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**May 1977**

**NEW PLAYS FESTIVAL**

Kitharistes

**SEAGULL RISING**

by A. E. Ellis

What a lot of plays nowadays are about plays. Are writers afraid of real life? Is it so terrible?

Let's forget about Chekhov. For two acts this play had all the makings of a good comic melodrama in its own right, full of lovely big clichés about life and death and even a skit on the obscene bits modern plays must have to make us feel liberated. There was a vague sort of connection with Chekhov that added to the fun, and even an underlying theme that life is nothing but a drama after all.

But then the last act went and spoiled it all. It descended into bathos — it was all so serious, so expected and so dull. Even the delightful notion of the stuffed seagull was never exploited.

What would I have preferred? It's not my job to say, but since A. E. Ellis has had a go at Chekhov, why can't I for this once have a go at A. E. Ellis? I would have liked a grand confrontation with Irena, the fading actress and Nina the rising star, upstaging each other with melodramatic speeches, with more and more banal clichés uttered in ringing tones as if they were new truths. In the course of this they would utterly expose Trigorin for what he was and melt suspiciously into each other's arms while planning Kostia's future. There would be an heroic bawdy death scene for Sorin. What does happen to Konstantin? Well, what's Masha there for — she has been standing there mute for most of the play.

Alas, neither this nor anything else much happened, so it looks as if the play were intended to explain Chekhov after all — 'Big fleas have little fleas...'

The acting was a joy. Peter Field's exaggerated facial and other gestures, Wilfrid Sharp as Sorin, Philip Sheahan's fantastick, Ken Ratcliffe hamming Trigorin and above all Diana Benn as Irena in a virtuoso performance. How they all enjoyed it too — except the last act!

**LYKOS: THE DANGER IN THE MAZE**

by Paul Ramsey

Two young men, one slim, one plumper (note the tact!) kept on undressing and dressing on the stage. Modesty prevented a complete strip: there was, to quote Shakespeare, only 'a little brief'. In the same way, the author failed to reveal all — if indeed there was anything to reveal. His last words were "Nothing! Nothing! Nothing!" This was not true of the two young men.

What was the play about? It seemed to be about a young man called Hart who built a fantasy around a tomb he had once seen in the centre of a maze with the name Lykos on it. We were all supposed to know that Lykos is the Greek for 'Wolf'. He was a hart hunted by a wolf. I apologise to everyone for being continually reminded of Cowper's hymn 'As pants the Hart....' Or was he creating a fantasy for the doctor trying to extract his story in the mental hospital — a fantasy of being pursued by the doctor? Was he in a hospital at all? Who was imprisoning who? Was it about loss of identity or confusion of identity or fusion of identity — or not about identity at all? There was no clue.

Was it a Freudian play about unconscious fears or sexual fears? Phrases about Heaven and Hell suggested this.

Was it a Jungian play about racial memories? The subject—lycanthropy—"thinking you are a wolf" is very much mixed up with that. Or is it about everything changing—are we back with the Greeks? 'Everything is in a state of flux'.

There is a classical Greek idiom. I put it in Greek capitals like the title: 'LYKOΣ ΙΔΕΙΝ'. Literally it means 'to see Lykos' (or see the wolf). For the Greeks it meant 'to be struck dumb'. I was!

A brief word about the production. The lighting and sound effects were excellent, and the production kept the actors moving in what could easily have been a static play. Full marks to those concerned.

**EARLY SHAKESPEARE AND THE LATE MARLOWE**

by Michael Moriarty

A play about dramatists this time!

This was a piece of vaudeville—including the stripping. A strident non-Shakespeare beds a ginger lady of the sonnets with dead Marlowe—apparently having been run over—under the bed. As he can act he takes charge of all their lives, tries to out-do Sophocles by re-writing the tutor's speech from Electra, puts on a bad play in which they all change parts and costumes and produces a travesty of history. It was all rather tedious. The chamber pot joke died a long time ago—except on seaside postcards. Was it trying to say something about the theatre or about acting or role play? I asked two members of the audience what they thought. Mr. P. Chamberlain muttered something about "tragic—comical—historical". Mr. S. Johnson said "It is not well done: but you are surprised to find it done at all". Moral: Good lighting, lots of costume, even action and people on the stage, don't make a play.

**Epilogue**

There is an old story that when a bishop was reproved for the poor quality of the clergy, he replied: "Sir, we have only the laity to choose from."

P.S. I feel rather a beast myself.

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