

7, 8, 9, 11 and 12 November, 1968

MEADOW PLAYERS LTD.

in association with the Arts Council of Great Britain

present

AN OXFORD PLAYHOUSE COMPANY PRODUCTION

WORLD PREMIERE

PIPPA PASSES

by

Robert Browning

Music by MICHAEL DRESS

Designed by ALIX STONE

Directed by FRANK HAUSER

PIPPA PASSES

PROLOGUE

New Year's Day 1820 at Asolo, in the Trevisan, North of Venice. A large, mean, airy chamber. A girl, PIPPA, from the silk-mills, springing out of bed.

Pippa SHARON GURNEY

SCENE ONE

Morning. Up the Hillside, inside the Shrubhouse. The mill owner, LUCA's wife, OTTIMA, and her Paramour, the German SEBALD.

Ottima ZOE HICKS

Sebald ROY MARSDEN

Talk by the way, while PIPPA is passing from the Hillside to Orcana. Foreign Students of Painting and Sculpture, from Venice, assembled opposite the House of JULES, a young French Sculptor.

1st Student TONY ANHOLT

2nd Student BARRY SAVAGE

3rd Student CHRISTOPHER LEGGE

Schramm RICHARD KANE

Gottlieb ROBIN HALSTEAD

SCENE TWO

Noon. Over Orcana. The House of JULES, who crosses its threshold with his bride PHENE.

Jules SIMON WARD

Phene KARA WILSON

Interval

Talk by the way, while PIPPA is passing from Orcana to the Turret. Two of the Austrian Police loitering with BLUPHOCKS, an English vagabond, just in view of the Turret.

Bluphocks BARRY SAVAGE
1st Police man TONY ANHOLT
2nd Policeman STANLEY BEARD

SCENE THREE

Evening. Inside the Turret. LUIGI and his MOTHER entering.

Mother MAGGIE JONES
Luigi NIGEL ANTHONY

Talk by the way, while PIPPA is passing from the Turret to the Bishop's brother's House, close to the Duomo St. Maria. Poor GIRLS sitting about.

1st Girl GEORGINA WARD
2nd Girl WANDA MOORE
3rd Girl JAN LEEMING

SCENE FOUR

Night. The Palace of the dead Count, by the Duomo. MONSIGNOR, with his late brother's INTENDANT or Steward.

Monsignor LEWIS FIANDER
Intendant RICHARD KANE

EPILOGUE

Late at night. PIPPA's chamber again.

During the fifteen minute interval the fully-licensed theatre bar will be open. Coffee, soft drinks, chocolates and ice-cream are also available.

BROWNING AND "PIPPA PASSES"

Robert Browning was 23 when in 1835 he met the famous actor Macready. He already had a deep interest in the theatre, and his earlier published works, "Pauline" and "Paracelsus" suggested to many people that his talent was dramatic. The first result of the meeting was "Strafford" which was produced in 1837 with Macready in the lead. Four other plays followed during the next seven years, though only two were performed. None of them were noticeably successful, and Browning abandoned the form.

In between, in 1841, came "Pippa Passes," published as the first of a series of pamphlets under the general title of "Bells and Pomegranates." It is doubtful whether Browning intended it for stage presentation. The form of it—a Prologue and Epilogue framing four duets—suggests an extension of his great invention, the dramatic monologues: but "Pippa" comes before these. The five plays have many flashes of interest: but they are fatally crippled by Browning's submission to conventional 19th century ideas of verse drama. All too often what sets out to be Schiller ends up at "Ruddigore."

"Pippa Passe" alone catches the essence of Browning genius. And it is noticeable that in this work alone he invents a new form of writing which is not chained to acts and the long-range development of plot, but uses terse, pregnant, dramatic ideas which can be fully exploited within what amount to short-story proportions. Five years before he met Elizabeth Barrett face to face, and six years before they eloped to Florence, Browning's imagination had been fired by Italy. Asolo, where "Pippa" is set, is a little hill town in the hills north of Venice, Pippa one of the mill-girls who were given one day's holiday in the year, on New Year's Day. The action starts at dawn, with Pippa preparing herself for the great occasion, praying for fine weather, and deciding to pass the four quarters of the day imagining herself to be the four Happiest Ones in Asolo. In successive scenes we are shown these happy people, each the recipient of some form of love, each in a state of acute personal crisis which Pippa's songs, as she passes by, help to resolve. At night she returns to her room, contented, tired, utterly unaware of the effect she has had.

It is a bold and original scheme, which an experienced writer might have rejected as too formal. Browning succeeds so considerably because he is writing as he wants to, not as other models dictate. The obscurities (and there are plenty) are lightened by his astonishing visual sense: he gives no stage directions, and much of it is obscure to read until one has worked out what it is that the characters are physically doing at that moment. His extraordinary psychological insight packs as much into the twenty minutes of *Ottima and Sebald* as an average dramatist would unfold in three long acts. His lyrical gift shines out of the scene with the young sculptor very much as it does in some of the knottier pieces of music by his contemporary Schumann. Hatred of the Austrian overlords of Italy in the scene of the young revolutionary is tempered by an understanding of the muddled motives that boys such as Luigi have: and in the last scene with the Bishop and his late brother's factotum the fascination that real evil had for Browning produces an encounter worthy of Henry James. And in addition there are three brilliant and vivid little linking scenes which show a knowledge of students and sluts very unlike the conventional image of the bearded philosopher-poet, besides introducing, through the mysterious figure of the shady English ruffian Bluphocks, an ingenious sub-plot.

It would make an interesting study, pieces not written specially for the stage which nevertheless succeed on it. Much of Alfred de Musset comes into this category: "Under Milk Wood": even perhaps W. H. Auden's "The Sea and the Mirror," which the Oxford Playhouse Company gave last May. Writing before the present production reaches the public, I am loathe to offer fortune much in the way of hostages. But I hope at the least that those who have read Browning's monologues and "The Ring and the Book" with pleasure, and wondered why he never wrote 'a real play,' may find that in fact he did so.

FRANK HAUSER

Sculpture Tools kindly loaned by MESSRS.. AXTELL & PERRY LIMITED,
Cowley Road, Oxford.
Costumes made by BARBARA HIGGINS
Scenery painted by RITA TAYLOR.

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Lighting operators, sound technicians and stage staff provided by Students Union Stage Administration Group.

In accordance with the requirements of the licensing authority:

- 1 The audience may leave at the end of the performance by all exit doors.
- 2 All gangways, corridors, staircases and passageways which afford a means of exit shall be kept entirely free from obstruction.
- 3 Persons shall not be permitted to stand or sit in any of the gangways except in positions authorised by the licensing authority and in the numbers indicated in the notices exhibited in those positions.
- 4 The safety curtain shall be lowered and raised at each performance in the presence of the audience.

The management reserves the right to refuse admission, also to make any alteration in the cast which may be rendered necessary by illness or other unavoidable causes.

The taking of photographs in the theatre is forbidden