

Bernard Shaw produced at Mattock Lane

"I LIKE a book with a plot in it," declares the anyone-for-tennis young Philistine Johnny Tarleton to his circle, quite early on in Shaw's 1910 comedy "Misalliance" (now running at the Questors Theatre, Ealing, until Wednesday).

"You like a book with nothing in it but some idea that the chap that writes it keeps worrying, like a cat chasing its own tail. I can stand a little of it, just as I can stand watching the cat for two minutes, say, when I've nothing better to do. But a man soon gets fed up with that sort of thing."

G.B.S. knew full well when he put these sentiments into Johnny's mouth that the play he was writing fell into precisely this tail-chasing category; but he had confidence in his own ability to make the pursuit enjoyable.

Several ideas

Nor, on the whole, was his confidence misplaced. As it happens, he worried not simply one idea but several. Apart from the highbrow v lowbrow gulf expressed by Johnny, there's the gulf between parents and children, the phenomenon of the working-class Socialist intellectual, the concept of the Superwoman with her Life Force, and the issue which gave the piece its title: whether any lasting contact between bourgeoisie and aristocracy constituted an unholy union.

None of them are chewed over very purposively, for this is among the lighter items in his canon. Yet one speech at least does bite home. "Men are not governed by justice," says Lord Summerhays, "but by law or persuasion. When they refuse to be governed by law or persuasion, they have to be governed by force or fraud, or both."

"Thank Goodness!"

Granted, the final twenty minutes or so of Peter Whelan's production led me to ultimately echo Hypatia's fervent curtain-line, "Thank goodness!", when her father admitted there was "nothing more to be said." But my feeling of exhausted anti-climax towards the finish was only due to the exit of Paul Imbusch, whose performance as the twitching, Bluebottle-piping Kentish Town anarchist, complete with fearfully clutched pistol, cloth cap and brown boots, maintains a hilarity expert enough for any London revival.

In a uniformly efficient cast, Awen Griffiths as Hypatia is a Supergirl in every sense; Laurence Nixon remains endearingly himself as Summerhays; while Rachelle Ellis does a neat impersonation of Ninotchka.

DOUGLAS McVAY.