

Shaw play poor choice

By JOHN LUFF

JUST after half-past eight last night in the theatre of the City Hall, the Egyptian Sun God Ra, with the voice of Michel Meredith, announced that we were to be taken back in time two thousand years.

Somewhere around midnight, I had the terrible feeling that Ra intended his speech to be taken literally. That we, the audience would find that age could wither us, and that right on the spot.

For there were three faults with the Garrison Players opening performance of George Bernard Shaw's "Caesar and Cleopatra," produced by Barbara Lawrence. First, the choice of the play; second, its interpretation; third, the stage management.

Allow me to take the third point first. It matters not how fine your set is, how visually true your columns and arches tower, how realistic your sound effects, no audience is going to sit through continual intervals of scene changes, with every curtain drop lasting something like a quarter of an hour.

The audience was bored, yawning openly. What little interest there was in the play was lost; a number of the audience crept away somewhere around eleven.

Why the Garrison Players chose "Caesar and Cleopatra," I do not know. Written in 1898, it was topical then, Shaw's Caesar full of wise-cracks, well known in those days. For instance, the remarks on Cyprus originate with Disraeli; his platitudes are those of Wilkes and Bradlaugh. The whole thing sounds like a Victorian debating group at a Mechanics' Institute.

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In spite of all Shaw's raving, and his modest suggestion that his play was greater than Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra," "Caesar and Cleopatra" has never stood up to the test of stage production.

Even when Forbes-Robertson, for whom it was written, revived it in 1914, it dropped dead, while mention not Pascol's attempt to make it a film. It was the ghastliest failure in British film history.

And here we have the Garrison Players trotting it out with hopes of trying to entertain us.

Now regarding the interpretation of the play. Shaw was very much the child of his age, strongly influenced by Ibsen and the social changes of his time. Shakespeare was the creature of

immortality; his Cleopatra ... "age shall not wither her, nor custom stale." Shaw's Cleopatra passed away with the suffragettes.

Now what the Garrison Players tried to give us, I do not know. It seemed to me that in splendour, they attempted Shakespeare, but were stuck with the lines of Shaw.

For the props were authentic, the magnificent stage lent depth, while the too too realistic rolling clouds (how tired I am getting of them) added realism. Here then, romance and puritanism met, and the head on collision was awful.

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If it is Shaw, then for goodness sake leave it with Shaw. His characters talk and talk, and like the earnest pedants they are, they don't care if they sit on lemonade barrels. Why then stage them in this unexpected splendour? The whole cast seemed like a Sunday school decked out to visit a harem.

This is what Shaw was trying to do. Under the influence of Ibsen, he said, your heroic figures are out, here is your real hero. The trouble is, even as he said that, Hitler and Mussolini were waiting in the wings to show that tribal leaders, full of rhetoric and vain glory, were very much alive.

Now our heroic types look back in anger, and seedy Jimmy Porter struts for a moment. But it is a vogue, and will as Shaw's plays of this type have dated. Of last night, let the rest be silence. David Jordan carried a formidable role as Caesar, while June Armstrong-Wright provided a sketch of the heartless little cat Shaw made of Cleopatra.

Three there were, more favoured in their roles who seemed to get near to Shaw; Ted Thomas as the bluff soldier; Brian Tisdall in Shaw's caricature of the Englishman, Britannus; and Eileen Burgridge as Fatateeta.

The Garrison Players' "Caesar And Cleopatra"

BY ALEC M. HARDIE

On Wednesday The Garrison Players began their first production in The City Hall Theatre with Shaw's "Caesar and Cleopatra." "Tedious and brief." The phrase in its context came into my mind while in the Theatre—and the audience had plenty of time for thought. Tedious, indeed, were the pauses between the scenes, and brief were the scenes (especially in Act I) when they laboriously arrived. We were in the Theatre for four hours, two of which were devoted to the play and the other two to official intervals and scene changes. I know too well that many difficulties and problems will arise while the City Hall is new and untried. "Superb technicalities" are only superb if they can be effectively used. Whatever disasters occurred backstage on Wednesday the cause of the tedium must lie with the Producer and the Set Designer. Unwieldy and rather 'bitty' sets obviously could not be quickly changed. The stage was an odd mixture of curtains and pseudo-realistic Egyptian oddments, with too much cyclorama glaring at us. Clearly the whole conception should have been simplified. Was it necessary, for example, to have an elaborate setting for the Prologue when we had to wait fifteen minutes before reaching Scene I?

The Producer must have realised that it was impossible for her cast to maintain tension or to hold the interest of the audience. All continuity and contact was broken, and I viewed the whole affair as a series of episodes.

All this was particularly unfortunate as "Caesar and Cleopatra" is not one of Shaw's more coherent plays. Published in 1901 it has too many Shavian thrusts that are now blunted and a situation that never seems to grow to a point. Perhaps Shaw saw himself as Caesar, a witty, diplomatic general, but he never needed Cleopatra in that case.

DAVID Jordan can carry such a part and although he started off somewhat uncomfortably he did his best. He and June Armstrong-Wright must have suffered greatly from the slowness and they both struggled hard and quite effectively to link up the audience with the previous instalment. I resisted the temptation to leave at the second interval and the best scene comes on the roof of the Palace in the third Act. This is also Shaw's best scene.

I think Caesar could have been somewhat more tender to Cleopatra; he was tolerant and amused but after all he was a Roman and hated to be reminded of his age! June Armstrong-Wright was always lively and spirited. More variety of range would have accentuated her development from 'kitten' to woman and on to the spiteful young Queen. She lacked the authority—even if it were second-hand—and so the breakdown and fear of being alone were not sufficiently emphatic. But under trying conditions these two gave some pace that was otherwise lacking.

Of the rest of the cast Eileen Burbridge as Fatateeta and Ted Thomas as Rufio were the greatest supports. Fatateeta was the noblest Egyptian of them all—and was the only character who looked Egyptian! Her performance was nicely sinister mixed with a love of intrigue and possessive loyalty. Ted Thomas was a strong soldier and has a good stage personality; he had a decisiveness that he might well have imparted to his Centurion.

MICHAEL Dickens too suggested intrigue as Potinius and had force of character. That Brian Eisdall as Britannus was not as real as he might have been was due to Shaw, playing rather easy jokes against the English character that lack the impact that the angry young Irishman thought so outspoken sixty years ago. How old-fashioned and dated Shaw can become; I suppose the reason is that he can hardly ever be a detached man of the theatre. He never submerges himself in the characters he ought to create.

The rest of the cast never came to life or reached the proportions of the main characters because the Producer cared "for none of these things." Slow in speech, weak in tempo and unrelated to the main action they sank into recitation and inaudibility.

Inaudibility! Do not trust the acoustics of this theatre; from the fourth row I could not always hear the quieter tones of even the principals, and I know they can be heard in the Loke Yew Hall.

This must be a colourful affair, so that the audience is deceived into believing that the play is convincing. The costumes were a weird conglomeration of styles and colours. Poor Caesar's tunic was so scanty and his kilt so uneven that his dignity was impaired. Cleopatra was a strange cross between a chorus nymph and a dated fashion-plate that the glory of Egypt never emerged. No unity of colour was evident; a few more yards of material and a level eye might have helped to take this school-production (and I intend no disrespect to schools, as I have recently seen school techniques far above this!) unto a higher level.

I feared that the City Hall Theatre would reveal more faults than a less presumptuous hall might show, and this production generally proves the point. I am not convinced that this is an ideal stage and the lighting was very uncertain and weak. Perhaps more technical experience is necessary.

Would this were not such a calamitous affair! Would the cast knew how to come on and go off without scampering across the stage, would the sound effects were less realistic, would the crowd scenes were more organised, would that Caesar's barge could be abandoned or move with grace!

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South China Morning Post
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