

NORTH QUEENSLAND DRAMA FESTIVAL 1966

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This year's Festival attracted nineteen entries and offered to the public as varied a programme as it would be possible to present. As usual, the audiences were well stimulated and entertained; alas, also as usual, the audiences were far too small. As well as being very discouraging for the Committee, this factor also affects the actors. On Thursday night, to a fair house, the plays seemed much brighter than on either Friday or Saturday's first two sessions. Players need an audience and its response or they sink into the doldrums.

It was pleasing to note that there were new junior groups - an indication, I hope, that the "gospel of Theatre is spreading". All the young players acquitted themselves well, but, again, the winning play was one which afforded as much enjoyment to the actors as to the audience.

The opening night included the winning play which showed fine inspiration by both producer and players. Grouping, unison speeches, quick-changes to convey the biblical scenes and characters, and the resumption of the modern parallel demanded variations of speech, timing and characterisation with the minimum of props and costume. Religious subjects are ticklish themes and rarely successful at public performance, but this was an exception. The play itself was a little long

for one act; it would have had more dramatic impact if left at the Crucifixion, but the fine work of the players sustained the interest of the audience.

The "unseen" who are always taken for granted again produced fine effects of lighting and sound, almost impossible speed in setting up and breaking set, and general smooth assistance back stage. The mechanical virtuosity of these "hands" under the most difficult conditions is truly remarkable.

There were faults. Accents are difficult to sustain - not only dialectic, but speech a little more "classy" than everyday "Australian". Here, quite experienced actors "broke" character when they tired.

More than half of the women pitched their voices too high. This left them no reserve to raise their voices when it was required and resulted in shrieking, one of the deadly sins of theatre.

There was an improvement in timing, but many movements were sloppy and jerky, unnecessary backing also occurred. Actors could take more care of posture. Bad posture directs the voice upstage, or to the floor with inaudibility as the inevitable result. All too frequently during the festival lines were lost to the audience through this fault.

Some of the plays were too long. Where three or four of these one-act plays are performed in one session, no matter how well done, repetitive metaphysical meanderings of an off-beat character can become tedious. Where there is also a very small cast, players must be capable of giving great variety to hold the interest. Even first-class professionals find that audiences won't listen to long philosophical monologues, brilliantly written though they may be.

The "canned" music, which was supposed to create atmosphere before the curtain rose, again failed to achieve anything but an added raucous sound, through which people talked even more loudly. Only a live orchestra can create a feeling of

anticipation and still the noise from the auditorium before the curtain rises.

Many new plays were attempted, some of the "absurd" type. This is refreshing to see, as the requirements for these are very different from the usual "straight" drama, for though the lines are deceptively simple, the implications are much more complex.

One visiting repertory group always produces the work of its own local playwright. Long may this continue - the plays are good, they have an Australian flavour, producer and players are enthusiastic, and the Drama Festival is the richer in variety by it.