

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

New Plays Festival 1965

WHY A NEW PLAYS FESTIVAL

by Alfred Emmet

To rehearse three plays simultaneously and present them in repertoire, to have three first nights within four days, is a substantial undertaking for any theatre. Why, then, make this big annual effort? For this is the sixth year of our New Plays Festival.

One has to start with the premise that it is important that a theatre such as ours should present new plays, and moreover new plays by unknown and young writers. Any theatre manager will put on a masterpiece if it comes his way—always assuming he recognises it. But it is not every theatre manager who will put on the promising play, the play that has interest, can more excite or entertain an audience, that has theatrical quality and yet is short of perfection, or by reason of its subject matter or treatment or style is likely to appeal only to a minority audience. But the point is that there are not and never can be enough masterpieces to go round, and unless someone is prepared to do the promising plays, the promising playwrights will never go on to write the masterpieces that some of them at least may have it in them to write. And this is where a theatre such as the Questors comes in.

The second premise is that to see a new play performed, to be in at a birth as it were, is particularly fascinating and exciting, though at the same time it must be admitted that audiences are slow to venture to unknown plays, and the Questors members are no exception to this; they hang back from a new play they know nothing about until someone has told them it is good.

This makes it a little difficult for us to include new plays by unknown authors in our ordinary programme—audiences will prefer to come to the play before, which may be Shaw or Sheridan, or to the play after, perhaps by Chekhov or Ibsen, but may give the unknown play a miss.

The point of the festival then is that it gives a special and added interest to coming to the new plays we present. The seeing of three new plays in close proximity to one another is itself something of a special theatre-going event; the interest of comparing this new play with that, this promising author with the other, gives an added zest to the whole affair and the additional opportunity of attending a discussion immediately after the performance, led by some figure in the theatre world, adds quite a new dimension to the experience of going to the theatre. The Festival is, then, an Event, and we know from experience that it is one that is enjoyed, appreciated and supported by our members.

To declare the Festival is, as it were, an act of faith. When it is fixed it cannot be known what plays will be done or even whether any plays of quality will be found. This, I think, is a risk that must and should be taken, for unless the Festival is declared in advance in this way, it is pretty certain the plays will NOT be forthcoming. Occasionally we may have a dud, (though it is interesting to note that while most years there have been unanimous views that at least one play was a dud, there was equally a great cleavage of opinion as to which the dud was!). That is a risk that has to be accepted. It is not a high price for what may come out of the Festival. It is acceptance of that risk that makes it possible to commission plays from time to time. It was the commissioning of the play by us that alone induced James Saunders to write *Next Time I'll Sing to You*, which placed him among the forefront of contemporary dramatists.

Audiences at our New Plays Festival may be in at the birth of a new playwright. Indeed, you may make a new playwright, for there could certainly be no Festival if you did not come!

ALFRED EMMET