

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

11th Festival 1970

Amateur Stage, August 1970

QUESTORS NEW PLAYS FESTIVAL

THE OTHERS, by David Mowat; 5m., 3f. ALL THE LONELY PEOPLE, by David Pearson; 4m., 1f. THE LIFE AND DEATH OF ALMOST EVERYBODY, by David Campton; 13m., 7f., extras (doubling).

The Questors' admirable annual festival of new plays (the 11th) was this year a monopoly of Davids—one experienced (Campton), one (Mowat) who has achieved various professional productions and has just broken through into print (his first collection, by Calder, was reviewed in "New Play Reviews" last month); the third a member of the Questors (Pearson) with his first full-length play. How far did these three potential giant killers attempt here to batter at the daunting barriers of the established theatre? On the experience of many previous Questors' new plays festivals, they were less experimental and avantgarde than one might have anticipated—though this is not to say that everything was light and that fashionable obscurity was abjured!

The Others (as in another play with the same title recently presented at Leatherhead and on TV) immediately conjures up visions of beings from another world, or age, or dimension; and we are not disappointed, though the author is less than explicit in his white-clad invaders who come to set to rights the family, and presumably the world.

Mother is dying of cancer, daughter is abnormally retarded, and son is a drop-out (though at least comparatively sympathetically written). Father is a materialist businessman who experiences a sudden rush of spirituality to the head which precipitates the arrival of "The Others"... In a completely arbitrary and unmotivated decision he suddenly smashes down the conventional barriers of non-communication which have hitherto sustained the family in comparative sanity and outward truce, accuses each in turn of immoral thoughts and deeda, and forces from them self-exposure and confession. In his evangelistic zeal he summons up the four visitants, who, unexplainedly, turn out to be not only inefficient, but sadistic and vicious.

Everyone is left to create his own interpretation of their significance: mental hospital warders, gangster-type janitors of some private hell, twisted figments of the father's distorted and distracted imagination?—all could be part of the incomplete, unsatisfactory jigsaw. The play ends, not unexpectedly, with the total breakdown of the instigator-father.

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the author revels in the unanswered questions he raises and deliberately indulges in bafflement for its own sake.

Like so many inexperienced writers David Pearson has made the mistake of packing too many themes into a single play. (Though this may well be preferable to the predilection of some more experienced writers of padding out a thin theme and no plot to a full-length play.) *All the Lonely People* seems to be conceived more as a trilogy of one-act plays, so divorced and lacking in continuous and consistent motivation are the various scenes.

Albert, an effeminate young man whose life has been dominated by and devoted to his mother, on her death buys a large derelict house where in his fantasy dreams he sees himself throwing exotic socialite parties. His first caller comes ostensibly to "do up" the property, but it is obvious that his designs are more sinister; two Jehovah's Witnesses follow, a male foil and a female catalyst.

At the opening of Act II the visitors are unmasked in their true colours—the interior designer in a Nazi-type uniform as leader of a revolutionary band, and the girl as a nymphomaniac using her religious introduction as an opening to minister to "all the lonely people" she calls upon. There is a clever satirical scene which shows up the fatuity of racial prejudice if taken to its logical conclusion, as the self-styled leader reveals his particular obsession; but the author soon discards this theme and develops the set-up situation—the inevitable, eternal sex-war.

Each of these plays suffered to some extent from a common fault of undigested plays—prolixity; but this offended most, the second act in particular dragging interminably. A pity the producers do not feel free to prune severely: this play could have been immeasurably improved by losing at least 30 minutes.

Nevertheless, a very worthwhile first play, from which the talented author will no doubt learn much—one of the objects of this festival, to give authors an opportunity of seeing and testing their writing in performance. He has a ready facility for humorous dialogue and character drawing, and a surprising ability in a writer so inexperienced to move rapidly from laughter to tears without incongruity and bathos. With more technical discipline, which he should rapidly acquire, we should undoubtedly hear more of Questor playwright David Pearson.

The name of David Campton is already well known to regional professional companies and amateurs, but, apart from a short play in *Mixed Doubles*, he has, surprisingly, not reached the West End. His latest play, with certain re-writing in the light of this excellent production, deserves a much wider showing. It could conceivably be West-End material, though theatrical managements are notoriously unpredictable; but it must surely become a popular choice elsewhere. I am not being in any way derogatory when I say it would be ideal material for young people, for many youth theatres are now offering more ambitious and noteworthy fare than many more established theatres, both amateur and professional.

The Questors' open stage was particularly suitable to the conception of *The Life and Death of Almost Everybody*—an empty theatre, with the stage sweeper alone on a bare stage. But in the atmosphere hangs the aura of past performances and characters, so conducive to the sweeper's recalcitrant imagination. After a few trials of strength he conjures up the human race (no less!), from the Biblical starting point of Adam and Eve, who develop typical human pretensions of greatness. Appointed King and Queen, they defy their creator and learn to make their own decisions and mistakes, and when a ubiquitous Aunt Harriet enters upon the scene as the eternal enemy, the whole human kaleidoscope gets out of hand. Conceived essentially as a comic-strip cartoon view of history, on several simultaneous levels, it is shot through with witty invention and broader farcical humour; rather as in *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, the author obviously feels the subject too tragic to be taken seriously.

Two weaknesses which need to be ironed out: the white-clad figure of perfect chastity too readily succeeds in her conversions; and the updated Seven Deadly Sins introduced by Aunt Harriet (though extraneous to the main plot, amusing enough to be retained) come over rather fuzzily—they need sharper point and more biting satire to achieve their full comic potential.

It is not the purpose of this review to consider in detail acting and production, as obviously in a festival of original plays the accent lies primarily with the material. Suffice to say that the general standard was extremely high. There must be few amateur companies with such strength in depth that they can mount three simultaneous productions of such calibre (which makes all the more puzzling their disappointing Fall and Redemption of Man in the recent London Amateur Theatre Season).