

'SUMMER AND SMOKE' AT QUESTORS' THEATRE

Moving piece set in 1913

The controversial modern American author Tennessee Williams, much of whose work has been banned at various times in this country, is the writer of the next production at the Questors' Theatre, Mattock-lane, Ealing.

The theatre is to present, from March 15, "Summer and Smoke," one of Tennessee Williams' most exciting plays.

"Summer and Smoke" is not one of the author's most sensational plays (although thought by some to be one of his best), largely because the deep sexual passions involved in the plot are often presented in an unspoken form.

Nevertheless, it is a moving piece of work about the prim laughter of a Mississippi clergyman and her relations with the wild young doctor next door.

Set in 1913, it tells the story of two people who cross and re-cross each other's paths, and yet are never ready for each other at the same time. And the end? Not a happy solution, but perhaps not entirely tragic.

Some of the Questors' most experienced actors and actresses are in the cast, including John Clemow as the doctor and Theresa Heffernan as Alma, the clergyman's daughter.

Production is by Pamela Richards who, with the designer, has had to face severe problems in building a set to match the swift changes of scene. They have adopted a solution which is both ingenious (involving the use of remote-controlled flats) and attractive to the eye.

Because of the interest "Summer and Smoke" has aroused it has been decided to extend the run. The play will open on Saturday, March 15, and will be played from March 17 to March 26 without a break. All these are evening performances except for Sunday, March 23, which will be a matinee (3 p.m.). The performance on Wednesday, March 26, will be in aid of the New Theatre Fund and members' free seats will not be available that night.

The box office will be open from March 10-14 from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. and on nights of performance from 6.30 p.m. to 8 p.m. It will also open on Sunday, March 23, from 2.30 to 3 p.m.

Members only may book seats. New members are welcome and details may be obtained from the theatre (EAL 5184).

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A BRILLIANT PLAY BRILLIANTLY PRESENTED

'Summer and smoke'

HERE in the Questors' current production, Tennessee Williams' "Summer and Smoke" is a brilliant play brilliantly presented. From the opening, when the darkened stage lightens, to reveal an ingeniously contrived set by means of which two homes are simultaneously presented together with a central place dominated by a stark, evocative angel statue — from the opening, Saturday's audience sat enthralled. And, at the close, when the cast returned no more in response to the thunderous applause, they sat on for a few moments in their seats, as if unable to believe that the long, absorbing dream was over.

Long . . . for we lived a lifetime in that preacher's unhappy house! First, were the two children, the preacher's daughter and the doctor's son, beautifully played by Susan Lovelace and Lester Watson from Bushey Hill School, their soft Southern accents setting the pattern for the rest of the cast. Then came the grown girl, Alma, and the young doctor newly returned to his sleepy hometown. She, repressed affected, nervously gabbling and with a wonderful silly laugh (played by Theresa Heffernan), and he, conscious of a bond between them but noting with a beautifully observed, considering, clinical manner, the signs of her neurosis.

A BRILLIANT PERFORMANCE

As the doctor's son, John Clemow is brilliant. He has a charming voice, and the nuances of his behaviour are superbly conveyed. It is possible to accept the character as a whole, and the young man's attempts to break through Alma's affection to the ardent, pitifully struggling creature beneath, are beautifully done.

"You think you are stuffed with rose leaves!" he says impatiently. And, pointing to the anatomical chart which hangs in his father's surgery, he describes the 'three hungry birds' which live in the tree that is the body, 'birds in a tree they cannot fly out of.' She, he says, admits the bird that lives in the brain, she will feed the bird that is the stomach, but the bird that lives at the seat of love — that bird she starves and seeks to deny. "There are other things between a man and a woman than respect," he tells her.

But Alma, a prisoner of her own contriving, will not learn, and so she watches as the young doctor, in his father's absence, falls a victim to the long, sultry summer days, and turns to drunkenness and debauchery. From the window of the preacher's house next door she watches, while always in the background, watching in turn, is her mad mother, shrewd in her spiteful knowledge of her daughter's heart.

Diana Benn is excellent in this role, muttering to herself, crunching her eternal ice-cream cornets, gritting her teeth at the jigsaw puzzle with which she is set to play. "Insufferable cross yourself," she flashes, repeating after her clergyman husband his by no means sotto voce remark concerning herself. And the struggle for the plumed hat which she has abstracted from a local shop, with its revelation of open hatred between mother and daughter — and Alma for once forgetting her affectation — is wonderfully felt.

'FRIEND OF THE FAMILY'

Then there is the 'friend of the family,' Mrs. Bassett (Carla Craik), a lady who 'knows all about Blake' and who appears from time to time as the joyful bringer of unhappy news; and Rosa, the Mexican girl (Ruth Tremayne) with her voluptuous dancing and her feeling description of a childhood crowded in one room with numerous brothers and sisters and amorous parents; and the preacher father (Philip Wright), well conveyed. Nellie (Una Chapman), Alma's ingenuous pupil was, I felt, the least bit overplayed.

And so the tension builds, until at last Alma goes to the young doctor and offers herself. Here, Clemow's playing is perfect. Just the right touch of embarrassment, of concern, of distaste. For once, as Alma truly understood, there might have been something between them. But, the years have not awaited her change of heart. Her young pupil Nellie has grown up, and she and the young doctor are engaged to be married.

Dominating the play, as the author intended, is the wide, serene skyscape and, etched against it, the uncaring angel, symbolic of Eternity, to which the slow heartbreak of an Alma (whose name, symbolically, means 'soul') is as nought. "Who, if I were to cry out, would hear me among the angelic orders?"

Full marks go to Edward Mendelsohn for solving the problem of the setting, and to Pamela Richards for an inspired production. Original music was specially composed by Yvonne Cox which, played by a small ensemble under the direction of Eric Stuckey and recorded by Alec Brown, is worth listening to.

Other parts are played by Ned Gethings, Roy Montgomery, Neville Bradbury, Jill Tyler, Patrick Bacon, June Davies, Kenneth Porter. Costumes, circa 1900-1910, are by Kim Zeigler.

The show continues until March 26, the performance on that day being in aid of the New Theatre Fund.