

CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN PLAYS

edited by Ernest Pereira, (Ravan Press)

by Tony Voss

Professor Ernest Pereira's **Contemporary South African Plays** is an anthology of seven plays or selections from plays in English by South African writers. Douglas Livingstone's **A Rhino for the Boardroom** is a radio play and has been produced by the SABC: Ian Ferguson's **Ritual 2378** a version of **The Bacchae** was written for and produced by Professor Robert Mohr at the University of Cape Town: Don Maclennan's **An Enquiry into the Voyage of the Santiago performed by the Survivors**, a heroic and yet ironic recreation of a famous 16th century shipwreck on the Transkei coast was produced by PACT: an Afrikaans version of Stephen Gray's **An Evening at the Vernes**, an irreverent, fantastical theatrical entertainment has been produced by Pact. The anthology contains also the first scene of Sheila Roberts's **Weekend**, a naturalistic domestic drama of South African peri-urban life: the first act of Benjamin Leshoai's **Lines Draw Monsters**, which is in fact a separate play, a one-act township drama, whose title aptly conveys the play's argument, that in South Africa at least, separation distorts humanity. The final selection is the first act of Peter Wilhelm's **Framework**, a workshop, experimental study of political and personal loyalty and idealism in a context that recalls C. J. Driver's novel **Elegy for a Revolutionary**. None of the last three has been produced, as far as I know. Apparently all the selections were entered for the Olive Schreiner prize for South African English drama in 1975, which was awarded to Douglas Livingstone.

Apart from Sheila Roberts's slice of life, all these are plays of ideas: ecology, psychology, morality, history, economics, politics. Lest that sound like a limiting judgment let me add that there is almost throughout a sense of conviction about both personality and situation and about the dramatic medium itself. Perhaps those authors whose plays have been produced have had an advantage, and it is difficult to judge of a whole play from a selection, but in my view the best pieces are Don Maclennan's, Stephen Gray's and Peter Wilhelm's (probably in that order). What these three writers have managed to do is to make an audience believe in both their own involvement with their characters and situations and in the reality and independence of those characters. All three seem to have written with a clear sense of **how** they wanted their plays to be done: and this gives them an originality of style. There is novelty in **A Rhino for the Boardroom**, although it doesn't strike me as being as funny as it intends to be: and novelty in **Weekend**, which reminds me of the kinds of conversation one sometimes breaks into and is unwillingly held by, when telephone wires are crossed: and eloquence, and conviction in **Lines Draw Monsters**. Ian Ferguson's is

possibly the most ambitious play here, but it doesn't seem to me to come off: the verse passages particularly seem unconvincing to me, and the moment-by-moment, line-by-line concentration that poetic drama needs is not sustained. The same author's **Sylvia** seemed to me to suffer from the same faults, although there Ian Ferguson's contribution was a prose narrative and commentary woven around the life and work of Sylvia Plath.

Both Don Maclennan's and Stephen Gray's plays avoid (or ignore) naturalistic presentation and chronological consistency. In **the Voyage of the Santiago** a cast of nine on a constructivist kind of set play a voyage, a shipwreck and its aftermath: there is spectacle, poetry, an ear for idiom and character. Similarly in **An Evening with the Vernes** the four actors are called upon to represent a dozen characters. Jules and Honorine Verne remain stable, but the nephew Gaston re-appears as, among others, Cecil Rhodes, Captain Nemo and Paul Kruger, and Victor the butler as a Bushman and a Zulu mineworker etc. The result is both a study of a certain kind of imagination, (Verne's) and an irreverent (but not unserious) account of some South African history. The tone of these two plays could hardly be more different, to judge from the writer's own comments:

This strikes me as a major reason for celebration . . . that we have survived with the opportunity of examining one of history's nightmares and of trying to dream it again in order to awaken significantly from it. (Don Maclennan)

All that for the hell of it. (Stephen Gray)

Both plays, however, seem to me to require actors and stages of considerable technical sophistication.

The same does not have to be said of Benjamin Leshoai's **Lines Draw Monsters**, whose strength is in its simplicity. As the author says in his note on the play:

I am not preaching hatred and death, but I am saying to the white South African, listen to me tell you about the aspirations and frustrations of my father, mother, brother and sister.

Professor Pereira's introduction gives an interesting critical account of the plays, and touches sensitively on the political and social issues involved, including censorship. It is noteworthy that the editor has included a 'Glossary of Afrikaans words and phrases, and of other South African terms . . . and usages which may be unfamiliar to the reader.' Olive Schreiner included one in **The Story of an African Farm** when it first appeared nearly a hundred years ago. These are South African plays: what is a South African audience? □