

The Questors Theatre Archives
Questories
New Plays Festivals
16th Festival 1975

AMATEUR STAGE

August 1975

NEW PLAYS FESTIVAL. Questors Th., London W5.

THE ISLAND, by James Saunders. 5m., 2f.

FUNLAND, by Dannie Abse. 9m., 4f.

CIRCUSES, by James Hepburn. 6m., 2f.

This annual Festival of New Plays (the 16th) got away to a flying start with James Saunders' "male chauvinist" look at a future world populated exclusively by women. Nothing daringly new about the idea of an isolated island community "after the holocaust" (in this instance a war in which men have been virtually eliminated), or of women ruling the world—shades of Shakespeare and Shaw through to *Rape of the Belt*. But James Saunders can always be relied upon to provide a witty and entertainingly modern view of our society, past, present or future, at the same time raising provoking wider issues. Would an all-female society develop any differently or be less aggressive and predatory? Would a world all of love, sweetness and light be unutterably boring? Are the sexes inherently different or are our attitudes just stereotypes conditioned by tradition and upbringing?

In this world in which women reproduce only female babies parthenogenetically, five plastically clad sisters luxuriate placidly on a plastic tropical island, where no tensions or effort trouble their unruffled harmony. One day two male survivors are discovered—with all-too-obvious, and too-similar, female reactions. But with typical wry humour the author makes these not godlike Apollos, but pretty poor, very average, stupid and unwarlike specimens of the male of the species.

Coincidentally both the other two plays made use of music hall techniques, neither very successfully. Dannie Abse has conceived the interesting experiment of taking one of his poems, "Funland", as the fulcrum, and of building a play round it. Certainly an original way of introducing poetry into the theatre, but he did not quite succeed in overcoming the inherent problem of the poet/playwright—of translating imaginative images into concrete characters in visual situations, I cannot help feeling that this is not the best medium—the printed page or the radio leaves the reader or the listener more free in his own personal, private interpretations.

The play is set in a mental home, where we are shown inmates and staff in various routine situations—as demonstration "guinea pigs", and later taking part in a concert. The expected searching questioning—of where lies normality, and whether the world outside is any saner than those inside judged unfit to belong to it—were thrown up, and the isolation of the lunatics not only from the world but from each other, was effectively conveyed. But their abnormality came across as little more than hysteria in a world where this is not uncommon, which reduced the feeling of separation; and the method of presentation, in a series of short episodes, and in particular the music hall scenes in the second half, were too disjointed to make a cohesive whole.

James Hepburn's use of music hall techniques seemed even more pointless and abstruse. Though given an overall title, *Circuses*, the two halves seemed quite distinct and separate. The first, "Magic 'n' Tragic", comprised a series of short music hall acts, in which unfortunately the author's particular brand of humour failed to click with the audience. Imagine a series of comic turns greeted with but scattered, intermittent laughter, and mainly baffled silence. The spectacle of the sad-faced clown undermining his own act needs to be tragi-comic; here it struck one as just pathetic. The second half was in more serious vein—three short pieces under the titles "Deaf", "Dumb" and "Blind".

If Magic means Mystification, the author succeeded, for he failed to communicate any coherent *raison d'être* for this "entertainment" or for its particular chosen form. The only possibly linking theme which did recur was the contrast and conflict between man's spiritual and physical sides, presented in a strange mixture of lavatory and literary jokes.