

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

7th New Plays Festival 1966

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New Plays Festival

by B A Young

The Questors, the fascinating theatre in Ealing that hosts one of the best amateur companies I know and a playhouse many professional companies must envy, is a valuable test-bed for playwrights. They get a chance to see their plays done without having to persuade a commercial management that they will make money. The productions aren't quite up to professional standards, but they're mounted with care and with love. The writer can see whether he has achieved what he thinks he has; and the Questors audiences, eclectic and loyal, sit patiently through some occasionally sticky evenings in their hope of striking gold.

One strike they made was *Next Time I'll Sing to You*, which formed part of the 1962 festival. James Saunders has had many pieces produced by the Questors, and acknowledges his large indebtedness to them: and one of this year's plays, *The Guy*, by Walter Lever, is much influenced by Mr. Saunders in style. It is a modern morality, set in an Underground station to which a new Ulysses has come, as Plato says of the ghost of the old one, "in search of the life of a private man who has no cares."

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The station is inhabited only by sinister characters who represent (if I have it right) the threat to the soul presented by the various senses. A man threatens to cut off Ulysses Brown's nose with a razor; a woman is after his eyes, and another after his tongue; a telephone girl assaults his ears with a hellish noise on the instrument, and, most important of all, three schoolgirls, latter-day Sirens, try to seduce him. There is also a character named Foy, which means Faith, who begins by warning Ulysses against his persecutors but ends up on their side.

The burden of their accusations that Ulysses has been an informer and a traitor, but no actual evidence to this effect is ever produced, though a lot is fudged. Dr. Lever's exposition of his theme is bedevilled by his tendency to run too far after every hare he starts, and he starts a good many, some of them of only marginal relevance. However, there's no doubt that the piece is full of interesting ideas, and by seeing it on the stage Dr. Lever will perhaps realise how much clarification is required. He will also, I hope, realise how flat some of his heightened naturalistic dialogue sounds. It's a very hard medium to work in.

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John Hearne's *The Golden Savage* is another re-working of classical myth, but on a lower level. It's the story of Theseus, how he slew the Minotaur and how he abandoned Ariadne on Naxos and got rid of his father Aegeus (all for the public weal) by hoisting the black sail instead of the white.

It's written in modern English and equipped with modern morals (though acted in Greek costumes)—the aim being, I take it, to demonstrate how little human nature has changed through the centuries. This, I have to say, is something we all know without hearing an Athenian general talk like Field Marshal Montgomery. Mr. Hearne adds little to the original story, in fact, and to keep it "contemporary" he's had to leave out some of the jollier bits. We don't hear, for instance, that this nymphomaniac Pasiphae is actually the Minotaur's old mum.

One thing this company needs, by the way, is a classical scholar to impose some uniformity in the pronunciation of Greek proper names.

In Crete again, but some thousands of years after Minos, for Malcolm Quantrill's *What Really Happened to Felicity Hope?* Well, what did ? Was she raped by frogmen in the captain's cabin of a wreck in the harbour ? Was she murdered at the orders of her fiancé, Jeremy, now in love with his Bulgarian boy secretary? Was she a secret agent with a transmitter grafted into her left breast? And while we're asking these unanswerable questions, why did her fiancé and the Cretan police captain exchange identities at the end?

These mysteries are never resolved in Mr. Quantrill's play: in fact they get thicker and thicker until the final curtain. "In Crete," says the author in a programme note, "any account of a factual happening

would be affected by myth"; but I don't think it fair of him to leave so many things unexplained. Also he cheats: he constantly thickens the mystification in the scenes of cross-examination with which his play abounds by not only having people give evasive answers, but by having people ask the wrong questions.

For example, when a detective tells Jeremy that Felicity has had "a slight accident" he never asks where she is: he asks: "Where have you taken her?" Mr. Quantrill also clouds the texture of his dialogue by the use of a lot of padding which sounds like an inept copy of Harold Pinter.

No, this piece doesn't come off. But it's an interesting failure all the same, the kind of thing that makes the Questors' new play seasons so very much worth while.