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'West Middlesex Gazette'

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Controversy About "Twelfth Night"

TO BE QUOTED in another publication is always flattering, but when I am quoted I like it to be done accurately.

The writer of the "Our Point of View" feature in the current number of *The Amateur Theatre* gets at me for criticising The Questors on their selection of "Twelfth Night."

This is what he says:—

. . . the WEST MIDDLESEX GAZETTE blithely announces that progress Stops Short at Shakespeare.

The last-named statement is aimed at the Questors for including "Twelfth Night" in their programme for the coming season. The newspaper wants something less "hackneyed"—a lesser known work. What it forgets is that by choosing one of the best known plays, the Questors will be able to demonstrate how "new" Shakespeare is when he receives a modern interpretation; or, if that is not the Questors' intention, how lovely a thing "Twelfth Night" can be when it is not played as the WEST MIDDLESEX GAZETTE has generally seen it, but taken back to its Elizabethan form. If we know anything about the Questors we should imagine that the WEST MIDDLESEX GAZETTE will not recognize "Twelfth Night" when they see it in Ealing!

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QUOTING one of the headings without the others is apt to give a wrong impression. My article was headed "Progress Stops Short at Shakespeare! The Questors to Play 'Twelfth Night'—Why Not a Lesser Known Work?" Putting the word hackneyed in quotation marks is also unjust. What I said was:

Far be it from me to describe anything of Shakespeare's as hackneyed, but if a progressive society is going to tackle a Shakespeare play at all, why pick one that most local societies have had a shot at one time or another? Why not one that we seldom get a chance of seeing? The choice is wide.

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IT IS MY EXPERIENCE that when I say something that does not go down well with those of whom I write they do not hesitate to let me know.

But I have not received a single protest against the remarks quoted above except that in *The Amateur Theatre*. This suggests that those who know more about the amateur dramatic movement in West Middlesex than *The Amateur Theatre* realise there is a lot in what I stated in my article of September 14.

THE QUESTORS are our most progressive society, but, as they would be the first to admit, they are not the only one with an appreciation of Shakespeare.

About the time they were founded a lot of our societies were doing Shakespeare, and doing it at a loss. "Twelfth Night" had several presentations.

It may or may not be the idea of *The Amateur Theatre* that the Questors are capable of giving "Twelfth Night" an interpretation that will amaze both the Press and those societies which have done it before, but whether such a production would justify their selection of a play which has already had a considerable vogue locally is a matter of opinion.

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WHEN THE QUESTORS gave "Dragon's Teeth" they got a lot of praise for breaking new ground by putting on a play which it was impossible to see elsewhere. It was a brave thing to do, and it gave expression to the viewpoint that the future of the amateur theatre lies in presenting those plays which, while possessing merit, do not commend themselves to commercial enterprises.

My suggestion is that the same principle should be extended to Shakespeare, and that the Questors, as our most progressive society, should follow this line of reasoning.

Or if they do not want to go all the way I suggest why not one of the better known works that has not had a local presentation? "The Merchant of Venice" can be made a thing of as great beauty as "Twelfth Night," but I cannot remember any of our societies attempting it, while I have never seen an amateur performance of "Romeo and Juliet"—strange when it is the ambition of every actress to play Juliet.

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IT IS THE CHOICE of the one play that we all know so well and see so often that I criticise. On the professional stage it has been done time and time again in recent years, and many forms of production technique have been brought to bear upon it.

As for these new treatments of Shakespeare of which *The Amateur Theatre* reminds us. . . . An acquaintance of mine, a veritable lion in amateur drama, spent his honeymoon at Stratford-on-Avon. Off the happy couple went to some Russian-ized Shakespeare. Husband hasn't got his good temper back yet!

Not that I condemn all modern versions of Shakespeare. One man's poison is often another's meat. In any case, modern Shakespeare is not new. At least ten years ago Hamlet smoked a cigarette in the West End.

Questors Missed Chance of
Furthering Their Policy

PROGRESS STOPS SHORT AT SHAKESPEARE !

THE QUESTORS TO PLAY "TWELFTH NIGHT " — WHY NOT A LESSER KNOWN WORK ?

YOU must know, if you follow the activities of amateur dramatic societies at all closely, that there has been a big move of late years to escape from the hackneyed—to refrain from putting on those plays which we know so well.

And if any society has been in the forefront of this movement it is The Questors.

This time, I believe, I can make out a good case for accusing The Questors of having lapsed from this movement.

They are going to put on Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night."

Far be it from me to describe anything of Shakespeare's as hackneyed, but if a progressive society is going to tackle a Shakespeare play at all, why pick one that most local societies have had a shot at one time or another? Why not one that we seldom get an opportunity of seeing? The choice is wide.

I applaud The Questors for including one Shakespeare play in their season's list and if any society can give it a worthy production they can, but I should have liked to see them delve into that wealth of Shakespeare that amateurs and professionals alike seem to keep in the confines of their library.

This apart, I have nothing but praise for The Questors' 1935-36 selections. In November we are to have Sladen Smith's "Wonderful Zoo," believed to be the first production of this play in London, and in December the neglected "Captain Banner" of George R. Freedy. The "Twelfth Night" production will be in May.

POST-PRODUCTION DISCUSSIONS

Each of The Questors' productions will be followed with a discussion, within a few days, of the play produced—a valuable innovation—and on other dates during the season will be readings of "Androcles and the Lion" (Shaw), "The Man With a Flower in His Mouth" (Pirandello), "Bernice" (Glaspell), "Getting Married" (Shaw), and "A Sleeping Clergyman" (Bridie).

I should not be surprised if The Questors produce some of these plays a year hence; they read "Wonderful Zoo" last year and are to produce it this. But I do hope they leave "Getting Married" alone! Talk, talk, —and then some!

You know, I expect, that The Questors are their own workmen.

Each year, during the summer months, members become carpenters, electricians, seamstresses, painters, plumbers, locksmiths, and jacks of whatever trade the particular job in hand demands. The result is facilities for improved work during the season.

This year considerable improvements have been made in the stage lighting, and additions made to the stage equipment, including a new set of stage drapes. The storage of the large wardrobe which is being accumulated is also a problem which had to be tackled.

The convenience and safety of the audience have not been neglected, and this season will see new lampshades throughout the auditorium and an ingenious arrangement for battening the chairs together.

The "Twelfth Night"

Controversy

REAL TEST OF QUESTORS' PRODUCTION

WILL THEY CONTRIBUTE ANYTHING TO THE THEATRE ?

[From Alfred E. J. Emmet, hon. secretary of The Questors.]

May I be allowed to say a few words on the controversy about our intended production of "Twelfth Night"? At the moment I feel rather like the bone over which the lion and the jackal are fighting!

I think I may claim that there are few people interested in the local theatre—more keen than myself to get away from the hackneyed. The point at issue appears to be: when is a play hackneyed?

"L.J.D." would have it—and though he would apparently prefer to use a softer word, this is surely the point of his criticism—that "Twelfth Night" is, whatever the circumstances, hackneyed. *The Amateur Theatre*, on the other hand, pays us the rather doubtful compliment of suggesting that The Questors' production of this play will be so unrecognisable that hackneyed is the last word that could be applied to it!

May I suggest that the proper test to be applied is whether, by this production, we succeed in contributing anything to the theatre, and that if we do succeed in this, that will justify us in our choice. I agree with "L.J.D." that this may be a matter of opinion—but can one properly form that opinion before one has seen the production?

FRESHNESS PROMISED

I confess that I was not aware that "Twelfth Night" had received so many presentations in Ealing a few years ago. But, if I may say so, subject to correction and without having seen any of the productions in question, from what I know of the general state of the local amateur theatre at that time, I should very much doubt whether there was any particular freshness about any of them. I can at least promise "L.J.D." that there will be this quality about our production, and that it will not be merely the traditional Shakespeare of recent generations. (And the traditional Shakespeare of to-day is at least as far from the original as any of the extremes of newness referred to.)

"L.J.D." would almost appear in his

article to divide Shakespearean productions into two classes, labelled respectively Ancient and Modern. Ancient "Twelfth Night" has been done to death—and as for modern Shakespeare, well, some experiments in that direction have been unsuccessful, and that's that! But other fresh treatments of Shakespeare have been supremely exciting and successful. I use the word "fresh" rather than "new," because I think the trouble with some of the more unsuccessful experiments has been that they aimed to be *new* at all costs, without regard to the play or the poor author; they were not dictated by any fresh approach to the play in an endeavour to interpret it unshackled by convention or tradition.

CHOICE LIMITING FACTORS

If we merely succeed in distorting "Twelfth Night" into unrecognisable shape, as *The Amateur Theatre* suggests, however much we may amaze those who see us, I shall be the first to agree with "L.J.D." that it was not worth while. But if we succeed in making the play fresh, either by a return to the original Elizabethan form, or by some fresh method of interpretation, I venture to think we shall have justified our choice.

Whether we do succeed or not is not for me to say. Your critic will have the last word, as critics always do, and I shall look forward with genuine interest to his criticism. But is it fair that he should claim the first word, too? May I suggest that he withholds his judgment until the accused has had an opportunity to produce his evidence in defence?

In point of fact, there were certain factors limiting the range of our choice for this particular production, the chief one being our intention to give a number of open-air performances, for which all Shakespeare's plays are definitely not suitable, at any rate, for amateurs. But in any case, it is a fact that "Twelfth Night" is one of the most perfect of the Comedies.

Would "L.J.D." give us his views on whether we should choose "Hamlet" or "Titus Andronicus" for our next Shakespearean venture?

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The "Twelfth Night"

Controversy

QUESTORS' POLICY SHOULD APPLY TO SHAKESPEARE

WHEN A CRITIC HAS RIGHT TO THE FIRST WORD AS WELL AS THE LAST

By L.J.D.

IN HIS REPLY to my article of a fortnight ago, Mr. Alfred E. J. Emmet, hon. secretary of The Questors, says the proper test to be applied to that society's production of "Twelfth Night" is whether it contributes anything to the theatre.

Surely the test of any production is whether it contributes anything to the theatre. That is why some dramatic societies lay themselves open to criticism by imitating the professional theatre when they not only chose a West End success of recent date, but slavishly copy the West End production method and acting technique.

I doubt whether Mr. Emmet would object to the critic having the first word as well as the last word about shows of this kind. Probably he's had it himself. Why, then, should he describe it unfair for me to criticise The Questors' choice of "Twelfth Night"? Whether he thinks my views are sound is a cat of quite another colour.

Knowing their work as I do, I have not the slightest doubt that The Questors will make "Twelfth Night" a thing of freshness and beauty. My original argument and that one I stand by is that if they, as a progressive dramatic society, are going to give us Shakespeare, why not carry into Shakespearean realms their policy of putting on plays that are not popular commercially or, at the very least, one that no other local society has given us.

I have had my say and I do not propose to flog the subject. Certainly my last word on "Twelfth Night" will not be coloured by what I have said at this stage. My great hope is that this production will be seen, not only by the "converted," but by those who regard Shakespeare as dull. Unfortunately The Questors audiences are chiefly composed of the former—which is another reason why The Questors' Shakespeare should get away from the usual run in play choice.

ABOUT "TITUS ANDRONICUS"

Mr. Emmet asks for my views on whether "Hamlet" or "Titus Andronicus" should be the Questors' next Shakespearean venture. Because we hardly ever get the chance of seeing it acted I should like to plump for "Titus Andronicus." But I recognise that The Questors must have applied to them some of the limitations which bear upon amateurs.

"Titus" is probably the most difficult Shakespearean play to put over to-day, although it was popular enough in Shakespeare's own day. According to George Brandes it was mentioned in contemporary writings twice as often as "Twelfth Night."

I doubt very much whether the Questors could play it "straight" in a manner that would ensure such a scene as Titus baking the heads of Tamora's sons in a pie and serving it to Tamora not being laughed at, while it contains material, notably the ravishing of Lavinia, which puts it out of court for melodramatic treatment.

TONGUE CUT OUT —HANDS CUT OFF

Then, of course, are the difficulties of staging. Lavinia has to have her tongue cut out and her hands cut off! Titus has to cut off his own hand and later stick Tamora's sons like pigs while Lavinia holds a basin to catch the blood with the stumps of her arms!

In Shakespeare's time the stagecraft we know to-day was not expected. If audiences were told that Lavinia's hands had been cut off they probably did not require the evidence of their eyes. Naturally, it is possible to overcome these difficulties as the Old Vic must have done in 1921. (I did not see the Old Vic production and I have not heard of any other).

So "Hamlet" has my vote.

But why must the choice be between these two plays? Especially if open-air performances are projected. I can

think of no better play for the open-air than "The Tempest." Nothing very new in the mere fact of playing "The Tempest" I know, but at least we have not had it in public in Ealing.

I am quite ready to appreciate that it is difficult to choose a play that fills all requirements and open-air performances do limit the field.

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The Questors have two productions before "Twelfth Night" and the first of these—Sladen Smith's "Wonderful Zoo" is next Friday and Saturday. The following Tuesday and Wednesday St. Thomas's Players are to bring us to earth with a bang with a revival of "Leave it to Psmith," by Ian Hay and P. G. Wodehouse, at the Park Theatre.

"TWELFTH NIGHTS" ---GOOD AND BAD

By J.E.R.

THOUGH I do not claim to have the knowledge that my colleague, "L.J.D.," and Mr. Emmet, of The Questors have of the local amateur stage, my interest in Shakespeare plays is unbounded.

"Twelfth Night" I have seen played excellently and badly. I have seen it on the stage of the Stratford-on-Avon Memorial Theatre, in school halls, and played by members of Women's Institutes. It is a fact, as Mr. Emmet says, that it is one of the most perfect of Shakespeare's comedies.

It takes some playing by seasoned professionals, as all the critics on the stage have said. Therefore, in that respect The Questors deserve our congratulations. At any rate they are getting away from the spate of "farces" and comedies" with which amateurs are so fond of exciting our yawns.

Yet there is "L.J.D.'s" point to be considered that a production by amateurs of this charming comedy is hackneyed. It has been performed many times in Ealing, he says, and could not The Questors have chosen differently?

I cannot see how The Questors will contribute anything to the theatre in its production, nor how a "freshness" will be given to it. Convention and tradition are two shackles that hang together on all of Shakespeare's plays; the characters are there, and by their words it is known how they shall or shall not be played. I am not one of those individuals who go to a Shakespeare play to see it presented with this quality of "freshness"; I go to hear the beauty of the language, the incomparable blank verse, the stateliness of Olivia, the humour of Belch, the human frailties of Malvolio. I want the play played as Shakespeare intended. I do not want a picture show.

NO LIMITATION OF CHOICE

But could The Questors do better than "Twelfth Night"? The play is well chosen, but yet again there is "L.J.D.'s" point that it has been done many times locally. Indeed, it is a favourite one of amateur societies—too much of a favourite, some will say.

It is easy for me to say that if I were producer of The Questors—that Society will sigh with relief that I'm not—I would have chosen something that has not been done locally. The choice does not seem to me to be limited. But then I am writing without knowledge of The Questors and its members.

I notice, too, that most amateur societies (including The Questors), whenever they have the daring to give Shakespeare, choose a comedy. But is a Shakespeare comedy any easier to produce than a tragedy? I do not think so. Perhaps I am tragedy-minded.

Mr. Emmet hints that The Questors could not tackle "Hamlet." I am disappointed. To aim at the stars and fail is better than not to aim at all.

WHY QUESTORS CHOSE 'TWELFTH NIGHT'

Quality of Greatest
Importance

PROMISE OF FRESHNESS

Mr. Alfred E. J. Emmet, hon. secretary of the Questors, writes:—

I can hardly suppose that I shall be allowed to have the last word on this "Twelfth Night" controversy, but perhaps I may be allowed to slip in a word or two in reply to some of the points made by L.J.D. and J.E.R. in your issue a fortnight ago.

My point was, of course, that the proper test of any production, to determine its value, is whether it contributes anything to the theatre. In the case of some plays, it is evident that nothing of any value can materialise from their production, and in those cases I willingly concede to the critic both first word and last word—and as many further condemnatory words as he likes to take.

My point is rather that, *prima facie*, a production of "Twelfth Night" in Ealing can conceivably contribute to the theatre; the performance is the test of whether or no it does so. I believe our production will do so—if I did not believe that, I would have had nothing to do with the choice of this play. L.J.D. would appear to pay us the compliment of agreeing. If so, what's the fuss about? Apparently just this, that L.J.D. considers we should make a greater contribution to the theatre by the production of some lesser known Shakespearean play.

Remembering that (quite naturally) the lesser known plays are less good, and that I have promised a freshness in "Twelfth Night," I venture to suggest that this does not necessarily follow.

"THE TIME IS NOT YET"

However, there is time for all things, and I hope that "Twelfth Night" will not be our last Shakespeare play. One cannot always do at once the play one most wants to do. We have just put on "Wonderful Zoo" (as to which L.J.D. is doubtless giving us his valued views in another column), and much as I wanted to do that play, I could name many plays I more wanted to do—"Within the Gates," "Peer Gynt," "Hassan," "The Adding Machine," to name but a few which I hope may figure on our programme sooner or later, but as to which one had to say, "The time is not yet."

I fear L.J.D. has allowed his leg to be gently pulled by my reference to "Titus Andronicus" and "Hamlet," and has fallen into a trap! Save that he recognises certain practical difficulties, some of which he enumerates with delicious detail, he would prefer "Titus Andronicus" to "Hamlet," regardless of

the fact that it is a very poor play beside "Hamlet." However much one may want to explore the unusual, quality is surely of greatest importance.

THE ORIGINAL WOULD BE FRESH

J.E.R. I find more difficult to follow. He refuses to believe that we can contribute anything to the theatre by the production of "Twelfth Night" (I am not clear whether he considers this to be true of any production of this play, or only of our production), yet almost in the same breath states that the play is well chosen! I accept J.E.R.'s challenge, I shall hope to be able to prove to him that we can make a real contribution to the theatre by putting on "Twelfth Night."

He also cannot see that we can make the play fresh, and seems to suggest that he prefers it stale. Is he not confusing the quality of "freshness" with that of "newness," which I was so careful to distinguish in my previous article?

J.E.R. states that he wants the play played as Shakespeare intended. I venture to think that would be something fresh, and I very much doubt whether J.E.R. has ever seen the play so performed. The tradition that so shackles many Shakespeare productions has nothing to do with either Shakespeare or his time.

My final remark, which seems to have been misunderstood by J.E.R. as well as by L.J.D., was not intended to suggest that I thought we could not tackle "Hamlet." Indeed, I very much hope that one day we shall.

I trust that when we announce a production of "Hamlet," we shall not be told we should have done "Titus Andronicus" instead!

MY LAST WORD

I am afraid Mr. Emmet is claiming a point he did not score when he says I fell into a trap over "Titus Andronicus."

In the concluding paragraph of his last article he asked for my views whether "Hamlet" or "Titus Andronicus" should be The Questors' next Shakespearean production. The subtlety of this request did not escape notice, but had I ignored it I should have been open to an accusation of shirking the issue. As for the "delicious detail," well some description of the play was necessary since all those who are following this controversy may not be familiar with an obscure play.

Mr. Emmet has already told us that when "Twelfth Night" was selected he did not know it had received a number of presentations in this district. He did not say that had he been aware of this The Questors' choice would have been different, but I think it would.

Mr. Emmet's latest article raises no new points in the main controversy, and I can only repeat that while I know full well that whether The Questors succeed or fail in imparting "freshness" to "Twelfth Night" their attempt to do so will not lack interest, they could find a more suitable vehicle than a play which has already received dozens of different kinds of interpretations.

And now, I am afraid, it is necessary for me to say, on the Editor's behalf, that this correspondence must cease. Since this means that Mr. Emmet will not have the last word, let me say that it is in no spirit of recalcitration that I look forward to the performances of "Twelfth Night." Rather shall I expect a super effort by The Questors to justify their choice.