



beyond the capabilities of the cast (indeed, they performed admirably) as that it set the audience problems outside their scope of appreciation. It is a difficult piece of theatre. If the tensions that develop in the relationship between professor and pupil are to produce that essential of good theatre — immediacy and electricity of atmosphere — the latent dangers must slowly but surely become apparent and necessarily impinge upon any humour that is to be drawn from mathematical and linguistic conundrums along the way. Helen Jagger's innocent schoolgirl, eager to please, of computer intelligence, at home with vast multiplication but ill at ease in subtracting three from four, gradually becoming exasperated and overtaxed, so that mental stress produces physical ill-being that bit by bit assumes total control of her, was everything that could be asked of her in a very demanding role. She and Philip Clymer held the stage for long periods with complicated dialogue convincingly performed. His role too, starting as the squeaky-voiced professor, becoming the engrossed teacher, soon exasperated in his turn, far too interested in his young pupil, rising to its conclusion through the slow unveiling of his twisted mind to the murder, and then falling to the anti-climax of the daily reprimand by his servant, made great demands on him, and he met most of them. Was it not a mistake, however, to burden himself with the extra load of production — in a play where the overall vision is so hard to get across to the audience? Wouldn't he have been wiser to vindicate the selection of this play by concentrating his efforts on achieving a more rounded whole from off-stage? Be that as it may, he might well have made judicious, but hearty use of scissors on the text. Difficulties arise again, because to remove some of the play's repetition alters it radically, but it could have reduced the overwhelming odds against which the cast toiled. The two main characters had no flaw in their up and down relationship, but it was precisely this sequence of build-up followed by anti-climax as dictated by the text that made it impossible for them to maintain any momentum. Consequently, things came to a halt in dramatic terms, at regular intervals, and a great deal of talent was shown in overcoming the recurring problem of getting the ball rolling again. Miss Jagger's progression from mild irritation to overpowering pain was excellent, but

BEAR PIT

“THE LESSON” & “THE REAL INSPECTOR HOUND”

December 5th, 6th and 7th, 1974.

An evening of two very distinct halves, which said much for the Bear Pit tradition, but also underlined some of the pitfalls into which youthful ambition can lead its treasured autonomy. Two aspects of humour, black comedy with philosophical overtones, and tongue-in-cheek who dunnit? were on parade. Here is not the place to air personal preferences, or to attempt an evaluation of the merits of one or other, but the reviewer's task must be to assess not only the interpretation and staging of the plays, but also the wisdom of their choice, their relevance to the audience and its experience of theatre, and their success, not in box-office terms, but at least as measured by their reception at the back of the stalls.

Reluctantly, therefore, but firmly and on behalf of those who voted with their feet at the interval, I must condemn the choice of Ionesco's 'The Lesson' as inappropriate. It was not so much that it proved to be a task

by this point the audience was bogged down and could only see this as needless and therefore boring repetition on the part of the playwright. Nick Edwards only served to underline the hazards of playing a bit part, either so boisterously that it destroyed the situation carefully built before his appearance, or so outlandishly, witness the casting and drag costume, that the laughs he got were cheap. Surely less distracting and more effective would have been a female with some subtlety in the art of calming her errant charge. The direction was at fault here in instructing the part to be played for belly laughs, in direct contrast to and contradiction of the main line of the plot.

Perhaps the producer will feel some of the above criticisms merely express in negative terms what he felt to be the assets of the play and the production. Perhaps I missed the point! What was the play about? Was it funny,



or just slightly amusing in a perverse way? If I failed to understand the lesson, so did many others. Who is learning which lesson about what?

Stoppard's 'The Real Inspector Hound' provided the second section, rather like a prolonged successful Monty Python sketch, demonstrating all that zany humour has to offer, following one of those sequences in the show that fail to communicate their humour. It was, inevitably, a success. Simon Andrews deserves first mention here for his authoritative and clear-cut staging of the play, emphasised and enhanced by touches of real insight. He got from his cast much more than he can have bargained for in terms of slick dialogue and action, without allowing them to indulge in irrelevant and pointless over-acting. All credit to him.

The complicated plot begins as Birdboot (Paul Segal) and Moon (Colin Burgess) take their seats to watch a play they are both to review. Both earn full marks for their characterisation. As a writer, Stoppard provides excellent opportunity for success, but his wit demands speedy delivery, his plot thrives on lively acting. These two set the tone at the start, and it was never allowed to falter in pace or direction to its conclusion. Particularly memorable were Birdboot's indignation when his 'scrupulous integrity' was 'Falsely besmirched', Moon's ecstatic list of exotic chocolates, and importantly, their involvement in the back-biting one-up-manship of their job. We move quickly on to Moon's bitterness at being Higgs' understudy, and are soon bombarded by critical jargon, relentlessly sustained. All this work was done via the microphone, the problems of which were surmounted to such a degree that diction was at all times clear and very close to the over-emphasis of a David Frost homily. While Birdboot pinpoints murderer and murder victim several times, Moon lapses, and lapse he did with obvious enjoyment, into 'Je suis, it seems to be saying, ergo sum.'

Meanwhile, back 'on stage', Mrs. Drudge (Gaynor Davies), the archetypal housekeeper who stumbles over everything from instant police messages on the radio to innumerable overheard motives for murder, sets the who-dunnit? going. And with style! The pick of the cameo parts with her duster horizontally poised for action, personifying her name in gait and mannerism. Her delivery of the scene-setting lines 'Lady Muldoon's country residence in early spring' and 'The same, half an hour later' was hilariously dead pan. Tom Fry's dramatic entrance as Simon Gascoyne, with cat burglar stealth and superb upper-upper accent and intonation, worked marvelously with Mrs. Drudge's double-take glance at the cloack ('Judging by the time') and her rambling local weather forecasts. Their timing exemplified the high standard maintained by all throughout on the lines: 'Wonderful how country people really know weather.' — 'Know whether what?' The plot thickens as Felicity (Jane Feldman) and Lady Cynthia (Ellen

Birley) enter. Both fulfilled their roles admirably, performing that important function of providing strong minor links in the chain. Just as required, Felicity was all innocence and jolly tennis rackets, while Cynthia combined melodramatic gesture with exactly the right punch in her trite, epigrammatic lines, such as 'I'll never give up hope! Let me go! We are not free'.

From the moment of his entrance, speeding onto stage and bowling over Simon, Chrys Shaw as Magnus stole the show. In terms of the who dunnit?, he takes control of the situation, and eventually reveals himself as the long-lost husband, and, believe it or not, the real Inspector Hound. The verve he brought to the part, ad-libs that delighted the audience, together with his domineering outbursts of quivering rage, made this a notable performance.

Meanwhile, Birdboot's wife embarrasses him by phoning, and from this point, critics and actors begin to change places. With Simon dead, Birdboot assumes his role as the action is played over again and verifies his theory about the authenticity of the stage kiss with Lady Cynthia. Again the mock card game with quick fire lines following hard one on the other, the cast maintaining exactly the right acceleration to the point of Birdboot's triumphant 'Bingo!'

The involvement of the critics in the reality of the stage suddenly glares both of them in the face, when it is discovered that the body on stage is Higgs, Moon's number one, who, as soon as their seats in the 'audience' are vacated, takes up his rightful position, from where Tom Fry excelled. Inspector Hound (Ian Cameron) also managed the transition from his first entrance complete with swamp boots and foghorn to his later role as critic very well, but his slightly unassuming attitude was out-of-character with the blundering confidence of the insistence that, despite her denial, the corpse must be that of Lady Muldoon's husband, and the exasperated cries of 'I'm in charge of this case' and 'This case is becoming an utter shambles.'

Very soon, Birdboot lies dead on the floor, and Moon finds himself faced with the unanswerable question, 'Are you the real Inspector Hound?' as he attempts to unravel the problem. Here again, another good transition to prepare the way for the final revelations from Magnus. Rising from his wheelchair, to be recognised by Moon as his understudy, Puckeridge, he gratifies professional ambition by shooting his superiors on stage.

Altogether a very entertaining, fast-moving production, where the complications of the plot were never allowed to interfere with the simple truths of aiming to hit the audience right between the eyes. Verdict: a direct hit!

T. W. Tindale.