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HANS KOHLHAAS
By Michael Billington

HERE'S IRONY for you: one of the most Brechtian plays we've seen in a long time, and "Hans Kohlhaas" by James Saunders, being staged in (of all places) the Stanislavsky Room at the Questors Theatre, Ealing. But even if the setting is nominally inappropriate, Saunders's dramatisation of Heinrich von Kleist's novella about a 16th century horse-dealer's passionate quest for justice is one of the best pieces this chameleon writer has given us since **"A Scent of Flowers."**

The technique is sedulously Brechtian: the theme is stated clearly in advance, the content of each scene is summarised in headline terms, the actors identify the characters they are about to represent. But this is not an irrelevant gimmick! it fits perfectly with the story's demonstration of how the unjust appropriation of Kohlhaas's horse by a tyrannious junker spirals into a mini-revolution and a major diplomatic conflict between Saxony and Brandenburg. Right-wingers might interpret this as an example of what happens when a man launches a fanatical, obsessive personal quest for justice ; but Saunders's moral is that if you deny man justice at a humble local level then anarchy and confusion will quickly spread through the whole body politic.

At times Saunders loses sight of the clear narrative line and his own fascination with multi-yiewpoint drama occasionally cuts across the Brechtian need for simplicity. I also wish the director, Bill McLaughlin, had staged the play against a map of the relevant parts of the Holy Roman Empire to illustrate the work's complex geography. But, cavils aside, it's a theatrically gripping narrative that's coolly and rationally presented and that proves Agate's old point that there aren't really amateur and professional actors : simply good ones and bad ones. And the Questors cast of eight is uniformly good.