

HIGH COMEDY WITH BROAD TOUCHES

Mixed Performance By
The Questors

"THE CIRCLE"

IN presenting Somerset Maugham's "The Circle" at their theatre in Mattock-lane, Ealing, on Friday, The Questors announced that they were conscious of aiming rather higher than they could reach.

"It should be frankly admitted," a programme note stated, "that no amateur company can have the technical accomplishments necessary for an entirely satisfactory performance of a Comedy of Manners. But, if this is true, it is equally true that one can learn a great deal from such an attempt coupled with a realization of the difficulties."

I am not sure whether this play appealed to The Questors' supporters. The attendance was rather thin and I did not detect quite the same atmosphere as prevailed at "Dragon's Teeth," which was more of an event than "The Circle" because it had never been played in this country before.

On the surface it may seem unjust to compare these two plays. Yet comparison is not out of place, and it becomes necessary if one is to draw a word picture of The Questors in different vein. "Dragon's Teeth" became largely a spectacle and provided opportunities for using stage resources and the imagination of a deep thinking and far-seeing producer. "The Circle" is the kind of play that might be played in the forest setting without losing a lot of value as a play, success or failure depending first and foremost upon the players.

The producer was the same as in "Dragon's Teeth"—Mr. Alfred E. J. Emmet and he gave us a performance that veered between the elegant and the spirited.

PROBLEM ENDING

"The Circle" is one of those plays that leaves the audience free either to accept a rather obvious ending or mentally to turn it into a problem play and work out another ending. Years before Lady Catherine Champion-Cheney has left her husband and run off with Lord Porteous thus spoiling his career and preventing him ever becoming Prime Minister, which was the position his friends prophesied for him. In the period of action covered by the play Lady Catherine's son, Arnold Champion-Cheney, also well on the way up the political ladder, loses his wife to Teddie Luton. He makes the way easy for her, even offering to let her divorce him and to provide her with sufficient money to make her independent of her lover. When the curtain falls she has burnt her boats and left him; thus is the circle complete.

But the ending I prefer to provide myself with is that the way having been made so easy for her, the rupture between husband and wife will not last and that she will return.

TWO BRANDS OF COMEDY

In the programme note already quoted this play is described as high comedy. It is for the most part, but parts of it border on broad comedy. Comparing the broad comedy with the high comedy generally, the broad comedy was better done which suggests that The Questors did need the experience of this play and that they will be the more accomplished as a result of it.

The best of the broad comedy was that of Mr. Christopher Spurrier, as Lord Porteous. His studied, exaggerated dignity was masterly and his trouble with ill-fitting false teeth was as laughable a piece of pantomime as one could wish to see. Mr. Spurrier's work was also a very fine character study, for the more obvious attributes of the past were backed up by a sincerity that made the come-down from dignity to emotion absolutely convincing. I am told that Mr. Spurrier is quite a young man; in this case I can only say it was the finest example I have come across of a young man playing an old man's part on the amateur stage.

The other broad comedy was that of Miss Betty Gray as Lady Catherine. It must have been an ordeal for her to keep up the note which she struck of a rather common streak in the aristocracy, but she did it without any hint of inconsistency. In its way, it was as good a display as that of Mr. Spurrier, and only suffered in the comparison because the latter's part bore much the greater depth.

GENUINE ARTIFICIALITY

On the side of high comedy the best note was struck by Mr. Leonard Hackett as Lady Catherine's deserted husband. In an artificial state of affairs he played an artificial part with such deft touch that it made everything look so un-artificial.

But there ended the delights of making the artificial genuine. Even for a rising young politician, conservative in principles (presumably) and conservative in his whole make-up, Mr. Philip Matthews was starched and the acting of his wife (Miss Marjorie Lees) was in the same key.

When wife told husband that she intended to leave him both showed so little emotion that it might have been a rehearsal for words only. While realising the requirements of the part in the direction of well-bred calm, it is hardly conceivable that a husband would in addressing his wife on such a matter, stand at attention with his thumbs down the seams of his trousers. Miss Lees, too, was for too placid and well behaved.

As for Teddy Luton, with whom the wife was about to run away, well, Mr. Fred Greenfield reminded me more of a suburban young man looking for a tennis partner than a planter seeking a

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soul mate. I think it was his broad and rather inane smile that spoilt him.

The settings of Miss Audrey Perkins and the dresses she designed justified the producer's claim that they were attempts to catch the styles and convention of the play, but the lighting was spoilt by French windows being allowed to cast a shadow on a sky so blue that it might have been part of a Riviera-boasting poster. Apart from this the stage work was efficiently done.

L.J.D.

"THE QUESTORS" AT HOME

Good Performance of "The Circle"

On the back of the programme of Somerset Maugham's play, "The Circle," which the Questors presented in their own theatre in Mattock-lane, Ealing, on Friday and Saturday evenings of last week, Mr. Alfred Emmet (hon. sec.) stated that "this play is generally held to be Somerset Maugham's masterpiece." Many will be inclined to dispute this, ranking "For Services Rendered" as this dramatist's finest work, but "The Circle" is undoubtedly a craftsmanlike, brilliantly polished example of high comedy, of the school to which Sheridan's and Oscar Wilde's works belong. Its highly-stylised, conventional brilliance needs particularly tactful handling, but both Mr. Emmet as producer and Miss Audrey Perkins, who designed the stage setting (as also Lady Kitty Champion-Cheney's costumes) tackled their jobs successfully.

It is a very difficult thing to be artificial naturally, and that is exactly what the principals need to do in this comedy of manners and mannerisms—a period play with a touch of continuity in it. It is, indeed, so difficult of achievement that the production by The Questors last week is a landmark in the local amateur theatre as well as a milestone in the annals of the society.

With the exception of the parts of Mrs. Shenstone and of the butler, Mason, competently played respectively by Miss Mildred Hackett and Mr. Clifford Foreman, the success of the comedy is in the hands of the six principals; if any one of these fails either in his or her individual or communal contributions to the play, it falls, and none of the remaining five can piece it together again. Fortunately the principals rose to the occasion. Miss Betty Gray gave a delightfully alive portrait of the volatile, cocktail sort of character of Lady Kitty. There were moments when her habitual flippancy was tragic and her shallowness became pitiable. Paint and powder, dye and rouge were then seen as the barricade behind which she desperately tried to shelter an amæmic, tired spirit and fast-fading physical charm. It was because she showed us the two sides which together made Lady Kitty that Miss Gray was so good. Miss Marjorie Lees, as Elizabeth, the younger woman who, three years before, had married Arnold Champion-Cheney, M.P., Lady Kitty's somewhat priggish son, gave us quite a different type of character, but in her day and generation doing the same thing that Lady Kitty had done—running away from husband and home to suffer even more than had Lady Kitty; for her character was deeper and she needed more of life than a good time or the return of a superficial sort of affection. Miss Marjorie Lees as Elizabeth supplied the needful, sharp psychological contrast required. She has a personality that grows upon one, repose of manner and movement, a nice speaking voice, and knows how to time her lines and gestures. Above all, her acting was intensely sincere.

Mr. Fred Greenfield played opposite her in the role of Teddie Luton, the business man in love. He realised the masterfulness and selfishness inherent in the type of character he was supposed to be, and rightly gave us a modern, cultured cave man—but a cave man for all that. It is a role that could easily have been caricatured, but Mr. Greenfield never spoilt his effects by exaggeration.

Mr. Christopher Spurrier was admirably cast as Lord Porteous, a black-and-white character, snappy and gruff, a bit of a soaker, but always a man of breed. In addition he was a man of some heart and of understanding, and his lines to Elizabeth and Teddie when they are on the point of running away together: "You're damned fools, both of you; damned fools. If you like you can have my car," were so well given that they bit-in as with acid. When history in the family circle has repeated itself, and he is trying to console Lady Kitty, Mr. Spurrier made a fine effect in his speech beginning, "My dear, I don't know that in life it matters so much what you do as what you are. No one can learn by the experience of another. . . . You can do anything in this world if you're prepared to take the consequences, and consequences depend on character." The bye-play of this actor is excellent; he was often very funny, but always one was conscious that here was a man who had staked everything and lost, and knew it, the comedy being the outward and visible sign of inward tragedy.

The portrayal of Arnold Champion-Cheney, M.P., husband of Elizabeth, and of his father, Clive Champion-Cheney, were safe in the keeping of Mr. Philip Matthews and Mr. Leonard Hackett, respectively. Each is an egoist pure and simple, though unconsciously so. Both are intensely pleased with themselves and their ways of life, self-centredness dominating. Arnold, with his politics and hobby of furniture collection was shown to us by Mr. Matthews as indifferent or almost hostile to anything likely to interfere in any way with these interests. Clive, as portrayed by Mr. Hackett, was more subtle and adaptable, on the surface, indeed, suave, but behind this mask he was the proud chess-player moving the pawns about in life according to his own plan without any interference, getting from his very self-absorption an increasing belief in the unshakability of his own intellect and powers of observation. Cold, calculating—"A downy old bird" is his own comment upon himself. But fate stripped him bare of his self-conceit by proving him wrong. Each of these two actors filled his rightful role in the cast, thereby showing intuition as well as technique.

The same room-setting is used for the three acts of this play, and it was good because it carried out the underlying idea without obtruding itself unnecessarily. Variety and beauty even was given to the scenery by the day and night effects of the sky behind the French windows of the room at Aston-Adey, produced on the use of the cyclorama. On the first night, owing to an insufficiency of electric power, the architectural shadows of the house were reflected upon the sky, but this was lessened on Saturday by more lighting power.

The serving of coffee and biscuits in the intervals when radio music was played was acceptable to many.

QUESTORS' SPRING PRODUCTION

Somerset Maugham Play

The Questors are presenting their spring production at their own theatre on Friday and Saturday, March 23 and 24. The play chosen, Mr. W. Somerset Maugham's comedy masterpiece, "The Circle," is in striking contrast to The Questors' last production in Ealing, "Dragon's Teeth."

One advantage that The Questors have found to accrue from having their own home is the facilities it gives for a better mounting of their productions. The setting for "The Circle" has been designed by Miss Audrey Perkins, who will be remembered for her costume designs for "Dragon's Teeth," and is being executed by the members on the premises.

The play is being produced by Mr. Alfred Emmet, and members in the cast include Miss Betty Gray, Miss Marjorie Lees, Miss Mildred Hackett, and Messrs. Philip Matthews, Christopher Spurrier, Leonard Hackett, and Fred Greenfield.

Tickets are, as usual, only obtainable from members of the Club.

On the Amateur Stage



A scene from "The Circle," the play by Somerset Maugham, produced by the Questors last week.