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**THE NEW PLAYS FESTIVAL**

by Alan Chambers

The thought of the New Plays Festival always tugs me in two directions. There is a feeling of hope that we may be about to see something original, but this is mixed with a certain foreboding that the plays may be mediocre or worse still, that we may make a hash of presenting them.

**The Island** was a very pleasant evening in the theatre, perhaps too pleasant, for James Saunders in this mood is a very funny writer who is also uncomfortable. His fable struck at my masculine complacency about sexual relationships without ever landing a knockout punch. Audiences obviously enjoyed it immensely, though I was surprised to hear many of them rating it lightweight. It ended abruptly and perhaps is not yet completely resolved, but I heard the author say to one of his friends who suggested that there ought to be another scene, "You bloody well write it then!" There is no answer to that and I, for one, was more than satisfied with what I got.

**Funland** raises a different problem. My heart sinks when a play opens with two actors in foetal positions being addressed in semi-darkness by a dreamer dressed symbolically(?) in black. But Dannie Abse's text went on to present a series of hospital scenes which, if played with attack, ought to have been truthful and so funny enough to hold us in their theatrical grasp. As it was, I felt like a Jacobean courtier being invited to come and laugh at the lunatics and this was not the mood in which to come to the daring presentation of the long poem towards the end of the play. Beautifully spoken by Norman Wilkinson, I found the caricature madmen a distraction. Reluctantly I must come to the conclusion that once more a Festival production was not able to match the author's intentions, and I think this must account for the feeling of dissatisfaction that I heard from members on several nights.

James Hepburn's two plays were not helped by being lumped together under the umbrella title of **Circuses. Magic 'n Tragic** seemed to be the least formed of the two pieces. Ideally, I would have liked to have seen it played by a cast of grotesques in a Grand Guignol setting or a sleazy cabaret. The producer cast it as best he could and opted for a Palace of Varieties style, but this seemed to jar with some of the American feeling, and no more so than in the textually very funny No Joking and its mordant sequel. It must have been a very difficult decision to make, especially in the sparse conditions which the Festival set up imposes.

**Deaf, Dumb and Blind** excited me a great deal. Despite some patchy acting and using a stage that was about fourteen times too big, this intimate chamber play existed and will carry on existing in my imagination at least. Hepburn is a poet whose words have to be felt. Whereas *The Island* created laughter with sexual innuendos and *Funland* failed to create it with Fat Blondie's sexual predicament, Hepburn's sensuousness created the blind girl's body loving, though all we saw was a bare stage and two relatively static actors. Hepburn is a rare talent, but his plays are elusive. He should re-read a poet he used in *Poor Dumb Animals*, Wallace Stevens:

*It might well be that their mistress  
Is no gaunt fugitive phantom  
She might, after all, be a wanton,  
Abundantly beautiful, cager,  
Fecund,  
From whose being by starlight, on seacoast  
The innermost good of their seeking might come in the simplest of speech.  
It is a good light, then, for those  
That know the ultimate Plato,  
Tranquillizing with his jewel  
The torments of confusion.*

Criticism is too often presumptuous, and my only reason for accepting this commission is because I believe in the New Plays Festival as an idea. Unfortunately there appears to be a disturbing and growing lack of confidence among our active membership about the Festival, which is undermining the presentation of the plays. The conditions in the middle 1970s are not those of the time when the Festival started. Cellar and Studio theatres make it easier for experimental plays to be produced professionally, so that good new plays are becoming harder to find.

Perhaps the time has come when all of us, not just the Artistic Directorate, need to reconsider the principles on which the Festival is based. James Saunders' play got the extremely high standard of casting and presentation that it did because he is known to us all. The Questors' support of John Norman as a resident playwright is a good move, but we need more ideas to put the fire back into us and I don't think the answer lies in expanding the side shows, splendidly managed as they were this year.

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