

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

New Plays Festival

11th Festival 1970

AMATEUR STAGE

Questors' New Plays Festival

THE LAST EMPERORS, by David Shellan, 13m .. If., extras. JOHN, by David Mowatt. 3m., 2f.
BLEACH, by Arnold Meyer. 3m. POOR DUMB ANIMALS, by James Hepburn. 7m. m., 4f.

I have no means of judging whether this, the 12th Questors New Plays Festival, was up to the standard of its predecessors, because this was, to my shame, my first visit. In the record of the 11 previous festivals appear the names of playwrights who have, in the widest sense, established themselves in the theatre, so that the Festival can claim to have been a forcing house of talent. For myself, I enjoyed a stimulating experience in that I saw four plays well outside the general run.

David Shellan in **The Last Emperor** had taken for his theme the last, sad years of the Byzantine Empire which had, for a thousand years, been an oasis of Christianity in a desert of barbarism. Empires, as history relates, all pass through the same cycle of conquest, consolidation, compromise and decline and Mr. Shellan justifiably draws parallels with our own experience of departed Empire. I do not think, however, that he was entirely justified in putting the words of two British Prime Ministers into the mouth of Emperor John. "You've never had it so good" and "Peace in our time" were, it seemed to me, jarring and out of context.

Production was inclined to be slow and the acting generally was determined rather than inspired and this underlined the play's main defects: it was over-long and rather heavy in treatment. There is, however, a better stronger play inherent in the script and there were several short scenes, contributing atmosphere rather than action, which could be cut with advantage. The author was well served by Dick Roberts who gave a forceful and considered performance as Emperor John. This was the most rewarding role in the play and among the highlights of the evening was the Emperor's death scene—surely no historical character has yielded up the ghost in a situation at once so amusing and so macabre with the passing bell sounding a premature knell.

I believe the play could be greatly improved by compression, excision and a measure of rewriting particularly in the last third of the script.

The **"John"** who gives his name to the title of the second play is a drop-out who has utterly withdrawn from life into a catalyptic condition, the origin of which is never explained.

The Eagle has Two Heads has one of the longest opening scenes in the modern theatre with the action proceeding wordlessly for something like 12 minutes. John opens with a scene which dispenses with words for what one member of the audience claimed to be 20 minutes. All I can say is that it seemed longer and, with the greatest possible respect to Mr. Mowatt, this is self-indulgence on a monumental scale.

John's immediate family, an idiot sister and a father who is almost certainly a psychopath, are so heedless and so self-absorbed that one wondered how a creature as helpless as John could have survived in such a disorganised household. There was also mention of John's mother who had recently disappeared in mysterious circumstances, but this, like so much else, was not resolved. In fact, very little is explained throughout. Questions are asked but seldom answered.

Characters talk and nobody on stage listens. This would seem to be a play concerned with non-communication and, if so, it was carrying the theme too far to exclude the audience from involvement.

John's former girl friend makes an appearance and tries, unsuccessfully, to rouse him from his self-induced torpor. Another visitor, an amateur actor, keeps popping in and eventually he and the girl friend go off together. One can only wonder why they waited so long. (Incidentally, this amateur actor must belong to the worst group extant—he went along to the dress rehearsal but was dismissed because "they were only doing the big scene"!)

In faithfully reporting my reactions to John I am afraid I have made it appear very dull fare. It wasn't. We saw an irritating, baffling and curiously haunting play. Mr. Mowatt has an ear for dialogue and an eye for character, and his talent is undeniable. It was a mistake for this author to direct his own play.

If another director had produced, David Mowatt would have had to answer a number of questions and, in doing so, would have had to communicate something of his intention, and this could only have increased our understanding. I should like to see another play by Mr. Mowatt in the hope that next time he will take the audience into his confidence.

Two very different offerings (comprising a double bill) concluded the Festival.

Bleach, by Arnold Meyer, gave us, through the medium of lecture technique and flashback, a civilian soldier's view of the war in Vietnam and its effect on what had promised to be an enduring friendship. We, the audience, could only agree that human values did deteriorate under battle conditions and that ethics are a dispensable luxury when it is a question of survival. There were few surprises and no novel developments, but the play's obvious sincerity and its uncompromising presentation of the effects of an unjust war upon conscript soldiery had an impact which was achieved with remarkable economy—three actors and the simplest of settings. A film introduced as a link between two scenes and which showed actual fighting in Vietnam added little and might inhibit groups who otherwise would stage the play. For me Bleach provided the most rewarding experience of the Festival. A programme note informed us that this was Mr. Meyer's first play. Already he has many of the qualities which go to make a playwright of real stature.

James Hepburn's **Poor Dumb Animals** gave us five very varied playlets of which the first two—*Duck and Cow*—had the most audience appeal. They could very well serve students as acting exercises. *Morning in the Life of Joseph and Joseph Weam* had an element of suspense with the darting beak of a blackbird threatening the existence of the leading characters, but the sketch was interesting for its lighting and staging rather than for its content. *Ants in Their Pants* awoke recollection of the Marx Brothers—it was [fantastically] mobile and was [intermittantly] very funny, but suffered from continued repetition of its effect. *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird in Twelve Scenes* over-estimated audience interest in the subject matter.

The settings on the Questors' open stage were a striking feature of the Festival. In particular **The Last Emperors**, with its heavy scenic demands, would have taxed the resources of any theatre, but John Rolfe was able to meet the challenge and gave us sets at once visually satisfying and imaginative.

The Questors rightly consider the Festival to be one of the major events in their calendar and this year they have provided four playwrights with the opportunity of seeing their plays presented to an audience which is theatrically sophisticated and therefore not easy to woo. It is always difficult for a writer to be completely objective in respect of his own work, but I am confident that all four playwrights have benefited enormously as a result of these Festival productions.

After each performance there were discussions during which the play was appreciated and criticised and I must report that I greatly enjoyed hearing the views of the celebrity leading the discussion and those of the members of the audience. The experience confirmed a long-held belief: any audience of two hundred has seen two hundred totally different plays!

N.H.