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HANS KOHLHAAS
by Michael Coveney

James Saunders' new play, taken from a story by Heinrich von Kleist and given as part of this year's New Plays Festival at The Questors, is a lucid and fascinating demonstration of the political and personal disasters that arise when a man's instinctive sense of justice challenges the Justice practised in a corrupt society. Kohlhaas's tragic flaw was his excess of virtue in respect of this sense of justice, and his story is used by Saunders in a highly skilled piece of work which achieves a quite remarkable standard of political seriousness and texture.

Kohlhaas was a horse-dealer in 16th century Saxony. On his business travels he is done out of an honest deal on a couple of animals by the selfish intervention of a young noble. He gathers that such abuses are in the usual way of things in this district, and so he decides to take a stand on principle, assuming the role of George to the dragon of legalised bullying. Having embarked on this course, he experiences at first hand the bureaucratic closing of ranks as the court case he attempts to instigate is squashed. At this point the play broadens its base to coincide with the political maturation of the hero; horses now have little to do with it, and Kohlhaas is prepared to break up his home to see justice done.

But his wife stands by him and indeed loses her life in a desperate attempt to get through to the Elector in Berlin, with her husband's petition. Kohlhaas plays into the enemies' hands by leading a peasant uprising and is eventually executed on a charge of breach of the Empire's peace. Ironically, the pathetic junker who originally cheated him receives his come-uppance, and the two horses are presented to the dealer as he mounts the scaffold.

A blistering speech half-way through the first act underlines Saunders' main point. It is a fact of life that the legal system, then as now, exists partly to preserve the interests of commerce and those in political ascendancy. This is not so much the fault of the system as the fault of the citizens themselves who are apathetic in defending their basic human rights. Kohlhaas's fellow dealer, who at the beginning of the play philosophically resigns himself to the loss of his horses, is as responsible for a corrupt legal system as the exponents of the system themselves.

There is no doubt that the texture that I referred to earlier is achieved not merely because of the story itself, but very largely in the manner of its telling. The plot is stated at the outset, and each scene captioned by a summary in true Brechtian style. The writing has all the delicacy and deftness to be expected from the author of *A Scent of Flowers* and *Next Time I'll Sing to You* and the play deserves a very full life at a time when citizens in this country are spoken to by their politicians in tones normally reserved for naughty children.

The actors are uniformly excellent and the direction by Bill McLaughlin is exceptional in its qualities of restraint, understanding and efficiency.