

10 FEB 1972

One-act plays by students

THE Questors' highly successful student group will be presenting three one-act plays at the theatre on February 15-19.

The first play will be "Suddenly Last Summer", Tennessee Williams' powerful drama set in the Southern United States and concerning a man's escape from the influence of his mother, and the mother's hatred for the girl who helped him to freedom.

The second play on the programme will be "Rites" by Maureen Duffy. In many ways the play could be taken as a plea for Women's Lib, as all the women in the storyline have been exploited, in some way, by men.

The action takes place in a ladies' lavatory and, though the play is funny the climax is unexpected and tragic.

The last in the trilogy of plays is "Electra" by Sophocles. Based on the famous legend of Orestes, the play tells of Orestes' efforts, with the help of his sister Electra, to avenge the murder of their father Agamemnon.

Questors students put on display

Reviewed
by
**BERNARD
TAYLOR**

A curious mixture of pathos and mirth made up the programme presented by the Questors Theatre last week as a showcase for the talents of its student group.

The diversity of this programme — which contrasted the smoky atmospherics of Tennessee Williams' "Suddenly Last Summer" with the glib contemporary style of Maureen Duffy's "Rites" and the heavy drama of Sophocles' "Electra" — was obviously designed to show the range of the group's capabilities.

But it also severely tested their limitations, which were most apparent in the darker moments of their material.

While they were all very successful in the lighter territory of the very amusing "Rites" — the general rendering of which was virtually faultless — they failed, on the whole, to attain the right emotional pitch in the other two plays, both of which suffered in these interpretations from overstatement and a lack of shading.

This was largely the fault of the director, Wylie Longmore, who could have scaled down some of the performances, done a better job of casting some of the parts, and orchestrated these two plays with more restraint and subtlety.

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It must be pointed out, however, that Mr. Longmore is a student himself. And while the lack of experience was clearly obvious, he nevertheless showed himself to be a director of some promise — particularly in his deft handling of "Rites".

The presentation also indicated a shortage of male students, for they were outnumbered by at least three to one among those taking part.

Those who emerged from this showing as the bright prospects of the student group were headed by Maureen Connew, who showed considerable promise both in her comic role in "Rites" and in the title role of "Electra".

Her performance in the Sophocles play was overcharged and consequently melodramatic to some de-

A GIRL TO WATCH



Maureen Connew, one of the bright prospects among the present crop of Questors students.

gree, but as these adjectives are more strongly applicable to the production as a whole, the blame cannot be laid entirely at her door.

If her performance had been toned down slightly, and been given better support, it could have resulted in a very fine piece of acting. She has an expressive face and an excellent voice, and firm command

of her physical movements and gestures, and she combines all these qualities with a natural stage presence.

With more experience and polish, she could well become an actress of some stature, particularly, I think, in roles calling for a degree of urbanity and sophistication — two qualities which were needed in the role of Mrs. Venable in the Williams play.

As it was, however, the role was taken by Irene Macdonald and it was a definite case of miscasting. Miss Macdonald's portrayal of an elderly divorcee was commendable in its own way — it could have been perfectly right in another play — but in "Suddenly Last Summer" it was quite wrong.

Her portrayal lacked the air of worldliness, emotional command and intellectual ruthlessness which are the essential qualities of this part.

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In the same play, Rosemary Parry Jones fared exceptionally well in what was probably an even more demanding role — that of the distraught niece and potential victim of Mrs. Venable.

It is a role that requires the actress to steer a thin line between drama and melodrama, and in which it is extremely difficult to find balance. Miss Parry Jones deserves a lot of credit for the fact that she failed only by a very narrow margin.

"Rites" was by far the best ensemble effort of the programme and everyone concerned deserves a mention. Irene Macdonald was much more at home in her part as an elderly widow. Among others who particularly caught the eye were Janice Stanley as Norma, Dana Stuczynska and Caroline Finch as the ladies in charge of the women's public toilet in which the play is set, and, again, Maureen Connew as an office girl.

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Students' jungles of tragedy and comedy

THREE jungles were created on the stage of the Questers Theatre last week when Suddenly Last Summer, Rites, and Electra were performed there by the Questers student group.

Suddenly Last Summer by Tennessee Williams presented us with a tangled jungle of cloying emotionalism. A possessive, near-incestuous mother grieved for her son, Sebastian, who had died far from her grasp in New Orleans.

His strange death was witnessed by his cousin Catherine. The experience, rife with Williams' usual body punches of paederasty, homosexuality and cannibalism, had driven the girl into a state of mental unbalance.

The mother refused to believe the circumstances of Sebastian's death. By using the influence of her money she tried to have the dreadful story lobotomised from Catherine's brain.

The main part of the play was taken up with the deranged girl's tale of her cousin's death. It was to Rosemary Parry Jones as Catherine that the honours went for a powerful performance in this tense play.

The mother was played by Irene MacDonald, who was almost convincing in the difficult rôle of the domineering matriarch which she marred by allowing her Southern accent to slip.

Relief

The second play of the evening, chosen to provide comic relief between two heavy dramas, was Rites by Maureen Duffy. Set in a ladies' lavatory, this piece mixed character comedy with a jungle of primitivism.

As in Golding's novel, The Lord of the Flies, we saw how the basic savagery in us all is never far beneath the patina of civilisation.

In Rites it was the battle of the sexes that stirred up the bestiality which only ended with the brutal slaying of a lesbian who was mistaken for a hated male intruder.

Fine characterisations were given by Claire Patrick and Irene MacDonald as Nellie and Dot. Their scene in which one of them described her sole visit to a gents provided a high point to the humour.

Dana Stuczynska gave a commendable performance as the manageress of the convenience, Ada. Her ego and bosoms were equally inflated, a man-trap, produced by her reading of the benefits of thinking big!

The tight direction of the dialogue by Wyllie Longmore, produced the desired comedy and horror but the climax of the killing and the subsequent disposal of the corpse in the incinerator came without sufficient build-up to justify the change in mood.

Blood-lust

The last jungle we explored was in Sophocles' Electra. In this, vengeance wove a black maze of blood-lust around the daughter of Agamemnon. He had been murdered by Aegisthus who usurped his throne and wife, placing Electra in a Hamlet-like position of being alone in upholding her dead father's honour.

Unlike Hamlet, it was not lack of decision that stayed her hand, but the lack of her brother, Orestes, who had been living as an exile for many years.

Orestes returned, having sent word that he had been killed, that he might catch Aegisthus off guard. This news brought Electra to a pinnacle of grief and gave us the best minutes of the play as she lamented the loss of father, brother, and all hope of revenge for her family's honour.

Inevitably, Orestes revealed himself to his sister

and slew his treacherous mother and step-father as the malefactors of the piece.

The play centred very much around the title rôle and this was fortunately well played by Maureen Connew. She managed to capture the style of acting demanded by Greek tragedy.

Other performances of note were given by Peter Harborne as Orestes, and Clare Patrick as Clytaemnestra, his mother. The latter attained the regal authority required by the part and was especially good in her confrontation scene with Electra.

If a fault could be found in the production it would be with the Chorus as is usual in all performances of classical drama in this country.

Choral speaking is an art, more difficult than choral singing. It requires endless rehearsals to perfect, and anything less than perfect is bad. Perhaps directors would be best advised to replace this difficult convention with a narrator who is unlikely to be out of key or synchronisation with himself.

D. A.