

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

9th New Plays Festival

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AN ABSORBING PLAY LIGHTS UP FESTIVAL

Arthur Berry's "The Laughing Willow" is the fascinating and completely absorbing second new play to receive its world premiere, at the Questors Theatre New Plays Festival. It is vivid and it provides much thought provoking entertainment.

It centres on the family of Cliff, a cripple from birth, whose complex character it explores. All the family's relationships with each other are coloured by their reactions to the needs of Cliff. Mother, Father, brother Gerry and Cliff, himself, constantly weave "stories" to illustrate points and either to express or disguise true emotions. At times, the dividing line between fantasy and reality is almost invisible.

Laughter there is in abundance, but good humour is absent. Bitterness and tears are dominant. The dialogue is brilliant and interest is maintained throughout.

UNHAPPY

Michael Bird's performance as Cliff is remarkable for its depth. He portrays the rapidly varying moods of this unhappy character with expertise and conviction. Alternatively petulant, childish, profound, witty, bitter, blasphemous and just plain vulgar, he gives a highly revealing portrayal of a man whose mind is almost as crippled as his body.

He never loses the overwhelming sympathy of the audience albeit, at times, he asks for a well placed kick in the seat of the wheelchair to which he is confined for the majority of the play. The skill with which he manipulates this chair about the stage is admirable.

Kay Eldridge plays the mother with great skill. She develops the character extremely well as the play progresses. At first she is a typical mother whose concern is for her crippled son. Her own inadequacies are revealed later until, at one stage, she appears almost malicious. It was all very well conveyed by this talented actress.

SANCTIMONIOUS

The rather sanctimonious brother, Gerry, is well played by Roger de Toney. His marital, sexual difficulties and his jealousies are sand-papered by Cliff's biting tongue. Gerry's reactions were excellent and a clear, if somewhat weak, character is revealed.

The self-made tolerant and easy going father is well characterised by Kenneth Ratcliffe. He, too, has his problems and these are given clear definition.

In a lesser role, Gerry's alluring wife, Irene, is played with confidence by Heidi Steinberg. Altogether this is an extremely well-cast play in that each of the characterisations is clearly distinctive.

The play is well directed by Bill McLaughlin. The pace never flags, movements are purposeful and well achieved and the story holds attention throughout.

HIGH PRAISE

This is the first of Arthur Berry's plays to be performed and as such, it deserves high praise. Mr. Berry, who works for a firm of publishers, has been writing for many years, mostly short stories and one-act plays.

"The Laughing Willow," is one of three, recently completed, full length plays written specifically for the open stage.

"The Laughing Willow" will be seen again on June 29 and July 3.

W.R.N.