

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

10th New Plays Festival

Thames Valley Times

Playwright puts the cat amongst the pigeons...

Our local councillors would doubtless be shocked and, in some cases, offended by Twickenham playwright James Saunders' cutting send-up of council affairs in his latest play, "The Borage Pigeon Affair," which opened Questors theatre's 10th annual new plays festival last week.

It is highly unlikely that Mr. Saunders based any of the cartoon characters in his play on members of Richmond upon Thames Council, but the flaming arrow has been shot in their direction.

The setting is a town called Borage, just outside London, where Labour and Tory councillors keep themselves amused wrangling endlessly over trivia at the town hall. As soon as they lose interest in the topic under discussion, they fall asleep.

The latest burning issue, sparked off by the megalomaniac Tory leader, Dinsdale Badger, concerns the town's pigeon population. Badger proposes to kill them off because they are becoming a menace, but Labour Councillor Makepeace Garnish, who keeps pigeons of his own, is horrified at the suggestion.

A local reporter, bored and frustrated by the triviality of local affairs, calls in a TV reporting team to cover the pigeon controversy.

This diversion allows Mr. Saunders to vent his wrath on TV types, like the phoney producer who assumes that everybody has heard of him and the scatter-brained continuity girl whom he is constantly criticising—behind her back, of course.

There is a valid point here about the magnification of unimportant matters by TV and Press when they are determined to get a story, whether it exists or not. This is true of top-line news programmes like "24-hours" and "Today."

Colourful though the TV types were, they had very little impact compared with the wildly caricatured council members: Badger, the demented Fascist, voting in favour of a motion with a Nazi salute; the bombastic Brigadier, accusing local immigrants of fouling the footpath; and Barnet Puke, the completely ineffectual Town Clerk, scribbling notes like a nervous secretary.

One could argue that the play contained too many outlandish characters and attempted to embrace too much in one evening. But when a play is consistently entertaining, as this undoubtedly was, one only thinks objectively on reflection, when the laughter and the applause have died down.

Besides, Mr. Saunders' primary message about the amount of time wasted on trivia, not only by local councils as a whole, but by petty-minded individuals who are elected because of petty-mindedness, came over loud and clear.

The other two plays in the festival—"The Appointment" by Malcolm Quantrill and "The Dogs of Pavlov" by Dannie Abse—were not half as successful as "The Borage Pigeon Affair," either in presentation or literary merit.

"The Appointment," about the appointment of a managing director for the Preservation Society, suffered a chronic lack of definition and purpose. Despite good acting and adequate direction, none of the characters was credible to any satisfactory degree.

The fact that the one and only female member of the Society, a lascivious old bag, constantly scratched her backside, only served to emphasize Mr. Quantrill's lack of imagination in defining his characters.

"The Dogs of Pavlov" by Dannie Abse was a largely unsuccessful attempt to show the personal involvement of someone acting as a guinea-pig in a scientific experiment.

The dialogue was interesting and lively, but the subject is too demanding for a low budget amateur production. Considering all things, the Questors' presentation was a superb feat of co-ordination.

The use of filmed sequences showing the guinea-pig girl wandering around parks and playgrounds with her coloured boyfriend provided an alternative to watching the props being moved. After a while, I found myself watching the prop-shifters.

The most successful part of the play was the dream sequence, in which the girl imagines herself being persecuted by the experimenters and her fiancée.

I should imagine it would make a first-class television play, or even a film. It would certainly be better without the unavoidable limitations of the stage.

As always, the general standard of acting and presentation of all three plays was exceptionally high for an amateur club. It is sometimes easy to forget their amateur status and judge them as professionals.