

"BECKET"

by Jean Anouilh

Being performed at Rensselaer College on December 1st, 2nd, & 3rd.

"Becket", first performed 7 years ago, has probably been Anouilh's most successful play. The translated version received a great deal of publicity and praise on both sides of the Atlantic, (it was performed in New York with Laurence Olivier as Becket), and has since been filmed with Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole in the leading roles.

Briefly, the play deals with the changing relationship between Henry II and Thomas A'Becket which ends with the murder of the Archbishop in Canterbury Cathedral. Henry, who has had a repressed childhood in the English court, has at last found someone who he can love and trust. Becket belongs to a conquered race and feels he has sold his honour by accepting the luxuries of Norman life. He chooses to uphold the honour of God as a way of restoring his personal honour, and it is his conflict between the honour of the king and the honour of God that is another theme of the play. Anouilh also raises broader questions: the problems of racial conflict, of judging historical relationships, and of the necessary adjustments of a conquered people are all brought to the attention of the audience.

Thus Anouilh has written a historical drama with 20th. century relevance, a device he used in many of his plays. The stage presentation also uses methods he evolved in earlier works, the disregard for chronological order and the almost film-like rapid change of background.

The end result is an outwardly spectacular and impressive picture of a tempestuous relationship, with underlying themes of a serious philosophical nature and very real to these times.

"BECKET" AS A SCHOOL PLAY by D. de G. Sells

Choosing the play is perhaps the most difficult part of all. Once you have made your bed, you can usually make the necessary Procrastean adjustments to enable you to lie on it; the resilience and inexperience of youth are on your side. The initial decision causes much agony.

It will be hard to please the whole of an audience ranging in age from seven to seventy; the most you can hope for is that everyone will find something to his taste. In a school play it is possibly more important to please the cast. I can remember producing a thriller "Men in Shadow", This probably appealed to a wider audience than most we have produced; the cast and I were heartily sick of the trivial dialogue by half-term, and few of us have remembered anything of the play. Some philosophical content is desirable.

Next it is important to suit the play to the talent available; otherwise the adjustments needed can produce a grotesque effect. I first conceived the idea of doing "Becket" while watching Bill Griffiths and Nicholas Lakin in the last night of "The Lady's Not For Burning". If you have a Becket and a Henry, the rest will probably not be too difficult.

In casting, there is one pronounced limitation in a boy's school. You must be sure that the female parts are not too demanding for the soprano talent available. In this respect, "Becket" is favourable. The ladies, while most stimulating to the general effect, are types not too hard for boys to portray. We are most fortunate in having one who can sing.

"Becket", then, seems broadly to suit the histrionic talent available. It has the further advantage of having a large number of small, comparatively unexacting parts. This gives an opportunity to a good many people to walk on and to get the feel of the stage, its excitements and anxieties, satisfactions and disappointments. The two main characters are given ample opportunity to display emotion; there is something for the amateur actor to get his teeth into. And yet they are exacting and, of course, contrasting roles. There is no easy way to success in them. Their theme is that of a personal relationship, timeless and likely to contain something for most of the audience.

It is a serious theme, treated at times with humour; this last is most important in view of the hardness of the Assembly Hall chairs.

There is also opportunity for "collective" acting to produce atmosphere. I hope that both the Bishops and the Barons will produce their own distinctive "ambiance", evoked as much by attitude and gesture as by dialogue. These groups, and the Saxons, the soldiers, the Royal Family, the French Court and others all help to provide the main characters with a background, the absence of which would leave them treading a bleak stage indeed. The essence of a good school production is teamwork, the interdependence of the various roles, large or small.

Amateur productions are also greatly helped by colour, and for this reason I make scant apology for choosing another medieval setting. One of the most remarkable things about Rendcomb, unnoted in the prospectus or by visiting Commissions and fact-finders, is its acting cupboard. A producer is indeed fortunate to have this at his disposal.

Apart from the costumes, the cinematic succession of scenes in "Becket" serves as a stimulus to the stagemen. Contrary to popular superstition, I have an enormous respect for these troglodyte beings, but there is no doubt that they have wallowed too long in the easy pastures of one-set plays.

"Becket" has occupied some sixty boys and four adults working in close co-operation for most of the term, not to mention other helpers whose work has been invaluable. This co-operation has been creative; all have worked hard and most will, I think, have enjoyed it. The faults in production are very much in my mind, and I can only say to critics, and to the 'Critic': "tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner."

We are extremely grateful to Mr. Sells for finding time in the last few days to write this article.

NOT TO BE TAKEN TOO SERIOUSLY

The Rendcomb Experimental Theatre of Cruelty (to whom?) production of Becket/Sade has met with huge acclaim. It has been hailed as a new step forward in the realms of audience-participation and, more important, actor-participation, (actors do in fact appear on the 'stage' and 'act out' their lines). The brilliant new concept of having minor actors build the entire set in front of the audience before the play can begin has been called "a masterpiece of theatrical technique" by the Sunday Times, and "a bloody good skive" by Head Stageman Geoff Smith. (Is nothing sacred?) The symbolic backcloths used, representing scenes of 18th. century life in a Dasingstoke Bawdy house, (if you've got that sort of mind), are being borrowed by the Royal Shakespeare Company when the production ends.

As for the play itself; the opposing themes of the future of space travel and the Suez crisis, with the customary undercurrent of existentialism, have been magnificently woven into the original plot by producer, David Sells.

If you notice Kenneth Tynan, Peter Brook, Peter Hall, Joan Littlewood or others in the audience, you are requested not to draw other people's attention to the fact, as you can't really be very good at recognising people.

Some Press reviews of the production.

- | | |
|---|--------------|
| ...more disturbing than The Staircase.. | The Times |
| The costumes were quite well tried | ?! |
| .. dramatically worthless, but an enjoyable evening for all avid students of theatre erotica. | The Guardian |
| ...except for...and...and...and.. | Oxford Mail |
| ..I could not help but admire the part played by the two horses. Those poor dumb beasts remained patiently on the stage for 20 minutes, and I did not see either of them move a muscle. | The Field |