

The Questors Theatre Archives
Questories
New Plays Festivals

Alfred Emmet's foreword to
THREE QUESTORS PLAYS BY DANNIE ABSE (1967)

It was a chance remark through a chance contact that brought **Dannie Abse** and **The Questors** together again in 1960 when we were looking for new plays to present in our first Festival that summer. The result was the submission and acceptance of **THE HOUSE OF COWARDS**, a play that despite certain naivetes in construction proved to have a compelling power on the stage. This play opened our first [Festival of New Plays](#) and the fact that in doing so it earned the **Charles Henry Foyle New Play Award** for that year did much to encourage us to continue our experimental venture, with the result that it is now a firmly established annual event.



A year or two later Dr. Abse was writing a two act tragi-comedy called **THE JOKER**. A rehearsed reading of this before a small audience of about fifty people proved to be an intermediate stage towards production, besides giving the author an opportunity for some re-writing, and it was decided to include it in our **New Plays Festival** in 1962. It was too short, however, to play alone and I telephoned Dannie Abse one day to ask whether he could not give us something else to go with it. He had nothing in mind but would think about it. The next day he telephoned me to say he had an idea, if we were interested. We were and we commissioned him on the spot. Within a week we had received the script of **GONE**, a brilliantly conceived and tautly written one-act play which is perhaps the most purely theatrical piece Dr. Abse has written.

So it was that for our 1964 Festival we decided to commission Dannie Abse to write us another full-length play. He turned back to **FIRE FROM HEAVEN**, which had been based upon a short story by Balzac called **THE EXECUTIONER** and decided to make a new play, not in verse this time, from the same theme. The result was **IS THE HOUSE SHUT?**, which since production. has been further re-written and appears in this volume as **IN THE CAGE**.

I have recited the circumstances in which these plays were written and presented because it seems to me an excellent example of the kind of cooperation between theatre and playwright which is so mutually valuable. Had it not been for that, it is likely that none of these plays would have been performed and probable that two of them, would never have been written. I know that Dr. Abse considers that **The Questors Theatre** has been of help to him and I know that he has been of help to the

Questors Theatre. How splendid it would be if every theatre were to establish such links with a few promising writers who could look to the theatre for help and encouragement and, above all production of their plays!

The outstanding quality of **Dannie Abse's** work for the theatre is that it is memorable. If one sees one of his plays on the stage, whether one likes it or not, one is unlikely to forget it in a hurry, so deeply etched are the impressions it makes, so vivid the images it evokes, for he knows how to use words and in the theatre words are still a potent force.

One of the most rewarding things about running a theatre is the opportunity to forward the talents of promising and developing playwrights. Although a truism, it still cannot be too often said that unless theatres exist that are prepared to present the promising play of the dramatist whose promise is not yet entirely fulfilled, that promise will, in many cases, not have a chance of fulfilment, and possible masterpieces will never be written. This is particularly true today, when the frustrated playwright is likely to turn to the alternative outlet of television, which, with its insatiable appetite, will swallow his work at one gulp, consuming it wholly and finally almost in the moment of birth (unless of course it should qualify for a regurgitated repeat). In the most literal sense the television play has no future but only the most ephemeral present. I think it is not possible for a masterpiece to be written for television

The theatre future depends upon its talented writers, and so its talented would-be writers must have their opportunity to develop their craft. This requires that their plays be performed irrespective of commercial prospects.

It was for reasons such as these that **The Questors Theatre** in 1960 established its annual festival of New Plays, in which each of the plays in this volume had its first performance.

We first met **Dannie Abse** in 1947, when he brought us a verse play which despite all its faults (which I do not now remember) had such a strange and haunting power that I still vividly recall the impression that it made upon me at the time. This was **FIRE FROM HEAVEN** and it was an ironical twist of fate that when later it was published the entire publisher's stock was destroyed in a warehouse fire. Unfortunately **The Questors** were not at that time well geared to present new plays by unknown authors, and for some years Dr. Abse turned away from the theatre to concentrate upon writing poetry and novels.

ALFRED EMMET

1967