

LIMELIGHT

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PROSCENIUM in "TWELFTH NIGHT", by William Shakespeare
Harrow Weald Memorial Hall - April 27th 1956

A friend of mine, who is a confirmed Pessimist, always advises me to prepare for the worst, because I shall be so pleasantly surprised when things turn out better than expected. I am beginning to think that he is probably right after my experiences at Harrow Weald. Being somewhat obstinate, I usually try to expect the best, even in Amateur productions; on this occasion, I was most eager for the feast that was to come: here was one of the world's great plays being presented by one of Harrow's leading companies, produced by a master of his craft.

We were puzzled by a programme note that seemed to disrupt the whole Shakespeare canon by calling this the last comedy, and that announced the omission of the one scene that serves to give balance to the play. We were given extra time to speculate on this, and when the curtains eventually staggered open, they revealed an inelegant and shaggy Orsino, looking rather like a bored Prince of Monaco arranging his wedding. To those hardened to the Amateur Stage, the sight in the next scene of a Hand inserting a convenient barrel would no doubt be no surprise; but after a fellow critic's remarks only two months ago in these pages, my disappointments really began when we were privileged to watch the scene-changing through gaps in the protesting curtains, and when the embarrassing pause after the third scene had to be filled by the clown singing a song extempore from paper, so to speak. A Shakespearean play is composed of so many scenes that if it is to move at all, these must generally be taken as consecutive; annoying waits between each scene merely serve to slow the pace, irritate the audience, and enable the critic to write his notes.

The setting as a whole was not very good, and served to distract us from the good things of the play: why was the backcloth so creased? Why the fiddly little gate which tripped everyone up on their exits? Why the clashing colours of the drapes? And did we need a tree arch for a basic set that had to represent so many diverse situations? All small points, you will say, and all justifiably excusable on such a small stage.

Really, Proscenium! From a company with your experience we expect better treatment for your actors; these distractions took our attention from Miss Jones and have taken up far too much of this report.

The production aimed at securing a balance between humour and comedy; from the programme, we gathered that here was a charming play, to be marred with nothing offensive such as would be found in

"Troilus and Cressida" for instance; we were to have good clean fun and purity of thought and verse. This aim, however, was upset by both author and cast. Even apart from the omitted scene, the tricking of Malvolio by Maria and her crew of tipplers is at best a coarse practical joke, and the comedians combined to make sure we realised this. JOHN GOBEY as Sir Toby certainly enjoyed himself, but his humour was wicked - there was an evil glint in his eye and a villainous hanging of his nether lip that fitted well with his rather amorous partnership with Maria. He did not need the hoarse voice and the awkward stance to amuse us. Maria, played by BARBARA SIDDALL was a saucy milkmaid out for a good time - a Restoration comedy jade rather than the bubbling spirit of mischief indicated by the text. The excellence of REGINALD OVENELL, as Feste, lay in the poignancy of his singing rather than in his clowning, where he seemed ill at ease, like a Professor playing trains with his grandson. PETER PEEK's appearance as Aguecheek was delightfully traditional, though we looked for more silliness in his voice. In the two scenes that mattered, however, he managed excellently. The sight of his round hat bobbing over the box hedge warmed the hearts of those whose line of vision was not marred by the curtain, and his fight with Caesario was a triumph for actors and Producer: here at last was real movement and pace - and some delightful humour that was neither farcical nor bawdy. Fabian became in the hands of HASLETT CONNOR a much stronger and more interesting character than the vague hanger-on he usually seems to be.

As for Malvolio himself, IAN SMITH extracted all the comedy from the part without turning it into a caricature; the extraordinary mobility of his face and the scornful twitching of his drooping mouth made him hateful yet very real. His appearance in his nightcap added humour to a scene that had been chiefly remarkable for the vigour of the roisterers' singing.

If the comic scenes of the play could not help being impure, there was ample compensation from the serious characters: here was Beauty indeed. Olivia (SUSANNE MOLLER) was extremely beautiful, especially in that troublesome pink dress. Her diction was so nearly faultless that verse became a joy to hear; perhaps it would be ungracious to suggest that this very perfection tended to make her seem somewhat cold - she gave us little sign that she was falling in love with Caesario. It is Viola who conceals her love; Olivia declares that

"Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide"

There seemed no good reason, either, for her to have been so young; small wonder that her household was so unruly!

ROY JACKSON, as Count Orsino, also spoke his verse beautifully, and did his best with the unstable character that Shakespeare gave him. His stance and make-up gave us little idea of a Count, however, and we felt he was scarcely a suitable husband for Viola. At times his pages seemed better dressed than he was.

Among the supporting characters the two Seamen made a vivid impression by their fierce appearance; and a very strong word of praise is due for the music, admirably chosen by DENIS GRIST. The drum and fife tune was particularly appropriate. Would it be possible to have the titles of the music on the programme in future productions?

There is one character who has made herself felt already in passing. What can we say of Viola? Regrettably, I have never seen KATHLEEN JONES before; I hope I have the privilege again. Here was acting as we rarely see it - acting with mind and body, with every turn of the head and every inflection of the voice. What a range of emotions she managed to display! She established the mood of a scene on her every entrance, and dominated the stage from beginning to end. Whether upright page or wilting woman, whether sighing for love or joking with the clown, she conveyed her message quickly and clearly to the audience. Her verse speaking was delightfully varied ("Make me a willow cabin" was superb;) and the recognition scene with Sebastian (DEREK LEROY) most movingly performed. She even managed to look like her twin brother, which is not always the case in this play. By the very depth of passion she displayed, she transformed what might have been a light-hearted and fanciful Romance into a story that was every bit as touching as the songs of Feste. In view of the pleasure she gave us, it is churlish of me to mention her breathlessness, which suited the fight but at times became her way of showing her passion.

A mixed evening, then, made up of some moments of real pleasure and a surrender to the magic of the stage, and of others when we felt disappointed at technical slips or mediocrity. Perhaps it was because from MR. G.W.WOOLLANDS we always expect so much. We certainly had a most competent and interesting production, and personally I was thrilled to see an amateur company essaying Shakespeare; but we lacked a sparkle, a master touch, the extra something that makes Proscenium "Worthy to touch Fortune's fingers".

Thank you Miss Jones, for all your hard work. May Proscenium soon have a stage worthy of its talents!

J.S.G.