

The Questors Theatre Archives
Questories
New Plays Festival
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AMATEUR STAGE

FIFTEENTH NEW PLAYS FESTIVAL
QUESTORS THEATRE, EALING, LONDON

THE OWL-WINGED FACULTY, by John Norman, 10m, 3f, extras

The Faculty are that enclosed society of a Senior Common Room, dealt with so perceptively by Ronald Millar in his adaptation of C.P. Snow's *The Masters*—though here we are in a "new university" rather than the cloistered confines of Cambridge. According to this play, however, the academic rituals and entrenched attitudes are much the same—though one wonders how true this is generally of the staff of our post-war universities. The picture that emerges is that, with a few exceptions, they are caught up in the academic rat-race of American lecture tours and in the furtherance of their own personal ambitions rather than in their pupils or in education generally. Academic vocation seems to have given way to professional careerism—in a very civilised, though ruthless, way.

The Master has invited a financier and his wife with a view to wining and dining them into making a benefaction to the college. But outside the students are staging a sit-in on two issues—a student charged with seducing an underage girl. and the rights of gypsies. No doubt these are the kind of comparatively minor issues that students do revolt about, but in the interests of dramatic weight, it would surely have been preferable for the sit-in to be involved in a more fundamental issue, such as the proposed benefaction or an important educational matter—which would have provided a better balance to the conflict. Here the staff seemed civilised but selfish, the students more altruistic but trivial, which was accentuated by the stylised exaggerated way in which they were written and played, with gimmicky pig-masks and pointless slogans. But these criticisms should not cloud the fact that this was a well-written and witty play (though a little over-indulgent in anecdote and reminiscence). Apart from the students the characters were sharply observed—the staff, mainly traditional but including some more sympathetic to the students' demands; and two representatives of a different class, the college scout and the working-class father of one of the lecturers.

THE LAST ANALYSIS, by Roland Bowden. 12m., 5f., doubling.

Sessions with a psychiatrist at Lewisburg Penitentiary, where Wilhelm Reich died in 1957, provide the basis for a series of short flashback scenes of episodes in his life from his earliest *Spring Awakening* at the age of 13 to his death in the USA 47 years later. The author has obviously thoroughly researched his subject—certainly "the first apostle of the sexual revolution" provides fruitful material—and a great deal of light is thrown on his life and theories: three marriages, encounters with Freud and Einstein, rejection by the Communist Party, and persecution in the USA.

Unfortunately the author's dedicated diligence is not combined with sufficient dramatic instinct, and what one would have imagined should have been erotic as well as scientific (assuming he practised the complete sexual freedom he preached) emerged merely as a clinical documentary. None of that emotional energy, which he named Orgone, the love force, and which he claimed literally made the world go round, was generated on or off stage amongst cast or audience. Moreover the construction gave the impression that his death signalled the end not only of his physical presence but of his ideas— which though still, in our permissive times, seeming far-fetched, have nonetheless exerted a considerable influence. Another weakness is that Reich's opponents and persecutors are shown only through his distorting mirror of the analysis sessions and thereby lose some credence and stature.

A BORDERLINE CASE, by Harry Barton. 4m., 2f.

Beneath the deliberately trivial story set in Ireland in 1944 of a young couple travelling south to meet the Serviceman's family lies the disturbing violent undercurrent of Irish history, made even more poignant by hindsight knowledge of the continuing tragedy of Ireland 30 years later. Tragicomedy is a speciality of the best Irish writers: here the accent is on the lighter side, as the author makes his point through the self-mocking comic fantasies of Irish life—but one senses how spontaneously and almost inevitably the people will suffer in the blood bath of the extremists.

The play has a formal pattern—beginning and ending with Colin and Henrietta at Belfast railway station. Their journey across the border and back is ostensibly for Colin to introduce Henrietta to his mother and father, a dean.

In their luggage is a pram and a prop. baby, but Henrietta does not believe in the outmoded concept of marriage. Under protest she agrees to go through the wedding ceremony and then finds herself involved in a petty smuggling operation with the aid of that invaluable smuggler's prop., the pram. Acting as commentator, scene arranger and general link man is M'Masters, a Belfast man, aided and abetted by Mooney, a Dubliner—a style of production which admirably suited this satirical and inconsequential Irish fantasy/comedy.

It is the Questors' and our policy in these New Plays Festivals to concentrate on the plays rather than productions or performances. Suffice it to say that the three productions were up to the usual Questors' high standards in these respects. Artistically and financially this was the most successful for some years—playing over the fortnight to 86% capacity. My personal preference was for *The Owl-Winged Faculty*—though all three plays are well deserving of wider showing.

R.S.