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The Questors, Ealing

New Plays Festival

by GARRY O'CONNOR

Of the plays I have seen at the Questors New Plays Festival this year, James Hepburn's **Poor Dumb Animals** is without a doubt the most talented and entertaining. It takes up a long second half of an evening, and would show to better advantage performed on its own—it was bracketed with another play, **Bleach**: contrary to most long one-acters which are often split arbitrarily for a 20 minute interval to fill out the evening, I think it would benefit from a break in the middle.

There are five scenes, and the play is based on Wallace Stevens' poem, **Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird**—though only the last scene, which is a literary mosaic, using a Chinese lantern style of presentation, quotes directly from the poem. This last scene I found the least successful of the five, as it introduces rather late in the proceeding a complicated technique of surrealism and comic fantasy, taking Wallace Stevens' poem stanza by stanza.

The other four scenes take, in each case, a comic animal motif—Duck, Cow, Morning in the

Life of Joseph and Joseph Worm and Ants in the Pants—and embroider them with a delightfully playful spirit, as well as compassion and understanding.

In the demonstration of the Ducks' habits, Mr. Hepburn shows great skill in phrasing and placing his comic lines, and the Questors company responded with zest—it's one of the funniest short passages of writing I've seen for some time. The two Worms—glum figures waiting for the blackbird's beak to strike—I felt could do with a bit of pruning, and the end seemed to be obscured by a lighting fault. Ants in the Pants reminded me of Alfred Jarry—knockabout and anarchic, and rewardingly unburdened with significance.

Bleach, written by an American, Arnold Meyer, is a study of two American draftees in Vietnam. I don't know whether Mr. Meyer has been to Vietnam. Some lines strike a false note, but he has otherwise quite a good ear for that kind of emotionally lacerating dialogue that probes men under strain. The crunch comes when these two young men kill a little Vietnamese boy.

Personally it is not to my taste, but it does go yet again into an area which has been so exposed in the various media that there isn't very much more to say—documentarily, at least—while to use it as a personal artistic vehicle seems to me a little suspect. But the emotions of the two GI's, as well as the film the director Mike Custance has effectively placed in the middle of the action, did keep the audience involved.

The Last Emperors, a sprawling historical play, takes up another evening of the Festival. Here we are in the death-throes of Byzantium. Emperor John VIII is vacillating, abused by his mother for being weak, attacked by Orthodox zealots for trying to bolster up his empire by making a treaty with Rome. His throne is surrounded by corrupt functionaries, who behave like aging Hollywood bit-part players. When John dies, having successfully put down a rebellion by his brother, another brother, Constantine, succeeds him to the throne. But Constantine is the last emperor, and during the final moments of the play—in all too peremptory a fashion—Constantinople is sacked.

Although David Shalan makes a promising selection of scenes, his handling of them is unsatisfactory. Too much of the action proceeds by means of dialogues, and, atmospherically, there is no sense of final catastrophe hovering over the events. Much of the dialogue too, is trite, though, to be fair, not all that much triter than some of Vivat Vivat Regina.

But it is in the character conception that the play falls down most of all. John, the Dove, and Constantine, the Hawk, are depicted very thinly indeed.