

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

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The Borage Pigeon Affair

by Garry O'Connor

James Saunders' latest full-length play—it opens the Questors Tenth New Play Festival—is a cosy affair. One feels warm towards it, but not over-enthusiastic. Mr. Saunders tackles all the right themes, in the right manner, with plenty of verbal invention—turning the obvious gag to useful advantage—but at some point he stops short. The result is pleasurable, but only mildly astringent.

The Pigeon Affair itself is a set of loosely connected pegs on which to hang Mr. Saunders' verbal jokes. An obsessive town councillor, in charge of public health, sees his provincial backwater threatened by the menace of another town councillor's pigeons. A local newspaper hack, a baggy-trousered balding liberal, promotes, for no personal gain, the controversy. A television current affairs programme descends on the town, and the smoothie talks producer seduces a local girl, who of course is the daughter of the pigeon fancier.

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The plot thickens without deepening—its peak is verbal adultery in contiguous telephone booths—with local machinations which smack of Llareggub Hill, and a sandwich man who relishes snogging couples. Like a Paris gendarme, he blows his whistle at the end of each scene to marshal on the next. The ending is a composed still for the TV camera: a parody of a Jean-Luc Godard view of the pigeon controversy.

The humour careers from deliberately feeble puns through restaurant gags to xenophobic outbursts on the colour question and the need to stem the invasion of foreign birds. Some of the flights of Mr. Saunders' fantasy are undoubtedly very engaging, and the whole is spiced up with music-hall professionalism. Old hat, but judging from the reaction of the audience, it still goes down very well.

At moments one detects a more serious implication, as though Mr. Saunders might be struggling to say that something has seriously gone wrong with civilisation, but the frustration is cosily ironed out in a destructive image of a cricket match, and a quick reckoning up of how many obscenities have been aired. The truth is that Mr. Saunders is a populariser: he tempts with great literary charm, leaving the real issues hanging in mid-air. But to get them to hang there in the first place is perhaps something.

By its emphasis on parody, and by rapid furniture changes on the open stage, Bill McLaughlin's production is a perfect vehicle for the witty self-denigration of the pigeon wranglers. Certain touches, such as a sudden unexplained carnival, are a delight in themselves, while Keith Godman, as the Sandwich-Board Man, brightens his linkmanship with effective absurdity.

Among a talented cast, Mary Jones as the Landlady is outstanding, and a whole armoury of Councillors and Camera Crew keep the wit on the simmer.

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The Appointment by Malcolm Quantrill opens with a snoring tramp on a bench by a silvered bare tree. Upon awakening, he thumps his back to warm up, though in the theatre on a hot night more is needed to establish a freezing Hyde Park setting. He is the outsider, and his only "chemical" experience, as he says, has been Auschwitz.

Meantime, the "Preservation Society," whose aims appear uncertain, continues into decline looked after by an ageing president and an attractive secretary. Other members of the society are less wholesome—a horrible old harridan who scratches her bum, and a sly old curate who has stepped backward off a page of a Graham Greene novel. The curate, in the most effective scene of the first act, attempts a seduction, but this fails with the emergence of the old bag from the loo. She abuses the secretary for having long loose hair, and advises her on a bun: "At least you know where you are with a bun." To which the reply is made: "Not if it's in the oven."

Other lines of this slow moving play betray a forlorn out of touch nostalgia for the old world. Perhaps the play is trying to give us an image of our own decaying

dilapidated world—such as Mrozek does in *Tango*—but if this is so, the style is not incisive enough to carry the content. Every third line at least needs cutting. The acting, too, in Michael Bird's production, is slow-paced, and too ominous. Yet it must have been difficult for him to know where to place the emphasis. Imagine shades of Joe Orton fighting it out with *Tales from the Vienna Woods*.