

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

Third New Plays Festival 1962

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Questors' festival their least rewarding

OWING to various unimportant circumstances, I hadn't a chance on the first night of the third Questors' Festival of New Plays to check up in my programme which production was actually on before the lights went down.

After ten minutes, though. I began to consider that this was appropriate: the piece concerned was nothing if not anonymous. The Questors are becoming dangerously fond of including in the Festival at least one Tract For Our Time per year.

In 1961, sincere but sluggish anti-apartheid aperçus in "The South African": now, anti-Commie slogans carved out with a dramatist's hammer and sickle.

"Children of Saturn"

I finally discovered that the dramatist in question was Lydia Ragosin: the play, "The Children of Saturn." The trouble is that its subject (young revolutionary idealist appalled by violence of real rebellion) needs intensely imaginative treatment to click.

Wajda in "Ashes and Diamonds," and to a lesser extent Sartre in "Les Mains Sales," almost managed it. Ragosin doesn't: the hero remains simply a rather dim undergrad-type who decides to fight: then reverses his decision before he's struck a blow (although he knew in advance exactly what he'd have to do), yet eventually fights after all.

Characters and dialogue are taken from political debate instead of life. The total impact is serious, sober, literate, and uninspired.

Bad trad-and modern

If "Children of Saturn" is a bad trad. play, James Saunders' "Next Time I'll Sing to You" is a bad modern one. Production (by Shirley Butler) and acting were admittedly livelier than in the Ragosin: but is this merely because Saunders can on occasion write much livelier prose? Not that there's nearly enough of it here.

In "Ends and Echoes" at the 1960 Festival, over half the evening was entertaining and significant; here, no more than fifteen minutes entertain - and significance is utterly absent.

Granted he isn't backward in making with the fashionable references: Brecht and Pirandello (alienation-effects, play-within-a-play construction), Osborne (musical-comedy patter from "The Entertainer," itself Brecht-influenced), and Dylan Thomas (patches of rhythmic "poetic" rhetoric); plus sideswipes at Shakespeare, Shaw, Chekhov, Beckett, Nigel Dennis - and (inevitably?) C.N.D.

"Next Time" also resembles a second-rate nouvelle vague movie ("A Bout de Souffie." perhaps), in that its basic hold upon an audience is the indiscriminate and limited one of uncertainty as to what's going on.

Humorous elements

The humorous elements (acted by Lawrence Irvin, Laurence Nixon, Jo Arundel) come off better than the philosophical - emotional aspects (Peter Whelan. George Ritchie)

But a quarter-hour's enjoyment is small recompense for two further hours of the sort of stuff Professor Ayer might have returned spouting had the Russians brain-washed him on his recent tour.

Saunders is a bit like the self-indulgent train-conversationalist you can't get away from: he has innumerable bright ideas about the world, and he tells you every single one of them.

Dannie Abse's 1960 Festival entry "The House of Cowards" suffered from similar garrulity: and the fault isn't entirely conquered in his new double-bill. "Gone" is a short, Pinteresque study of a husband and a lover deserted by the same woman, in which the potential wit and sadness of the incident are only tentatively and a shade artificially explored.

"The Joker," the longer item, quite owes its main creative debt, on the other hand, to (again) "The Entertainer": the central figure, a misfit hiding behind a clown's mask, has unmistakable affinities with Archie Rice.

But unlike Archie's, his masquerade is never made sufficiently plain. He fools everybody (including us) too regularly for the characterisation's good: we are never really sure how seriously to take him, so that the intended pathos of the final curtain seems, instead of logical, a trifle forced.

Nevertheless, these two plays mark a decided rise in their author's powers. Neither is as consistently successful an achievement as Mr. Saunders' "Barnstable" in 1960, or Peter Philp's "A Quiet Clap of Thunder" in 1961; and indeed this strikes me on the whole as the least rewarding Festival to date.

Yet whereas two years ago Saunders' work emerged the most diverting of the programme, this time that honour must go to Dr. Abse.

Wryly amusing

The best moments of "Gone" (a typically Pinterish squabble as to whether "dumb-bell" or "bar-bell" is the correct word: the betrayed husband's childishly mortified efforts to reassert himself by acts of perverse, petty possessiveness) are wryly amusing: and Ned Gethings and Bob Jones do them justice.

More substantially, the opening forty-five minutes or so of "The Joker" provide a genuinely funny series of japes, malapropisms, and would-be marriage-making, somewhat akin to a Jewish version of the old Manchester school of social comedy.

From the introduction of a distinctly priggish youth onwards, the zest is never fully recaptured; but the performances of Joseph Green, Joe Levine, and Pixie Laurie are admirable, and the direction of the bill (by Dr. Abse and Jeffrey Smith) reflects the instinct for theatrical situation apparent in the writing: precisely the instinct which "The Children of Saturn" and "Next Time I'll Sing to You," in their opposed ways, lack.

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