

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

New Plays Festivals

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PLAYERS EXCEL IN OBSCURE DRAMA

EVEN AN ardent historian would need text books to follow the sequence of events in **"The Last Emperors,"** staged at the Questors Theatre, Ealing, on Saturday.

One "happening" followed another in a series of short scenes, mingled with longer, heavier dramas. Many aspects of the play were left unexplained, the audience having to strain to understand the action.

The play is the second of David Shellan's works to be performed at the Questors. It is one of five new plays in the Questors' current festival, which opened on Saturday and ends on July 3.

The plot, set in 15th century Constantinople, deals with the downfall of the age-old Byzantine Empire. Constantinople, capital of this Eastern civilisation, is a city of ancient traditions, which the emperor and his citizens are reluctant to forego.

OUT-DATED

Chief of these are the ancient palace ceremonies and outdated functionaries, which have little or no use, yet are retained. Described by one of the cast as "a city centuries past its peak," Constantinople is badly in need of a larger, stronger army and another emperor.

The Emperor of the time, John VIII Palaeologus, decides to offer the Pope a "united disunity" by linking the East and West churches and religions. The fifth crusade takes place—the audience learns of this after it is all over—and the Turks attack Constantinople. The new emperor, Constantine XI, is killed as he kneels to pray, and the play ends on this note.

Credit must be given to the actors for excellent performances throughout the rather complicated play. Each seemed confident in his role and made an impression on the story despite its lack of continuity.

Dick Roberts was well cast as the weak, indecisive Emperor John VIII, who gropes his way through life asking other people what action he should take.

His brothers, Demetrius and Thomas, played by Geoffrey Webb and Richard Lewis, respectively, were played with confidence. Frances Martin, the only woman with a major role, played Helena Dragasha, mother of the emperor. The palace functionaries, the Great Logothete and the Drungary of the Watch, played by Tom Ponsonby and Harry Ives, captured to perfection the haughty, slow-moving atmosphere of a bygone era.

DOUBTS ABOUT RELATIONSHIP WITH JOHN

NO-ONE spoke for the first fifteen minutes of the Questors Theatre production "**John**" — and one couldn't help wondering if the popular idiom "Silence is Golden" had lost some of its magical qualities.

A rather meek "hello" finally broke the uncomfortable silence and released the audience from the somewhat tense atmosphere. Once this initial hurdle had been overcome, both cast and onlookers settled down comfortably to the routine of the story.

Written by David Mowat, a member of the plays and production committee of the Questors Theatre, the play was specially commissioned for this year's New Plays Festival after the success of "The Others" in 1970.

The action is centred round a mute "drop-out" named John, played by David Champion, who remains silent throughout the play. He lives at home with his giddy young sister and rather vacant father, who spends all his time solving new cases and picking up clues for his "unmentionable" work.

John's former girlfriend, Anna (Alexandra Gwynn) comes to stay at the house after her parents reject her, and cannot understand why John refuses to speak to her, not realising he is unable to.

Charles is an "old friend" of the family who frequently visits the house while his wife is in hospital, and finally asks Anna if she would like to have an affair with him.

The action seems rather disjointed at times, and the audience is left in some doubt about the other four characters' relationship with John. His father and sister practically ignore him, Charles is mildly indifferent after an initial attempt to communicate, and Anna is the only one who seems concerned about his welfare and his lack of interest, especially in her.

PERFECTION

Perhaps the most difficult of the five roles was that of John. David Champion brought over the part to perfection, managing to retain a permanent glazed expression on his face and a feigned disinterest in all the activities around him. In fact he would have had to listen with extreme care to all that was said, to give him a cue when and where to move off-stage.

Alexandra Gwynn gave a very impressive performance as the luckless girlfriend, Anna, who tries to revive John's interest in their past love affair.

She is excellent as the capable young woman who takes over the organisation of the household, and provides a patient ear to both John's father and Charles.

John's sister Glenys (Liz Parravicini) seems to rather overdo her acting at times and one feels she is a little too loud and noisy when she is attacked by her boyfriend's mates. But she does provide the audience with several laughs throughout the play, and is a welcome contrast to the sombre silences which occasionally creep in.

Charles and Vince, the father, played by Michael Haines and Stanley Goodchild respectively, seem overshadowed by the two girls, but both attack their roles with confidence.

F.G.

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A DUMB ANIMAL

THREE men waddled their way around Questors apron stage on Tuesday, in an attempt to demonstrate what its like to be a duck.

The first wore a duck's head, the second its wings and the third its tail feathers, and between them they succeeded in "raising the roof" of the Questors with hysterical laughter from their audience.

This was the most enjoyable sketch from a series of scenes aptly called "**Poor Dumb Animals**" by James Hepburn, presented on Tuesday night.

A scene called "Cow" persuaded the audience that such beasts are really enormous contented singing stomachs. Three more male actors were suitably dressed in horns and "rich brown jersey coats."

"Morning in the life of Joseph and Joseph Worm," took us underground to where two worms were waking to the sound of drilling bird beaks seeking their breakfast. Clever triangles of light dipped onto the stage, and shadowy dead "worms" were pulled out of sight.

"Ants in the pants," in the next scene, busily built a wall, oblivious of two lovers who trod all over it in an attempt to see each other.

The last scene, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird in Twelve Scenes," was based on a poem by Wallace Stevens, and each of the dozen scenes was punctuated with an oriental gong and green curtain fall. The 13th scene was left open and the lights dimmed without the gong being sounded.

Actors were Ken Ratcliffe, Don Starkey, Paul O'Connor, Richard Lewis, Gillian Redhead, Barbara Butters, Val Caren, June Bowie, Diana Matthews, Roy Edwards and Peter McNamara. Director was Cecil Hayter, the sets were designed by John Stacey and the costumes by Marie Kettle.

J.H.