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A Review

'Canterbury Tales' Is Bawdy Fun

By WALTER LAZENBY

What better time for a resurrection of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims than April—when, according to the poet, "folk" long to go on pilgrimages?

Those willing to make the pilgrimage to the shrine where Eastern's University Players are currently holding forth in a modern musical adaptation of "Canterbury Tales" will be rewarded with pageantry aplenty, liveliness in the performances, bawdy fun, and perhaps even a tidbit of timeliness in the play's treatment of the quasi-liberated fourteenth century woman.

But purists among them may be disappointed in comparing the adaptation with the original. Chaucer, for instance, is forced to appear on stage to narrate his own work; such an appearance to some may be as unnerving as requiring an actor to impersonate God recreating the earth. At any rate it invites unflattering comparisons.

Chaucer's original descriptive comment on each pilgrim comes across only in ill-motivated dialogue among the pilgrims, all the more disturbing because none of them can possibly assume Chaucer's amused omniscient point of view. For some, Chaucer's brilliantly brief sketch of a character like the Prioress might paradoxically bring her more palpably to life in the imagination than any actress could be expected to do on the stage: in this adaptation the Prioress may

seem far less warmly human because she is forced to burst twice into a syrupy song celebrating divine love.

Also the dramatic interplay among the pilgrims will probably seem less intense than in the original, where it gave rise to the notion that if Chaucer had lived two hundred years later he would have been a great dramatist.

Only four of the tales are here dramatized, three of them depicting faithless women. The adaptors seem to have selected them on the principle that the bawdier, the better. What is original is the strand of interest which holds them loosely together, namely suspense as to what tale the lusty Widow of Bath will tell. Hers comes last and purports to answer a question asked in our own century by Freud: What does a woman really want? As a finale her slightly sweeter tale, with its magical elements, will likely seem fitting.

By arousing suspense thus, the adaptors have made her a focal character. They have distorted her from the original

very little, and she comes across the footlights well.

So much for the vehicle. The Eastern production of it has merits of its own. Nancy Paule's Wife of Bath is the fullest characterization of the lot, and audiences who saw her in "The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds" will recognize that she has not been type-cast.

Michael Vassen, who like others in the cast takes on several roles during the evening, always sustains character and delivers the lines of poetry far more naturally than most of his fellow actors. Marianne Challis, Reece Brink, and Scott Stanley exhibit pleasant singing voices.

Anne Shapland has to face the challenge of two widely differing roles, both unlike roles in which she has been seen before; and she does complete justice to them both. It is perhaps unfortunate that the stage business could not be designed so that she could perform a quick change and appear as her lovely real self after the "transformation"

scene.

J. Sain deserves notice as the lecherous Friar. And the antic dance in which Pat Richardson really lets himself go as an aged man preparing to join his very young wife on their wedding night is a high point of the performance.

Two cleverly done sequences are the Pear Tree Quintet in the Merchant's Tale and an inevitable "chase" scene complete with strobe lights flashing in the Steward's Tale. Nimble footwork by male and female dancers completes the picture.

The costumes perhaps suggest that the resources of the Theatre's wardrobe are finally—after three "period" shows this season!—being slightly taxed; but then many of them had to be designed to hide another costume underneath, in order to allow doubling or tripling actors to make quick changes.

Performances will be repeated nightly through Tuesday at 8 p.m., except on Sunday, when there is a matinee at 2 p.m.