

The Questors Theatre Archives
Questories
New Plays Festivals
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DRAMA QUARTERLY
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One would like to be able to speak well of the technical aspects of the Questors first work in its New Plays Season but, in fact, these were quite awful and again and again ruined what might have been effective theatre. The play, *The Last Emperors*, by David Shellan, dealing with the concluding years of the Byzantine Empire—a subject not conspicuously overworked—was written with skill and humour and, in the early scenes achieved, in writing anyway, some good characterization made the more appetizing by a wry humour not always present in costume plays. It came badly to pieces in the second half and the tragic ending, the murder of the last Emperor in St. Sophia's Cathedral, was so perfunctorily handled that it seemed scarcely to have happened. There was some good acting in the play, and one performance, at once moving and witty, that of the Emperor John by Dick Roberts, which would have been distinguished in any company. But the look of the production was almost totally unattractive. It is useless to know exactly how a shawl was tied in Byzantium if it is made of a material which looks wrong and no amount of gilt paint can make a very modern shop-bought sandal seem authentic. (In fact, the footwear in this play illustrated a point where the amateur and the professional can come sadly to grief. In this case an ill-chosen mixture of ballet shoes, pumps, modern sandals and bare feet—occasionally even trendy shoes which had approximately the right shape but were made of the wrong materials—was quite destructive of atmosphere.) There is a gift for writing historical plays somewhere in Mr. Shellan. It was not on this occasion fully exploited or well enough interpreted.

There seemed to be absolutely no gift of any kind apparent in the play *Bleach* by Arnold Meyer, which made up half of the second programme of the Festival. This dreary work included just about every cliché now to be encountered in the world of the Manhattan Liberal Intellectual, using dialogue of extreme banality freely embellished with four-letter words, to present a story which inevitably included a homosexual relationship, the war in Vietnam, a native killed by a U.S. soldier, the ensuing conscience and all the current furniture of the protesting mind. Decked out as it was with some rather murky film of war in Vietnam, the play became progressively less engaging by debasing the seriousness of its subjects through hysterical repetitiveness. The other half of this programme, *Poor Dumb Animals* by James Hepburn, was a series of short sketches, presenting in one way or another, some attitudes of non-humans. Again, one felt that there was good writing here, but the plays were so laden with Movement (with a jumbo-sized capital M), at that not too well executed, that the genuine impact of the words was nearly always muffled. The first piece, about the behaviour of ducks, would have been perfectly in place at the end of season dance/cabaret at a local tennis club, so full was it of rather naughty jollity. At moments when the words did come into their own, one had the impression of a work which, if presented differently, could have been a moving and honest commentary on living. Nevertheless, the presentation shone by comparison with what had immediately preceded it.

At last year's New Plays Festival, I found myself distinctly unattracted by a work, *The Others* by David Mowat, and it was with no particular eagerness that I looked forward to the same author's *John*, the other new play of the Festival. The more pleasure then to discover a new play, rich in humanity and compassion and presented with no concessions to current preoccupations. This was a rare pleasure, only occasionally marred by errors in emphasis. Its story, if such it can be called, evolves around a family who are at the same time closely related and yet non-related, and is focused through the character of a catatonic young man (very well put before us by David Champion). I think that no two persons could carry away the same impression of this work, since it is so multi-faceted but its author, certainly in this play, has a gift for presenting his persons obliquely yet with fullness, not through the words of the other characters but through their apparently unrelated reactions to situation. Again, though, what is the most rewarding thing about this young playwright (and seeing *John* has led me into reading as much of his other work as I could) is his strong compassion for the human condition in its deeper terms, quite unembellished with shallow social comment. I now feel that I should like to see again the play which I did not like last year. The Questors can be congratulated on adding to their considerable gallery of playwright discoveries the name of David Mowat.