

I hope they will get their money for the standard of their production and acting is impressive and they do plays which are out of the general run.

Their present offering, "Testament of Cresseid," a new piece in verse by one of their own members, Alexandra Mikellatos, is a fierce test for actors. The authoress has literary ability but little sense of form and hardly any of that theatrical guile by which experienced dramatists make things easy for their audiences.

The story of Cressida's defiance and death emerges only slowly from an immense amount of obscure talk which may well be clearer on the printed page. Patricia Jones played Cressida with sincerity and intelligence and did all that an actress could to make clear her very complicated state of mind.

John Vernon was direct and manly as Troilus and Joan Bate gave a welcome touch of comedy as a frivolous and empty-headed Helen of Troy.

Middlesex County Times
23 Feb 1952

Another new play by the Questors

NOMINATED FOR FOYLE AWARD

On Saturday next, March 1, the Questors will present the premiere performance of a new play, "Testament of Cresseid," by Alexandra Mikellatos. The run continues until March 11, and the box office is now open.

The authoress, who is an acting member of the Questors Theatre, was trained for the stage at the Theatre Studio run by Michel Saint Denis before the war. Her play, which is written in a modern verse idiom that has excited the people working on it was enthusiastically received by members, the majority of those present expressing a desire to see it given a full production. Since then the play has been extensively rewritten and improved; and it has a considerable dramatic quality, derived from the theatrical experience of the authoress.

"Testament of Cresseid," as the title implies, is an original and fascinating treatment of the familiar story of Troilus and Cressida, with the emphasis on the character of Cresseid. It is based on Robert Henryson's poem. For this production, by Barbara Hutchins, the settings have been designed by Graham Heywood and the costumes by Carlisle Chang, a West Indian artist, whose work is new to the Questors.

It is very interesting to know that this play has been nominated for the recently-instituted Charles Henry Foyle New Play Award, about which there has been discussion in our correspondence columns in recent months.

Members should apply for their free seats in the usual way. Non-members wishing to join should write or phone the theatre manager, The Questors Theatre, Mattock-lane, W.5. (EALing 5184), from whom all particulars can be obtained.

Stage

6 March 1952

THE QUESTORS

"TESTAMENT OF CRESSEID"

On March 1, at their theatre in Mattock-lane, Ealing, W.5, the Questors presented a new play by Alexandra Mikellatos entitled

"Testament of Cresseid."

The play follows the path of traditional Greek drama with comparative faithfulness and, as a tragedy, is both effective and impressive. It is when Miss Mikellatos in developing her theme introduces some kind of Existentialist philosophy that the play tends to become obscure. She implies by Cressida's speeches and misfortunes that the gods are false and cruel and that sickness and suffering, instead of ennobling the spirit, degrade it. Only one character displays any charity, the rest being selfish or pitiless, Troilus himself being in such black despair that he has become practically emotionless.

Many of the lines are in verse, with flights of poetic imagination in evidence. The temple scene, where Cressida is cursed with leprosy, and the rioting in the leper house are the two most dramatic events, and the author has, at times, used the chorus to break the starkness of the tragedy. A little judicious pruning, however, would not only help to speed the action, which is slow in places, but would benefit the play as a whole. Patricia Jones acquits herself extremely well in the arduous rôle of Cressida. Her father, the priest Calchas, is an opportunist torn between his duty to the gods and his own social position. Francis W. Smith plays this part with the right amount of unhappy hesitation. An interesting study of the flirtatious Helen is presented by Joan Bate, John Vernon is a gloomy but virile Troilus, and able support is rendered by the rest of the company. The play is produced by Barbara Hutchins.

Middx County Times

8 March 1952

Premiere performance by the Questors

"TESTAMENT OF CRESSEID"

Last Saturday the Questors presented the premiere performance of "Testament of Cresseid," a play written by Alexandra Mikellatos, one of their own members. The run continues until Tuesday next March 11.

Patricia Jones plays the part of Cresseid, and gives a sustained performance of this most trying role with such assurance, and variety of facial and vocal expression, that even the most wary could only call it brilliant. It is the most outstanding performance at the Questors for many months. Only sufferers from amnesia will hesitate to call it memorable. It ascends to the rare class that makes modern critics wish for the necessary space to give a detailed description. Perhaps the most salient part is that where Cresseid, stricken with leprosy, turns into a personification of hatred. One of the author's finest speeches, this is delivered by Patricia Jones as though the very blood in her veins has curdled into the most potent vitriol. Her whole body, face, hands, mouth, and eyes all distort into a ghastly picture of savage hatred. If one is tempted to turn to Shakespeare, it is to hear Troilus, saying of Cressida, "She is as far high - soaring o'er thy praises as thou unworthy to be called her servant."

Quiet authority

Francis W. Smith plays Calchas, Cresseid's father, with quiet authority. The part is written as a satire on religion, the scene in the Temple, when Cresseid speaks with Zeus, whom she sees in the likeness of her earthly father (Mr. Smith is also Zeus), and the following scene, where Calchas is besieged by a particularly well-rehearsed chorus, being full of pointed comment on the nature of the god and his wordly servants. A realistic attitude to religion is one of the play's main themes, linked to which is a derogation of the idea that man is ennobled by suffering.

The play would not be complete without Helen. This is a clever comedy portrayal by Joan Bate; though just a trifle much "light relief" to my mind. Then there is

Troilus (John Vernon) who is approached by the mendicant Cresseid for alms. He does not recognise her, but is merely moved to remembrance of her by the hideous form in which she now appears. He gives her all he has of worth, never realising that his most valued gesture is the kiss he plants on her leprous hand. This touching moment is beautifully handled by both performers.

The author's lepers are portraits of despairing greed; they fight among themselves for pitiful scraps of food, and death is just their cue to fight for the possessions of the newly-created corpse. This is the pathetic end, when Cresseid dies.

Masterly examples

Graham Heywood's solid, formal settings are masterly examples of mood evoked with economy. Cleverly concealed behind a facade of utter simplicity is a complex efficiency that paves the way for a smooth transition from each scene into the next. These changes are handled quite admirably by the producer, Barbara Hutchins, whose use of music and lighting (particularly in the Temple scene) occasionally becomes almost unbearably telling. Indeed, the author and the audience owe a great deal to the producer, designer, and the leading actress. But this is the point from which we started; and it is the point to which we will return, in the future, whenever we hear mention of Troilus or his fair lady Cresseid.

PAUL BEDFORD

Drama

Summer 1952

TWO NEW VERSE PLAYS

"Testament of Cressida" at the Questors

Alas, poor Cressida, her story of infidelity is one that subsequent civilisations with their attendant wars have rendered commonplace. We see her now as a light-weight figure—a pathetic Tennessee Williams heroine, whose only sin was frailty.

Alexandra Mikellatos' play, however, is conceived as a full-scale tragedy. Like the Henryson version of the myth it deals with the fate of Cressida when, deserted by Diomedes and many subsequent lovers, she is stricken with leprosy by the gods as a punishment for a "blasphemy" which is, in essence, a demand for truth. It is strongly written with passages of good dramatic verse and in manner resembles a Greek tragedy retold by an Existentialist. There is great insistence on personality. Cressida must behave as she does because she is Cressida and the truths of others are false to her. Perhaps because of this insistence, and the fact that the part is written rather on one note, she does not entirely succeed in winning the sympathy of the audience.

Generally speaking the authoress has not yet learned when and what to discard. Too many minor themes are touched upon which, although exciting, confuse the main issue of the play. Perhaps the best writing is in the simple, moving meeting between Troilus and the dying Cressida and in the satirical comic vein employed for Helen and the Chorus. If this play fails, it fails nobly; in the words of another Troilus "the will is infinite and the execution confined."

The Questors are to be congratulated on fulfilling with this production one of the most important functions of the Amateur Theatre, which is to provide a hearing for promising new dramatists.

"Believe It Or Not," at the Watgate

This is a promising first play by Peter Albery, a dramatist who already writes with some distinction. It is set on Mount Olympus at the time of the

Trojan Wars and it is concerned with the unsuccessful efforts of a benevolent but bewildered Zeus to impose order on his rebellious, amorous offspring and the warring mortals below. He is finally confronted by a messenger from Higher Authority who tells him that Man has outgrown the gods, that they are now to exist only through the mind of a mortal—the blind poet, Homer, and he whirled them off into legend and a different kind of immortality.

The play has faults; the first act sags, the humour is often coy and the jokes over-protracted. In the main, however, the story is told with wit, liveliness and a wealth of imagery and metaphor. But it is in his more serious mood that the dramatist is most compelling. The scenes between Hera and Zeus have great felicity of mood and verse and the play as a whole has, for all its surface ebullience, unusual depths. For this, though cleverly disguised, is a Cautionary Tale. Zeus finds he cannot regenerate man with even the latest thunderbolts; force, the dramatist implies, is an outmoded weapon. Like many of us, however, Zeus cannot grasp a concept of universal order based on love and humility; but, the messenger insists, "every conception of magnitude is always preposterous in the beginning. It isn't the possibility of a thought that matters, but the purity of its conception and the selflessness of its pursuit."

DONALD FITZJOHN