

BEAUFORT PLAYERS: "NEW DIRECTIONS"

There could hardly be a more varied trio of one-act plays than those presented by the Beaufort Players in the Ascension Hall on 25, 26 and 27 March. The first was bewildering, the second chilling and the third rumbustious. Each flowed smoothly with realistic timing and movement, so their directors, all novices, should be delighted to have made such heartening starts. Nothing looked artificial or stagy.

Praise too for the scenery/props team who created admirably realistic sets - a 1950s suburban sitting room, a dank interrogation cell and a colourful circus ring - as these contributed considerably to the effectiveness of the actors' performances.

The first play was "A Resounding Tinkle", an absurdist comedy by N.F.Simpson, directed by Craig McCrindle. Accurately described in the programme as lacking "plot, character, structure or suspense", it was supposed to reflect the meaninglessness of life, but as the curtains closed on it, members of the audience could be heard muttering words like "rubbish" and "dreadful".

This was certainly not the fault of Alan Robinson and Kate Martin who played the young couple very effectively, supported by Laura King as their post-sex-change Uncle Ted. Indeed they deserve credit for managing to keep straight faces throughout, even while supposedly observing a large elephant called Mr Trench paying his annual visit to their garden or having to say dialogue like "There's a man at the door who wants you to form a government" or hearing prayers on the radio (Kitty Martin) for "woodlice and buildings 69 feet high". There were certainly some funny lines which the audience enjoyed but the play seemed to lack both a middle and an end.

In complete contrast, "The Trial" by Anthony Booth, directed by Matt Tylanakis, was all too realistic. Heralded by menacing music, it was a tough interrogation scene with echoes of the Northern Ireland "troubles". A local girl has fallen in love with a soldier and been accused of acting as an informer. Two newcomers to the Beaufort Players, Jane Quill and Rosie Oliphant, made impressive debuts as, respectively, the officer and the prisoner, with strong support from Jayne Bowman as the informer, Esther Holt as the witness and Angela North - utterly transformed - as the sadistic guard. Their appropriately tense performances created a silent chill in the audience throughout, fearful at what might happen next.

After it, "The Fabulous Zucchini Brothers", an inventive comedy written and directed by Thomas Cobb, came as welcome relief. Set in a circus, it was about the search for a replacement human cannonball after the original performer had been injured. Martin Perrott and James King played the extrovert brothers with dash and verve, Paul Malhotra was suitably uncertain as the civil servant lured from the audience as a potential replacement and Gemma Breakell was convincingly anxious as his girlfriend. They won plenty of laughs throughout, not least during the pre-flight briefing - "Have you packed it all yourself", "Oxygen masks will drop", etc - which the dreaded Health & Safety required before Colin could be permitted to lower himself into the barrel. The cannon itself was a splendid creation, thoroughly deserving the applause it won when unveiled, while the test firing which shot a dummy blown into two halves across the stage was a special-effects masterpiece.

Altogether "New Directions" was a highly varied evening which clearly demonstrated the Beaufort Players' wide range of talent and skills, both on stage and behind the scenes. With 13 actors and 19 further members credited in the programme, they have certainly developed into a formidably entertaining force.

John Harrison