

The Questors Theatre Archives
Questories
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DRAMA QUARTERLY

A book is a book whether in manuscript or in print; a play is not a play until actors perform it in front of an audience. One of the virtues of a festival of new plays, such as that now in its fifteenth year at the Questors' Theatre in West London, is that it provides new playwrights with a controlled greenhouse for the young growth of their trade—a greenhouse, be it noted, not a forcing-bed. In the past, Dannie Abse, James Saunders and Malcolm Quantrill have all benefitted from the festival. Now it seems to be the turn of John Norman and Harry Barton.

Last year, the festival showed Mr. Norman's **Crincum Crancum**, a sort of excursion into Marat/Sade country, but one firmly on this side of the Channel. It was an epic with the insanity of George III as its starting point, and, like all epics, it sprawled. Then came a small-scale play **Journey**, in which the ambivalence relationship between a decaying author and a young man was explored with sympathy and intelligence but with dialogue that tended to monologue rather than conversation. Now we have **The Owl Winged Faculty** and, in about three productions' time, there will be a play to put Mr. Norman before the widest possible public.

This one is not yet completely self-assured. It is set in one of the newer universities (no prizes for guessing the model), where the staff divide between the Oxbridge and the With-it, and the students riot. Like a shawl, it is debedilled with loose ends and knots—there is far too much exposition in the first scene, little of which has anything to do with what follows, and at the end, although life may well go on like that, it doesn't do for the stage. Robin Duval's direction is excellent, the setting, is apposite, and Kenneth Ratcliffe as the Master, Ted Scrivener as a working class father of Anthony Barber's tentatively trendy lecturer, Gillian McManus as an articulate student and Ruth Lister as a lecturer torn between her duty to her employers, to her students and to herself, give fine performances.

I was much less happy about Roland Bowden's **The Last Analysis**. This is a flash-back biography of Wilhelm Reich (the psychologist whose theory of sexual force set him at odds with Freud, Einstein and just about everyone else with whom he came into contact). It is a wordy play, play, far too much so for David Gower's plodding direction, and, good as the performances of John Wilbourne and John Wilson were as the protagonist, they could not be expected to drag the piece into life by themselves. I suspect that the author has done too much research into his subject; a little less fact and direct quotation and a little more imagination would have worked wonders.

A Borderline Case by Harry Barton deserves a wider audience. It is that rarity—a play about Ireland which is genuinely funny and equally compassionate, and its final coup de théâtre—author's or director's ?—makes its point with economy through simplicity. There are only six characters if you exempt a clutch of acting stage managers, and the action takes place, until the very end, in 1944.

The naval officer son of the Protestant Dean of Dublin is on his way home on leave, with his baby and the baby's mother, a nice girl, also an officer, well bred, well spoken, good looking. It is just that she can see no good reason why she should actually marry him. Two Everyman characters who represent the two sides of the Eire-Ulster border play everyone else with whom Colin, Henrietta and his parents come into contact, as they travel to Dublin and back again.

Carol Wiseman is the director, and the haunting music is by James Simmonds. Chris McDermott and Tom Pritchard look and sound just what everyone else imagines an Irishman and an Ulsterman to be like. With Lyn Langridge taking a lot of female sympathy as the girl who will not compromise, and Barbara Hutchins getting all the laughs as the ecclesiastical lady with few scruples, neither the Dean of Alfred Anderson nor the Colin of Michael Loughnan could make as firm a mark. I am not quite sure whether this play is 'commercial' or not; I do know that it should not be allowed to be just a fading voice in the no-man's-land between political and escapist theatre.