

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

6th New Plays Festival 1965

Amateur Stage, June 1965

THE QUESTORS' New Plays Festival is now an established annual event, and it is a tribute to the status of the company and of the plays presented that such a number of well-known critics, playwrights, producers, actors, etc., are willing not only to attend the performances but to lead the informal discussions immediately after "curtain fall" (or whatever is the appropriate open-stage expression!), which are so invaluable to author, audience and cast alike.

In addition to the three full-length plays reviewed below, during the fortnight the Questors acted as week-end hosts to over 100 Little Theatre delegates, and presented poetry readings and a late-night revue by Vincent McQueen and others—*Ooh! (or How I Assumed the Rôle of a Popular Igloo for the Purpose of Becoming a Shed)*!

How I ASSUMED THE ROLE OF THE POPULAR DANDY:
FOR PURPOSES OF SEDUCTION AND OTHER BASE MATTERS,
by Derek Marlowe. *4m., 1f., 1b. supers.*

Playwrights who want to be "with it"—and with a title almost as long as the Marat/Sade and set in an asylum, Derek Marlowe is not writing for Aunt Edna—seem terrified of being accused of providing a plot. Yet towards the end he does make some concession to audience enlightenment, through the medium of the chief warder—but strangely enough this proved to be a little superfluous for those brought up in the "Anger and After" decade.

This is a study of a man whose schizophrenia is so strong that it has tipped over the edge of the accepted dividing line between "normality" and sanity—forced there by the breakdown of his sheet anchors of religion, sex and family. Many questions are thrown up, such as the nice distinctions between the normal and abnormal, sanity and salvation, reality and disguise, sex and symbolism, and combinations and permutations of all these aspects; but, in the contemporary idiom, no deep philosophical implications are considered or solutions suggested ... the author states but does not interpret. The effective method used is for two actors to play the split personalities of the same man, Petra and Perdito—one imagining himself acting as valet to the other, disguised, ostensibly to pander to the other's whims, as that "popular dandy", Beau Brummel. Finally one half commits suicide, leaving the other without his compensating balance of abnormality.

I felt that the two elements of the same personality should have been more often interrelated and overlapping, and that some moments on the "right" side of sanity would have been more realistically accurate and theatrically effective. Considerable cutting to speed up the production and elimination of some of the less happy "epigrams" could be made with advantage. Nevertheless, a most interesting and well-written piece, well suited to the Questors' open stage, brilliantly played and excellently cast as the contrasting near-duologue of David Gower and Paul Imbusch, and offering admirable scope to producer Alan Clarke to heighten with other atmospheric aids of lighting and sound.

THE SHED,
by Charles Hatton.
9m., 4f., supers.

Regular Questors' customers were no doubt surprised to find this Coronation Street-type working-class over-the-garden-fence comedy included in their usual avant garde New Plays Festival. The title might have conjured up sinister images of dark deeds at the bottom of the garden, but this must be labelled strictly "for entertainment only". Good new comedies are hard to find, and this lighter leavening would be welcome—if it were good of its kind. But though the basic idea of a man seeking in vain his own private refuge is most promising, the development and characterisation are not sufficiently interesting to sustain a full-length play, though, heavily pruned, it could make an excellent one-act cameo.

Ted, an engineer whose job has been reduced to dial watching, and whose private married life to sharing a house with two other generations, seeks at the same time a sanctuary and an outlet for his creative ability, by tinkering about with some machinery in the shed at the bottom of the garden. Weird noises late at night and a bolted door cause gossip, fear and protest from nosy neighbours, and he is so hounded by them and the local press that he is finally driven to smashing up the machine, and his secret retreat, in his own personal Chartist riot. There are some amusing character studies, particularly of grandpa, well played by Harry Ives, and some good moments of verbal neighbourly cross-fire, but when the author is reduced to introducing a completely extraneous Hell-fire gospeller complete with sandwich-boards, for the sake of a laugh, it is proof that genuine plot development has misfired. The play fails because it is not outrageously funny enough for farce, and lacks satirical comment to make it a *Semi-Detached*-type comedy.

The Questors' acting area lent itself admirably to this divided garden setting, with the shed forming the backing, and the garden path exits leading back to the house. Opportunities were provided for a number of the society's younger players, who made the most of mediocre material.

THE IGLOO,
by Kon Fraser.
2m., 2f.

Coincidentally, this play, like *The Shed*, is also concerned with a place of escape from reality and the world—but there the resemblance ends. This is a study, observed in meticulous detail and unfolded with infinite sympathy and sensitivity, of the relationships between a mentally defective man of 40 and a precocious, tomboyish schoolgirl of 13. Michael lives with his aged, ailing mother and her dead husband's former secretary/mistress now turned nurse/"companion"—though the relationship of the two women is hardly companionable but mutually antipathetic, their lives bound together in hatred and distrust by the men they have shared.

During a big freeze-up the snow tempts Michael out of their London flat, where he meets Johnny engaged in building her igloo; the first act opens with a great deal of exposition and then traces the delicate growth of the innocent man/girl relationship as they happily build the ice house together. By the second act their refuge is complete and we follow the working out of their friendship to its ultimate tragedy, as Johnny desperately tries to meet her demands (job for her father, typewriter for herself and cheque book for himself) and break free of maternal suffocation, whilst his mother even more desperately clings on to every device to hold him. After the sensitive treatment of this difficult theme throughout, the rather melodramatic ending may come as a disappointment to many, but at least it has the virtue of an Ibsen-like structure far more solid than its title.

I have nothing but praise for the performances, particularly of Sandra Wainwright-Fahey as the common little slum girl with poetry in her heart, and of Roy Grant who somehow contrived to play the simpleton without ever making him boring or embarrassing to the audience. Producer Alfred Emmet held his players on an immaculate tight-rope throughout, though at times the play dragged, largely owing to problems of handling the numerous scene changes from flat to igloo; in this instance the open stage, with its blacking out difficulties, proved a disadvantage.

With a playing time of nearly 150 minutes, it needs considerable cutting, and streamlining to reduce the number of scene switches. But again the Questors' New Plays Festival has more than justified itself in bringing to light a play of considerable merit, which deserves a much wider audience.

R.S.