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GRAMMAR SCHOOL PLAY



Last evening Fakenham

Last evening Fakenham Grammar School pupils excelled in the first of three nightly performances of Ibsen's "Peer Gynt." Here are the players in a dramatic crowd scene. Right — Peer Gynt (Colin Riches) and Ingrid (Faith Abbs) in a pensive study.



Ibsen's "Peer Gynt" as an Arena Play

To undertake an arena production of Ibsen's "Peer Gynt" was an ambitious venture on the part of the Fakenham Grammar School Dramatic Society, but after seeing their performance one can have nothing but praise for their effort.

Yesterday was the first time the play had been performed in an arena. The result was very pleasing—and not only from the spectators' point of view, for the players gave a much more natural performance than would have been the case had they been all the time conscious of the audience "out front."

Those who have seen "Peer Gynt" on the stage must have wondered if they were seeing Ibsen's play or listening to Grieg's suite of incidental music—which in many cases has completely overshadowed the substance of the play itself. By eschewing Grieg, the producer has, I feel, taken a very wise step.

PLENTY OF TROLLS

The story is largely what the audience cares to make of it. To younger people it is a pleasant play with plenty of trolls—how much more expressive is that word than pixie or elf—a story which can be traced throughout the play, and moments of humour, as when Peer carries his mother across stream and sits her on the roof of her mill, or when he dances for Anitra, his gold-digging Eastern houri.

But for the older section of the audience, the play is something which is left to the individual to interpret. It is a challenge to one's imagination; a challenge which, if taken up, leads into a world of fantasy. Yet one is all the time aware that the play has a message, a message which perhaps has a different significance for each member of the audience.

With fifteen scenes, lasting almost two hours, it can be seen that Peer had no easy task, as he appeared in every scene. Seventeen-year-old Colin Riches carried his part with an ease which would be the envy of many more experienced actors... but I feel that he would actor should be used with circumspection, for from the moment Colin Riches entered the arena he

ceased to be a member of a dramatic society, and really lived Peer.

First seen as an imaginative youth, he took his audience with him through his early adventures, dreams and hallucinations; through his middle-age, when he was a wealthy traveller in the Middle East; and after seeing him as an old man returning to the love of his youth, it needed a strong mental jerk to return oneself to reality.

EXCELLENT SUPPORT

Not only was Colin Riches faced with the task of having to master a long part, but he had to start as an exuberant youth and end his story as an old and wearied man. He showed not only an excellent command of his lines, but the audience could almost feel themselves growing old with him. Peer deserves unqualified praise, but without the first-class support of the 20 other main members of the cast, and the 39 "extras," much of the play would have been lost. All gave a really good performance.

Catharine Mahlet, as Aase, Peer's mother, gave a fine portrayal of a middle-aged woman, troubled, yet full of a possessive mother's love for her son... "You smash my Peer? Just try if you dare! His old mother Aase's got sharp teeth and claws!"

John Shepherd, as Maas Moens, evoked sympathy, and playing Aslak the Smith, Brian Barker was just sufficiently belligerent. Seeing Solveig (Judy Stangroom) walking demurely behind her parents at the feast, one cannot blame Peer for falling in love with her. Ingrid, the bride kidnapped by Peer, was played by Faith Abbs, and it was after he had sent her away that we saw the first of his hallucinations, a Woman in Green. What a contrast to the gentle Solveig! Played by Sylvia Southerland, the Woman in Green was a perfect embodiment of feminine wile.

The Troll King (Brian Phillips), Karl, Aase's friend (Gillian Tuck), the three big business men who steal Peer's yacht (Edgar Mussett, Paul Guest and Bertie Wilkin), the dancing girl Anita (Shirley Stubbs), the Mad Professor

(Continued on Page 3.)

"PEER GYNT"

Continued from Page 1

(Colin Bird), Kenneth Faircloth and Harold Farrow (two keepers in an Egyptian lunatic asylum), the Egyptian peasant (Sheila Francis), the Quill Pen (William Cooper), the Skipper (David Dawson), and crew (Paul Guest, Edgar Mussett and Harold Farrow), the Strange Passenger (William Bushell), the Policeman (Bertie Wilkin), the Button Moulder (Donald Rout), and the Man in the Cassock (Donald Curson), all put their best into their performance. The two old women (Margaret Harcourt and Dorothy Pike) had small parts, but their use of Norfolk dialect was very pleasing.

FINE CROWD SCENES

Credit for much of the visual success of the play must go to the extras, who made the crowd scenes really live. A very big word of praise too, to all those "also serve," the prompter, the people responsible for the wardrobe and make-up, the electricians and the effects man, and the small band of boys who changed the arena settings. And, of course, the producer, Mr. G. V. Canham.

The play continues tonight and tomorrow.

D. G.