

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

James Saunders remembered by Peter Whelan and Larry Irvin

JAMES SAUNDERS

1925-2004

A TRIBUTE

By Peter Whelan

I once got well and truly "Jimmed" in mid-conversation. I was airily advancing the theory (God knows why ...) that the cave dwellers of northern Spain painted scenes of bison being hunted in order to ensure a successful hunt for the tribe. But Jim interrupted: "Why does it have to be for anything? Why couldn't the caveman have simply woken up that morning thinking: I know what ... I'll paint a bison being hunted today."

Jim had this central anxiety that we should not be tyrannised by theories. We should focus instead on people, give thanks for their individuality and, where tragedy strikes, attend to their grief.



A Cup of Cocoa and A Three-Legged Dog

When I first met him in the heady Post Godot era of the fifties his work was a revelation to me. It shone with truth ... often realised through laughter or surreal visions. In **Barnstable**, one of the first plays he offered The Questors, a country house gradually disintegrates around a woman who calmly goes on dispensing "cocoa for all".

In another early play of his, **The Ark**, one of Noah's sons tries to persuade his father that he should take on board a three-legged dog seen wandering the streets of the doomed city. The Ark already had two four-legged dogs but couldn't the three-legged count as a separate species? I caught myself marvelling at the inspired urgency of the argument. This was the onset of the nuclear age. Who wasn't in the Ark was Jim's concern.

Food for Thought

I loved the man. There was no conversation that was not improved by his presence. You had to be careful - his words could sting - but his actions were kindness itself. He was a generous maker of breakfasts and had an entire philosophy concerning the best way to cook thick back bacon. I'll remember him building sandcastles on Cornish beaches, or pronouncing solemnly on what should go into a picnic basket. In dark December he would do the rounds before Christmas, bearing gifts of superb jam from his country garden in Eastleach.

And all found its way into his work the small human change of everyday life is interwoven with the most lyrical poetic vision and the weightiest of thoughts. His voice lives ... even though the favourite pipe, used to punctuate his arguments, remains strangely unlit.

OUR OLD 'PLAY' MATE

by Larry Irvin

Jim was a playwright and a family man.

He and his family were very easy to love, and our two families became very close - and still are to this day - when we found ourselves living in the same house in Ealing Common, not long after we first met. He and I bonded - as they say when we discovered we had quite a lot in common. For a start our ages and backgrounds were similar, both being brought up in North London: at one time even in adjacent streets. We also shared the same tastes in theatre, corny jokes, pints of beer and life in general.

Humour

Although his erudition, word power, sense of fun and irony was well revealed in his writing, there was also a clownish showoff side of him that,



although always there, his more dominant introvert nature allowed out only on special occasions. This is the bit I felt I could do for him and could always tell when his silly moments needed an airing.

Generosity

His generosity was extreme to a point of vulnerability that you felt needed protecting. But not only in the material sense. He was also over generous with praise for anything he thought you could do better than he. On one occasion, and how many there were, when I was complimenting him on a play, I said how I envied him his talent. His reply was "Yes - but I can't tap dance."

Maybe not, but he certainly could "Sing" to us - and that is something that will never die.