

Amateur Stage

THE QUESTORS IN "ARMS AND THE MAN"

BY PETER QUINCE

The Questors: "Arms and the Man," by Bernard Shaw; The Questors Theatre, Ealing; Friday, April 5, 1940.

THIS Shavian tilt at humanity is one of several that bespeak his opinions of war among men who call themselves civilized. I do not know if it was for this reason that it was chosen by The Questors. At all events it was good to hear a few well-rounded expressions of the idiocies and hallucinations of a subject that is getting a good deal of praise in the newspapers nowadays.

"Arms and the Man" is a favourite of amateur and school societies. I was curious to see what intriguing touches The Questors could give to this play, the plot and subject of which are so well known. Why, only the other day the B.B.C. broadcast, in its usual maddening way, just the first act of the comedy, with Miss Lucie Mannheim as intense as ever as Raina.

The Questors, having dropped their familiar role of giving unfamiliar plays, gave an ordinary, in some respects disappointing, production of the play. I do not complain of the perfection of the production; technically it seemed to me to be perfect—perhaps a little too technically perfect and precise. Was this disappointment due to the fact that I know the play so well and have seen it performed under so many varying conditions, that I was anticipating something that never could be?

OF Mr. Alfred Emmet's production let me say this: it was workman-like and interesting; he handled the cast well; but I thought the play had a shocking beginning when instead of Raina and Catherine speaking to themselves, they insisted on addressing the audience, almost as if we were on a barrack square and they were giving us orders. That moment fortunately passed, and the rest was so good as to be passed over in silence. But I still remember the shock I had.

Miss Muriel Curtis's Raina, except for that unfortunate beginning, was a graceful, lovely piece of feminine attractiveness. How well she carried off her costumes! I could well understand Bluntchli's admiration. Once or twice Miss Curtis grimaced instead of being intense, but generally was as capable as she has always proved herself to be.

Bluntchli (have I spelt this name right?) was given a cool, methodical, yet vigorous and sustaining performance by Mr. Lionel Locke, who has never yet failed in any part that has come his way. In many ways, Mr. Locke is the best actor The Questors have produced. This may only be a feeling—or failing—of mine, as I have always admired his work. He, more than most amateurs, lives in his part, and breathes it.

SERGIUS was played by Mr. Albert Hooper, a newcomer, and a brave, strong part it was. Mr. Hooper spoke well, and his deportment was laudatory, a good augury for any future acting we may be permitted to see.

Miss Yvonne Angel, as pretty as her name, was an adorable minx of a Louker, and Mr. Brendon Abrams gave a quiet, appealing performance as Nicola.

As Major Petkoff, Mr. Lester Beck puffed out his cheeks with bluster, and managed to convey to the full the role of this incompetent leader of men. Miss Barbara Sharp was Catherine, a part that had much of goodness in it. Mr. Philip Allen was a Russian officer.

Some excellent settings had been designed by Mr. Gunter Heilbut.

On reading this through, I realise that I may be charged with unfairness against The Questors, because of that quip about departing from their questing voyages into strange waters. Like every other society they have been hit by the war, and Ealing owes them thanks for keeping the lamp of the amateur stage bravely burning in these unhappy days. And, anyway, their next production, Lennox Robinson's "The Whiteheaded Boy," will be an unfamiliar dish for theatre gourmonds. It will be played on May 24 and 25.

QUESTORS IN SHAW PLAY

Bright Production of "Arms And The Man"

Two well balanced and securely riveted performances of Bernard Shaw's comedy, "Arms and the Man," were given by the "Questors" in their theatre in Mattock-lane, Ealing, last Friday and Saturday evenings, and a full-dress rehearsal was watched by members of the Young Women's Christian Association on the previous Thursday evening.

Sophistication and the light satiric touch, two qualities in which Shaw is a master craftsman, are also strong suits in the acting equipment of this company, and the eight members of the Questors who took part in the production entered fully into the spirit of the play, which they seemed to enjoy acting as much as the audiences enjoyed watching it.

The production, under Mr. Alfred Emmet's direction, was quick-moving yet never breathlessly so, and the satiric emphasis was evident but not aggressive. The settings, too, designed by Mr. Gunter Heilbut, were pleasing to the eye and correctly conveyed the place and period desired, and a shrine and other properties loaned by Mr. Charles Izod helped in the creation of a realistic atmosphere.

THE PETKOFF HOUSEHOLD

Honours were easy as regarded the acting of members of Major Petkoff's household, and were shared equally by the servants and by their proud employers. Miss Muriel Curtis made an altogether charming heroine as Raina Petkoff, and managed to make Raina an individual human being and not just a type of humanity, which is always an achievement in a Shavian role. Miss Barbara Sharp, as her self-reliant and determined mother, of sharp tongue, was an 1886 Bulgarian prototype of the British militant suffragette of the period preceding the last war, and her deep voice well matched her magisterial presence.

Mr. Lister Beck babbled and spluttered as the Bulgarian Army's ineffectual Major Petkoff and as Catherine's equally ineffectual husband. Miss Yvonne Angel acted the part of Louka, the serving maid with a vaulting ambition to rise above her station by foul means if not by fair. This role suited her, and she played it with vivid colouring and a mixture of pouting and pertness which it required, but her studied insolence, good as it was, tended to become a trifle monotonous, especially during the last act. Mr. Brendon Abrams, as Nicola, the Petkoff's manservant, whom Louka accuses of having only a servant's mind, whereas he has a tradesman's, gave an exceedingly sound performance, lending definition and a certain slow, purposeful dignity to a character often regarded as quite subsidiary.

Mr. Lionel Locke was very happily cast as the intruding Swiss fugitive. His portrait of this soldier of fortune had about it a quality and charm inclining in its humorous insouciance to remind one of the characters which Dumas sketched in his "Three Musketeers." The unprepossessing role of the braggart-coward Sergius, who feels so many "selves" good and bad but mostly the latter contending for supremacy in his make-up, was effectively played by Mr. Albert Hooper, and Mr. Philip Allen did all that was required of him in his short entrance as the Russian officer.

The costumes, both the military uniforms worn by the men and the gowns worn by the ladies, particularly Catherine's robes, were gorgeous in the extreme. As usual, Mrs. Mildred Emmet was wardrobe mistress, and was assisted by Miss Peggy Cooper. Mr. Fred Robinson (stage manager), Mr. Michael Kelly (lighting manager) and Miss Jean Mackrory (property manager) each contributed a share to the success of the performance.

A discussion on the play took place on Monday evening.

On May 24 and 25 "The Whiteheaded Boy" will be produced.

C.C.

