

A Slam on the Slam

Blue Jesus

1969

Editors' Note: "Fortune and Men's Eyes," a play by John Herbert, will begin its Detroit run Nov. 28–30 and again on Dec. 5–7. Performances will begin at 8:30 p.m. Tickets may be purchased at Hudson's box office or obtained through the mail at 2717 Montgomery, 48206, care of: "Fortune and Men's Eyes." All tickets are priced at \$2.50. Performances will be at the Central Methodist House, 23 E. Adams. The proceeds from the performances will go to aid the people of Biafra.

It appears that the Great Cultural Wasteland of Detroit may finally be sprinkled with a few seeds of underground theatre.

I had an opportunity to rap with Dennis Foxx last week who will be directing and producing the performance of "Fortune and Men's Eyes," a controversial play dealing with the nature of capitalism's benevolent institution of rehabilitation: the prison.

After being turned away by most of Detroit's bastions of bourgeois culture—including the so-called Institute of Art—Mr. Foxx and the "freedom players" were offered the use of the facilities at Central Methodist Church.

I guess the established theatre in Detroit is more interested in preserving Mary Poppins' virginity than helping to make available something of interest and radical content to the people of the Motor City.

As Mr. Foxx described the play, it is an honest depiction of prison life, which is to say the performance slams the shit that goes down inside the gray walls all over the country (the author of the play, John Herbert, is a former inmate who was incarcerated in a Canadian prison).

Various aspects of the penal institution are exposed on the stage in much the same way they occur in the slam: overcrowded conditions, corrupt guards, degradation of the prisoner, the loneliness of ten years in a cellblock, and homosexuality engendered by isolation from women provide the audience with some sense of the horror those who got caught are confronted with every day. For crimes that seem irrelevant in relation to those committed by the ruling class in building and maintaining its world-wide empire, these men are subjected to a medieval hell.

The main character in the play, Smitty (played by Ralph McCain), enters the prison a naive young man busted for a minor crime and is "rehabilitated" into a hardened criminal. Other inmates are played by Josef Powell, Keith Somerville, Frederick Lapalmier, and Don Freeman. The cast is composed of community people from the factories, schools and streets of Detroit.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the play is that it attempts to give an overview of life in the society on both sides of the wall. As Mr. Foxx put it "we are all caged animals on the street; the difference between life on the outside and life in the inside is simply one of degree." Right on, brother.

He also suggested that the play presents a realistic idea of what is necessary to get on a revolution in the prison: "there must be a union of corrupt minds." Dig it all you acid-heads and dope-smoking degenerates still fortunate enough to be running free on the streets.

For the future Mr. Foxx intends to produce more plays along the lines of this one. He mentioned for example, "Connections," a heavy play dealing with the plight of the junkie.

“I’m not interested in entertainment at this time” he commented, “but rather stimulating thought and anger. Our art must begin to address itself to the realities we are faced with every day in this country.”



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