

"DR. KNOCK"

Putting a Whole Town to Bed

THE QUESTORS AS LAUGHTER-MAKERS

"To begin with, every single soul in the place is, ipso facto, a potential patient . . . what's wrong with we doctors is we are all too timid. I believe I'm the only man amongst you that would put a whole town to bed and keep it in bed till I've found out what was really the matter with it."

It is on a practical application of these words which Jules Romains put into the mouth of Dr. Knock, quasi-commercial, quasi-medico, that he built up his comedy of that name which enjoyed so successful a production in Paris under the direction of Monsieur Louis Jouvet, and Harley Granville-Barker's capital translation of which into English "The Questors" gave at their own theatre in Mattock-lane, Ealing, on Friday and Saturday evenings of last week.

The aim of playwright and performers alike was frankly to amuse, and in this both succeeded—the practically non-stop laughter of the audiences was sufficient evidence of this. Indeed, it was only at the intervals that laughter ceased, yet the play, far from being the fatuous stuff of too many plays that cater for laughter, proved intelligent, stimulating, original in theme and treatment. Versatility in a company is as valuable an asset as variety in a dinner menu, and to be able, within a few weeks of each other, to present—and to present well—such widely differing kinds of plays as "The Witch" and "Dr. Knock," is evidence that the Questors are not a one-way society. Moreover, Mr. Alfred Emmet, who has previously chiefly acted as producer for the Questors, on this occasion left that task in the safe hands of Mr. Christopher Spurrier, and himself took the title-role.

The success or otherwise of any production of this play lies almost entirely in the manner in which the character of Dr. Knock pulls or fails to pull its full weight. Mr. Emmet gave it the kind of prominence and insistence it requires; his acting was tense, rightly focussed, highly polished and percipient. His sleek, well-groomed appearance, his ability to let the audience see the working of his brain, as it were, all combined in a brilliant portrait study, which, while stressing the money-making shrewdness of the doctor, did not altogether leave out of account his curious strain of whimsical idealism. Mr. Emmet has made great strides in acting of late; he goes down deeper and rises higher, and his playing in the second act could hardly have been bettered. He was excellent, too, in the last act, rejoicing in his success at putting a "whole town to bed," in thinking of 250 invalids simultaneously lifting 250 thermometers to their mouths at 10 a.m. and 10 p.m. precisely, and in the deft skill with which he roped Dr. Parpalaïd (his predecessor in caring for the hygiene of St. Maurice) into the ranks of those who "have no health in them," and are glad of it.

Although Dr. Knock takes the stage throughout the play, the characters who rotate around him, who drift in and out of his consulting room, first enjoying free medical treatment and then paying heavily for it, have one and all chances of showing their acting powers. It is one of the assets of this clever play that there is practically no part, however small, without its opportunities for

good effects, and each potential or actual patient had been studied as an ego, so that the doctor's approach to each was different. Mr. Cyril Thomas, as the weak-kneed apothecary, who, until Dr. Knock's advent, was half-starved (Dr. Parpalaïd not being much of a believer in drugs, and having few patients to prescribe for); Mr. Dudley Clark as the nervous and apologetic schoolmaster, living in fear of being a germ-carrier; Mr. Clifford Foreman as the voluble town crier, and a French porter, who might have stepped on the cross-channel boat at Dover; Miss Betty Gray as an entirely sophisticated French matron; Miss Agnes Copnall, a farmer's wife, fat and forty, in the pink of condition until Dr. Knock suggested imaginary weakness; Messrs. John Baily and John Heron, country rustics, strong as horses in anything but their intelligence, each and all cut his or her own slice of comedy, and cut it well and cleanly. In addition, there were the eminently sensible Dr. Parpalaïd, played by Mr. Leonard Hackett, Miss Audrey Perkins as his pleasant wife; Mr. Arthur Peters as motor-man Jean; Miss Mildred Hackett as an immaculate, white-uniformed nurse; and Miss Lillie Elliot as the sharp-tongued, money-dazzled hotel-keeper (now worried to find rooms for patients, whereas, of yore, she had been equally harassed because she could not find applicants for rooms). Mr. Laurie Rivers as the hotel servant, Scipio, was, perhaps, the only character who struck a stagey note.

The audience was asked to take a strong dose of satire when the curtain rose on the ramshackle motor car belonging to Dr. Parpalaïd, but, this once swallowed undiluted, everybody settled down to enjoy the play in the right mood. To the success of it both Miss Betty Mercy (stage-manager) and Messrs. Roy Bennett and William Chambre (lighting manager) contributed their share.

Members of other clubs in the West Middlesex Dramatic and Operatic Federation attended one or other of the performances.

The Questors' Christmas Party will take place at their theatre next Thursday.

THE PUZZLE OF "DR. KNOCK"

Satirical Comedy By
The Questors

NEW PRODUCER

When The Questors presented "Dr. Knock" at their theatre in Mattock-lane, Ealing, on Friday and Saturday they revealed that they have someone besides Mr. Alfred Emmet to function as producer and to do the job well and that in Mr. Emmet they possess an actor of great efficiency.

The producer on this occasion was Mr. Christopher Spurrier and he gave us a very satisfying rendering of this satirical comedy—a translation by Harley Granville-Barker from the French of Jules Romains. On the whole his treatment was serious, thus enabling the wit of the play to carry its own effect, but here and there, notably in the first act, he applied a deft touch in keeping with the spirit of the play.

I particularly liked his burlesque motor car and the way the occupants walked it round the stage to suggest part of a journey. Here Mr. Spurrier showed sufficient confidence in himself to achieve an excellent effect at the small risk of looking ridiculous.

THE AMATEUR THEATRE

By L.J.D.

On the other side of the balance Mr. Spurrier might have eliminated some apparently unnecessary movements. Two or three times he had Mr. Emmet, as Dr. Knock, striding across the stage just before delivering a speech for no dramatic reason at all.

"Dr. Knock" showed The Questors in a very different light from "The Witch," their last production, but like the latter work it revealed them as always efficient and frequently brilliant.

PRACTICE WITHOUT PATIENTS

"Dr. Knock" was worth producing not only because it has merit in the technical sense of play construction, but because, while telling a clear story, the author has also contrived to be puzzling. It is what he is getting at that puzzles. A play of this character causes an audience to think and stimulates discussion; therefore it has done good.

The puzzle in this play is the doctor himself. He bought a practice without patients and immediately shook the villagers out of their complacency of feeling well to a realization that they were really very ill and had 250 of them in bed inside three months.

Was he, as he said, doing it all in the cause of medical science? I do not think so. I am unkind enough to put him in the same category as the inventors of "advertising diseases." In other words £ s. d.—or rather francs—was his objective.

EFFICIENT MR. EMMET

Efficient is the only possible description for Mr. Emmet as Doctor Knock. He had the part at his finger tips, so to speak, and played it as if he had been doing so for months. The only question is whether he was too efficient. I do not suggest that he was mechanical—not at all—but it was the sort of acting that made me give up after the first five minutes or so of his being capable of making a mistake. The effect, on a critic at least, was to make him taken for granted.

The acting I enjoyed most was that of Mr. Leonard Hackett as Dr. Knock's predecessor—the man who had lost his patients through being honest enough to tell them that they were well when they were not ill instead of pandering to supposed ailments and, when treatment was required, prescribing simple and cheap remedies. His quick little steps when he walked were a delight.

CHARACTER ACTING

There was some more pleasing character acting by Mr. Cyril Thomas, as the village chemist, and Mr. Clifford Foreman as the town crier. Mr. Dudley Clark, as the schoolmaster, almost qualified for the same category, but lost marks through the elementary mistake of being too softly spoken, a criticism that also applied to Miss Audrey Perkins as the wife of the old doctor.

As compared with the rest of the parts, those occupied by Mr. John Baily and Mr. John Heron were as low comedy is to subtlety and with all their agricultural guffaws they were not ridiculous, which was a distinct triumph for them. Miss Agnes Copnall (a farmer's wife) and Miss Betty Gray (Mme. Pons) had the job of retaining conviction while responding to the doctors' diagnosis of serious trouble. They entered as healthy women and left as invalids and both accomplished the transition quite naturally.

These small parts, each one a study in itself, were well played and one could not help marvelling at the array of talent The Questors can parade. Many of those in "Doctor Knock" were far from being regular members of Questors' teams.