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Questories

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SAUNDERS GOES TO TOWN

Questors Theatre: The Borage Pigeon Affair, by James Saunders

by Michael Billington

James Saunders is one of those writers it is gratifyingly difficult to pigeon-hole. However, from his early post-Ionesco one-actors up to *A Scent of Flowers*, one would have said his preoccupations were private rather than civic or at least that he was more interested in perennial metaphysical problems than in specifically contemporary issues.

In this latest work, specially written for the Questors Tenth New Play Festival, he transfers his attention to the community at large and comes surprisingly close to social criticism. The setting is a small town just outside London. A hygiene-obsessed Tory councillor, anxious to strike a blow at his bird-loving Labour rival, creates a rumpus about the area's non-existent pigeon-problem. Out of nothing arises a ludicrously artificial controversy, busily stirred up by a disillusioned local journalist and an invading news-hungry television crew. If crises don't exist, then clearly the media-men have to invent them.

Mr. Saunders's general point about the magnification of trivia by television and journalism is one that can be readily accepted. The trouble is that he undermines his thesis by caricaturing everyone in sight: the television director is inevitably a vain, promiscuous trendy, the hack journalist, a soured idealist in crumpled clothes and the local councillors slogan-touting fools. Thus the complexities of municipal life (captured in all their ambiguity by Arden in *The Workhouse Donkey*) are here reduced to the simplest cartoon terms. I also distrust plays in which characters come on and provide potted self-analyses rather in the following manner: "Evening. My name's Hamlet. Heir to the Danish throne. Over-fond of my mother who's posted with great dexterity to incestuous sheets. Likely to throw a moody at any time myself. Basically, though, mine's the tragedy of a man who couldn't make up his mind."

Fortunately Mr. Saunders's play is redeemed by some neat flicks of wit and by the fact that it was written specifically for the peninsular Ealing stage: thus Bill McLaughlin's production is able to transport us round the town with the greatest of ease. From a large cast I would also single out Julian Tayler as a nervy socialist and Mary Jones as a pseudo-genteel landlady. I only wish Mr. Saunders had offered the actors something closer to observable reality.