

Student Group 17
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DARK OF THE MOON

Press transcripts

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Witchcraft ends Questors season

THE QUESTORS finished their current season last week with four performances by the second-year student group of "**Dark of the Moon**," the American folk tale by Howard Richardson and William Berney which was made over by Peter Brook in 1949 into one of his early, eye-catching productions.

Tastes have changed since then; faux-naïveté is now rather out; but seeing the piece again at Mattock-lane, I felt that Brook's wizardry probably led critics and audiences to overrate the witchery of the play itself.

"A witch hoy from the mountain came,
A'pinin' to be human,
For he had seen the fairest gal...
A gal named Barbara Allen" . . .

The theme is fine, with its echoes of both the Orphic myth (the witch boy will stay human for ever if Barbara is faithful to him for a year) and Romeo and Juliet (Questors director Michael Hoddell, in his most invigorating scene — a square dance rumbustiously choreographed by Ludmila Mlada — heightened the star-cross'd lovers reference by having the couple walk slowly, raptly towards each other, like the pair in "West Side story").

But such a fragile romance would be more satisfyingly contained within the ballad on which it's based for in a 60-minute compression, as in Philip Saville's 1956 television adaptation), than in this two hours 20 minutes prolonging.

Several interpolated episodes are clearly superfluous, and even the climatic revivalist meeting (ending on a striking new interpretation of "I will lay down my burden"), while heartily staged, had at least this congregation member beginning to nod in his pew.



Good moments

We were left, finally, with some nice playing, and some good moments. Wylie Longmore, arms and fingers bent and outspread, a bounding black eagle, as the witch-boy. Sorceress Estelle Hampton and Cleopatra Wrighton tormenting and enslaving him with a perilously whirling axe, their long hair like golden and ebony seaweed.

Two things, though, were the real tragic: Gillian Kerswell singing “Barbara Allen,” only comparable in yearning beauty amongst American folk-songs with “Black is the Colour of My True Love's Hair”; and the curtain... the witch-boy, his brief humanity lost, callously pushing Barbara's dead body with his foot, sending it toppling down a slope, casting his scarlet neckerchief after her — and vanishing as the lights blacked out...

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