

GARTHEWIN

A Welsh Festival of the Drama

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GARTHEWIN is the name of one of the most gracious of Welsh houses, but by this it has come to mean even more for the life of Wales. For here, serenely set in the hills and looking down to the vale of Elwy, a Georgian mansion, with all its privilege of place, has become a centre for the Welsh theatre. In 1937, Mr Robert Wynne, the owner of Garthewin, decided to convert a barn on his estate into a little theatre. The barn itself was built about 1770 of undressed stone, but within it had two remarkable features—a pair of brick arches—which lent themselves to the perfect adaptation of a simple building into a place where plays could be worthily, and audibly, performed. One arch forms the proscenium, and the theatre itself can accommodate about two hundred people. At Christmas it is the setting for the celebration of Midnight Mass.

To begin with, Garthewin was used for occasional performances by amateur companies. It is not easily reached, and its immediate audience is drawn from the villages and scattered farms nearby. But at once its autonomy as a theatre, free from the irrelevant associations of chapel vestries and village halls where plays are generally only a means of raising funds for some local cause, gave a new seriousness to Welsh drama. Experimental plays and translations of European classics found a home at Garthewin, and the theatre, lying in the very shadow of the mansion, seemed to symbolize the emergence of the Welsh drama as the new inheritor of that unbroken cultural tradition which is the glory of Wales.

Since the war Garthewin has immensely developed the scope of its theatre, and last August the third of a series of National Festivals (with the support of the Arts Council) was held there. Each year the Festival has been based on the same general pattern: the performance both of new plays and of plays translated into Welsh, with lectures by experts (both in Welsh and English) to help the work of education in the theatre which Wales so greatly needs. Thus in previous years there have been performances of

Welsh versions of Molière, Ibsen and Camus as well as plays written specially by Saunders Lewis for the theatre at Garthewin. It may be that Englishmen are at last beginning to realize the true stature of Mr Lewis as a poet and dramatist of European importance. A recent 'Profile' in *The Observer* gave some indication to English readers of how profound has been his influence on the contemporary life of Wales, and at Garthewin his greatness as a playwright has been wonderfully revealed. It may seem a misfortune to those who know no Welsh that his work can only reach a limited audience, but Mr Lewis is resolute in working in a language that is his own and in contributing so powerfully to the enrichment of its literature. It was rightly emphasized by Sir Ben Bowen Thomas, when Mr Lewis was presented with the gold medal of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion in 1951, that he has not merely accepted the Welsh language. 'He has chosen to enrich it and to adapt it. In contemplating our society he has been compelled to discover new modes of conveying his skill, his passion, his pity, his humour and his scorn.' And he has brought to his work the trained intelligence of a scholar who is at home in the European tradition: he serves Wales so well because he more than any other man has reminded the Welsh people what is their true inheritance, and that not in terms of a medieval nostalgia but in a living language and with an unceasing joy in new invention.

This year Saunders Lewis's *Siwan* was the festival play. Like its predecessors, *Blodeuwedd* and *Gan Bwyll*, it is set in medieval Wales and is written in a free verse that exemplifies his principle of 'making the literary language and unrhymed verse convey the rhythms and modes of the speech of people who think and feel deeply as they speak'. Its theme is the love of Siwan (=Joan), the French wife of Llewelyn Fawr, the greatest of the Princes of Wales, for the young marcher lord, William de Braose; their discovery by Llewelyn; the execution by hanging of William and the reconciliation of Joan with her husband. But behind the usual pattern of infidelity and intrigue (for Joan was a politician of remarkable skill, acknowledged now as dominant in the success of her husband's campaigns and in the establishing of his power) lies a subtle inspection of the roots of motive and desire. The ageing woman's liaison has put her wholly at her husband's mercy. His revenge, in hanging her lover, means risking all that

he has achieved in consolidating his position as virtual ruler of Wales. But he has vindicated himself before his wife, and the last act is a brilliant analysis of a reconciliation that cannot forget what has come to pass. For Joan demands that, when she comes to die, she may be taken across the water to Anglesea, to be buried alone at Llanfaes in a church to be served by the Franciscans, for Francis, the 'new' saint, had meant much to her lover. The allegiances of life end with death, she says, and she must await eternity apart from her husband.

The technical problems of such a play, performed by a cast of four amateur actors, are considerable; and the second act which 'reports' the hanging of William as seen and heard by Alice, lady-in-waiting to Joan, through the window of the cell in which her mistress lies imprisoned in chains, is written with extraordinary skill and makes great demands on its interpreters. Mr Lewis was well served by actors who were aware, from within themselves as it were, of the implications of what they said and did. Rarely can a play have been performed in Welsh which revealed such intelligence and integrity.

It is impossible to give any idea of the peculiar felicity of Mr Lewis's writing, moving so easily to the rhythm of usual speech and yet penetrating the very springs of imagination with its occasional thrust of deep poetry. Thus Joan speaks of William:

'Once, before I grew old, there came a boy:

'He played a harp to my barren heart'

Again, her demand for her separate burial is thus conveyed:

'But the grave unties every knot, it liberates all:

I want my bones to rot there—with no one beside.'

The worth of a play such as this extends beyond the occasion of its performance, and already Mr Lewis's achievement in the drama is seen to be major contribution to the literature of Wales. But it is a matter for gratitude that at Garthewin graciousness of setting and seriousness of aim have given a new dimension to the Welsh theatre. Here in the very heart of Wales a great dramatist has the freedom to speak as he will, and the profoundly religious mind of Saunders Lewis, moving with enhanced authority with each play he writes, has made of a stage and its characters much more than a literary occasion. He has given to Wales and its language a new dignity, and the name of Garthewin will remain in future years as the mark of that achievement.