

The Questors Theatre Archives
Questories
New Plays Festivals
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FELTHAM CHRONICLE

HISTORIC EVENTS IN QUESTORS' FESTIVAL PLAY

The Last Emperors, by David Shellan, was the first play presented by The Questors last week in their annual festival of new plays.

The period is 1430 to 1453, the scene Constantinople, and the events told of are the efforts of John VII, Emperor penultimate of Rome, to save the Empire through unity of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, before the Turkish onset.

After John's death, and his brother Demetrius's succession (he is of the Eastern faith), the play ends with the capture of Constantinople and the sacking of the great cathedral of Saint Sophia, which has remained a mosque to this day.

UNFAMILIAR

The play is absorbingly interesting about an unfamiliar period of history. It contains vivid speeches and dramatic scenes. But I fear that, in spite of many good qualities it has deterrents to a wide public favour.

Firstly the "feminine element" is entirely absent. The only woman character is the smallish part of Helena. This is unlikely to make it appeal to hundreds of amateur companies who consider themselves rich if they can muster three good men (The Last Emperors needs at least eight).

The playgoing public relish big women's parts, such as are in St. Joan and Vivat, Vivat Regina, not to mention one W. S. Without them, glamour and richness are absent.

I think we have to wait too long for what is the climax of the play, the capture of Constantinople, which is followed immediately by the final curtain.

Among the many good lines, Emperor John's, at the end of the second act, "I want peace with honour; peace in our time", seem surprisingly unoriginal and corny to those of us who have lived through our recent history.

The play was beautifully directed by Peter Anderson and splendidly acted right down the cast list.

Dick Roberts made a commanding figure as Emperor John, and was complete master of the very long and verbose part. Geoffrey Webb as his brother Demetrius, who succeeds him, was equally good in complete contrast in both temperament and character.

BROTHER

Michael Smith as a third brother, who becomes Constantine XI, and Richard Lewis, as yet a fourth, as Thomas Palaeologus, each gave fine character studies.

But these four stalwarts couldn't help Frances Martin, who, in spite of a brave attempt, was miscast as their mother Helena. Her obvious youth made her seem more likely to have been the daughter of any one of them.

Kevin Fells was, I imagine, a typical Renaissance Cardinal. Richard Halberstat, also sounding very young, was equally effective as the Archbishop of Kiev. Everyone else filled their parts nobly.

The sets, costumes and lighting, could not have been bettered, and I cannot recollect a more realistic thunderstorm.

Special mention must be made of everyone's first-class diction, delivery and audibility.