

FESTIVAL REVIEWS

"UN INSPECTEUR VOUS DEMANDE"

Thursday, March 2nd

The Sacred Heart University drama group provided a rather weak opening for the 1961 Regional Festival with a French version of J. B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*. The play, a suspense thriller with an obvious moral, requires tight intense acting which was generally lacking in the Sacred Heart production.

The piece begins as the Birling family, seemingly prosperous, smug and unshakable, are celebrating an engagement; a treacherous atmosphere of congratulations thickens the air even more densely than the cigar smoke. Into their midst, however, comes the Inspector, a formal uncompromising figure armed with such shrewd questions and relentless determination to achieve the truth that he forces from every member of the family the kind of admission that displays their character in depth. His enquiry concerns a girl who committed suicide, and it slowly and uncomfortably emerges that the Birlings and General Croft (Miss Birling's fiancée) have all in one way or another contributed to the causes of her death. The father sacked her for demanding more money; the daughter complained about her manners to a shop manageress and insisted on her dismissal; General Croft had given her some hope through an affair, but eventually cast her off; the mother refused to allow her charitable committee to help the girl financially when she was expecting a child; and the son of the family was that child's father. Uneasy, frightened, the family are left alone to rake over the dry bones of their self-satisfaction. As the realization dawns on them that perhaps the visit was a hoax (the Inspector shows them each a photograph, but they might all have been looking at different girls), the ground is cleared for a moral battle. Only the son and daughter recognize that according to a spiritual standard of truth, they are still responsible, while the others with brusque irritability start fighting their way back to self-esteem. When they are fully satisfied that the Inspector was an imposter (no girl had been reported as a suicide), and the curtain is about to fall, the telephone rings: a girl, having swallowed disinfectant is dying in hospital and a police inspector is on his way to make a few enquiries.

To produce the intense effect of the plot, considerable stage presence was required in each of the actors. The Inspector, in the course of the inquiry, dealt with each member of the group individually, while the others were required to emphasize their consternation by means other than that of speech. Jean Doucet portraying *Monsieur Birling*, was perhaps the most successful of the suspects in this respect; by changing his facial expressions and by a nervous though subtle wringing of his hands, Doucet remained obviously disturbed. But his portrayal of Mr. Birling, a man who believed that "un homme digne de ce nom doit penser avant tout à lui-même", lacked the necessary pomposity. Guy Lortie, as *Eric Birling*, was moderately successful in portraying his consternation, but failed to heighten pity for the dead girl when his own part in the tragedy was being expounded. Julia Gallant (*Gladys Birling*), Paul Doucet (*Gerald Croft*) and Rita Patrice (*Mrs. Birling*) appeared less dismayed while observing the Inspector's inquisition, thereby lessening the intensity of the atmosphere. Mlle. Patrice slipped too easily from the required haughtiness into a damaging serenity, while Paul Doucet, the weakest member of the cast, let his attention wander from the scene through occasional glances at the audience. Roger Roy's steady and forceful portrayal of the *Inspector* was slightly dimmed due to this lack of visual emotion in the suspects and the relaxed atmosphere which followed his departure was ineffective for the same reason. Many of the technicalities used to display edginess were obviously lacking in the stage directions of the play, and the director, Rev. Andre Blagdon, could perhaps have interpolated certain movements and technicalities to produce the effect. The set arrangement could also have been narrowed to enable the silent members to participate more intimately in the drama of the person being questioned. A closer drawing of the curtains and an arrangement of the furniture at right angles to the extremities of the backdrop would have produced a more compact scene.

Certain faults were shared by the entire cast. Faulty, uncertain movements were largely responsible for producing the "static" effect which Adjudicator Roland McNicoll noted as the chief failure of the production. Again the sprawling arrangement of the act perhaps hindered the certainty of the characters' movements towards and away from each other. With the exception of Mr. Roy, the individual dialogues of the players often failed to spring dramatically from the cue lines; Mr. Paul Doucet, particularly, often seemed to be waiting for one speech to end so that he could get on with his own. This is basically an actor's problem, but a physical tightening of the set could possibly result in a more dramatic dialogue. The diction of the entire cast was excellent; both Mr. Roy and Jean Doucet had an effective range of inflection in their speeches, and the rest of the cast was audible throughout.

The set was well illuminated, and there was little necessity of exploiting an elaborate scheme of light changes. The production's main weaknesses were of a technical nature, involving both actors and design, and it is not much wonder that the Sacred Heart group were not a serious contender for the Festival Awards.

C. B.

"THE PILLARS OF SOCIETY"

Saturday, March 4th

The Mount Allison Player's Society production of Henrik Ibsen's *Pillars of Society*, presented as a matinee on Saturday, was not enthusiastically received by the audience or by Adjudicator McNicoll. The play, selected by Director Ivor Morris was quite involved and topically moralistic, and much adverse criticism was centered around these points. The multiplicity of incident is indeed perplexing; the satire on business methods, local politics, the story of Lona Hessel, the love of John and Dina, Dina's own history, the adventure of little Olaf, the stories of Martha and of Mrs. Bernick would overcrowd the stage even without the main story, that of Bernick himself. But surely the play can be criticized constructively as well as destructively; surely the Mount A. group deserves considerable credit for their attempt to merge the different lines of interest

into a very effective dramatic role.

The play is certainly full of topical meaning for the year in which it was written (1877); the railway plot, the plot surrounding the "coffin ship" and the "Indian Girl"—have parallels in history. The revolt of Lona Hessel and Dina Dorf provided a basis for satire on the scandals connected with the New Woman movement. This was the main difficulty under which the Mount A. group worked; the characters of the play are too often slaves to the plot. But several members of the cast managed to get beneath the plot and depict successfully the greed and selfishness of Big Business, the stuffy morality of docile "pillars of the community" and, in the face of all this, the beauty of sacrifice.

Robert Knox, as Karsten Bernick, had the most difficult role, since this character is the one most savagely

swisted by the demands of Ibsen's plot. For personal gain, Bernick preserves a lie which robs a man of his honour and keeps the Counsel's family emotionally divided. Bernick ultimately repents, but his recantation is a dramatic convenience through which Ibsen expounds the moral of the play.

... so let it really come to pass that tonight we begin a new era. The old era with its affectation, its hypocrisy, and its emptiness, its pretense of virtue and its miserable fear of public opinion shall be for us like a museum, open for purposes of instruction."

It is a difficult shift for an actor to believe in, and Mr. Knox (playing his first dramatic role) was understandably more convincing in the first three acts. His speeches were natural, sharp on cue and distinctly enunciated; his movements were precise and well varied according to his particular emotional states. Lacking, however, was a subtlety in facial and vocal expression. The remaining male performers were in some cases badly cast, and shared a number of faults. The speeches of Rummel, Vigeland and Rorland were stilted, mouthed rather than generated from within.

The reader of the play comes to despise Rorland, but Mr. Windle's version of this character was tolerable to a fault. Ronald House's young-sounding voice was an incongruous attribute of the eighty-year-old-plus Mr. Vigeland. Rod Bryden gave the poorest performance in the vital role of John Tonnesen; his movements were much too uniform, stiff and awkward. Both technically and psychologically his speeches were poor, lacking conviction and proper inflection. His "hoorahs" at joyous moments rose scarcely above the level of his normal voice, and the overall impression of his Johan was that of a poor companion for Miss Butler's lovely and sensitive Dina. Mr. Allworth was properly efficient in his role of Krap, the head clerk, but certain ill-advised movements detracted from his dignity. Young John Duchemin, playing Bernick's son, Olaf, spoke very well, and must be commended for a complete lack of stage-fright. Paul MacLean did little for the character of Aune, the shipwright; his speeches lacked vigour, and his facial expression and movements were far too wooden. The character of Hilmar Tonneson was obviously intended for exaggeration, and John MacMillan pleased the audience with his performance, although his bluntness was often not well sustained.

The actresses had a better afternoon. Margaret Wynne, in the role of Betty Bernick, emphasized her stage presence with beautifully timed movements and natural facial expressions. Her portrayal of Bernick's wife was obviously the result of a sensitive interpretation of the part; she emerged as a woman not willingly "conventional", but sacrificing any personal tendencies to become the New Woman for the sake of her husband's reputation in the community. It is difficult to imagine in what capacity Miss Norma Cartwright could have improved her portrayal of the New Woman, Lona Hessel, although her voice was nearly inaudible in her more restrained speeches. Veronica Butler was perfectly cast in the role of Dina Dorf. Her slim figure and youthful features contained adequate hints of the growing sensuousness of a young woman, and her low but insistent voice was properly varied as the character developed. Elizabeth Morgan was outstanding as Martha Bernick, the pretty but aging schoolmistress who condemns herself to the life of a spinster for the sake of John and Dina. The society ladies were a bit shrill in the opening scene, but may have been purposely exaggerated by the director.

Adjudicator McNicoll was a bit too frank during his hurried remarks to the audience at the conclusion of the play, and remarked that no direction was visible in the Mount A. production. Several technical flaws did manage to hamper the performance, but the set was excellent, and blocking was well executed considering the size of the cast.

"DEATH OF A SALESMAN"

Friday, March 3rd

Part of the tragedy of the play, *The Death of a Salesman*, is the near ruin of Biff because of the intemperate praise accorded him by his father. I wonder if the irony of the situation occurred to the Festival adjudicator. It is unfair to any cast to leave the stage thinking that they could not improve upon their performance. Certainly there were praises due to the Stage Door '56 presentation but a temperate adjudication would have been of more value to all concerned.

Willy Loman, after a tentative beginning, lived his part, shifting his center of interest from the situations at hand to the maze of memory and fantasy with skill. There was little to say about him otherwise. He was Willy Loman. I think I was caught up in the play to a considerable extent because of the fact that he was a salesman. I did not notice it until afterwards, but the Adjudicator was also a salesman. He knew as I knew the dreams of the killing tomorrow, the lying about sales and the heartache of no sale on the order book.

Willy's wife was not so successfully portrayed. She moved well on the stage, picked up her cues and otherwise fitted the part admirably but her voice was irritating. She attempted so much expression in each word that there was no reserve left for the spots that needed the bit extra. Her best scene, which brought tears to my eyes, was the grave scene, done with a certain reserve which gave it its force.

The two sons lumped together for reasons other than paternity. They moved awkwardly and were always at a loss to know what to do with their big hands. Happy was anything but happy. He seemed to me to be a small-time con man and seducer with nothing likeable. His line with the women didn't make him "Happy" to me. Biff fell into the same mistakes but not so far. I could not really say that I ever believed in either of them, but was always conscious that they were amateur players in roles that they were not too sure of. This was in sharp contrast to Willy whom I came to believe in completely.

Bernard was a caricature of the studious boy, not a character and this almost cheap comedy was not in keeping with the rest of the play. On the other hand, as the successful lawyer, he seemed in command of his part. His father and the "other woman" were handled competently. The best bit part was the waiter. That young man picked up the motions, the speech pattern and even the expression of the part so that I was driven to wonder why he was not one of the sons.

The direction and staging of the play have received the praise due to them. I thought perhaps that the set could have been touched with a little colour. This was "the house that Willy built" after all and a point was made that he was handy with tools — bright paint perhaps on the walls? The technical aspect of the play was marred once by a slight lag but that only emphasized the all round excellence of the production.

J. S.

"ANTIGONE"

Saturday, March 4th

There is a wealth of difference between *ANTIGONE* and the other plays presented at the Festival that it almost deserves to be put in a category by itself. Having been familiar with the Greek play it is somehow difficult to reconcile the two. It gave me some confidence to see that the director had mixed the costumes — ancient Greek and modern to indicate the dual nature of the treatment of the tragedy — modern language in ancient setting and theme. The stark simplicity of the setting and the costumes imparted a silent graveness on the play and the director is to be praised on the good taste used.

Of the individual players, *Antigone* gave all her talent to a reserved force which completely captivated me. Not only was she personally attractive but her movements were beautiful and her pauses, while she listened to Creon, were held with such statuesque grace that they spoke the silent strength of her will. It is difficult for an actress to stand quietly and still have presence and command. I was amazed after the play when I went to congratulate her to find that she was such a delicate, small girl. She seemed to assume a certain size on stage to fit her role. Her voice was as controlled as her actions and held the audience with its sweetness and force. Creon declared too much. His movements became predictable as the play went on. His bearing was so commanding that he did not need to use his hands so much to emphasize his words. Sometimes I thought his voice was far back in his throat and a little difficult to follow because of this. I had expected an immobile Chorus, but was treated to fluid voice and movement which seemed almost like a ballet. This movement was so graceful that it added rather than detracted from the play for me. I supposed that the director did this to give an illusion of motion to an otherwise static play. *Haemon* lacked this force on the stage. He was tall and his appearance was in keeping with his role but he did not mean "King's Son" to me at sight which was what he should have meant. His bearing was not princely. Neither was I taken with Ismene, the sister of *Antigone*. Somehow there was nothing memorable about what she said though I must admit that her presence drew my eye not a little.

Two scenes are especially deserving of praise. The opening lines delivered by the Chorus, introducing the characters in the drama were given with such expression of voice and motion that I knew from the moment it began that the production would be a success. The white-robed figure in the foreground against the immobilized figures of the characters dim in the background was extremely effective. The other excellent scene was that in which the guards sat and gassed about their projected activities in one of their spare moments. Perhaps the First Guard declaimed a bit too much but not enough to spoil my enjoyment of the production.

Regarding the presentation of awards at the end of the Festival, I can only say that beautiful *Antigone* could be allowed a tear of disappointment. The popular action alone had to be her award and after all that is the real prize. Certainly, had the decision been mine she would have carried the trophy home in her arms. No one could take the glory from Willy Loman. He deserved his moment fully. Biff was a very wooden supporting actor but perhaps there wasn't much to choose from. The decision as to the best producer must have been a very difficult one to make. I would not have wished the responsibility. Having nothing left with which to disagree my function is ended except to thank the Festival Committee and the BRUNSWICKAN for the opportunity of seeing two excellent plays.

"WIT and WISDOM" — March 18, 20, 21

C. B.