

Letter From London

Diary: Time After Time At The Theatre

By **SONNY LINDER**

Essay Staff Reporter

Friday, Oct. 4

"The Tragedy of Tragedies or the Life and Death of Tom Thumb" at the Young Vic Theatre, directed by Bernard Gross. Although the first act of the comedy of manners by Henry Fielding proved to be a bit torpid, we are highly entertained by the final scenes.

Fielding was getting at the pomposity and falseness of his contemporaries in the theatre; the last scene in the play ended with each character dying a verbose saccharin death. Some funny moments.

Friday, Oct. 11

Experts from the "Canterbury Tales" presented by Robb Inglis, actor and director.

This afternoon was quite enjoyable for our group. We saw this one-man show. Not a reading, but a full-scale staged production in costume, the program included "The Nun's Tale," "The Priests's Tale," and the "Millers Tale."

Part of the two-hour show was done in original Middle English dialect.

Immediately following the performance for our group, Mr. Inglis departed on a scheduled tour of U.S. and Canadian theatres.

Monday, Oct. 14

The Royal Shakespeare Company's production of "Summerfolk" by Maxim Gorky (English version by Jeremy Brooks and Kitty Hunter Blair); at the Aldwych Theatre.

Most students agreed that the way in which the Royal Shakespeare Company presented Gorky's powerful, intricate portrait of the sedentary life of Russia's turn of the century nouveau-riche was practically flawless. Although just over 3½ hours long, the time passes unnoticeably as we were compelled to identify with and examine the predicaments of these sad, pathetic lives.

Two weeks later, Ms. Margaret Tyzak, who played Maria Luvna in "Summerfolk", came to speak with us.

Saturday, Oct. 19

All day trip to Stratford-on-Avon. A two-hour auto bus jaunt through rolling pastoral English country brought all 20 of us to this town of Shakespeare's childhood and his death.

We visited such landmarks as Shakespeare's birthplace, and to New Place, where the poet spent his retirement and death.

Holy Trinity Church, in which Shakespeare is buried, contains his gravestone.

At 2 p.m., we attended a production of "Twelfth Night", again by the Royal Shakespeare Company. This was done at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre on the Avon River bank.

Nicol Williamson, a well-known actor here and in the U.S. played Malvolio.

Discussion lasted among us for several days about the company's interpretation of underlying homosexual motives. Duke Orsino's attraction to Cesarie (Viola really); and Antonie's devotion to Viola's brother Sebastian.

Monday, Oct. 21

An afternoon visit to the Queen's Theatre in the borough of Hertschurch. We saw both the present theatre here (old and cramped), and the new theatre which is in the process of being built (modern and spacious).

Also, director John Hole entertained students questions on many aspects of English professional theatre. We all left with the realization that to be an actor over here is much more of a self-sacrifice than in the U.S. For instance, the standard Equity wage here is between 17 pounds and 30 pounds per week. That is the equivalent of \$50 to \$70. The cost of living is about equal to the U.S.

Wednesday, Oct. 23

The National Theatre Company production of "Spring Awakening", written by Franz Wedekind (translated by Edward Bend.)

The thought provoking study of adolescent naivete as presented in the first act of this play, rapidly transformed (or rather degenerated) into a sermonizing expressionistic climax and

denouement, complete with a headless ghost and a mysterious stranger.

Still, some of the acting was admirable, displaying that much sought after commodity of repose which Mr. Dodding and our other directors are now trying to cultivate in us awkward Americans.

Friday, Oct. 25

Double-header! An afternoon with Margaret Tyzak of "Spring Awakening", followed by an evening at the Old Vic to see "Equus."

The dynamic Ms. Tyzak answered questions for about two hours in an informal session at Moreley. We also got a chance to chat with the actress over tea cakes.

Suck topics as vulnerability, ensemble playing, and an actors individuality were discussed in depth. Ms. Tyzak also described the rigorous two-week repertory system in which she grew over the years, refining her technique and perfecting her craft.

Later that day, we saw the National Theatre Company's "Equus". The play by Peter Shaffer explores the relationship between a psychiatrist and a young boy with a horse fetish. Although some of the acting seemed weak, the play was well-staged and carried off in a bold, forthright, interesting manner.

As the London climate grows mistier and colder, our pace grows increasingly swift. Classes are constantly challenging; our work for voice, acting and verse speaking classes continues to stretch our minds, bodies, and emotions.



Photo by Hazel Leuchars

Students chat with actress Margaret Tyzak. Left to right; Ms. Tyzak, Katharine Buffaloe; back to camera Sonny Linder, Danny Arden; standing, Lucius Houghton, David Wynn, faculty.

Chorus Objects to Requirement

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There has also been a disciplinary problem in chorus, mainly because some non-voice majors are so resentful of their forced attendance, they bring their resentment out into the open at each rehearsal. At least once every two weeks, some non-voice major speaks out at some point in rehearsal to say, "I know we sang the last passage badly, but we don't want to be here in the first place."

The discipline problem has been worse in years past. Nancy Vineyard, a voice major and member of the chorus for the past two years, says, "There were many more discipline problems last year. For one thing, Dr. Rockabrand is a better conductor than the one we had before. He's more of an inspiration to the chorus and makes us want to do a good job."

Ms. Vineyard also has some suggestions for future improvements, and her first suggestion was echoed by most students interviewed by this reporter. "I think the main problem is people who are in chorus against their wishes. We could have a much better chorus if all the people who don't want to be in chorus were allowed to drop out. The administration keeps saying that people are getting musical benefit from being in chorus, whether they like it or not. It seems to me that if a person resents being in chorus they won't learn anything at all by being forced to attend."

Chorus is a four year requirement of all piano, guitar and composition majors. Many have never sung before, and have difficulty singing "Three Blind Mice" in tune, much less Igor Stravinsky's "Mass." Also, a number, not all, of these non-voice majors feel they are forced into a situation that makes them uncomfortable, and wastes their time that could be spent practicing.

The attitude of some of the unwilling choristers was typified by the comments of Bob Priest, a guitar major.

"I came to this school to improve my technique on the guitar, not my voice," Priest said. "I need all my time to practice my instrument. I have sung previously in a choir at another school, and did profit some from the experience. However, I think now is the time for me to concentrate on the guitar, and I resent spending time singing in chorus when I should be practicing."

"Many non-voice majors agreed with one who said, 'I have such difficulty singing that I am embarrassed to open my

mouth in chorus.'" Some students say they do not sing at all in chorus, they just put in the time to "pay their dues."

Speaking for the music administration, in an extensive interview, Scott Schillin, assistant to the dean of music, spelled out the reasons for the chorus requirement.

"It's easy for me to sympathize with the non-voice majors in the chorus," Schillin said. "After all, I'm a pianist and I had to sing five days a week (as opposed to the one two-hour rehearsal here) in a chorus in graduate school. I sort of resented it too, at first, but I eventually got a lot out of the experience. Many of the things I learned in chorus are the very reasons for the chorus requirement here."

"From chorus you learn improved musicianship, better ear-training and the inner workings of good music, by being part of the rehearsal experience, and you learn something invaluable - how to work within an ensemble."

Surprised By Complaints

"I'm surprised at the number of people that complain to me day after day asking to be let out of chorus. If I could assume that every piano major, guitar major, and composition major would always be asked to only work at what they majored in, then I would say the chorus requirement is not needed. The chances are, however, in today's job market, it could be very valuable to be able to work as a conductor of an ensemble, or do some other work within an ensemble."

Schillin went on to say, "Some of the students who wish to get out of chorus are too single minded about their majors. Their degree should stand for a total musical experience, and that includes some ensemble."

Alternatives Discussed

During the interview, Schillin discussed several alternatives. One of the possibilities is a system of two choruses; one for people who already know how to sing and a second training chorus, that would teach people how to sing with an easier repertoire.

A popular solution to the problem would be to drop the requirement altogether. Several students voiced the opinion that some sort of training chorus where the people who have real difficulty could slowly learn the art of choral singing, seems preferable to the situation as it now stands.

Ms. Vineyard said, "We could surely

cut the size of the chorus to include just the people who enjoy it. People who enjoy singing and happen to come from another school such as drama, might like to help us replace the musicians who don't want to sing in chorus. Of course, the time would have to be re-scheduled so that all could participate. When the non-voice majors simply look at the chorus as a drudgery, they should be allowed to quit."

Derrick Croom, also a voice major, said, "Those who just can't carry a tune in a bucket shouldn't be stuck in chorus! How can you derive benefits from an experience in which you show no interest?"

Many Enjoy Chorus

There are quite a few non-voice majors that do enjoy being in chorus. Heawon Kim, a piano major, says, "I like being in chorus. It was hard on all of us to try and sing the Stravinsky, but the music is getting easier now and it's more fun."

Another student who enjoys being in chorus is Sally Lillenthal, a sophomore voice major.

She said, "I personally like being in chorus; however, I don't think everybody not in an instrumental ensemble should be forced to take it. I think Dr. Rockabrand is definitely a more exciting conductor than last year's chorus director, and there is a chance that the choir could work out its' problems. That chance remains slim, unless there is a complete turn-around in the attitude of some choir members. Some of the problem lies with a number of voice majors who see themselves as being strictly soloists, and feel that it is beneath them to sing in a group."

Rockabrand Hopeful

Dr. Rockabrand says he is hoping for a turnaround in the attitude of some chorus members. This is his first year at NCSA, and even though he admits the first choir concert was not up to par, he continues to have high hopes for the future of the chorus.

In an interview, Dr. Rockabrand expressed his feelings on the importance of ensemble experience. "Ensemble is a social art. It is the art of working together with others to present a work of artistic merit. Ensemble is a worthy goal to pursue, and as soon as the students become more at ease with the concept of ensemble, I'm positive that they will begin to really enjoy this experience".