

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

8th New Plays Festival 1967

Amateur Stage, August 1967

IT WAS NEVER SO MERRY, MY LORD, by David Shellan, 5m., 2f.

DEATH IN LEICESTER, by Roy Minton. 2m.

PRIVATE FIRES by Fred Walson. 5ma., 3f.

Questors Th .. London, W.5.

The press handout for this year's Questors' New Plays Festival stated: "One thing links the three authors—each is an experienced writer with professional productions behind him."

In the event other links became apparent—that these were all off-beat, quirky modern comedies, each with a predominant theme of the relationship between two men, sometimes physical, sometimes not. A further link was the lack of discipline in the writing—a sin of which such experienced writers should not be guilty: in two of the plays one of the leading characters is accused of being in love with words—a criticism which boomerangs back upon the authors.

In this annual event the Questors are providing a unique platform on which dramatists of some achievement and considerable promise can spread their wings and be listened to attentively by a sympathetic audience, without having to pander to real or imagined commercial considerations. This is admirable, though it does in turn impose some strain upon audiences who thus willingly offer themselves as sounding boards for the playwright's experiments.

In *It Was Never So Merry, My Lord*, the central character, Albert, is an elderly historian, whose eccentric methods have lost him his teaching job many years ago. Since then he has been eking out an existence with private pupils and other hangers-on, three of whom we see re-creating scenes from history, verging on the thin Pirandellian border-line between reality and illusion. One of his pupils, Jacob, learning only too well from his tutor of the workings of the capitalist system, has made a fortune as a "developer". Nonetheless, he, like the other two, is drawn back to Albert and his fantasy world—or, at least, that, though a success in the material world, he is still a failure as an integrated person. He is finally disposed of by a play-within-a-play, by being given the role of Wolsey in his death scene—a theatrical contrivance quite effective in itself, but appearing in this instance to be artificially super-imposed.

This is basically a study of lonely misfits and their need for each other—to exploit and be exploited. It is related with sympathy and understanding of these shadowy and shady characters; it contains some well-written dialogue and good moments, but, like the characters, fails to become integrated.

Roy Minton has set himself an incredibly difficult task—of holding an audience for 2½ hours in a duologue between two characters, with one single setting, and practically no action or development of plot. In the event it is surprising that he succeeded so well. Two men, both of whom have deserted their wives in Leicester, now share a basement room in London with the bare minimum of furniture, food and clothing. They work in a West-End store and all the money they can scrape together goes on trying to win a fortune on the dogs. We see them, in the first and third acts, going through their self-inflicted weekly dose of hope and despair as the result of each race of the evening is known. Finally, they miss the jackpot so narrowly that they, and the audience, know that they will never succeed—but now they are so committed to their way of life that there is no alternative but to go on hoping that perhaps next time... Just as much as those characters in the first play, their need for each other is so great that they are doomed to live together in hopeless hope.

The author has bravely inserted a middle act with absolutely no purpose whatsoever—apart from revealing how the characters might behave at other times, such as typical Sunday. In this he shows his undoubted talent at dialogue and pathos, but this is rather a sterile, undramatic exercise from the point of this particular play and was pushing his audience's tolerance just a little too hard.

Private Fires is a black farce set in a crematorium, through the running of which the present proprietors have climbed out of working-class enjoyment in life to middle-class respectability in death. The play opens slowly, but on the arrival of a gangster with six bodies for disposal, we are taken right out of the realm of reality into a series of crazy sketches, which conclude by the gangster himself being tipped into the incinerator and the changing of the nature of the establishment into a night club.

Orton-wise, corpses are a giggle—though here we do not actually have bodies on view, only coffins littering the stage. We also learn, quite pointlessly it seems, that at one time or another most of the characters have been involved in murder.

The style veers disconcertingly, giving the play lack of continuity and direction—but each sequence is amusing enough in isolation,

R.S.