

## MIDDLESEX COUNTY TIMES

Saturday 17 July 1954

### Student production will be end of Questors' current season

At the Questors Theatre, Mattock-lane, this evening starting at 7.30pm, the Questors' Second Year Student Group, who have just completed their two year course of training for the stage, will give the first performance of their production of Norman Nicholson's play "**The Old Man of the Mountains.**" Further performances will be given each evening next week (except Thursday), the run ending on Saturday next. All performances commence at 7.30 pm and the box office is open on nights of performance only, from 6.30pm until curtain-rise.

Widely known as a poet, Mr Norman Nicholson has also gained solid recognition as a dramatist since his first play—the one we are to see revived this week—was initially produced by Mr E Martin Browne during his famous season of Poet's Plays at the Mercury Theatre in 1946. Shortly after this production the Little Theatre Guild of Great Britain (of which the Questors are founder-members and Secretary) commissioned a play from Mr Nicholson. The result was "**Prophecy to the Wind**" which was first played at Newcastle by the People's Theatre, and later brought to Ealing by the Questors during their 1948-49 season.

"**The Old Man of the Mountains**" is set against the author's own Cumbrian landscape (Cumberland plays an enormous role in all of Mr Nicholson's writing) and it tells in a modern setting, the Biblical story of Elijah and Ahab. It was Robert Speight who described it as approximating to a genuine folk-drama, adding that Norman Nicholson "shows something of Synge's power to adapt a popular speech to a poetic usage."

This play is the last production of the Questors' current season. The next production will be the first of a special season of new plays, with which the club is to mark its Silver Jubilee. This will open in September, on Saturday the 35th. In the meantime there are a few other interesting ventures to fill in the summer

gap. On August 7 there is a day trip to Stratford-upon-Avon, visiting the Memorial Theatre production of "**The Taming of the Shrew**" (a few seats are still available at the time of writing); and on September 10 there is to be a silver jubilee dinner and dance at the Red Lion Hotel, Hounslow.

During July and August parties of Questors are meeting every week-end to paint their theatre, and members who have not yet done so are invited to add their names to the lists of helpers on this most essential work of maintenance.

Also during July and up to August 18, applications are invited from people interested in joining the new Student Group now being formed to start training in September. A leaflet giving full details of classes, fees, and other matters may be obtained on request from the theatre.

Members are advised to make early application for their free seats for "**The Old Man of the Mountains**". They are also reminded that it is useless to telephone for tickets outside of the stipulated box office hours, as there is no one there to deal with box office enquiries. All other inquiries, about the Club; facilities and particulars of membership; the Student Group or any other matters, should be addressed to the Theatre Manager (Miss Rena Rice) at the Questors Theatre, Mattock-lane, Ealing (telephone EAL 5184).

## MIDDLESEX COUNTY TIMES

Saturday 24 July 1954

### Prose, poetry, and petrification by Paul Bedford

AMID the rocks of the Cumbrian hills, against a petrified solid background, in a mixture of prose and poetry, Mr. Norman Nicholson, in his play, "**The Old Man of the Mountain**" which was presented by the Questors' Student Group last Saturday, retells the Biblical fable of Elijah and Ahab. The run ends tonight.

Elijah, a statesman farmer, is in conflict with Ahab, the local Squire. Their conflict turns on their worship of different Gods: the God of wealth and the God of Witness; Baal and Jehovah. Elijah receives

messages from Jehovah, through the medium of the Raven, and he is able to foretell a drought, during which he is directed to the home of Ruth, where he raises her son, Ben, from the dead. Ben then follows him and later becomes the instrument of renewing his faith when, while waiting for a storm, following prayers from the villagers to their respective Gods, he finds himself doubting. But Ben maintains his own young faith and Elijah learns from him to hold on to his own trust.

There is conflict here; and some suspense. Baal, God of money, does nothing; and, for a long time, Jehovah does nothing also. During this interminable ordeal of anxious waiting, Elijah and Ben settle down to a quiet game of draughts, interrupted every few seconds by Elijah asking Ben to have another, another, and yet another and another look for signs of the rain that we know perfectly well must come sooner or later. It comes later—much later—long after tedium has set in, as "there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand," and we are reminded that were we in the least bit interested in Elijah we could get it all over in five minutes at home with a Bible (First Book of Kings, Chapter 18). It is classroom Old Testament stuff: Scripture on Wednesday morning after break; and the only valid reason for using it as the basis of a play would be that the author has some fresh light to throw on it, or some novelty of interpretation. Otherwise, why bother?

Whether or not Mr. Nicholson throws any new light on the matter, I have no idea. The fault may be mine, Mr. Nicholson's, or that of this particular production, by Pamela Richards, wherein the entire piece fell into two distinct elements, both with regard to form and content. The form was sometimes poetic, often prosaic; the content often unintelligible, more often quite simply uninteresting. These divisions roughly correspond with each other and, not for the first time in our thoughts about modern poetic drama, we echoed Goethe's saying: "To write prose one must have something to say; but he who has nothing to say can still make verses and rhymes, where one word suggests another, and at last something comes out which in fact is nothing but

looks as if it were something."

On the opening night, the production plodded ponderously from prompt to prompt, and the prompter was often more audible than some of the prompted. Only in one scene were the necessary atmosphere, pace and life truly caught; and that was the storm in the third Act. Here the lighting, setting (admirably done by Honor O'Nians) and sound effects combined in perfect harmony; and the players were integrated into the production as they were at no other point. The fact that the author also rises to the occasion probably helped. Hear his: "Now Thy words go bumping round the sky Like huge empty barrels on the cobbles of the clouds, / Bursting the water-butts and tipping the gullies / On the fells and the woodlands and the dale."

If we have left little space to mention the acting, the omission is, obviously, deliberate. There is so little acting to mention; so much unmentionable. It seems likely that much of the trouble could be traced to the fact that this is a play in dialect, and, as often happens, too much attention has been focused on this minor aspect of it, at the expense of the inner fire from which all acting must spring. Too many people estimate performance in brogue on whether a player "kept it up" or not. If he had been acting—really acting—the question would be irrelevant, as lapses would pass unnoticed. Most of these players did "keep it up" (whatever it was: possibly Cumbrian: who knows, and who cares?) but forgot to act. The result was that—apart from the storm scene—we never became immersed in the play.

This matter is worth thinking about because we happen to know, from previous and happier experiences, that some of these players are really capable actors and actresses. It seems incredible. for instance, that Edward Pitt, whose Becket is so worth recalling, can offer an Ahab so flat and uninteresting; that Catherine Scrivener, usually so bright, could possibly become so dull and lifeless. The Elijah of Roger Fleming was remarkable chiefly for a superb make-up: Mr. Fleming's playing is obviously very sincere, very minutely thought out; but it suffers, at present. from too much effort

going into it. The answer is to be found in greater relaxation.

Zoe Bailey, whose performance in "**The Other Son**" last February is quite unforgettable. was unfortunately wasted in the part of the Raven. Not that this is by any means a small part; it is a large one. But it doesn't call for an actress, as Miss Bailey is, so much as a person with a brilliant vocal technique, which, at least for the time being. Miss Bailey has not attained. The result, in those long, long, ever so long passages of poetic obfuscation, is monotony, such as it would be extremely difficult to overcome. It would also be difficult for Miss Jose Rowdon to overcome the fact that she is a girl; and we can hardly blame her for a performance of Ben, that was utterly

ruined by the fact that we could never for a second believe she was a boy. It should have been comparatively easy to find clothing more in keeping with the obvious requirements of the case.

To end this whole catalogue on a happier note, we may turn to Denys Moran, whose performance of Ruth was unerringly correct at every turn; perfect in voice, in gesture, in movement and in manner. It would seem (and only Miss Moran could confirm the impression) that she had mastered her accent at a very early stage in the rehearsals. held on to it. grown completely confident of it, forgotten all about it, and then concentrated, quite rightly, on playing the part of Ruth. In this she was distinctly successful, in a way that none of the others was.

#### **MIDDLESEX COUNTY TIMES**

Saturday 31 July 1954

#### **ELIJAH AND AHAB**

Sir,— In your issue of July 24 your contributor, Paul Beresford, in reviewing a play presented by The Questors' Student Group says it retells the "Biblical fable" of Elijah and Ahab. This is not correct.

The incidents recorded in the 11th chapter of the 1st Book of Kings are actual facts,

not fables. Ahab was King of Israel and reigned for 22 years, from 918-897 BC. Elijah was contemporary with him. God used Elijah on any occasions to rebuke him for his many wicked acts. He married a bad woman named Jezebel, who led him into worse crimes.

The Bible is the inspired Word of God and not a collection of fables.

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