

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

10th New Plays Festival

The Sunday Telegraph

THEATRE

by Frank Marcus

The enterprising Questors Theatre, a long-established amateur organisation operating in Ealing, launch their annual New Plays Festival with *The Borage Pigeon Affair*, by James Saunders. Most of Mr. Saunders's plays have received their first performances here. It is an arrangement that works to their mutual advantage; the Questors offer their well-equipped theatre—not unlike a miniature version of that in Chichester, unlimited manpower, dedication, and total integrity freed from commercial considerations. Mr. Saunders contributes his talent and his reputation.

In "*The Borage Pigeon Affair*," he takes a panoramic satirical view—a bird's eye view, if you like—of contemporary society. Borage is a small town near London, and the action spans one day. Unlike *Llaregyb*, it does not inspire a hymn of life but an exposure of viciousness and hypocrisy. The town's pigeons, hitherto harmless nuisances, become the object of irrational fear and hate. Not only do they defile monuments, they are said to pollute the air and to carry the germs of pestilence.

Councillor Garnish, the Labour man, is a well-known pigeon fancier; Councillor Badger, his implacable opponent, all but suggests forcible repatriation for the pigeons, with a packet of bird-seed for each. Mr. Garnish's position is weakened by his private failings: he "carries on" with Mrs. Badger. Meanwhile his daughter offers herself as a life-belt to a seedy reporter, the play's anti-hero, but is seduced by a phoney television personality who arrives to exploit the pigeon scandal for the benefit of his viewers. The play ends with a carefully arranged tableau: the statue at the centre, pigeon perched on top-hat, surrounded by corpses with red ribbons flowing from their mouths into plastic pools of blood.

It sounds grim but it is in fact extraordinarily funny, even jolly. This jollity, slapstick, and farce tends to undermine the serious purpose of the play. It is like a Breughel canvas, with innumerable figures playing varieties of games, but lacking a central focus. Everything is in sharp outline; there is little room for subtlety.

The play's distinction lies in the writing. There are felicitous phrases and occasional penetrating insights. A creepy landlady tells a moving story of her mad son; the shabby journalist hints at despair; even the ludicrous TV star is not unaware of his inner emptiness. The cast of 30 are mostly caricatures, but always there is an underlying compassion. The pigeons are not intended as a metaphor for the colour problem, but rather as a generalised symbol for the objects of prejudice. People who are frustrated require "a conglomeration of scratching-posts."

I hope that some of our more progressive repertory theatres will avail themselves of this consistently entertaining, intelligent, and humane play.