

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

[The Second New Plays Festival \(1961\)](#)

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NEW PLAYS FESTIVAL IS A HIT

PIECE for piece, the festival of three new plays currently in progress at the Questors Theatre. Ealing, is superior to that held last year. While in 1960 we were supplied with a near-success, a misfire and a portentous flop, the 1961 selection provides a definite (if lightweight) hit, an interesting experiment and a well-meaning bore.

There are just three things wrong with Peter Philp's "A Quiet Clap of Thunder." One is the title, which misleads us into anticipating a chunk of Pinter-Simpson surrealism, when we are actually treated to what might pass as an accomplished example of minor Shaw.

"God and the Devil"

Considering the play's theme (God and the Devil), an appropriately Shavian label would have been "Ups and Downs." But the important question is, how does Mr. Philp handle his subject? And the answer here must be: no more profoundly, yet not less entertainingly, than G.B.S. himself.

The author's fondness for the Master, if it doesn't extend to matters of title, certainly shows in his choice of characters and their names. A self-unfrocked priest called Bill Burgeon immediately strikes an echo of the plain man's politician Bill Boanerges in "The Apple Cart," especially since another of Mr. Philp's protagonists (a bluff North-country "Leader of the Opposition" called Bingo Tapperfield) could easily be Boanerges' brother.

... And Satan

Add to these figures Tapperfield's equally typical Government equivalent, the immaculately public-school Cabinet Minister Sir Gerald Copley; Burgeon's enigmatic young wife, who hardly lives up to her name of Christina through turning out to be Satan; a similarly enigmatic stranger named Klein, who in contrast entirely lives up to his Jewishness by turning out to be the Almighty: and the inevitable bourgeois matron, Mary Minnick - and you will realise we are unmistakeably in Shaw territory.

Above all the resemblance continues when we come to the vital ingredient of dialogue. Again and again Mr. Philp's flair for epigram and paradox brings off genuine Shavianisms.

I can perhaps best indicate his sustained level of wit by mentioning that, amongst no fewer than twenty-four extracts which I scribbled down in the course of the evening, only a couple were unfavourable to the work.

They are, in fact, its other two faults, and I reprint them in order to save you pain on the night you attend. The first: "Are you just a pair of cheap crooks trying to pull the cotton wool ectoplasm over eyes?" The second: "Assumptions are for virgins, and you consummated a marriage with knowledge long ago." (Enough said.)

The remaining twenty-two quotations I withhold, in the hope of further whetting your appetite. Suffice it that the cast of six - Dorinne Ingram, Pixie Laurie, Michael Behr, Peter Sainty. Geoffrey Sasse and the infallible Tony Worth - speak them (and the play as a whole) with the disciplined style necessary, under Alfred Emmet's predictably expert direction.

"The courtyard"

If Peter Philp's model is Shaw, Antony Brown's "The Courtyard" seems rather like a cross between "The Archers" and the asylum scenes in "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari."

Mr. Brown introduces us to a village the majority of whose inhabitants are, in one way or another, failures: failed school-teacher, failed business man, failed public speaker, failed husband, failed wives, and a failing old ex-athlete reminiscent - with his armchair, shawl, dark glasses, trilby and beard - of nothing so much as Joseph Cotten in "Citizen Kane."

Amusing ... Touching

The opening half-hour or so arguably contains too many jokes about lavatories and laxatives for aesthetic - as distinct from moral - comfort. And even later on there are occasional passages of rural rhetoric which suggest a somewhat curdled version of "Under Milk Wood."

Yet gradually the various human predicaments are made both grotesquely amusing and oddly touching. For this achievement Mr. Brown deserves praise, but a share of the credit goes to the players (of whom I single out Philip Wright, Denis Skinner, Graham Evans, Awen Griffiths, George Ritchie and Ruby Feast), and to the fluently grouped production by Jeffrey Smith.

Play of ideas

T. R. Sharpe's "The South African" is unfortunately a "play of ideas" where it ought to have been a play about people. As regards personal relationships, Mr. Sharpe can only present us with a wife who sniffles to her husband, "I want another child" and a son who first endeavours to assault a girl and then brains his Dad with a club on the final curtain.

In the circumstances the cast in Kenneth Connington and Barbara Hutchins' production may be forgiven their inability to do more than stride about solemnly emoting; although it is good to see Frangcon Price and Mr. Connington reunited after their memorable teaming in last year's "Three Sisters."

At the end however, the most one can say of this stiff, convulsive tract is that its heart (as Alan Bennett remarks innocently of Dr. Verwoerd during his far neater condemnation of apartheid in "Beyond the Fringe") is in the right place.

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