

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

11th New Plays Festival

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QUESTORS FESTIVAL

Reviewer Frank Cox

To conjure up three brand new plays of value for a festival lasting a fortnight is no mean feat for any company, but The Questors seems to manage it with amazing regularity. Dannie Abse, James Saunders, Lydia Ragosin, Fred Watson and Roy Minton are a few of the writers whose work has been featured in Ealing over the past decade, and for an amateur group, albeit, one of the highest standing in the country, that is a creditable record.

Pleasingly, since the standard of the pieces selected is this year as high as ever, there is somewhat more to this festival than the mere staging of three separated and un-related plays. For one thing, all three authors. David Mowat, David Pearson and David Campton, are closely associated with this theatre either as audience members, acting members or as a contributor to former festivals. Consequently each play is nicely tailored to suit the stage and the resources of the company. But, more surprisingly, there is one clear theme common to all three works, different though they are in individual style.

The Mowat one, *The Others*, is most obviously rooted in the avant-garde. Beginning as a prolonged soliloquy by a father as he sits at the family table with wife, son and daughter, it swiftly becomes an exercise in domestic savagery of a kind often painful to contemplate. The father, urging himself on into paroxysms of fury, works out his self-disgust in attacks on the son, a gentle, well-mannered teenager, and on the crippled daughter, a pathetic creature whom he terms a witch. The wife, dying of cancer or so we presume, is powerless to prevent her husband's manic verbal onslaughts, and the first half of the play reaches heights of abuse and suffering which only writing and playing of the strongest orders, as here, can contain.

We move further into the realm of emotional fantasy, as the father introduces 'the Others' into the family circle, four figures of unexplained ominousness whose functions seems to be to intimidate the son and daughter into some sort of submission. For a while they succeed, but as it becomes more apparent that these strangers exist only in the mind of the father, his influence fades and the mystery visitors, brought to heel by the humanity shown them by the rest of the family, lose their malevolence as the father cracks and embarks on a final, gibbering dance of atonement himself. What it seems to be saying is that within all of us is a violence which must either be exorcised or destroy us. It is an oddly haunting work.

With David Pearson's *All The Lonely People*, we are in Tom Stoppard land. Albert, a shy, mother-fixated youth, has bought a house with a crumbling but impressive staircase, perfect, he maintains, for making spectacular entrances at parties we feel he will never hold. Brown, a bogus interior decorator, who sports a military uniform beneath his raincoat, asserts his authority over Albert and moves in with an army of twenty tramps who march to and fro in the upstairs billiards room, training for the imminent campaign against Brown's least favourite people, 'the Scotch'. There is a girl, Cynthia, a Jehovah's Witness with a sex problem, who goes in for one night stands with lonely men who may or may not buy her religious pamphlets. The writing is assured and inventively comic, both in terms of character and situation, and the play holds the attention for most of its length, until the point when the billiards room floor caves in and the plot almost collapses with it. What follows is an excess of motive-explanation, reversing of roles and the mutual discussing of character which would benefit by hefty cutting. But for a first full-length play this is a commendable achievement, and the theme of innate violence, which only honest exposure can vitiate, is again strongly evident.

The Life and Death of Almost Everybody is technically the most accomplished one of the three. David Campton has fun with that favourite playwright's theme, the nature of a stage, a character and an author. As we enter the theatre, the Sweeper is already at work with his broom, and he begins to chat us up before the house-lights dim, telling us how he enjoys creating things—a rabbit, an elephant ('Can't you see it? You're not using your imaginations!'), and this time, getting really ambitious, a man and a woman. What shall he call them but Eve and Adam, as they do indeed materialise before him and us, products of our several eager thoughts? And so the march of history begins, as they say, and it is a military march, as each event which the Sweeper attempts to stage for our enlightenment turns inevitably violent. So it's been done before, only last year at Chichester by Peter Ustinov, yet the message is a worthy one and there is much amusement to be found in Mr Campton's version, well aided as he is by Robert Byrne's wholly professional bearing in the central role.

The playing and the direction in each play, incidentally, would be the envy of many a repertory theatre elsewhere in the country.