

ABOUT DRAMA

Shelagh Delaney, 19, Looks at Life Honestly in 'A Taste of Honey'

By HOWARD TAUBMAN

The freshest talent revealed on Broadway thus far this season belongs to Shelagh Delaney, the Lancashire girl who wrote "A Taste of Honey."

She finished this play, her first, when she was 19. The only signature of the adolescent is the ache of the pessimism that imbues the piece. Since the very young sometime derive comfort from despair, Miss Delaney's view of life should be indulged. Otherwise, she requires no indulgences, for she writes affectingly about the world as it is.

No matter what happens to Miss Delaney as a playwright, her achievement in "A Taste of Honey" will remain impressive. Her second play, "A Lion in Love," which folded several weeks ago after a short provincial tour in England, will get another chance soon in London. But the outcome cannot affect the evaluation of "A Taste of Honey" as an expression of unusual gifts.

The spring that released "A Taste of Honey" in Miss Delaney parallels the impetus that led Lorraine Hansberry to write "A Raisin in the Sun." After sitting through an ineffectual work about Negroes, the American writer decided that she could do better, and she did. The Lancashire lass, who was working as an usher in a Manchester theatre, watched a vacuous piece by one of England's successful playwrights and was roused to indignation. "I just went home," she has said, "and started work on my play."

Modest Proposal

She dispatched the manuscript to Joan Littlewood and the Theatre Workshop in London with the following note: "I am sending this play to you for your opinion. Would you please return it to me, as whatever sort of theatrical atrocity it is to you it means something to me."

Miss Littlewood put the play into rehearsal within two weeks, and it had its first performance at the Theatre Royal in London's East End on May 27, 1958. It reached Wyndham's Theatre in the West End on Feb. 10, 1959, where it ran for months.

The eager hospitality that the Theatre Workshop offered an unknown like Miss Delaney explains in part the development of a new group of British playwrights. Miss Littlewood, like the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre, encourages fresh approaches. The influence of these progressive companies has spread to the commercially oriented producers, and some have dared to present plays concerned with thorny matter rather than graceful manner.

Let us not worry the question of whose is the larger share of the credit—the vigorous companies or the lively, new playwrights. It is as impossible to answer as to solve the ancient conundrum about the chicken

and the egg. It is enough to know that, like the chicken and the egg, adventurous theatres and original writers are inextricably linked in a common destiny.

Miss Delaney was lucky to come along at a moment in English theatrical history when a forum awaited her. And the theatre is fortunate that it had a door open for her. First efforts like "A Taste of Honey" are rare and merit tender care.

Not Dispiriting

Although "A Taste of Honey" is disillusioned, it is not dispiriting. Nor is it, like the work of the angry young playwrights, clamorous with wildly aimed, rebellious rage. Miss Delaney does not accept the world's ugliness and bitterness with docility; if she did, she could not write with such energetic honesty.

The sad burden of "A Taste of Honey" is quickly summed up. A teen-ager raised indifferently by a mother with loose habits comes to live in a Lancashire slum, the latest in a series of seedy lodgings. She and the mother never cease their bickering and reproaches.

The mother takes up with a vulgar, one-eyed fellow and goes off with him. The girl has a brief moment of romance with a Negro sailor who disappears. She is pregnant and fearfully waits for the baby's arrival. An art student, a homosexual who shares her home because he has none of his own, mothers her and gives her the sympathy and affection she has never known.

The relationship of these unhappy waifs infuses "A Taste of Honey" with a bittersweet humanity that lifts it far above the raw slice-of-life category. These two cannot fulfill each other, but they can extend delicate, scarcely visible tendrils of understanding to bridge, even if temporarily, their terrible loneliness.

The Actors

The performance of Joan Plowright as the girl is hard on the surface but suffused with an inner radiance, and as the boy, Andrew Ray plays with sensitivity. The one thing he must stop doing, whether the idea is his or that of the directors, Tony Richardson and George Devine, is to flounce around and wave his wrists like an exaggeratedly effeminate male. These obvious touches impair the play's integrity.

Don't think that "A Taste of Honey" is all grimness. There is laughter in it, some disenchanting and some earthy. Angela Lansbury as the mother and Nigel Davenport as her admirer capture the rough humor, and Billy Dee Williams as the sailor moves with silken grace.

Second only to Miss Delaney, Miss Plowright supplies the magic distillation of "A Taste of Honey." The young English actress lights up the Lyceum Theatre with the unfaltering rightness of her performance.