

EALING JUNIOR QUESTORS

SHINING LEAD NOT FOLLOWED

MACBETH as a first production! Schoolboys in parts in which seasoned actors count it an honour to shine!

These things came to pass in the Questors Theatre, Mattock-lane, Ealing, on Saturday evening, when the Junior Questors made their bow to an Ealing audience. They are all boys of St. Paul's School, Hammersmith, and the model theatre the Questors have equipped was well filled.

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It was a warm evening and quite half of the audience must have spent the one long interval in the grounds—happy retreat from the heat of the building.

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IN a programme note, "A.B.C." reminded us that the Elizabethan stage was a bare uncurtained platform jutting into the auditorium, having a covered curtained section behind, with a balcony above that. Modern audiences, used to the "box" curtained stage, would probably be distracted by this unaccustomed bareness, and it is usual nowadays to attempt a compromise by using a front stage, as a supplement to the usual curtained stage, and making the settings as simple and suggestive as possible, so as to gain the swiftness of action and the contrast of alternating scenes that Shakespeare's stage permitted. These courses were adopted on Saturday evening and the admirable resources of the Questors Theatre helped the production side a great deal.

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THE programme told us no names of the players. Such personal details were not to distract us from the masterpiece to be played. One character outshone all the rest. It was that of Macbeth. The boy who played this part not only spoke the lines so that they pulsed with the greatness of them, but also he could act. It was not a reading of Macbeth he gave us, but a definite performance. He showed a genuine understanding of the passing moods, the fears and the hallucinations, the heights and the depths of the character.

Macbeth stood alone in his super-excellence. Lady Macbeth was played with a good sense of character and the sleep-walking scene could not have failed to impress, but it was unfortunate that the player of the part was hampered by a factor he could not control—a voice probably not uncommon to one of his years. It is a disadvantage on the stage that time no doubt will remedy, but in so important a part it told heavily against what would otherwise have been a sound piece of work.

ANOTHER big part, Macduff, was played by a youth who showed some appreciation of dramatic values, but whose performance lacked vigour, so that in parts the action of the play fell away lamentably.

One bright gem of the evening was the part of the porter. This was played with a grand sense of character. The three boys who played the witches looked the part and, helped by good lighting, the two scenes on the "blasted heath" were both well done.

There was nothing outstanding about the playing of the other parts. Some inadequacies of speech and other failings deprived the audience of what would have been a great performance had there been six more like he who played Macbeth in the cast.

It was a worth while experiment. What will the senior Questors make of it if and when in their wisdom they follow suit?

R.C.W.

THE JUNIOR QUESTORS

St. Paul's School Boys in "Macbeth"

EALING PERFORMANCE

Dr. Johnson's comment, so it is said, when Boswell had told him he had been surprised to hear a woman preacher at a Quakers' meeting, and that she had not preached surprisingly well, was: "The surprising thing, Boswell, is not that it was not well done, but that it was done at all."

This anecdote was quoted by Mr. Alan Cook, a master at St. Paul's School, Hammersmith, at the close of a performance of "Macbeth" by certain pupils of the school calling themselves "The Junior Questors," given on Saturday evening, in The Questors' Theatre, Mattock-lane, Ealing. "We have seen some surprising things this evening," continued Mr. Cook (the producer), thanking Miss Hackett, Miss Cook, Mr. Harbord and Mr. Alfred Emmet for their valuable help, "but the most surprising of all is that the play got through at all" (prolonged laughter and applause).

THE AMATEUR THEATRE

The Junior Questors

An interesting development in the Questors' activities is the formation of a junior branch. Imbued with the same ideas and inspired with the same aims as the senior body, the Junior Questors, as they style themselves, are starting well. Following upon an informal and private performance of two one-act plays and scenes from "Macbeth" a few months ago, they are now rehearsing a full production of "Macbeth," which will be given at the Questors' Theatre, Mattock Hall, Mattock-lane, on Saturday, July 6.

The Junior Questors at present consist entirely of boys still at school, who rehearse with unbounded enthusiasm at all odd moments between "schools" and "preps." That they have among their number at least some talent is evidenced by the fact that the boy playing the part of "Macbeth" has recently been awarded a scholarship at the Central School of Speech Training and Dramatic Art.

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Macbeth was, to say the least of it, an ambitious choice for youngsters of from 14 to 17 years, whose only other dramatic attempt had been some one-act plays. The acting, watched by Mr. Emmet senior (himself an old Pauline, who has a younger son at the school), was perhaps rather a matter of interest and promise than of achievement except in the case of a few players—notably the pupil who played the title-role with so much fire, purpose and dignity, and who made Macbeth's soliloquies come over the footlights and hold the audience. Strength, maturity and promise were curiously mingled in this conception of the part, added to which this youthful Thane of Cawdor had an excellent stage presence, understanding of the value of pause and variation of tone, and a pleasant speaking voice. He was audible throughout, which certainly could not be said of some in the cast. The porter, too, in the third scene of Act II., a small but important part, was outstandingly well acted, and the character of the Scottish nobleman, Rosse, was another bright spot. To take such a role as Lady Macbeth was a task which might have appalled the stoutest boy's heart, but it was stoutly attempted, and, especially in the sleep-walking scene, not without success. A voice on the point of breaking was an undoubted handicap.

AGREEABLE-LOOKING WITCHES.

Three particularly agreeable witches seemed thoroughly to enjoy cooking their hellish "hot pot" whenever the red flickering flames threw their young faces into relief, but these scenes were well done on the whole, and the atmosphere of brooding evil and ghostly presence in the banqueting scene was a high-light in the play. As was only to be expected, considering the immaturity of the players and the demands made by this tragedy, the production was patchy, but where the patches were good they were very good, as just now and then they were the reverse. The boys remembered their lines well, and there was little prompting.

The staging and setting, grouping and colouring deserve unstinted praise. A rough, bare stage, with exits at either side, had been erected in front of the stage proper, and this was very useful not only for lessening the waits between the many scenes, but for bringing back the conditions under which Shakespearean plays were presented in the Elizabethan days. The players just stepped forward when the action demanded it on to the front stage, and the action went on while the scene behind was being changed.

The cyclorama at the back gave great facilities for picturesque sky colouring, and the fine lighting effects of the theatre made all the difference in the setting of castle, heath and battlement scenes. Extraordinarily faithful effects were achieved by a minimum of means and the staging of the play did not cost a halfpenny, everything being to hand at the theatre. The costumes, too, were effective and picturesque, and here, too, effect and economy were combined.

C.C.