

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

9th New Plays Festival

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QUESTORS NEW PLAYS FESTIVAL 1968

For the past decade or so—since the acceptance of Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter—playwrights with any serious pretensions, and with their name to make, have been almost afraid of being explicit, in case they are condemned as old-fashioned by the cognoscenti. Over the past nine years this annual festival of original plays has understandably reflected this current predilection for obscurity and symbolism in a large proportion of its offerings. How refreshing, therefore, to hear young playwright David Yallop, at one of the admirable discussion sessions that follow each performance during this festival, to state unequivocally that he wants to communicate, and, if he does not, he considers this a failure on his own part, not on that of the audience.

His play, *IN SEARCH OF A MAN* (16m., 1f.), certainly succeeded in communicating and was the outstanding play of the festival. Based upon recent research into the Dead Sea Scrolls, it presents Jesus, the successor to John the Baptist, as a figure selected by the Zealots and the Essenes, to inflame the Jews to revolt and overthrow their Roman overlords. The Jews were waiting for the Messiah, so the scheming Zealots were prepared to use any means to gain their ends: but when Jesus learns the truth about John's death and his own motivation, he refuses to be a political pawn and makes a confession to High Priest Caiaphas, which seals his fate.

There are some weaknesses in construction: the characters tend to be used as mouthpieces for ideas; the author gives Jesus a wife and child, but they have little place in the play; the great character difference, which we are told existed between John and Jesus, is not manifest; the motivation for Jesus's confession is not convincing; too much action takes place off-stage. Nonetheless this is an intriguing, thoughtful and important play throwing up immense, universal issues of divinity and faith, Christianity and Judaism, striking at the very core of our conventional religious beliefs humanity in search of a man, and of that man in search of himself.

The central character in *THE LAUGHING WILLOW* (3m., 2f.), by Arthur Berry, is the crippled son, Cliff, whose birthday is being "celebrated". In a long opening scene with his mother the nature of their relationship is interestingly revealed, but the promise of this early character study is not fulfilled, as the play meanders rather aimlessly. It is interspersed by games of story telling, in which the family indulge—presumably as an outlet for their own limited lives; but fantasy and reality become so intermingled that it becomes impossible to separate them.

It is understandable that Cliff should live largely in this fantasy world, but difficult to appreciate why the rest of this family, living average middle-class suburban lives, should similarly seek to escape reality.

At the centre of Cliff's stories is the summer house, his sole private retreat, where he imagines sexual fantasies with his brother's wife—recalling to my mind the "something nasty in the woodshed" of Cold Comfort Farm! Yet we learn that on the one occasion his mother dared to observe him in his sanctum, she found him on his knees praying.

In the second half Cliff becomes the catalyst of revelations which shatter the respectable outer veneer of the family life; their fantasy games get out of control and become disturbing reality. Yet nothing seems finally resolved, and at the end the characters make their separate entrances to continue their sterile, pointless lives much as before the revelations disturbed the uneasy peace of the summer evening under the willow.

The author's purpose remains clouded, but perhaps the clue lies in the title, for the willow, overhanging the garden setting, is already dead. If this is a just interpretation of the symbol, it is a message of negative unfulfilment and dreary hopelessness.

Again the central character, the catalyst, of *NO CAMELS IN ISRAEL* (3m., 2f.), by Kon Fraser, is an incurable. In this case Auntie is merely a near-lifeless lump in a bed up-stage, yet the fact of her presence and existence dominates the family equally as much as in the neurotic articulateness of Cliff

in the previous play. Dan has promised his dying mother to look after Auntie, but more than this he has become obsessed by a dream of taking her on a holiday to Israel, towards which he and his wife Ruth have sacrificed for years.

Into this life of self-deluding devotion come their student daughter, Miriam, and a German boy friend, Ludwig, picked up on her travels. When he sees Auntie he is so horrified by her appearance, that he reacts with a stream of Teutonic abuse, which terrifies Auntie, who, it is eventually revealed, was a victim of Belsen (a tragedy we had half-suspected as soon as Ludwig's nationality was revealed). Dan tacitly admits that he knew he could have obtained monetary compensation from the Germans for Auntie, but this he refused to accept, thus imposing a life of self-martyrdom not only upon himself but on his unwilling wife.

Although written and played realistically, there is always beneath this a deeper reality of fantasy, though the images Kon Fraser evokes here are less effective than in her play, *The Igloo*, presented three years ago in this Festival. This raises many important potential issues—the whole question of guilt and reparation, of the borderline between self-delusion and self-sacrifice, and of conflicting family responsibilities and allegiances. But here again the author's primary purpose remains unclear: one does not seek for simple solutions and explicit meanings in serious plays such as these, but a play cannot achieve its full impact if the various strands remain too diversified.

The Questors are to be congratulated on this varied and interesting programme of new plays, and their acting strength in depth is proved by being able to mount three such splendid casts simultaneously, their resources standing up manfully to such demands, particularly in casting the first play. Another Questors' tradition is promptness of "Curtain Up"—which is an object lesson to most other theatres, amateur and professional: if the audience knows that 7.45 means exactly this, they will somehow contrive to be in their seats at that time, and not wander in five or ten minutes later. Audience discipline is just as necessary as cast discipline.