

MODERN CLASSICISM BRINGS SEASON TO A CLOSE

THE last production of the current Questors season is a double-bill mounted by the student group, which ends its Mattock-lane run on July 20: the major item in this programme being Jean Anouilh's "Antigone."

Anouilh's piece belongs to a recent Gallic theatrical tradition of modernized classical literature and legend. It also belongs to another Gallic tradition of intellectualized emotion: shared in drama by writers from other countries (Shaw, Pirandello, Brecht, Eliot, Arthur Miller, John Arden, to name just a few instances of varying nature and stature.

Tragic conflict

The example of classical literature modernized here is Sophocles's play about a girl who condemns herself to death through an irresistible, immovable instinct of family loyalty. This story concerns what may fairly be termed one of the two or three genuinely tragic themes in life and art: the conflict of love and duty.

Anouilh, in his contemporary version, not only retells the story, but uses it as an opportunity to deliver an incidental lecture on the particular tragic theme it illustrates.

The best parts of the retelling (Antigone's early speeches to her sister, her lover and her nurse) are among the most austere poignant scenes that the author has ever created.

But in the speeches given to the nurse, to Creon and above all to the guards, Anouilh's desire to intellectualize leads him (like the other dramatists of this detached, alienation-effect school) into passages of colloquialism which risk provoking unsuitable moments of laughter.

Validity limited

And while the lecture side of the text (the Chorus's soliloquies) is admirably cogent and powerful, its validity and significance are limited by the ultimate restrictions in the love-and-duty theme itself. This theme (the natural one for the French modernizers to explore, since deriving simultaneously from certain Greek plays and Corneille) is indeed genuinely

tragic. But to me at least, it is neither (as Anouilh appears to suggest) the most, nor in fact the sole, tragic theme in drama-turgy.

Anouilh curiously (conveniently?) ignores the second great (in my view greater) basis of tragedy (principally perpetuated by certain other Greek plays, Aristotle, Racine, the Elizabethans and Jacobean, and Ibsen and Tennessee Williams): in which catharsis stems, not from a situation where all the characters are in their own ways "blameless," but from a situation where the central character is not blameless — but doomed by a "hamartia," a fatal flaw of personality.

Finally, though, if this restriction is endemic in Sophocles's original, the chief weakness of Anouilh's adaptation is entirely peculiar to him: his misguided attempt, in the closing stages, to abandon the love-duty idea and transform Antigone into an unusually pointless and irritating symbol of twentieth-century French philosophy, combining Sartrian existentialism with Cocteau-esque suicidal necrophilia.

Talented pupils

Nonetheless, the finest sections of the work remain notable. And Michael Hoddell's Questors revival stars three of the most talented of the present Questors pupils: Mary Holland (her large sad eyes already gazing into the next world) as Antigone; Michael Langridge as Creon; and Wylie Longmore as the Chorus. Mr. Longmore should soon tackle Othello: he further brings a contrasting sense of impish humour to his role in George Courtelin's "These Cornfields," a pleasant little specimen of the "theatre of the absurd," which completes the evening.

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