Flashes of brilliance highlight Channing players’ ‘Poor Bitos’

By ROGER GLADE
Thresher Fine Arts Editor

It is not without some degree of trepidation that one approaches a play like Jean Anouilh’s “Poor Bitos.” One cannot help but feel lost at the allusiveness, confused by an intricate structure and overwhelmed by certain flashes of brilliance both in the script and the production.

Such was the Channing Players’ fall offering last Thursday in Channing Hall at the First Unitarian Church.

Directed by David Dannenbaum (who has a couple of fine feathers in his headress from certain Rice Player productions), “Poor Bitos” presents the tragedy of a man driven by special scorn and essential egoism to the disaster of cruelty.

Revolution Re-Lives

André Bitos is a latter-day Robespierre who is invited to portray the role at a “wig party” given by one of his latter-day friends (Maxim). The whole idea is simple. Maxim hates Andre, and, in order to humiliate and possibly murder him in the “proper” manner, he sets up a little “charade.”

All the guests show up in French revolutionary personae which, presumably, will let them each tell Bitos what they really think of him. Maxim is careful, for he scrupulously picks his guests to fit their roles in such a fashion that the revolutionary interplay becomes indistinguishable from the contemporary.

Is Andre really Robespierre? Is Maxim really Saint-Juste? And who was Saint-Juste, anyway?

History

Heavy allusiveness on the part of Anouilh tends to make the play bewildering to the uneducated. There is certainly interplay between characters which we miss, simply because we do not take part in the historical context.

But, that aside, Anouilh mounts his drama splendidly. Drawing on an audience reservoir of pity, Anouilh wrings tears for the washerwoman’s son (Andre) and then disgust for the same man as demagogue.

In the end, we are happy to see Bitos escape the ultimately cruel fate that Maxim and the others have prepared for him, but we loathe him just the same.

Whether Robespierre was really like this is another matter, but essentially an irrelevant question. For, if one accepts Anouilh’s historical context, one must accept his historical characterizations.

Time Reversal

While the idea is simple, though, the structure is involved. Perhaps (and here one must stress the word “perhaps”) it is too involved.

That the revolutionary characters are used to permit contemporary machinations is pretty clear. However, come the second act, one is faced with the incredible situation of the contemporary acting on the revolutionary.

For it is most certainly true that Bitos does not appear in the second act, but rather Robespierre. We do not see the playboy Julian but the playboy Danton. We miss the petty deputy assistant prosecutor but see in his place the demagogue of the reign of terror.

And, one can only wonder why.

If there was a point in doing this, this reviewer missed it. But, in the final analysis, it makes good enough theatre to let the audience leave without noticing.

Top-Notch Performances

In the face of such a strange show, the Channing Players are to be commended for having succeeded at all—the fact that their production was truly admirable makes the evening all the more worth it.

True, there were some rough spots and one can only wonder at some of the glaring miscasts evident (one can only sit in anewed silence at the fact that one is expected to believe Miriam Merritt as a sweet young Lucille).

But more important is the greater number of absolutely top-notch performances. Jim Bernard as Julian/Danton walked away with top honors only after fighting Alfred Casas (Maxim/Saint-Juste) for the title.

Fervor Overcomes Him

Rodney Morgan in the title role is more than adequate on the whole and brilliant in short spurts. The second act proved his constant nemesis, however, when he let his religious fervor get the better of his cold calculation. Still, both as the petty bureaucrat and the mad-dened head of state, he produced a character of frightening proportions and dimension in the more intimate sequences.

Others worthy of note include Dennis (“The revolution can be a bore”) Kear, Roland Gallion, and Marti Marr, all of whom lent moments of essential theatricalism.

Except for some of the obvious and unavoidable pitfalls that confront all amateur productions, “Poor Bitos” came off very well indeed.

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