

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

The New Plays Festivals

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THE NEW PLAYS FESTIVAL IN RETROSPECT

by Martin Bowley

Three years ago B.A. Young wrote in The Financial Times of the 1966 New Plays Festival "The Questors is a valuable test bed for playwrights. They get a chance to see their plays done without having to persuade a commercial management that they will make money. The writer can see whether he has achieved what he thinks he has, and the Questors' audiences, eclectic and loyal, sit patiently through some occasionally sticky evenings in the hope of striking gold".

At the end of our tenth festival Mr Young's estimate of our aims is still true, and, with record attendances reported for this year's plays, his tribute to our audiences is more justified than ever. Of course there have been some very sticky evenings over the past ten years, and for the acting and active members who have been involved in the preparation of the ten festivals there have been some very sticky months of rehearsals, but recent research into the history of the festival has revealed a remarkable proportion of gold among the twenty-six full length and eleven short plays which have been performed at New Plays Festivals.

Inevitably **Next Time I'll Sing To You** remains the outstanding success of the past ten years with its West End run of nearly two hundred performances in 1963, its Evening Standard award and its numerous productions in the country, on the continent and in the United States, but it is not alone in having gone on from The Questors to other productions.

Dannie Abse's **The House of Cowards** was produced by the Welsh Theatre Company in Cardiff, and **Gone** was broadcast on the Third Programme and has been produced at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, on the continent and in the United States.

James Saunders' **Barnstable** was also broadcast on the Third Programme and subsequently presented at the Dublin Festival in 1961 and at the Comedy Theatre in London, while **The Pedagogue** was produced at the Aldwych Theatre in 1964, by the Royal Shakespeare Company as part of Expeditions One.

Walter Lever's **The Guy** was produced by the International Theatre Club at the Mercury Theatre and David Shellan's **It Was Never So Merry, My Lord** was produced at Richmond Theatre last year, while no fewer than three of the plays—Albert Bennett's **The Work Out**, Ken Fraser's **The Igloo** and Roy Minton's **Death in Leicester** have been performed at Edinburgh. Six of the plays have been published—three of them in Dannie Abse's volume of **Three Questor Plays**—and **The House of Cowards** won the Charles Henry Foyle New Play Award for 1959-60, and was chosen by J.C. Irwin as one of the Plays of the Year.

The New Plays Festival is the biggest undertaking of our year. It strains our resources almost to breaking point. It exhausts the energies of over a hundred active and acting members for much of the summer. But the story of the past ten years has proved it to be surprisingly, unbelievably perhaps, successful.

In 1965 Alfred Emmet wrote "there are not and never can be enough masterpieces to go round, and unless someone is prepared to do the promising plays the promising play wrights will never go on to write the masterpieces that some of them at least may have it in them to write". Inevitably the past ten years have seen their fair share of failure, but the subsequent history of many of the plays would seem to indicate that a gratifying number can be described as more than just promising, and that one at least is, arguably, a masterpiece. We need no further justification for our efforts,

MARTIN BOWLEY