

Festival Play

Lodge Gives Outstanding Performance

By K. C. Harvey

Standard Drama Critic

A play of men and manners, set within the elegant Regency period, is the sole contribution of live theatre to this year's Festival of the Arts. For that reason, alone, it merits our special attention and analysis.

The play is "The Man With a Load of Mischief," by Ashley Dukes.

It is produced for The Garrison Players by E. G. Smith-Wright, who brought to Hongkong William Douglas-Home's "The Reluctant Debutante."

Moreover, Producer Smith-Wright brings to this Festival production not only the memory of the ADC of Shanghai, but also yet another ADC stalwart.

He is Terence Spikins, known otherwise artistically for his etchings, but also a non-professional player well-known to Shanghai audiences.

These are two reasons why this play, which opened happily at the Missions to Seamen, last night, should appeal.

The third reason—and, to my mind, the foremost—is that it is a well-conceived play within a period setting and a refreshing change from many a simpering comedy, farce or drama, that comes the way of the provincial theatre.

There is a cast of six. The play runs for more than two hours, during which three acts are unfolded. I enjoyed it, despite two casting weaknesses which, however, did not detract materially from the play's success.

There are two outstanding players. John Lodge, the Nobleman's manservant, gives one of the most impressive performances that I have seen on the Hongkong stage.

Mavis Bartlett, well-known as a Colony actress in live theatre and in radio plays, is happily cast as the Lady's Maid. The scenes between her and the Nobleman's Man are well portrayed, with coyness, tenderness and finesse playing their respective roles like trumps in a master hand of cards.

Michael Birley lends dignity to the Nobleman, if with a tendency to over-act, yet his diction is sound and his stage movements are impressive.

Terence Spikins has a plum role as the practical, droll Innkeeper, but is not effectively partnered by Joyce Franklin, whose costumed presence lends more credence than her characterisation.

Valerie Sager's entrances, as The Lady, lose much of their dignity and grandeur by the musical comedy aspect of her appearances within the tale, as it is unfolded.

And I am taking into consideration that The Lady is a former opera singer, according to the play. It is not sound casting—but casting, in Hongkong, is quite a problem.

Highlights of this production are the set, which is reasoned Regency; the costumes, which are true to period and ingeniously created by the wife of the producer; the lighting, which faithfully adheres to the script's cues, and the timing.

The Lady's hunting habit is the only costume that would seem to be more at home at a fancy dress ball. Even so, Milady tended to dress thus in that elegant and artificial era!

The play will be repeated tonight and tomorrow night. It will repay your patronage.

Festival Of Arts Play



A scene from the final dress rehearsal last night of the Festival of Arts-play "The Man With A Load of Mischief," presented by The Garrison Players. The play opens tomorrow at 9 p.m. at King George's Hall, Missions to Seamen, Gloucester Road. It will also be held on Friday and Saturday at the same time and at the same place. — (Staff Photographer).

At Missions To Seamen

Friday, October 24th, 1958

ARTS FESTIVAL CONTRIBUTION

SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST

(BY ALEC M. HARDIE)

Last night "The Garrison Players" presented the only European drama entered in the Festival of the Arts. This is, indeed, a lamentable condition and the sparsely-filled St George's Hall at the Missions to Seamen might indicate that the Colony is just not interested.

But sufficient interest has been shown in the past, and surely could be aroused again. The actors and producers share the blame as some very careless and unfinished productions have been presented in the last year. The Festival period was an opportunity for dramatic reputations to be salvaged. If talent is lacking at the moment the Societies might have joined together and put on a large-scale production that would have shown the keenness and ability of all concerned. This was a suggestion put to me last night and I wish it had been considered.

However "The Garrison Players" have risen to the occasion, and Mr Smith Wright's production of "The man with the Load of Mischief" is one of the best I have seen on this stage. I still regret the awkward shape and limited size of this Hall, and The Garrison Players might well consider moving to a more convenient hall for at least their larger productions. Audiences have to be coaxed, unfortunately, and comfort is apparently one of the enticements.

The play is "period" Regency as seen through the mind of the Mid-Nineteen-Twenties. Ashley Dukes offers a variation on Sheridan's Man of Sentiment who has to meet the "sentimental" opposition of the growing children of Nature, who rhapsodise on the birds, the buttercups and the trees in between moments of stolen kisses! "The Load of Mischief" proves too powerful for the stratagems of the Regency Buck and, as "The Romantics" burst upon the world he retires deflated and left behind as the new century begins.

The author does not want us to be very serious, but he enjoys sentimentality and the cast emphasised this very well last night. Clearly both the producer and the cast appreciated the value of gushing emotions and much of the success is due to this understanding. It is a "talking" play and yet it moved quickly and never flagged although the lines would sometimes make Wordsworth write another irate damnation of contemporary sentiment. Cues were taken quickly and with point.

My worst criticism is one which applies to most recent productions, the lack of emphasis and inflection. This was particularly noticeable in the sentimental passages, but it was redeemed by the tone of emotion.

Michael Birley as "The Man" was much happier than in his last appearance though he obviously felt cramped on this stage. I would have liked him more debonair, affected, and stilted in voice to contract with the others around him, but he carried a large part well and as a rather solid "Buck" acted with almost too much conviction.

As "the Load of Mischief" Valerie Sager almost suffered from the same fault of sincerity at too early a stage, so that her final "renunciation" and determination to give up all for love was hardly a sufficient contract. But her final act was an achievement of hard work and feminine emotion.

The two servants have a good time and John Lodge and Mavis Bartlett made the most of their parts. John Lodge had made a real attempt to reproduce the affected tone that his master might have had. He had many subtleties of timing, inflection and superiority. His was a very good performance, but perhaps he could have relaxed emotionally towards the end.

I suppose Mavis Bartlett's performance as the maid was the most finished of all. She had all the coy impudence and delicate shades of confidence that could be wrong from her lines. The most graceful mover on the stage.

Terence Spiking and Joyce Franklin provided the humour of the Innkeeper, who had his own ideas of how "the quality" behaved, and his more domineering and practical wife.

This is a production worthy of the Festival, and should be seen not only for its polish but as a "period piece of a period." The producer's hand was firmly used but was never obvious. A few silly little faults could have been avoided; a Regency lady never crosses her legs; with so many candles around a snuffer is neater than fierce blowing. The men should keep their shoulders straighter and so display their costumes to greater elegance. Nearly all the cast need not bend their heads so much to the floor.

Perhaps this is niggling, but if so it is because the standard was otherwise high. An excellent beginning to the season for The Garrison Players.

Garrison Players

Arise To Real Theatre

By JOHN LUFF

Still bearing in mind this business of the 'new look' in criticism, I took myself to King George's Hall to see, and more particularly to hear, the Garrison Players present Ashley Dukes, "The Man With a Load of Mischief". I wish more people had taken themselves along. I wish that those who proclaim by profession and studentship to have a love for the English language had been there. For of what use is it to affect a love of the Arts if by application you negate such pretence?

My other reason for wishing to see more of the acting fraternity there, was for them to see what a producer can do with such a play and the actors we have in the Colony.

What a transformation! What a difference! What timing! What a set! The taking up of cues! Never in all their existence have the Garrison Players presented so polished a performance, an estimable presentation for the Festival of Arts. Plot? But what is your plot to a playwright? Merely a coathanger upon which to hang the rich mantle of the English language. And such is this. In other hands, this could be a dull little sketch of common intrigue. As it is, it sparkles with the crystalline brilliance of a frozen waterfall.

Warning

The play is set, I take it, in the Regency, and although we don't see that gouty prince spreading his broad posterior upon his carriage cushions, we are given much warning of his approach, and the curtain falls before his carriage wheels are heard outside the inn. And that is the tale, but what care we who sit back and listen to this dialectical fencing in a comedy of high manners? The Lady has run from this gouty monster, and arrived with her bag and baggage of a maid at the inn.

I am not altogether pleased with this, and my new and finicky self will say why. Certain gestures are unbecoming to a Lady, even if she has sung at the Covent Garden. And if she had sung there, she would have a fine appreciation of the nuances and modes of her longer passages. The voice fell with almost a rhythm, as if a feminine preacher were announcing "Dearly beloved brethren."

In verbal combat, Valerie Sager was altogether more satisfying. Her thrust and parry were delightful.

Skill

Mavis Bartlett now performs with an acquired skill to match her stage presence. Mixture of naivx, shrewd and grasping, yet archly coy, with well modulated tones, her voice and manner, a tepid duplication of My Lady's, was the performance of the evening.

A Nobleman there is, and Michael Birley takes on the character of this ignoble aristocrat. Tall, and of commanding presence, having all the part requisites, yet lacking in one thing. Do me the goodness Mr Birley, to take your copy, and read again before tonight: "I was sick of meadowsweet and buttercups, I was surfeited with rich acres. The world is very coarse: Nature disgusts me. And yet our poets sing of her!" And so on. Don't, I charge you, as you love the English language throw such lines away.

Cowering

John Lodge is the Man. Yet, I hold it, not one of your cowering lackeys. A man inspired by the rights of man, and a disciple of Tom Paine's to boot. Mr Lodge has a pleasant voice. Then let him not be selfish. Let us hear it. In soliloquy, do not gaze upon the floor as if your lines are written there. "Our stench corrupts the meadows, and the cattle hold their breath." Spoken like a true Jacobin. Then let us have a touch of Danton, even if you are the Man, you are a better man than My Lord.

Terence Spikins is the Inn Keeper, and such were the times that he too is out of face with the aristocracy. A good touch there in response to Michael

Birley's, "Is that the Inn Keeper?"

But for a play that does not call for much movement, the voice becomes increasingly important. It is most significant that Mr Spikins best lines were spoken when he moved, as for instance, his charade on My Lord going to bed.

Correct

Joyce Franklin as the Inn Keeper's wife had movement and word as correct as you could wish, but the part doesn't live yet. It lacks the indefinable something necessary to convince the audience.

But this play could be the turning point, for I warn you, it is a standard against which other productions will be measured. The Garrison players have found a producer, and although E.G. Smith-Wright lets loose the strings when the players are on the stage, the evidence of untiring rehearsal is there.

If Hongkong wants theatre, then it is here. Amateur only in the sense that the players seek no reward but an appreciative audience, in one production it has raised the Garrison Players to real theatre.