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AGITATOR

George Holyoake, chartist, Owenite and reformer, spent twenty-five years sitting on committees which achieved nothing, and died a disillusioned and disappointed man. "Agitator" has its two actors playing Holyoake from start to finish, and vice versa: halfway through, these two confront each other in a mirror, the young idealist hardly able to believe the cynic he will one day be, the other full of sorrow at the idealism that went nowhere. That, indeed, seems to be the keynote of the play—despite his efforts, Holyoake achieved no lasting change in society, and the question posed by the play is whether this is the fate of reformers for ever: the answer seems to be a sorrowful "yes".

The style of the play is often reminiscent of James Saunders' "Next Time I'll Sing To You", both verbally and in its action, with the constant interruptions and theatrical games: for example, the beautifully played 'boxing match between Holyoake and a clergyman, and the ritualised, ironic marriage ceremony. Central to the author's intent, I feel, are the many occasions when the audience is jolted out of its easy complacency by the actors suddenly complaining of the lines they've been given, and deciding to improvise, which improvisation—if such it be—breaks down into quarrels. The question raised here is how literally and obviously we dare take theatrical dialectic—or, indeed, any other form of received information: it might after all be the whim of the communicator.

Somehow the production never seemed to live up to the play—it lacked the essential incisiveness that there is in the writing, and it was an unnecessarily equable performance. Some of the devices were only half-realised, and then put away hastily, and, verging as it does on the nature of a solo show, a far greater degree of stylisation would have been appropriate. This is a complaint I shall be making again—at least here I left the theatre with only a vague sense of dissatisfaction, no more: I was sorry the production did not quite do justice to the play.

SANCTUARY

I was fortunate in being able to obtain a copy of this play to read, and came to the conclusion that the production was a travesty of the text. The innate structure and rhythm of the play went for nothing, its clear mediaeval metaphysic was confused with vaguely allusive or symbolic settings, and the morality of the play vanished in attitudinising and cheap conventional parody: note particularly the repellent "where there's muck there's brass" treatment of the Mafia-like Brotherhood of the Rose, which completely ruined the subtle irony of that scene.

The first half of the play is called "Temptation" and the second "The Fall", but this natural and easy divide disappeared in the ambling production: the tension of the last two scenes of the first act, which should prepare us for the second, is lost completely. Admittedly the play poses problems for any director, for it has a linear structure—plenty of action, but not a great deal of plot—but that doesn't mean it is impossible to bring out the inherent symbolism of the play. Partly the failure was due to the settings, which, like the production as a whole, were a collection of half-realised ideas. For example, projections are a useful device for a play with many scenes where there need be only a suggestion of locale, but here the ideas went for nothing: the chess board and the Bosch painting were the only ones that worked, and because these worked, it was all the more obvious that the others did not. Why not a great rose window for the ecclesiastical scenes, instead of a few straggly lines, and why not a simple Tudor rose, its pure symmetry being comment enough, for the Brotherhood of the Rose?

The rolling stairways were exciting the first time they were used, but thereafter merely interrupted the play's flow. The two beehives which figured prominently in the design are mentioned once in the text, and then indicated in the opposite direction by the characters concerned. In sum, the settings were big, awkward and misused for the play. The ideas were there, but went either in the wrong direction or fizzled out entirely. With a bolder use of symbolic settings, a gentler and more unified touch on the direction, the text would have survived with honour. As it was, it didn't.

OPERATION CERBERUS It was significant that the audience laughed heartily for the first twenty minutes or so of the play, but as the evening proceeded the laughter grew steadily more and more forced, until by the closing scenes no one was laughing at the jokes any more. That of course was hardly surprising, as they had all been cracked at least once, and in some cases two or even three times before, and the whole business was becoming rather tedious. Not once had any tension or conflict of character been generated in the entire play; and despite the opportunities afforded by the unquestionably macabre and somewhat sinister theme, "Cerberus" is no more than a pedestrian trudge through some quite neatly conceived scenes. At least there was consistency of character, and Staff Sergeant Hort became steadily more and more disturbing as his fantasies verged on monomania, and as he callously destroyed any intrusion upon his world. He's more than a trafficker in illegal immigrants using a disused W.D. site as a cover: here is a picture of a troubled mind unable to adjust to reality, and which builds ever more elaborately protected fantasies. It's a neat idea, but it never becomes in any way dramatic—the mounting horror is never theatrical—and the production did nothing to rescue the play.

A usually pleasing set was peopled by wooden stereotypes who acted in that fashion—as stage people one was supremely uninterested in their fate, and the non-meeting of Spicer and Endicott inadvertently symbolises the failure of the play—the ideas never meet the characters. I do not wish to condemn the actors—they did their best with repetitive and turgid material, but by the third time of asking even Khan was wearing thin as a comic device. These faults were compounded by the relentlessly wooden pace and most notably that of the scene changing, which was the most ill-conceived I've seen for a long time: surely it is indefensible to make a three-course meal out of resetting a couple of books and a chair, particularly when the play does not demand such rigid definition of each scene. The insistence upon cars arriving and departing was also tediously trivial.

"Operation Cerberus", with its nicely ironic title, should have been quite a clever play, but by failing to become theatre, it remained as a set of ideas, which the production did nothing to rectify.

TIM DEHN