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NEW PLAY IS OUT TO IMPRESS

Students in revolt, class distinction, the generation gap, middle-class apathy, pseudo- intellectual hypocrisy—all this (and more) is to be found in **The Owl-Winged Faculty** by John Norman, the first play in the Questors' 15th New Plays Festival.

It doesn't take an astute critical faculty to see that Mr. Norman has bitten off more than he can chew. Or rather, more than the audience can chew, for Mr. Norman probably spent weeks, even months, preparing his dish to put before an audience with two hours to digest it.

The result, naturally enough, is mental indigestion and critical wind. In response to plays that are all out to impress, as this one is, critics are either taken in or highly sceptical.

Mr. Norman doesn't make it easier for us by being banal one minute and brilliant the next. He contributed the epic "Crincum Crancum" to last year's new plays festival and he is obviously still developing as a playwright. One day, no doubt, he will come up with a winner, but "The Owl-Winged Faculty" is more of a runner-up.

It concerns an ill-assorted bunch of academics, university lecturers, whose socio political sympathies range from the extreme left to the extreme right. This causes much conflict, particularly in view of the militant mood of their students, who are angrily upset because one of them has been caught having sex with a minor.

It seems a funny cause to get steamed up about, but the students run around, masked as pigs, chanting their demands, which are that one of the lecturers should speak up for the student at his trial and that part of the college grounds should be made available to some unwanted gypsies nearby.

The youngest lecturer in the group, and therefore the most likely to identify with student behaviour, finds himself fearful of their passionate idealism. Any passion he ever had has been dissipated by academic claustrophobia.

Another lecturer talks loudly in a kind of political jargon, throwing in "hip" expressions to show that he is more attuned to youthful idealism than he looks.

A female lecturer in philosophy is sympathetic towards the students but finds little support from her reactionary colleagues.

While no-one could accuse Mr. Norman of being out of touch, there is a tendency for some of his dialogue to sound a little dated and the characters, though vividly brought to life in Robin Duval's excellent production, are little more than stereotypes when you boil it down.

Perhaps the most interesting character in the play is also the least defined, the young lecturer, thoughtfully played by Anthony Barber, and Ruth Lister's philosophy lecturer is a convincing study. Brian Taylor gives a beautifully underplayed performance as a precious academic and Peter Sainty, late of the Nondescripts, is equally good as a county type with elbow patches and a sneaking respect for the status quo.