

Langyel Melchior

Lessing Poem Reading Lacks Dramatic Bite

By Paul Sampson
Post Reporter

The current vogue for dramatic "readings" has spread to the Library of Congress, where an adaptation of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's eighteenth century dramatic poem, "Nathan the Wise," was given in Coolidge Auditorium last night.

The static nature of such readings demands that the work read must have in itself a pungency of wit, ideas or dramatic interest that can surmount the lack of movement and the essentially artificial manner of presentation.

There were ideas—or rather an idea—in "Nathan the Wise" as presented last night. But Melchior Langyel, who adapted the work, failed to make the idea live.

The idea, which was radical in 1778 when Lessing advanced it, is that a man may be good no matter what his religion and that holders of religious views should be tolerant of those with divergent faiths.

This is, of course, a noble thought and appropriate for any age, but considerably fresher in Lessing's age than in ours. Langyel has done little to recast Lessing's overwrought plot into a form more acceptable to modern ears.

Instead, he has aggravated the situation by a stilted translation that abounds in such interjections as "hark," "in very smooth," "in sooth" and just plain "forsooth." He has added the character of Lessing as a narrator, who comments and interrupts the action in a disconcerting fashion and with inflated, portentuous prose.

The play was staged by Clarence Derwent, who played the role of Nathan, a Jew living in Jerusalem in the 12th century who gets in trouble because he brings up a Christian without telling her true faith.

Derwent and his sister, Elfrida, were the only ones in the cast able to surmount the flatulent prose and hackneyed situations and create believable characters. The rest struggle with the prose and their bulky scripts and fail to arouse anything but boredom.