

# Traumas on the kibbutz

THE latest play for England is set in Israel. Paul Kember's *Not Quite Jerusalem* (Royal Court), it turns out, has three meanings to its title.

Geographically we are at a distance from the Holy City: out in the desert on a kibbutz. Spiritually, too, it falls some way short of the ideal—Jewish or Socialist or a combination of the two—though the members feel themselves to be making progress. The play focuses, though, on a quartet of volunteer British workers (none of them Jews), who have brought their national traumas with them. The kibbutz may not quite be Jerusalem—they have plenty of quarrels with it—but home falls a lot further short. And if you brought a box of burning gold to any of Mr Kember's four they would only complain of the heat.

So briskly resonating a title arouses high hopes of Mr Kember (an ex-journalist turned actor) and of this, his first play. It is indeed a very encouraging debut, strong on verbal crackle and narrative thrust. A lot of the banter is funny; if it could equally well be happening on Blackpool beach or on the football terraces, that is the point. Mr Kember has a nose for conflict. He can hardly have two characters on stage together before they start nuzzling at each other. This makes for excitement, but also for confusion.

Of the four volunteers two are in the box, the other lugubrious—arguably workless. The third is a doublet: out Cambridge undergraduate, claims to be, of some length. The fourth

**Theatre**  
by ROBERT CUSHMAN

the only girl, doesn't talk in such terms, but she tries to ally herself with the student and finds the attitudes and (especially) the language of the others objectionable. She says she is a nurse, and is quite convincingly characterised as such, but the other characters sense some mystery about her which is duly played out and solved: to the detriment of the play.

Meanwhile any debate she tries to start is cut short by the student cryptically telling her that she's really the same as the rest of them. If he ever gets more specific, he does it off stage. And this really is the play's main flaw. It starts hares, but never gives them a proper run. Then it finds time running out, and tries to wrap up issues and characters that have never been properly established.

The play might be tidier—though I suppose it would be less honest—if the kibbutz were left as a neutral background against which the visitors could interact. To an extent this happens. Mr Kember may hint at intolerance and rigidity in the set-up, but his Israeli official (played coolly and honourably by Bruce Alexander) functions dramatically as a court of moral appeal, like the headmaster in an *Outward Bound* training film. He is, no getting away from it, wonderfully understanding. The only other kibbutznik on show is a young lady soldier



Barbara Robbin of the Glasgow Citizens' terrorise-

with whom the student has an affair. This, though perfectly well written in itself, adds complication but not complexity.

All the volunteer groups are supposed to provide a native entertainment. The nurse is keen on having the English recite poems, but nobody else is. The Swiss and Swedes apparently regularly perform folk-songs; which (though nobody points this out) have rather less to do with their actual lives than the Eurovision Song Contest. The student, whom everyone regards as a natural leader, opts out (again). The other two sing 'God Save the Queen,' after which they bare their behinds at the audience.

The Israelis think they are being insulted; actually the vitriol is aimed at Britain itself. This, though, is the kind of theatrical gesture a playwright would like his characters to make, would perhaps have made himself if he had been in their place. However simplistic, it denotes a political consciousness which, earlier on, the playwright has been at pains

to show the characters lacking. At the end the student makes a long speech about how the British working-class have always been exploited, with especial reference to town-planning. This is true as far as it goes, which is no great distance.

It is demeaning for a playwright to deny his characters all responsibility for their own bad behaviour (and Mr Kember is a sensitive enough writer for his own hand to do dead when he tries it). Nor is it at all clear why it should be the student's final destiny to go home while his mates can stay on. Again the vital connections seem to have been made offstage. The upshot seems to be that the British are going to have trouble with Socialism, but ought to be allowed to try it; as usual it is the first, pessimistic, half of the proposition that registers most strongly. I should add that it is refreshing to see Israel presented in a radical theatre as a progressive force, and that Philip Davis as the student again displays a flair for snarled-up rhetoric.

The Glasgow Citizens'



Philip Davis (left) and Kevin McNally in Paul Kember's 'Not Quite Jerusalem.'

## Robert Cushman on Jerusalem

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