

SHOWPLACE

By Jack Karb

A handsome play is serving to introduce the town to a handsome new playhouse. At the Crest theatre on Mt. Pleasant Rd., last night, Murray and Donald Davis, putting into action a scheme to provide Toronto with a repertory company occupying its own permanent quarters, tossed the dice on the table in this ambitious theatrical gamble—and on this first roll at least, the cubes had the good grace to come up with a seven. Their "Richard of Bordeaux," a costume piece with melodramatic undertones, is a shimmering show, a talkative tableau dressed to the nines and carried off with glitter and a flourish.

Probably no local company ever had the good fortune to get its first curtain up before such a receptive audience. The Toronto branch of the Canadian Women's Press club had taken the house over for the premiere had sold every last one of the 700-odd seats, and had seen to it that those seats were filled with some of the gladdest rags in town. It was a toss-up as to whether the gals were getting a bigger kick out of eyeing each others' get-ups in the lobby, or admiring the superlatively good-looking costumes British designer Hutchinson Scott had equipped the actors to work in.

This was a well-dressed house on both sides of the floodlights. But for color, imagination and flash, it was Scott who won hands down. He also had the advantage of designing the backgrounds against which his costumes appeared. That gave him the edge from the outset.

At affairs of this sort—a new company taking its first plunge into something that has rarely been tried before—you can usually bank on the fact that the house will be loaded with the wisenheimers and the show-me boys who like nothing better than to see the pioneers fall flat on their faces.

Let it be said to the credit of that first night audience in the Crest that they were pulling for the players all the way. And as the evening wore on, the initial bursts of rooting-section enthusiasm were replaced by well-earned admiration. This is a thoroughly professional job of a work, with no apologies asked or given.

And it was a long test of strength both out front and on stage. Because of jam-up in the lobby, the opening gun wasn't fired until 9 o'clock. The final curtain wasn't rung down until a few minutes after midnight. Many a young matron may have been squirming inwardly as she rehearsed her apology to the babysitter and it will be small comfort to her to know that at later performances the pace will immediately pick up.

Now this "Richard of Bordeaux" which the Crest thespians have chosen to launch their big adventure is not—let's face it—a great play. Written by one Gordon Daviot who, for reasons all her own, has disguised her gender behind a pseudonym. It is a lengthy study in nine series of the somewhat enigmatic Richard II. But for all its shortcomings as brisk drama, it has a high gloss of literacy and John Blatchley had directed it into an episodic account of one of the more turbulent passages of Britain's history.

Miss Daviot—or Mr. Daviot, if she insists on it—is kinder to Richard, the boy king than many a historian has been. She sees him as a bewildered, pacifistic young man, surrounded by rascally, war-mongering advisors, mostly kin-folk, who have determined to take over the reins of the kingdom and have manoeuvred themselves into a fairly good position to do it. But through an innate cunning, Richard has asserted himself, has deposed his tormentors and has out-manoeuvred them through coups free from bloodshed.



The main spoils of the evening belong to Murray Davis who, as Richard, is almost constantly on the stage in a blond wig and fabulous regal wardrobe. And Davis, as the bewildered and bewildering king, has provided a subtle performance, managing the changes of personality through the 12-year period covered by the play with generally skilful shadings. His Richard is tragic, triumphant and tragic again in turn, and through the cycle Davis gives him both sympathy and dignity.

His associates are nearly all as successful in creating character as he is. Patric MacNee is a powerful Henry Bollingbroke; Max Helpmann has provided an imposing and determined Duke of Lancaster; and Ian Fellows, Earle Grey and Irving Lerner are equally menacing as other royal dukes. Undertaking three roles in the play, Eric House has finally settled on the Archbishop of Canterbury as his piece de resistance and turns that churchly, though not altogether Christian, gentlemen into a wily villain; George McCowan plays the king's champion with controlled sensitivity and Neil Vipond makes a great deal out of the smallish part of the king's secretary and companion. Space does not permit as close an assessment of the other players as could be wished but salute in passing to Bruce Swerfarger, David Gardner, Ivan Thornley Hall and John Clark for their courtly contributions.

The ladies, unfortunately, came off second best. But Barbara Chilcott has endowed the role of the queen, *Anne of Bohemia*, with warmth and humanity, and Norma Renault and Betty Leighton are briefly decorative on the short periods of time allotted them.

Decorative, in fact, is the best word for the show at the Crest. Seldom, if ever, has any show produced in these parts been dressed with such shining elegance. And to make his costumes all the more effective, designer Scott has muted the colorings of his many settings—mainly hanging panels, draperies, archways and pillars—to provide a complementary, though unobtrusive, framework.

Anyway, they're off to a good start.