

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

Sixth New Plays Festival 1965

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ENTERTAINMENTS PAGE

IT was a pleasure to find the Questors choosing for their new plays' festival such a witty, down-to-earth comedy as **"The Shed."**

In a programme note the author, Charles Hatton, explains that he wrote the play after lying awake one night while his next-door neighbour hammered away in his garden shed until long past midnight. He has, naturally, elaborated the theme and caused the noise to come from some mysterious machinery which a young man has installed in the shed in a spirit of independence and defiance against the automation job he has at an engineering works.

It is the kind of comedy at which one can sit back and enjoy without troubling about obscure meanings.

I was surprised, therefore, at the way Michael Warre, the actor, director and designer, tore it to pieces at the discussion on the opening night. He said it had no structure, that it had a very tenuous theme, that for him it was a no-play.

It is true that the young man, Ted Morcom, destroys the machinery at the end without letting us know what he expected to achieve. He was a simple fellow whose only desire was to be left alone to do something in his own way without interference from busybodies. When pestered by curious neighbours and even by the Press he lost heart and destroyed his brainchild rather than satisfy other people's curiosity.

Mr. Warre also said the characters were cyphers. But the author has put a great deal in his characters. There is, above all, granddad Morcom, with his constant diatribes against Stanley Baldwin, whom he blames for most of the world's ills, and his suggestion that men use their garden sheds as refuges from their womenfolk!

Then Mr. Warre complained of a mention of low gas pressure, asking what significance it had in the play. But it was used merely to get a character off the stage.

The introduction of a gospeller with his placards was, I agree, superfluous.

The play could be improved by strengthening or, alternatively, as Mr. Warre suggested, by reducing it to a longish one-act play.

As it is it runs for about an hour and 40 minutes playing time, too short for a full-length play, too long for one act.

The set consisted of two neighbouring back gardens in an industrial town. As with the characters there was a homeliness about it that seemed very real.

It was directed by Roger Saxton Howes with the simplicity demanded and with proper appreciation of the author's wit.

Harry Ives was outstanding as Grandpa Morcom. His ambling gait and his scoffing tone were a constant delight.

Derek Chandler was a sturdy Ted with his air of independence and confidence in what he was about, while Estelle Hampton had all the flamboyance of the local siren whom Ted at one point takes into his

Maynard Tweed was the cheeky milkman, David Lippiett was the smart Jewish dealer in anything from old silver to old iron, and Susan Mindelsohn, Sheila Bray, David Lorraine, Robin Ingram, Sandra Bromberg, Ronald Williams, Trevor Hopkins and Julian Tayler portrayed a variety of other characters.

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A man's craving to lead his own life is treated in different vein in Kon Fraser's "**The Igloo**." Again there is the man who finds satisfaction in creating something with his own hands. Only this time he is mentally deficient and has been sheltered from the practical problems of the world by an over-ossessive mother.

In creating an adult character with the mind of a child the authoress has tackled a very difficult subject. She has done so with extraordinary skill and sensitivity which, perhaps, is not surprising from one who has written poetry and stories for children.

I found it very moving, but Miss Fraser has, as yet, little sense of stagecraft. I cannot imagine an experienced playwright making his characters build a house of ice on the stage. The man, named Michael, and a 13 years-old girl, known as Johnny, go through the motions of sawing through a block of ice to make ice bricks. Apart from the impossibility of such a task the original block remained exactly the same size and shape throughout the play while the number of bricks increased with each scene.

It may be argued that this is fantasy but surely the background to these odd characters should have been real.

JOHN ALLEN, the well-known producer and theatre personality, who led the discussion on Friday night, found the play upsetting rather than moving. I cannot say I was upset by it, but I agree with his relief that Miss Fraser had made no attempt to romanticise the problem of the mentally retarded person.

Like Mr. Allen I was also under the impression at first that the girl was also supposed to be a little mad. What sane person, even a child of 13, would want to build an igloo—and in a cemetery of all places?

Then there were the two women who looked after Michael, his aged widowed mother, Helen, who is largely responsible for his retarded development, and her late husband's mistress, Laura. The very fact of them sharing a house together seemed odd, but Laura was obviously intended as the stabilising factor. She is the one person who has any understanding of Michael. And it is hinted that she gave Michael's father the true love and affection that he never had from the possessive Helen.

Alfred Emmet's production seemed very slow, but that may have been the play. He was certainly true to the authoress's intentions in his direction of the players. He might, perhaps, have caused the sawing of the ice block to be done on the side hidden from the audience. As it was it looked absurd.

Three of the cast of four are newcomers to the Questors. Roy Grant gave a life-like portrait of the weak-minded Michael, both in speech and movement. The girl, Sandra Wainwright-Fahey, was not so appily cast. She looked much more than 13 and it was difficult to assess her mental condition, although she was obviously a rebel against conformity.

Mary Jones, the third new member, played the sympathetic Laura, and Jo Arundel contributed a remarkable crotchety old woman who is insistent on Michael washing his hands on every occasion.

There are two more performances of "**The Igloo**," tomorrow and Saturday. "**Popular Dandy**," reviewed last week, is being given tonight and Friday.

THE late-night revue, given last Friday and Saturday and to be repeated this weekend, is not quite so funny as last year's, but it is still very entertaining and inventive.

Written once more by Vincent McQueen and produced again by Laurence Nixon, with the title, **"Ooh!" or "How I Assumed the Role of a Popular Igloo for the Purpose of Becoming a Shed,"** it had bright things to say about TV commercials, the disappointments of an actor, horror films, Hamlet and Macbeth, politics, fashions and the conventions of living in box-like houses.

It concludes with a glorious parody of current musicals, with Sylvia Estop as Julie Andrews in "The Sound of Music" and "Mary Poppins." Joan Pyle as the Mother Superior from "The Sound of Music," and others in "Camelot" roles.

Even the choice of new plays for the Questors' Festival is smartly satirised, with an author daring to submit a play with a plot.

Kay Eldridge writes another letter of woe to the box office manager. Don Kincaid sings to his guitar accompaniment a requiem to road victims, and among lightning sketches is one with Laurence Nixon pronouncing Charles II's famous last works in regard to Nell Gwynne, and Paul Imbusch as a lugubrious archbishop.