



Can you get a Degree in it?

STEPH CHAMBERS

The Sunday Times National Student Drama Festival has now been on the go for 26 years. A great many distinguished sponsors bless it. It is judged by the leaders of our profession. Its alumni are everywhere about our stages, in artistic direction, in management. To keep our feet among the groundlings this report on the happenings at Hull is by the Festival's student press officer. The photographs are by Tracey Muscutt and Bob Walls.

The National Student Drama Festival's extensive sponsorship is money well spent. Sixteen productions in one week, ranging from original work and modern one-act plays to large scale productions of the classics, illustrate the diversity of styles and forms into which students have channelled their energies this year.

Seven days in which curtain up followed curtain down without incident are an immense credit to Stage Managers, Front of House Staff and administrators. The quiet efficiency of the organisers at the front, and the uncomplaining dexterity of the technical crews in the wings kept the Festival's house full and running smoothly in a manner which belied the work involved.

The nomadic atmosphere created by several travelling troupes settling in Hull for a week transformed a campus into a circus and all but made people forget that there was a competitive edge to the Festival and that the day of imminent judgement loomed large. The promise of awards, and the presence of the four adjudicators: Estelle Kohler, James Fenton, Martin Jenkins, and Peter Willes, was best banished by the host of workshops and fringe events, which managed to snatch elbow-room from an already crowded programme. They provided the necessary light relief from high seriousness in a period of frenetic activity. Alan Plater and Victoria Wood gave hours of escapist humour in revues which ambled between satire and lampoon, comment and criticism. The fringe also produced a production of T. S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes* which achieved a blistering mix of levity and weight that often eluded the Festival finalists.

The workshops, as in years past, were an overwhelming success, taking full advantage of the specialist knowledge of visiting professionals. Especially memorable were William Hobbs illuminating stage fighting, and Mike Bradwell discussing the art of characterisation. Less impressive were the discussions which followed the performances. Such potentially useful and

explosive topics as the place of overt political statement in drama were avoided as though heretical. Once raised they were dropped with alarming alacrity.

It is a tribute to the plays selected that the week did not become blurred into vague memories of uncomfortable seats and indistinguishable performances. Certain moments remain in sharp relief: like the electric atmosphere which filled the theatre during the new play by Caroline Pugh, *A Portrait of Mrs Siddons*. A twenty-five minute monologue performed by Rebecca Harbord which deservedly brought her the BP award for best actress. It set out to recreate the sitting of the tragic actress Sarah Siddons for a portrait by Gainsborough, and became a beautiful exposition of the actress's art and a passionate self defence against the harrowing effects of time. Intelligently staged it also won for its director Joe Turner the BP stage design award.

The other play which remains a powerful force when recollected in tranquility is John Godber's *Cramp*, a new piece about a Yorkshire boy on the brink of a move away from his calcifying surroundings to



Victoria Wood performing 'on the fringe'

University, who suddenly and inexplicably commits suicide. The adjudicating gang of four were rightly impressed and thrust greatness upon John Godber who wrote, directed and performed in *Cramp*, by giving him the Yorkshire Television Award for outstanding personal achievement. This will allow him two weeks work in their Drama Department, a useful and much deserved prize for unquestionably the best new piece of writing at the Festival.

A noticeable theme this year was the courageous way in which more student companies essayed selections from the classical repertoire. Responding perhaps to the impassioned pleas made over the last two years by Sarah Badel and James Fenton, this year saw a tremendous entry of classics. From a list of entrants which included *Macbeth*, *Timon of Athens*, *Faustus*, and *Romeo and Juliet* we finally saw *Epicoene or the Silent Woman*, *The Changeling* and *Three Sisters*. Brave and some would say brazen choices for companies with limited experience and resources, it was ultimately the ability to

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