

Virtues and defects remain in Osborne play at Questors

WHEN John Osborne's early play "Epitaph for George Dillon" (now running at the Questors Theatre until October 17) was given its world premiere at Oxford four years ago, I wrote of it as follows:

"The Angry Young Man hero, an 'artistic' middle-classer who takes lodgings in working-class suburbia, sounds much too much like an unsuccessful undergraduate to be really interesting, and in his duologues on sex and failure with a faded forty-year-old female called Ruth, the writing of the piece is seen at its worst.

"At its best, however, in the uncompromising observation sympathetic yet free from all sentimental condescension, of the Elliot family and their milieu. . . ."

Then, a little later: "I realize now that what bored me in 'George Dillon' were not so

much the 'undergraduate' ideas (which seemed tedious only because they were familiar) but the undergraduate language."

Today, both virtues and defects remain. Above all, the character of Ruth continues to appear an embarrassingly literary blot on the landscape.

When, at the supposed height of her caferé, she suddenly starts to quote, "It's a Barnum-and-Bailey world, just as phoney as it can be", we can only groan "Hear, hear."

In Raymond Moss's Questors' production, Barbara Hutchins — who has become peccant in roles of Kensingtonian emotionalism — battles gamely but unavailingly with a part which one feels Celia Johnson alone might be able to make tolerable.

Larger figure

George Dillon himself, though, if sharing Ruth's penchant for pretentious conversation, emerges as an altogether larger figure.

Through what is clearly something of a self-portrait, executed before his meteoric rise to fame with "Look Back in Anger," Mr. Osborne traces in painfully truthful strokes the predicament of a person who fears he may have "the symptoms of talent but not the disease": from the irony of needing to live off good-hearted philistines while struggling for work, to the indignity of the interview with the National Assistance officer.

Yet the portrait isn't wholly autobiographical. Osborne hasn't been forced to end in degrading compromise like George; and George, unlike Osborne, despises his fellow-men.

Moreover, his egotism increases rather than detracts from his dramatic size. Without this disagreeable side to his nature, his desire for recognition loses complexity.

At Mattock-lane, in Larry Irvin's performance, the disagreeable side is muted. But Philip Wright, Betty Ogden, Sylvia Estop, and especially Dorothy Boyd Taylor plump-slumped and blinkingly bespectacled as the Plain lane daughter, a sea-change from Chekhov's Irina), form a convincing family group. And Tony Worth, a horribly credible theatrical shark, reminds us again of his Tafferism.

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