

## BOURGEOIS BIGOTRY IN BOURNEMOUTH

The Players may have been absent from the stage for 18 months, but their talented actors have only been resting. A round of applause for Wendy Watson for a production of one of Terence Rattigan's *Separate Tables* plays, which reminded us that live theatre can be challenging as well as entertaining.

Clive Wilson gave a powerful performance as the retired 'Major', who is caught out propositioning young men on the Esplanade at Bournemouth. I particularly enjoyed his false bonhomie behind a bristling moustache, as he struggled to convince his fellow guests at a seaside hotel of his military distinction. Heather Redding, as his formidable nemesis, the intransigent Mrs Railton-Bell, used her eyes and even the angle of her head, as well as a haughty voice, to bully her unfortunate daughter, her fellow guests and the erring Major, making her come-uppance, when it came, all the more satisfying. Grace Packman as Lady Matheson fluttered her hands indecisively in her lap, as she wrestled with her better nature, personifying the moral dilemma of the play in a quite delightful performance, in which the comedy emerged from acute observation, not caricature. The moral argument was also expressed in the bickering of the married couple, Charles and Jean, excellently played by Bruce Ellis and Anna Streather, working together on falling out, a convincing piece of interdependent acting. And Mary Truell's brilliant cameo as the batty Miss Meacham was a comic treat for the audience, who rewarded her on the night I was there with an exit round of applause. Sharon Wayland as the landlady who shows real sympathy for the Major gave a performance of quiet authority.

The Players had chosen to perform Rattigan's revised version, never staged in his lifetime, in which the fake Major's crime is homosexual advances, not touching-up women in picture houses. Curiously, this made the play less challenging. The law has changed since the 1950s, and so have our attitudes. It had the effect of making Mrs Railton-Bell an out-and-out bigot in our eyes, and the Major's crime little but mild social deception. The audience was let off the hook – there was no moral dilemma for us. We would have struggled more with our consciences had the Major still been a serial cinema groper.

*Separate Tables* was preceded by *Plaster*, a comic trifle by Richard Harris, set in a hospital. The test for the actors, Chris Barnacle and Daisy O'Dea, was in seeing how long they could delay the audience from anticipating the ending.

Both plays were presented with the audience raked on three sides round an open stage (the floor of the hall), an arrangement first used by the Players four years ago for *Still Life*. The Rattigan in particular benefited from the intimacy this brought. It was effectively set against a background of flock wallpaper. Pat Boaden's carefully chosen costumes, Jenny Moxom's make-up, and Caroline Hallum's appropriate props helped to take us back to the bourgeois world of a 1950s residential seaside hotel.

*Harland Walshaw*