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QUESTORS EALING
NEW PLAYS FESTIVAL
by Garry O'Connor

James Saunders' new play, **The Island**, takes the traditional theme, much used in French farce and utopian literature, of the faraway paradise. In this day of instant travel to all corners of the globe we can no longer envisage a place far enough away for fantasy, so Mr. Saunders, like others with the same idea, has turned to the future. His island is a post nuclear holocaust affair, where only women survivors enjoy the fruits of perfection, as the warring sex have knocked each other out.

The Island begins with a chorus of five nubile wenches all extolling their partheno-genetic freedom. Soon after a couple of chaps are washed up unconscious on the seashore. The ladies have no idea what to do and haven't quite the courage to finish them off (Mr. Saunders must be one of the few contemporary playwrights still chivalrous enough to show women both fair and gentle). Finally after much horseplay and tying and untying of ropes, The Island subsides into a wry and whimsical celebration of orthodox sex with mutual dependence winning the day.

There's little to object to in it and Mr. Saunders' turns of thought are often both intelligent and witty. They can sometimes be a little naïve and overstated. The Ealing audience always responds strongly to Mr. Saunders' work, enjoying the wry sense of whimsy and paradox which is the hallmark of his writing. Setting out resolutely to be lighthearted, he skirts the profound, or what is often confused with it, the obscene, at every encounter.

This is fine as far as it goes. Where Mr. Saunders' skill does let him down is in constructing a situation to give the comedy some extra bite. It dwindles to inconsequence without becoming positively negative. One has to conclude that humorous though the vision is, it is far too feeble, although the author would argue, feebleness is part of his comic intention.

The Island is given a spirited performance in Robin Duval's production and makes a good beginning to the Festival (which even includes J. M. Barrie's The Twelve Pound Look as a late night show). The second main offering, **Funland**, by Dannie Abse, is highly ambitious. Three inmates of a mental hospital are the centre of a pattern of bizarre events, the kinglypin of which is the hospital concert. One, Pythagoras, is an ex-stage magician who is continually calling up thunder and mesmerizing other patients. He has the enviable trick of willing telephones to stop ringing.

The second, Uncle, is a hysterical little fellow who reads the Daily Express upside down. And the third, Mr. X, is a poet echoes who does not feel he has an existence. The hospital superintendent, Dr. White, a firm and tranquillizing personality, in the words of one of the characters, governs well, finding support for his position in precepts such as Machiavelli's "whoever is sent to organize a state and govern its laws must presuppose all men are mad."

Mr. Abse is known primarily as a poet and indeed the structure of Funland is as much poetic as dramatic. A large part, for example, of the last of nine scenes is given over to Mr. X's poem. There are some good ideas which could have been explored more for their theatrical potential. One is the impersonation of the superintendent by Pythagoras as in the presence of the local newspaper reporter. This could have led to some interesting comic developments.

I should also like to have seen Mr. Abse concentrating more on one of his characters to the exclusion of the others. Pythagoras has the making of an excellent protagonist, with echoes of Thomas Mann and Jean-Paul Sartre (in Kean) but our concentration on him is broken in favour of the others.

John Turner's production of Funland is uneven. Some members of the cast were underprojecting, notably John Wilbourn as the Superintendent, and some, such as Phillip Sheahan, who plays Uncle, were too shrill. The complex continuity is well managed and the lighting, by John Andrew, is very effective. Robin Ingram as Pythagoras gives the boldest and clearest performance. Norman Wilkinson as Mr. X is also effective.

It's much less

Circuses, completes the trio of new works. Its much less formally constructed than the others, though James Hepburn, who wrote it, is making literary patterns out of traditional forms of entertainment such as the variety show. Most of the audience, myself among them, treated it as a series of sketches, shrugging off suggestions of "deeper meaning," if it could be found. At this level there are some quite promising sketches, such as that of Hermann the Honunculus, sawing a luscious young lady in half, and "The End," a black joke set in a crematorium. Apart from a certain sharpness and polish in the writing, some of the other sketches, like "No Joking" and the lamentable running joke of a man selling doughnuts. and then giving them away, fall very flat. Possibly the production could have been more lively and imaginative, but in my opinion Circuses does not come up to the standard of the other work in this Festival, whose setting and amenities for those who do not know the theatre, are always first-rate.