

4th Place – Keith Shaw for “Variety”

VARIETY

They come in from the big houses,
The tenements, the terraces; off the streets,
out of the pubs – spoiling for an evening’s fun,
The rococo of the Victorian theatre
brimming with top hats, cloth caps, bonnets
and scarves, the air bursting with laughter,
and ribaldry, heavy with chains of blue smoke.

When the first act, a cockney comic called
Tommy Gunn fails to hit the inner circle,
the punters hiss and boo him off the stage.
When the buxom Marie Lloyd wannabe
in bright purple bonnet and blue feather boa
bawls, “Show Me The Way To Go Home”,
they do – first with one soft tomato,

and then every scrap of rotten fruit
that could drop off an East End barrow.
Even the monocle master of hyperbole,
in plum waistcoat and cream cravat,
wielding his gavel and promising a compendium
of splendiferous entertainment to follow
can’t contain the rising pandemonium.

But when a pocket-sized ragamuffin
Stutters onto the stage and recites the tale
of “Tiny Tim”, the stalls, the boxes, the circles,
and even the gods, become spellbound.
It’s as if every father and mother in the theatre
has suffered the loss of an infant child,
each faltering word gathered as a keepsake.

When the little chap finishes, and, cap in hand,
bows the the audience, they clap
till their hands ache. Even the brawny butcher
who lobbed the first soft tomato
onto the stage, feels his heart strings being
plucked, and sinks back in his plush seat,

with large tears rolling down each florid cheek.

What the Judges said:

This has a fabulous meter that rollicks along, containing all the lively action of the poem within it. Clever internal puns (the 'ribald' mob with its overtone of menace, 'spoiling for an evening's fun'; the comic 'Tommy Gunn' who failed 'to hit the inner circle' -) add to the sense of 'rising pandemonium'. Stanzas 2 and 3 sustain the bawdy feel and then there is a well-managed transition as 'Tiny Tim' tugs the heartstrings of the house. Colourful detail (the 'purple bonnet and blue feather boa' of the singer, the monocle, 'plum waistcoat and cream cravat' of the MC); the rotten fruit; even the 'florid cheeks' and large tears of the brawny butcher) all contribute to the energy and 'Variety' of the title, and although sentimentality could have capsized the final two stanzas, they modulate believably to a gentle place of real feeling.

About Keith: To follow