Habeus Corpus — a stiff?

By Sandy Yulke

For the last several years, the British theater has been doing its bit for the balance of payments by exporting its most successful productions to the US. Habeus Corpus, now at the Colonial on its way to Broadway, is the latest of these, but I fear that is will not see the success of its predecessors. I don’t know what it is about British humor, but half of it strikes me as simply not funny, but macabre. Their taste for black humor seems unlimited, and only increases as their economic and social situation darkens. The comedy that results from this just doesn’t come through, or as Mrs. Swab, the cleaning woman/narrator of the play says, “It looks happy to me, but then again, I’m a behavesian.”

That is the feeling that I got from the play. It seemed as if it should have been much funnier than it was, showing great promise at some moments, only to drift off into semi-tragic, pathetic self examination. The disappointment was especially acute, since the play has one of the best casts to perform in Boston this year. Heading it is veteran Donald Sinden (Dr. Wicksteed). As the behaused middle-aged physician who has ignored his wife for years and is suddenly filled with lust for a sweet young thing who happens into his examining room, he tries to maintain some coherence in his role, but is constantly thwarted by the author, who has him reciting pseudo-philosophical laments, in rhymed verse, at every other turn. The other characters — Rachel Roberts (Mrs. Wicksteed), his ignored and frustrated wife; Jean Marsh of Gypsy, Downstairs Bame (Constance Wicksteed) as the spinster sister; Celeste Holm (Lady Rumpers) as the last bastion of the British empire — are more straightforward and play their parts admirably.

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