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ELTHAM TIMES

'KT' PLAYWRIGHT IN QUESTORS DRAMA FESTIVAL

DAVID SHELLAN, Assistant Editor of "Bromley Times" and "Kentish Times" record critic, is the writer of "**The Last Emperors**," presented as one of four plays in a drama festival at the Questors Theatre, in the London suburb of Ealing.

Mr Shellan, who already has 30 plays to his credit, has won many prizes in amateur festivals. Two of these have been produced—one at London's Comedy Theatre and the other at Surrey's Richmond Playhouse.

The Questors play is set in the 15th century in the days of Byzantium, and tells the story of Emperor John VIII, who is beset by the fear of a Turkish "take-over bid." This modern idiom is not anachronistic when Mr Shellan's dialogue includes such up-to-date expressions as "I have to buy time," "You've never had it so good" and a reference to burping.

AGHAST

Emperor John decides that it would be useful to offer Constantinople's allegiance to the Pope as a safeguard against those terrible Turks, and has to fight not only members of his own family but faithful supporters, who are aghast, especially the Archbishop of Kiev.

The whole plot seethes with political intrigue, just like the recent BBC TV presentations of "Henry VIII" and "Elizabeth I" with a scarlet velvet clad cardinal from Rome who comes to Constantinople to stir things up and is obviously not averse to a little off-beat manoeuvring if it suits his purpose.

There is, of course, not much action, the play relying on first-class dialogue to give a picture of what is happening off-stage, and Mr Shellan is adept at writing this sort of commentary.

"The Last Emperors" is not a play that will be to the tastes of the average TV watcher of "Z Cars" and other efforts of this intelligent playgoer who enjoys a reasonably well documented history in the turbulent days of the fall of Constantinople, with some slyly introduced parallels to modern days as a bonus, it is a good evening out.

Those who are familiar with the famous Questors Theatre, in Mattock Lane, Ealing, will know that it is a theatre-in-the-round and that for production facilities and decor it rivals many of London's West End playhouses. Mr Shellan has already had a previous play put on there, so that he is familiar with the "circular" technique.

AMATEURS

He is well served with his amateur actors. In fact, I have seen many professional performers who are not as good.

The man who virtually carries the show on his shoulders is Dick Roberts as Emperor John VIII, who has a wonderful stage presence, an impeccable memory, and an air of complete authority.

Others in the cast to stand out are Frances Martin as the Queen Mother, Richard Halberstadt as the Archbishop of Kiev, and Kevin Fells as the Cardinal.

With an in-the-round stage, the scenery takes second place but there is an impressive glimpse of the Cathedral of Santa Sophia in one sequence. Peter Anderson directed.

LATECOMERS

In a note that accompanied my tickets, the management ask latecomers to contact a steward to take them to their seats. On the night I saw the show, a couple came into the auditorium after "curtain-up," with a light. I immediately thought they were latecomers, but the duo turned out to be girl acolytes bearing candles to place before an ikon.

Mr Shellan is said to have written a good deal of the preliminary draft of "The Last Emperors" while waiting to report proceedings of Bromley Council. I think the Kentish Times should give him this chore to do again!

CLIFFORD R. SEWELL