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Questories

[Fourth New Plays Festival 1963](#)

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Questors' Festival is a pretty mixed bag

SEVEN new plays of varying shapes and sizes are being presented in this year's festival at the Questors Theatre (running until June 15). And the one which is the most frankly an "entertainment"- **"The Work-Out,"** by the sole American writer, Albert Bermel - is also, as it happens, the most entertaining.

A superficially merry but underlyingly scathing comment on modern materialism (equating religion, physical culture, sex and advertising into a single nauseous hybrid), it receives splendidly crisp interpretation by Kay Eldridge and above all, John Howard (looking and sounding like a heavyweight Martin Balsam, full of delightful half-suppressed amusement.

I shall pass hurriedly over Colin Finbow's full-length farrago **"The Things,"** which slams the lid firmly down on the coffin of his future as a stage dramatist into which the first nails were hammered a few months ago with his one-acter "Night Time for the Birds"

Pointless echoes

If a fitter title for the latter would have been "Strictly for the Birds," all one can do when faced by Mr. Finbow's latest effort (amateurishly pointless echoes of "The New Tenant," "The Lesson," etc.) is murmur that "The Things ain't wot they us'd to be."

Of somewhat more tolerable quality. however, are three short works by James Saunders and David Campton. Granted, Mr. Saunders's two pieces jargely find him once more in his "Next Time I'll Sing To You" vein of buttonholing, logic-chopping loquacity. This side of him is an acquired taste: I myself have not yet acquired it, though it appears I am in the minority.

But at least **"The Pedagogue"** begins with a fairly fool-proof idea. School-room plots have always been a safe bet, holding as they do a power over us both nostalgic and sado-masochistic. And Mr. Saunders, whose mischievous pleasure in having his characters quiz the spectators was evident in "Next Time," is quick to see how an extra twist can be given to this power through transforming his audience into childhood pupils again.

For a while we aren't sure whether the protagonist is going to start laying about us with his cane in the front row: which is undoubtedly a means of compelling our attention.

Solemn diatribes

The trouble is that pretty soon the uncertainty wears off, to be replaced by a mountingly solemn series of intellectual diatribes.

Now I'm quite ready to believe that these are really very erudite and profound. Yet they still don't get through to me in the theatre, any more than they did in "N.T.I.S.T.Y.": and tricking them out with ominous crimson lighting and final-curtain electronics doesn't manage to hide the fact.

Nevertheless, Lawrence Irvin deserves praise for his sustaining of this pedagogue-monologue.

Mr. Saunders's second offering. **"Who was Hilary Maconochie?"** combines to an even greater extent his twin penchants of inconsequential rhetoric and inconsequential humour. Unfortunately (despite adept cameos by Dorinne Ingram and Alexandra Mikellatos), this humour isn't as lively as in "Barnstable" or "Double Double."

Universally truthful

But in the concluding ten minutes or so, with the two widows boasting vaguely of their dead husbands' virility, the author at last turns to what he has always done best: the developing of an isolated, cogent theme or situation. The theme here is human forgetfulness; and it proves universally truthful and sad enough to lend the closing transition from farce to pathos genuine effect.

Mr. Campton's **"Don't Wait For Me"** comes as an unexpected contrast to his black nuclear joke "Four Minute Warning"; and is a more consistently successful achievement, albeit on a rather modest scale.

Its subject (a wistful look back at an unfulfilled romance between a restless girl and a quietly devoted suitor who just isn't temperamentally right for her) might almost be a parallel to Paul and Miriam's relationship in "Sons and Lovers," only with the roles reversed.

Melancholy Impact

It would have needed, though, a talent as intensely poetic and emotional as Lawrence's to prevent it seeming faintly old-fashioned and sentimental. Mr. Campton isn't in that class. All the same, the couple (and even the chorus-crone with her impoverished munching of chips) a certain inevitable, melancholy impact; and Mary Jones's portrayal of the girl generates moments of authentically bitter force.

Finally, the electronics and audience-threatening recur in William Norfolk's **"The Exhibitionists Are Among Us"** and **"Goodness Gracious! Is That Really Me?"** **"The Exhibitionists"** - concerning a young married pair who live in a cage - is, I suppose, intended to be a parable of semi-detached sterility: but apart from the wife's brief insulting of her neighbours (us), little is exhibited (or communicated) save boredom.

Escapism

There's a bit more to be said, however, for "Goodness Gracious!": a debate on the morality of escapism (boarding-house inhabitants living under assumed names murder anyone who tries to shatter their protective disguises and fantasies), benefiting from the various presences of Joan Pyle (an Earl's Court Madame Arcati), Jane Hodlin (vamping in red hair), and James Smith (camping in black leather).

DOUGLAS McVAY.