

The Questors Theatre Archives
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PLAYING POWER GAMES IN THE COURT OF BYZANTIUM

MUCH as I enjoyed the thrill of seeing four new works for the first time in the Questors' New Plays Festival, I have to admit that I was disappointed and baffled by all of them.

The least disappointing, though hardly the least baffling, was "The Last Emperors," a great hulking beast of a play about the downfall of the Byzantine Empire.

Needless to say, I know as much about the downfall of the Byzantine Empire as the next man. and consequently found it a little difficult to follow the endless machinations of the plot.

It was always an effort to keep up, and that kind of intellectual demand never endears me to a play. But that, as they say, is neither here nor there. Clearly, it was a considerable feat of compression by David Shellan, who took a hunk of Byzantine history and whittled it down to a couple of hours of absorbing, if obscure, political wrangling.

James Saunders, the distinguished playwright wrote in the Questors' newsletter that "The Last Emperors" was about "Christianity as a subversive doctrine, destroying temporal power structures from within." And I believe him.

EVIL FORCES

On a more simple level, the play concerned the triumph of evil forces over good ones. Mr. Saunders quoted Machiavelli: "A man who wishes to make a profession of goodness must necessarily come to grief."

The reference in this case was to the one and only sympathetic character in "The Last Emperors"—namely Emperor John, dismissed by his insensitive mother as a weakling and envied by his three brothers because of the power he wields over them.

To play John, the Questors needed an actor capable of projecting strength and weakness at the same time, and in Dick Roberts they found such a combination.

Apart from being ideally imperial in stature and bearing, Mr. Roberts is adept at revealing, with the utmost subtlety, the inherent weakness of the character, which inevitably leads to his downfall. It is an immensely sympathetic performance, faultless in conception and memorable in retrospect.

If "The Last Emperors" is the most involved play of the festival, David Mowat's "John" is the most straightforward, superficially at least.

In a Pinteresque domestic setting, the play concerns the relationship between two men and two women and a mute called John, who has absolutely nothing to do with the play or any of its characters, superficially at least.

When they are not going about their domestic duties in stony silence, the characters speak in bursts of jumbled rhetoric or stilted officialese. Either way, the dialogue rarely rings true.

One of the characters, who appears only at intervals, is rehearsing for a third-rate amateur play, in which he is playing the walk-on part of a doctor. He describes it as "a rather dismal little play I've been press-ganged into" and later, when asked how it went after the first performance, he replies: "We got through it, some mistakes, nothing very dramatic."

The reason for quoting these lines is that they seem singularly appropriate to Mr. Mowat's play, which promised everything and amounted to nothing, superficially at least!

A far more lucid exploration of a relationship is to be found in Arnold Meyer's "Bleach," in which two young Americans, stranded in Vietnam, discover that their friendship turns to hate as soon as they are faced with the reality of their situation.

CUTS DEEP

Mr. Meyer's dialogue cuts deep and erisp, and even he could not hope for a better interpretation of it than given by Michael Noakes and Alan Chisholm. Between them, they crystallise the plight of young men forced into a life of isolation and hatred. Beneath the surface camaraderie, there is always a feeling of panic and helplessness, which is borne out in the scene where they are forced to murder a Vietnamese boy.

The other half of the double bill, "Poor Dumb Animals," by James Hepburn, is a most peculiar pot pourri of thoughts and observations, most humorous, about animals.

The spectacle of four grown men cavorting around the stage, pretending to be ducks and attempting all the various functions of the aforementioned, is really quite hilarious.

Regrettably, wit gives way to profanity and "Ants in the Pants" seemed like an excuse to be controversial. It certainly didn't convey anything to me other than complete and utter boredom.

So, the festival as a whole was disappointing, but it had its moments and most of them were culled from the annals of the Byzantine Empire .