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Operation Cerberus

by Michael Kittermaster

This story of a secret Army establishment on the Yorkshire moors, which civil servants try to penetrate in vain, was a delight. My family had a discussion as to whether it was a black comedy or not, but decided that the prowlers were so tidily disposed of, in efficient Army fashion, that no sense of horror came over. It was all part of the fun.

The plot concerns one Staff Sergeant Hort, who continues in active service, without pay, long after normal retirement, in charge of a non-existent secret installation in the forgotten inspection chamber of a sewage system, aided unknowingly by a Security Officer who inspects him weekly on his way to other meetings all round the country, and supported by an Army organisation unwilling to give up supplying, however inefficiently, installations it knows nothing about — even if they do not exist. But what is Staff Sergeant Hort really there for? To run a racket, smuggling in illegal immigrants, to pass his 'A' levels, or merely to enjoy an Army life to which he has long been accustomed without the bother of Army pressures? Perhaps all three.

The delight came not only from the play, well constructed and slowly revealing. It came also from the acting, which was as good as anything we have seen at The Questors. Wilfrid Sharp, as Staff Sergeant Hort, never got a footstep or a gesture wrong. He was the epitome of a Sergeant so drilled in every action that it was repeated whenever he crossed the floor, put his cap on, took his coat off, walked up the stairs, used the telephone, deferred to his superior officer, or hoodwinked civilians. It was a masterly performance. Every other member of the cast aimed at the same high standard: in particular, Ken Ratcliffe as Glover, the Security Officer, and Philip Sheahan and John Kearns as the two Indians.

We enjoyed this tremendously and look forward to another new play from Michael Kittermaster at some time.

Agitator,

by John Norman

This is John Norman's curtain lecture on the political ideas of George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906), radical, defender of free speech, secularist, co-operator and agitator.

That it is possible to express philosophical or political ideas successfully in dramatic form, Tom Stoppard has shown. To recount ideas themselves, even thrown between two people representing different aspects of the thinker's personality, does not necessarily make a dramatic situation. Oddly enough, Holyoake's lengthy oration at Chichester, when he defended free speech, is very dramatic, but that was passed over with a joke about its length. So the play did not come alive.

Political ideas can only be judged in the context of their historical and economic situation. We cannot blame nineteenth century socialists for not having twentieth century conditions. And this the author seemed to be doing all the time. Holyoake, he keeps telling us, didn't try to keep the working class together. How could he? There was no united working class to keep together. He is sneered at for his co-operative principles, but the Co-operative Movement was one of the important constituents in the development of working class consciousness. His struggle for free speech and the right not to be religious was another step on the same road. The political criticism seemed specious.

Nor did the actors appear to believe in the play. One felt the unscripted hesitations and mistakes arose from lack of enthusiasm. I pass over the so-called improvisations, and pretended fluffing of lines, the references to 'Him' (the author), the pretended interruptions from the audience, the device of one character living his life forward, the other backward, the crawlings under the table. The play commented on itself as a dramatic experiment. "So what", it said. So what!

Sanctuary,

by James Keller

Take the plot of Susannah and the Elders (including the garden and the trees) from the Apocrypha, add the players from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, the Seven Deadly Sins from Dr. Faustus (duly spiced), spike with details from William Golding's novel 'The Spire', stir in some bits of Chester play, suitably garnished, curdle some Shakespearean names, sprinkle with hints of Anouilh and Christopher Fry. Serve the mixture in the parish hall, complete with magic lantern.

What is turned out, curiously enough, is a kind of romantic novelette — not unpleasant, and with some promise.

The actors were goodish, especially Neville Bradbury as the Bishop and Larry Irvin as Jacques Vintner. Full marks for the costumes, especially the Seven Deadly Sins. But did it really make any difference that the great squeaky staircase moved backwards and forwards? And why couldn't someone take the cloth off that long table, or bring in the beehives for the one time they were necessary? If something is to be 'all purpose', it should look 'all purpose'. Especially for an All Purpose Play.

P.S. James Brodie made a very good play of Susannah and the Elders.

Kitharistes