

SOLDIER IN CAIRO

THE Questors presented at their theatre in Mattock-lane, Ealing, the world première of the play by R. B. Rigby, "Better a Dead Hero . . .?" on November 13.

The story of the soldier returning to a foreign country after the war in search of the woman he loved is as old as history. Mr. Rigby takes it as the plot of his play, with war-time Cairo as the background, and by means of a flash-back relates the story of these ill-fated lovers. Although the keynote of the play is tragedy, light relief distracts the interest from the current of events and some of the situations seem contrived. But when one is beginning to think it is just another mediocre play Mr. Rigby presents a scene that stands out in dramatic power. Accurate in dialogue, pulsating with life and creating an atmosphere of merciless tension, it proves beyond doubt that once on sure ground here is a dramatist capable of great achievements.

The scene provides the climax of the play when the soldier, on the point of desertion through fear and for the love of a cabaret girl, resolves after a struggle with his conscience, to return to duty. Unfortunately the scene comes too late in the play to save it and bring it to life. Mr. Rigby is well served by the superb acting of Robert Jones as the officer, and by the forceful direction of Alfred Emmet. Barbara Hutchins appears as the intense cabaret girl, Vincent McQueen as the unfortunate soldier, and Sylvia Jarvis as an amusing hostess of doubtful virtue. Roger Fleming as the bar proprietor and Harry Mercer as an American Negro sergeant provide interesting character studies.



Amateur Theatre



IN connection with Twickenham's theatre scheme it is interesting to note that the plans of the Questors' new theatre will be ready shortly. I am told that the estimated cost of building is £50,000, the sum which Twickenham expect to spend.

The Questors' scheme envisages "a theatre of revolutionary design which can be adapted for all methods of presentation from the conventional picture-frame theatre to an arena theatre or theatre-in-the-round, which is the latest rage in Paris." It will be the first of its kind in England and possibly in the world.

The seating capacity, I understand, will vary between 300 and 450, according to the type of stage in use.

The theatre will be built on land which the Questors recently bought for £10,000, alongside their existing theatre at Ealing.

Twickenham is likely to be content with a theatre on conventional lines, but the Questors' plans should be well worth studying. Its cost, too, shows that Twickenham should be well able to build a theatre without any call on the rates, especially as the Questors hope to reduce their £50,000 estimate by undertaking some of the work themselves.

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IN the meantime the Questors are carrying on with their silver jubilee season of new plays. **"Better a Dead Hero . . ."** which I saw on Saturday, is one of the best plays I have seen them put on, new or old. Written by Ray Rigby, a new dramatist, who was celebrating his 38th birthday on Saturday, it is apparently largely based on his own experiences as a soldier in the Middle East during the war.

The setting is Cairo. It opens in a bar in 1947 with Clive Metcalfe, a British ex-soldier, recounting to a wealthy American what happened to him five years previously.

His story is then told in flashback—how he falls in love at first sight with Olga, a prostitute, overstates his leave on her account, plans to go away with her to South America, and is wrongfully sent to prison for being concerned in the death of a military policeman.

The whole play never lets go its grip. It is a study of a man who has never found a purpose in life, of a lost soul

wanting only to settle down and being caught in a situation not of his own choosing. There is much dry wit in the dialogue and some of the scenes between Metcalfe and the girl are very moving.

It seems strange, however, that Metcalfe should have no friend among his comrades apart from one bull-headed Irishman. Also, in the first scene—the play is divided into five scenes with a prologue and epilogue instead of the customary three acts—there are passages which, witty as they are, have no bearing on the plot.

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THE play's success owes much to the understanding direction of Alfred Emmet and the skilful characterisation of the players. John Clemow gives a most sincere and likeable study of Metcalfe. Barbara Hutchins is not too well cast as the girl, but she gives an extremely capable performance.

A wonderful study of a buxom, flashy but good-hearted red-head of doubtful virtue, known as Tiger Lil, is given by Sylvia Jarvis, although her accent varies from Cockney to French. Ned Gethings is excellent as the oafish Irishman and Roger Fleming is sound as Joe, the barman, with whom Olga is living.

Among many amusing cameos are David Lorraine's rascally Arab and Edward Pitt's lanky, bespectacled gossip.

Performances, which are open to club members only, continue until November 24th.

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Amateur Stage Survey

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BETTER A DEAD HERO . . . ? by R. B.
Rigby, 17m., 2w., 9 supers, 3 sets,
Questors Th., W.5.

The story of a soldier's romance with a cabaret girl in Cairo during his leave in 1942, embellished with the questionable characters one expects there, is rather slight—more like a tinted cartoon than the picture of brilliant contrasts it should have been. Characters unnecessary to the plot, incidents without sufficient relation to the story, situations underwritten, emotional peaks failing to attain the maximum tension, and a slow opening were weaknesses. This could have been a great play: if the propaganda had been cut down and the author had concentrated on rousing the audience's passions.

Production was slow, it lacked the variety of pace which emphasises the contrasts, tended to treat everything as of the same value, and failed to make us believe the characters were people and not puppets. But Scene 5 was outstandingly good and showed what could have been done with the whole play. Stage management, lighting, effects and settings were excellent.

Sincere performances were given by John Clemow and Barbara Hutchins as the soldier and his girl friend. Robert Jones as the Captain of Military Police must be praised for the technical skill of his performance, and Roger Fleming made Joe the barman a real character with feelings beneath his rough money-grabbing exterior.

J.B.

AN AFFIRMATIVE ANSWER

By PAUL BEDFORD

THE world première of Mr. R. B. Rigby's play, "Better A Dead Hero. . . ? ", was given at the Questors Theatre, Mattock-lane, last Saturday. The run ends on Wednesday next.

Answer to question posed in title is firm affirmative. Dramatically it would be far better to have a dead hero — indeed almost any kind of hero — rather than the spineless Clive, a part here gallantly undertaken by John Clemow. Play is set in wartime Cairo, with most characters in uniform. Against this background a killed man is automatically a hero: it may or may not be good patriotism; it is hardly good sense, and certainly not good drama to create heroes this way.

In theatre we want heroes we can admire; and no one could possibly admire Clive, who lives with a cabaret girl through his leave, then lives by her, a kept man, until confronted with having to desert; and then even lacks courage to go through with that. But his decision to return is intercepted by a friend, Fleury (Ned Gethings), who is shot in a scrap with the Military Police and inconveniently dies in Olga's room. Clive faces charges of desertion and, as one of the police has been killed, of murder.

But we jump too far ahead. How is the story unravelled? Prologue: 1947. Enter Clive looking for Olga in "Joe's Bar." Tale of woe to sympathetic American (sympathy derived from acute loneliness, finely played by Gerald Rawling). Flashback: same bar, five years ago. Contrast: abounding artificial gaiety, wartime vintage; soldiers, girls, drunks, dancers; sordid, colourful, bright lights, music; then an evangelist (lovely performance by Edward Pitt) solemnly bores the customers away, leaving only Clive and a negro Military Policeman (a wonderful likeness by Harry Mercer). Fleury, fighting-drunk Irish, tries to start a fight with negro, who refuses ("He once killed a man in the ring"). Enter Olga: Boy meets

girl ("This has never happened to me before" stuff). Then an embarrassingly unfunny bit of business as three R.A.F. "types" fill a bath with beer and start to undress. This is all effective atmosphere, agreed, and a triumph of production (by Alfred Emmet). But we have reached the first interval: the scene has been set; but the play has not started.

After the interval, interminable bedroom scenes. Forty days and nights pass (we easily believe that) before Fleury comes in, gushing blood, circumstantially to die on Olga's bed. Military Police arrive. Clive is arrested. Next interval.

SCENE: POLICE HEADQUARTERS

Now, finally, the play begins. Scene: Military Police Headquarters. Charges: desertion and murder. Evidence strong; outlook for Clive grim. For all that we despise him, we do know he is innocent of murder: will he escape the death penalty? . . . Of course he will. We know it because of the Prologue. So, our interest in the best written and by far the best acted scene of the play is that much blunted. But we can rest satisfied with the magnificent performance of Robert Jones as cross-examining officer. It is only afterwards that we have the notion this scene might effectively be transposed and used as Prologue, leaving us in suspense concerning Clive's fate and final story. The ending is unexpected; but marred by fondling. It should be cut clean at "I think I'm going to be sick" (or sooner, even). As it stands we were left in uncomfortable doubt as to whether there wasn't something else still to come.

Dialogue varies from the banal to the substantially good; but in general it is too natural, too diffuse, too repetitive. Art needs selection: here there is none. Many odd scenes could be completely cut; the rest severely pruned. This would make the work less like a patchwork quilt: the whole would take on a meaning greater than

the sum of its parts. It would be more like a play; less like a series of scenes interspersed with irrelevancies.

Then there is Olga, a "cosmopolitan with an American passport" who works in cabaret, where, doubtless her cosmopolitan virtues and American vices would stand her in good stead. One of the characters said she must be a smart girl to perform in a place where there was no competition. Only in the light of that remark, and all it might imply, was I able to make anything out of the performance given by Barbara Hutchins.

There were several excellent performances in smaller parts as yet unmentioned, such as David Lorraine's authentic Ali, Roger Fleming's sound Joe, Vincent Macqueen's Victor, and Sylvia Jarvis's glorious creation, Tiger Lil. John Springall gave us a nondescript sailor on leave, and James Drinkwater took his idea of a R.S.M. direct from the parade ground, evidently not believing it possible for Sergeant-Majors ever to pitch their voices on a civil level. Other parts were played by Michael Green, Peter Howell, Roy Deeley, Ralph Alder, Philip Green, Shirley Simmonds, Judith Rogers, Mabs Clifton, Madge Dolman and Ann Waters.

The settings were designed by Madge Turnbull. The bar was appropriately loud and cheerful, with a correct touch of the East about it; and it had the merit of being spacious enough for the vivid action of the opening scene. The Bedroom was perhaps not as tatty as Olga's lines suggested it was intended to be; but it is difficult to convey tattiness in a cut-out setting. The most irritating thing of all was that against this unnaturalistic setting there should have been the absurdly literal sound of running water in the off-stage bathroom. Are our audiences today so attuned to the cinema that they cannot believe a bath is being run unless they actually hear it? Is imagination completely stultified already? Surely, no. . . .