

The Questors Theatre Archives
Questories
New Plays Festivals
13th Festival 1972

AMATEUR THEATRE

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THE QUESTORS THEATRE CO. NEW PLAYS FESTIVAL, London W5. CANDLELIGHT & BABYLON, by Don Roberts. 11m., 8f. (some doubling possible).

The title was justified by the use of the nursery rhyme as a sort of theme song in this confused and confusing play. It was sung by the actress who played both a mother and her own son, added to which three of the characters were named Toby (the mother/son), Tobias and Tobit, who were supposed to represent the central character at three stages of his life. Peter Ustinov used this device brilliantly in *Photo Finish* but, with the greatest respect, Roberts is no Ustinov.

Toby suffered an unhappy childhood. He had a sadistically cruel father and a doting mother who died early and off-stage. Unenlivening episodes of Toby's childhood were presented during repeated flashbacks, and a hobby horse, a Woman in Black and a religious maniac contributed an equal measure of symbolism and bewilderment. None of the characters achieved dimension and the medium in which the play was written gave little help to the audience.

To be fair to the author, he intended that his play should be experienced as the idle dream of an old man drifting among his memories. That the audience did not appreciate this significant aspect of the play was more his fault than theirs.

Lest readers are inclined to believe that this review is unduly harsh, I hasten to report that, in the discussion following the performance, those members of the audience who stayed behind were in substantial agreement with the findings here expressed.

The direction by Jill Champion Torrance was both sympathetic and imaginative and the author was well served by the company. Philip Wright made the best of Old Tobit and there must be few amateur actresses who could have coped so successfully with the ambiguous role of Anne/Toby. Tom Pritchard made a terrifying figure of the father and Alfred Anderson's Balloon Man provided a welcome lighter note. There were rare moments of comedy, and Mary Hodlin, happily for us, took full advantage of her opportunities as the Elderly Nurse and the genteel Miss Melibee.

Not the most auspicious start to the Questors' New Plays Festival, but the rest of the programme suggests pleasant surprises to come.

N.H.

HANS KOHLHAAS, by James Saunders. 7m., 1f. (much doubling).

James Saunders and the Questors Theatre have worked closely together on many occasions, his association with this New Plays Festival dating back to the first, in 1960. This year the collaboration is even closer, for this play—taken from the German, of a 16th century horse dealer whose search for justice escalates into personal tragedy and national scandal—is the result of group improvisation developing out of a basic script.

It is not staged in the Theatre, but in the Stanislavski Room, converted into a studio theatre; workshop conditions are simulated at the opening by a group of actors in rehearsal garb indulging themselves in a closed-ended discussion leading on to the nature of Choice, and the crisis point of the story: At what dangerous corner the formerly reasonable, law-abiding horse dealer oversteps the bounds of reason and law? To what extent does man have control of his own destiny? Has he free will?

This group of eight actors play innumerable parts, donning appropriate costumes, yet at all times the action and characters remain clear, and one felt the Brechtian-type explanations unnecessary, for blessedly, communication was sharp and total.

This in fact does represent a new departure for James Saunders, for one of the rare qualities in most of his previous plays has been their oblique subtlety and shunning of the over-explicit. Here the narrative and the case for and against this tragic pursuit of justice are crystal clear, occasionally to the point of repetition (some cuts might be made with advantage to the 2 ¾ hours' playing time).

Though the story seemed fresh to most of the audience, I remember a film (German, I think) about this Brandenburg horse dealer, who, tyrannised and exploited by a petty local ruler, seeks retribution and justice, at the cost of the life of his wife, the loss of hundreds of lives and the burning of Dresden (note the modern parallel). Finally a kind of rough justice is arrived at—the return of his property, the imprisonment of the minor tyrant, and the execution of Kohlhaas for his insurrection. But James Saunders is more concerned with the absorbing arguments about justice and personal responsibility, which occupy the greater part of the play. Most of the violent action is jokily mimed—a flaw in the objectivity, loading the case and audience sympathy in favour of Kohlhaas.

An altogether admirable cast, in Bill McLaughlin's smoothly flowing production, contributed greatly to its success. This "workshop" type style of presentation lends itself admirably to the simplest production on any acting space (preferably not a proscenium stage) and deserves to be widely taken up by smaller professional companies and amateurs (it seems unlikely to prove viable commercial West-End material).