

From LONG ISLAND CATHOLIC-MAY 10, 1979

Review of "DEMONS."

OUR CRITICS

a view of the stage

HOWARD LORD



**Off-Broadway
on Long Island**

A distinctive asset to Long Island's cultural scene for the past eighteen years has been Lindenhurst's Studio Theatre. It aspires to be and succeeds in being Long Island's Off-Broadway theatre, a place to see offbeat and avant garde theatre competently performed by a company of capable avocational actors.

I saw the world premier of Robert Karmon's "Demons" there last week. Karmon, himself, is a distinctive asset to Long Island's cultural scene. He teaches Creative Writing at Nassau Community College, but centers his life on his playwriting. A resident of Syosset, he derives income from his television and screenwriting, but seeks to establish himself as a writer for the theatre. In addition to "Demons," he has written the harrowing "Brinck's Manor," "Smirnoff," a comedy of old age written with Ron Clark, writer of "High Anxiety" and "Silent Movies," and "Gulliver," an opera with music by Louis Phillips which has been performed by the Minnesota Opera Company at Minneapolis's Guthrie Theatre. You will be hearing from Mr. Karmon.

I might add that Mr. Karmon is one of a number of promising playwrights living on Long Island at the moment. I think of the prolific Ed Henefeld in Roslyn, August Franza in Setauket, Robert Pine in Sag Harbor and Walter Landau of Massapequa, author of "Goodnight Grandpa" now playing at PAF Playhouse.

"Demons" was a rich play, derived from incidents in the life of Cotton Mather, Boston's outstanding, pre-Revolutionary divine. It is known that Mather was sympathetic to the Salem Witch Trials, that, after the Salem Witch Hunt had been suppressed, Mather, then 30, had taken apparent witches into his home in an effort to exorcise their demons, and that his firstborn child was deformed and did not survive

infancy. Using these materials, Karmon has fashioned an account of the conflict between Mather and Mercy Short, an apparently possessed scullery maid he sought to help.

ORDER AND CHAOS

In Karmon's words, the conflict between the saintly minister and the disturbed maid "represents a timeless clash between certainty and mystery, reason and passion, order and chaos. . . . And in the light of the increasing number of spiritual cult figures in our day, Cotton Mather grows more and more familiar."

Karmon has constructed his tragedy neatly, but the conflict, for me, began to pall during the second act as it came to resemble more and more the irresistible force against the immovable object.

The play was imaginatively yet simply staged by Studio's Co-Artistic Director, Macey Levin. The cast worked with fine concentration. I especially admired the intensity and grace of Vicky Jacobs as Mercy Short, and the clarity of the performances by Jeanne Horn as Cotton's wife, Abigail, and Bob Arndts as the son of a Boston merchant.

Studio does not make a policy of performing new plays. However, the success of "demons" has prompted Co-Artistic Director Ron Siegel to think seriously about workshopping new plays in an effort to discover another "Demons." Workshopping would involve bringing playwright, a director and a company of actors together for a week or two to rehearse a script, improvise with its materials and exchange thoughts, culminating in a modest public performance. The playwright would have an opportunity to see his or her work on its feet and would, it is to be hoped, discover ways to strengthen the script.

Such a project would be consistent with Studio's aim, the growth and development of artists. Hitherto, actors and directors have been given primary attention. Perhaps it's time to do something for the playwright.