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New Plays Festivals
18th Festival 1977

THE FINANCIAL TIMES

26 March 1977

NEW PLAYS AT THE QUESTORS

by Michael Coveney

However dissatisfied to-day's playwrights may be with their professional lot within the theatre, as witnessed in the recent struggle for official recognition by the newly-formed Theatre Writers' Union, there has never before been such a profusion of outlets for new writing as currently exists. Both the National and the RSC are thirsty for material to fill schedules at their respective studio theatres, the Cottesloe and (in Stratford) The Other Place. And, before the year is out, the RSC will have another studio theatre in action in Covent Garden.

But should a bright new play escape the major subsidised theatres, there are still excellent production facilities available at Hampstead Theatre, the Theatre Upstairs, the Open Space (when it opens again), the Bush, perhaps the Half Moon and, for shorter pieces, the Soho Poly. So it is something of a surprise to find our leading amateur group, the Questors in Mattock Lane, Ealing, preserving their tradition of an annual New Plays Festival. Or is it? Kennedy's Children was turned down by every theatre in London before the King's Head eventually took it up. Quality writing can, and frequently does, slip through the net, although the chances of something exceptional rearing its head in Mattock Lane must be considerably slimmer than when the Festival was founded in 1960.

At which point, of course, it would make good copy to hail an undisputed masterpiece in this year's offering. The truth is, however, that two of the plays were tedious and undistinguished to a degree unmatched in the gloomier troughs of my theatre-going experience while the third, *Seagull Rising* by A. E. Ellis (whose *Grand Manoeuvres*, about the Dreyfus Affair, was a resounding flop at the National in December, 1974) was an intelligent, if dour, response to Chekhov by a writer obviously dissatisfied with the imaginative genius of the original.

Mr. Ellis's idea is to write in the scenes that never happened, and Chekhov's time sequence is adjusted to accommodate them. So we see the schoolmaster trying to hitch his wagon to Konstantin's ascending star with a proposal of joint publication of their work while reporting that Masha is in mourning, not for her life, but for her lost love. But Masha herself hardly exists at all in this version. The action is divided into three acts: in the first, Arkadina elaborates pedantically on her career and her dead husband before taking the internal stage with her son in a piece penned by Trigorin: and the literary competitiveness between Konstantin and the famous writer is highlighted in the former's dramatic consumption of laudanum in the latter's play.

The middle section is entirely presented as Konstantin's play, although Mr. Ellis's re-writing of the characters continues within it. With Trigorin reporting to Nina that to be in bed with Arkadina is "like sharing a coffin with a corpse" before playing a long, rather stilted love scene to her, the piece starts toppling absurdly into melodrama. Perhaps Mr. Ellis intends this, but the point of it all is beyond me. Poor old Sorin mumbles on about his bad health and impotency—"I couldn't get a cock-stand now if you presented me with the arse of Aphrodite"—and the curtain descends on Konstantin fainting dead away as Nina absconds with Trigorin to Moscow.

In the third act we have Konstantin's despair spelt out to us in a pathetic soliloquy, and the parallels briefly suggested between the acting careers of Arkadina and Nina are filled in with heavy lead as Nina returns, not broken by her brush with Trigorin, the stage and poverty, but brightly confident of her future as a great actress.

If the experiment is devoid of resonance or real creativity (Peter Stein has spoiled us for ever, I imagine, with his re-working of Gorky) it is at least decently acted and staged. So, up to a point, are the other two pieces: *Early Shakespeare* and the *Late Marlowe*, a first play by Michael Moriarty, and Lykos: *The Danger in the Maze* by Paul Ramsey. *Early Shakespeare* is an over-extended fantasy about the return of the dead Marlowe to sort out the sexual and professional entanglements of Shakespeare with the Dark Lady and Henry Wriothsley, Earl of Southampton (whom Mr. Moriarty assumes, with the weight of Bardic scholarship behind him to be Mr. W. H.). Lykos is an almost incomprehensible hotch-potch of purple prose and therapy session involving a young man trapped by his ancestral history and the attention of a sinister interrogator.