

DRAMATIC EXCHANGE

Nancy Tuft visits a theatre company who are using the life skills and experiences provided by pensioners to recreate a dramatic dialogue for today.

The Age Exchange Theatre Company directed by Pam Schweitzer consists of two young actors, two young actresses and a youngish musical director. None of them was even born 50 years ago. Yet their 'Fifty Years Ago Show' which toured the London boroughs during the summer months, plays to delighted and appreciative elderly audiences belonging to pensioners' clubs, sheltered housing schemes and old people's homes.



Pam Schweitzer, Director of The Age Exchange Theatre Company, feels that a lot of so-called entertainment for elderly people is totally undemanding.

The entertainment is reminiscence theatre relying on a simple but strong storyline, with linked sketches and songs, all about life in the thirties. The nostalgic package was devised by the company following a series of reminiscence afternoons with old people using slides, music, improvisation and discussion to evoke recollections of the period.

The spasmodic nudges, whispers, mutterings and murmurings from the audience during each performance are not only welcomed by the actors, all professionals, but they'd be surprised if they didn't happen. The response shows the company is striking a chord and triggering off memories of days gone by.

It's taken for granted that the audience will join in—verses as well as chorus—of songs like *Pennies from Heaven* and *Painting the Clouds with Sunshine*, all sentimental numbers promising better times ahead. And, come the scene when it's time for Dad's gold watch, his grandfather's, to go to the pawnbroker, this cameo is played virtually in silent mime, it's so familiar as a real life event. Similar sketches, with the tallyman calling for the overdue HP payments on the furniture and the Relieving Officer

querying the amount of crockery and linen before assessing a family's means, meet with nudges, rueful smiles and sad shakings of heads. But there's fun and laughter too, as recalled by the Shirley Temple tap dance number, *On the Big Ship Lollipop*.

The pop music of the period adds to the atmosphere. Musical director Barry Wilmore, who besides playing baddies like the tallyman, landlord and Relieving Officer, provides the piano accompaniment throughout, selected two or three numbers from the 'top ten' sheet music sales of the years from 1929 to 1935 and it is astonishing how relevant the lyrics are today.

Pam Schweitzer who started the Exchange Theatre Company used to be an Education Adviser with Task Force. She feels strongly that so much entertainment for elderly people takes the easy way out; she feels they want something more challenging than old music hall song and dance acts. 'The Fifty Years Ago Show' has already been shown to school children who met a group of pensioners afterwards and Pam Schweitzer wants to develop playing to mixed age audiences.

Even the elderly audiences vary, from the active mobile, sprightly pensioners attending the show at a community or day centre to captive audiences in old people's homes where sleepy old crocodiles with half closed

eyes suddenly snap, catch and swallow a passing precious tit bit of days gone by.

'The Fifty Years Ago Show' isn't only an indulgent trip down memory lane for its own sake. In the discussions with the cast which follow each show, the elderly audiences themselves are quick to make the link between the Black Shirts featured in the sketches and the activities of the National Front today. The old men in particular point out that in the past there were some options to the dole queue—joining the army, going to India or the colonies, or going to sea, none of which are viable today.

The lively opening number of 'The Fifty Years Ago Show', called ironically *We're in the Money* is far from the reality of the situation. The Age Exchange Theatre Company has been grant-aided in the past by the Greater London Council, SHAPE, Help the Aged and Task Force and more recently by the Greenwich Arts Council when they took part in the Greenwich Arts Festival producing their first publication full of photographs and reminiscences by local pensioners.

Later in the year they are participating in the centenary celebration of the Co-operative Women's Guild. But they are always seeking out new sources of funding in order to carry on and develop the work of linking the past with the present.



The young performers belonging to the Age Exchange Theatre Company draw on the reminiscences of elderly people in order to create 'The Fifty Years Ago' show.