

Middlesex County Times  
27 February 1960

## STIMULATING PLAYS BY QUESTORS' STUDENTS Week-end four-day run

Two of the most stimulating plays of recent years have been chosen by the Questors Theatre for the annual production of the Student Group.

Opening this Saturday for a run of four performances, the Questors students will present Act One of "The Crucible" by Arthur Miller, and a condensed version of Dylan Thomas's "Under Milk Wood."

"The Crucible" was written by Miller (who is the husband of film star Marilyn Monroe) at the time of the notorious Committee on Un-American Activities, who persecuted Miller himself.

It tells the story of a witch-hunt in Puritan New England, but although the setting is 18<sup>th</sup> century, the parallel with the late Senator Macarthy's investigations is clear.

"Under Milk Wood" is the best-known, and probably the best-loved, of the works of the late Dylan Thomas. It simply tells the story of a Welsh village from sunset to sunrise, as seen through the poet's eyes.

The play was originally written as a broadcast play, but was so successful that after the author's death it was adapted for the stage where it had a successful West End run.

The two pieces will be given on February 27, February 29, March 1 and March 2, all performances at 7.30. Tickets can be booked by members only but new members are welcome and should inquire at the theatre (EAL 5184).

### Variety concert

Another attraction at the Questors will be on March 6, when a variety concert will be

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Another attraction at the Questors will be on March 6, when a variety concert will be held, starring Harry Locke, fresh from his triumph as Justice Squemum in "Lock Up Your Daughters," at the Mermaid Theatre. Mr. Locke is an old Questors' member and played Macbeth there some years ago. The concert will be produced by Wilfred Sharp.

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5 March 1960

## CONDENSED 'MILK'

Were the Questors second-year students right to make room for Act One of Arthur Miller's "Crucible" by abbreviating Dylan Thomas's "Under Milk Wood," in their Mattock-lane presentation this week? I don't think they were. With the Miller, audiences couldn't help but be left asking what happened next. Production-wise, more time had clearly been given to the Thomas, so that the double-bill seemed very unequal. And no artist's work should ever be truncated on principle. Even when, as with "Under Milk Wood," one feels that, though shortened, it wasn't short enough.

Thomas's conception is atmospheric but not dramatic. If it observes the unities (Welsh village life drawn from dawn to dusk), it neglects the essential of theatre: progression of event. Nothing really happens. The abridged Questors version only lasted seventy minutes. Fifty minutes would have been preferable. Yet the basic trouble with the play is not its construction but its expression.

"Under Milk Wood" tries to blend descriptive poetry (the speeches of the narrator), pathetic poetry (the speeches of the blind old sea-dog Captain Cat and his past mistress Rosie Probut), and comic poetry (the rest of the village). The technical mainspring of Thomas's poems is the attempted discovery of the exalted in the commonplace, what John Grierson described in the films of the late Humphrey Jennings as "The Louis Quinze properties of a Lyons' swiss roll." Such metaphysical juggling requires absolute certainty. John Donne had it (compare, incidentally, his "Death be not proud" sonnet with Thomas's "Death shall have no Dominion"). Andrew Marvell had it at his best. In a different medium, Jennings had it as well. And John Betjeman's writing has it now; furthermore, his "Journey into a Lost World" on BBC television's "Monitor" last Sunday hinted how he might, allowd the chance, fill part of the void caused in British cinema by Jennings' loss.

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The narrator's speeches in the Questor "Milk Wood" were admirably delivered by Barry Clark, who unlike some of the supporting cast was never scared by the verse into either gabbling it or swallowing it. For all that, he couldn't hide the language's recurrent striving for effect any more than Christopher Whitbread and Terry Quinn could turn Captain Cat and Rosie into poignant people instead of vaguely pretentious abstracts. Lyricism and emotion must appear spontaneous things, subtle rather than demonstratively exhibitionist. Thomas gets close to them in his idyll of boyhood "Fern Hill." In "Under Milk Wood" he mostly doesn't.

There are exceptions. The Rev. Eli Jenkins' placid, grateful "morning service" on behalf of the town, spoken for the Questors with touching affection by Charles Conabere. Polly Garter's floor-scrubbing thorough for her bygone loves, sung with innocence but insufficient voice by Madeleine Margan. And the ardent, timorous unending courtship of Mog Edwards (John Chapman) and Myfanwy Price (priceless - pussy Lorraine Munna). They succeed as poetry because they strike a happy balance between the remaining alternations of high and lower style. But their success is brief.

As for the lower style itself, the village provides several good jokes, of which the pick is herpecked Mr. Pugh (Charles Conabere again) remunitatively eyeing Mrs. Pugh (Ann Woods) while consulting a plain-covered

copy of "Lives of the Great Poets." Hunched husbands are nothing new, of course. The level of the play's humour can't be called particularly original. What bothers me more is the attitude towards it and behind the whole. Not so much its extravagance. (Harking back to celluloid, "Whisky Galore" and "The Quiet Man" were scarcely naturalistic portrayals of the Scots and Irish). No, it's the persistent whiff of acidness in Thomas's view of the fleshly town, the suspicion of Puritan inhibition in his apparently "uninhibited" fun. I just don't warm to the majority of his characters as I should. Put it this way. I wouldn't like to live amongst them. Still, the acting and Geoffrey Alford's fluid direction did the Questor student group immense credit.

Every Arthur Miller play has a flaw in it. With "The Crucible" he endeavoured to criticise McCarthyism via a story of literal witch-hunting set in 17th century America. Unfortunately, he made the seventeenth century's grounds for hunting look stronger than the twentieth's, with stark results to the parallel. (Better the straight 1950s account of the movie "Storm Centre" any day). The witches, in fact, are too witchy for comfort. (When Jensen had the same difficulty in his novel "Anne Pedersdatter," judging by the stage and screen adaptations of John Masfield and Carl Dreyer). They don't warm up properly till Act Two, but Act One goes the crucible starting to simmer. Mrs. Putnam has buried seven of her babies in a row, and the eighth is already having troubles and fits. Mrs. Putnam blames the Devil, Miller, I suppose, blames hereditary disease. He doesn't, at least in context, convince me—despite assurances I've received that Queen Anne interred sixteen of her seventeen during infancy. (Seventeen! No wonder she's dead). The single authoritative performance at Mattock - lane was Mr. Whitbread's grim Thomas Putnam, and Mr. Chapman's exorcist preacher. Hald notably lacked the zestful fire necessary.

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RENTALS 50/ REDUCING

NORTHOLT WARD

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As for the lower style itself, the village provides several good jokes, of which the pick is henpecked Mr Pugh (Charles Conabere again) ruminatively eyeing Mrs Pugh (Ann Woods) while consulting a plain-covered copy of "Lives of the Great Poisoners." Henpecked husbands are nothing new of course. The level of the play's humour can't be called particularly original. What bothers me more is the attitude behind it and behind the whole, not so much its extravagance, (harking back to celluloid, "Whisky Galore" and "The Quiet Man" were scarcely naturalistic portraits of the Scots and Irish). No, it's the persistent whiff of seediness in Thomas's view of the fleshly town, the suspicion of Puritan inhibition in his apparently "uninhibited" fun. I just don't warm to the majority of his characters as I should. Put it this way, I wouldn't like to live amongst them. Still the acting and Geraldine Alford's direction did the Questors student group immense credit.

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