

MIRANDA'S MERRIER N

(Continued from Page 21)

"Irma"

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Thoroughly enjoying this opening night were the deputy-Governor Sir Eric Griffiths-Jones accompanied by his charming wife and elder son.

Mrs. Ellen Dorman, just back from her Continental visit, looked lovely in a gorgeous white satin gown; and making his last visit to the National Theatre, was Mr. Joe Clement who will join his wife Joyce in Engand shortly — theatre-going on this final occasion with Mr. and Mrs. McNeil, Connie McNeil wearing white and silver.

The Chairman of the Theatre Group, Mr. Tony Buzza — his wife Mary ahead on holiday in Britain — was noted in the foyer talking to the Musical Director, and Sq/Ldr. Gerry Stoneham. Well represented was the Judiciary — Mr. and Mrs. Justice Mayers were present; also Mr. and Mrs. Justice Rudd with their daughter Miss Oriole Rudd and their son Master Richard Rudd; and also Mr. and Mrs. N. W. Jackson — Mrs. Jackson Magistrate of the Juvenile Court, a post she is occupying during the vacation of Mrs. Barry Riseborough.

Mrs. Peter Pearce of course was there — Peter himself in the Show — and naturally Mrs. Brian Epsom was amongst those in the audience — not only was Brian one of the Cast but she also designed the

costumes. Mr. and Mrs. Geoff Pennington were seen, the petite Monica in silver-white; Mr. and Mrs. Frank Ballard brought their daughter Felicity who was celebrating her birthday — Mrs. Ballard wearing an exotic theatre-two-piece.

Also noted were Mr. and Mrs. Collier-Wright — Pauline her usual smart, slim self in gold brocade — they appeared to be partying with Mr. and Mrs. Ken Fyfe. Mr. and Mrs. Ron Garside were seen; also Mr. and Mrs. Macdonald the latter wearing blue; Mr. and Mrs. P. Heim; and Mr. and Mrs. Peter Marrian — Suzy Marrian in delightful green chiffon. Sbish Trzebinski being the leading man, it was not surprising to see his wife Errol there, wearing a handsome sequined black coat, and Yvonne Helliwell who used to take part in so many Shows. was there with her most attractive daughter Rosemary.

Seen too were Mr. and Mrs. J. Lockhart; Mr. and Mrs. A. H. Cooper with Mr. and Mrs. Michael Coe; Mr. and Mrs. R. A. Grace — the latter wearing a beautiful gown of grey lace. Mr. and Mrs. Robin Higgin were also seen — and Mr. and Mrs. Reg Potter brought their two young daughters who have just arrived out for vacation.

Irma La Douce — C'est Magnifique!

THE first thing to be said about the City Players' latest production at the National Theatre is

that all aspiring local producers should be forced to visit it repeatedly to see what good pro-

duction can do.

"Irma" is not uniformly excellently produced, but it contains

enough evidence that its producer knows his job to make it an exciting experience.

There are moments when the pacts sag, when the singing is below par, when inspiration seems to have flagged, but by and large this is the best produced play we have seen in Nairobi for many months.

There is an abundance of subtle touches, of points of interpretation, of imaginative and arresting detail which betoken the producer of professional stature. Mr. Young (or Mr. Beaumont) is clearly not satisfied with the bare outlines of a production and clearly does not believe that his audience ought to be satisfied with tuneful numbers, gay costumes and ingenious scene changes. His characters have idiosyncratic touches which establish their individuality, his movement has a wit quite independent of the script.

The producer (it is impossible of course for the observer to guess which producer) has, so to speak, an "attitude" to the material he is working with. This is not just a production where a producer-mechanic has fitted everything neatly together to make it an acceptable whole. It is the work of a producer-artist with a mind, and a witty mind, at that.

"Irma" is an outrageous piece of romanticism. It purports to concern itself with prostitutes, pimps, degenerates and other unsavoury characters. It is, in fact, pulling our leg.

We see only one "poule" or prostitute, Irma, and although the men queue up at her door and there is much talk and sug-

gestion of money passing for her favours, one never really believes any of it. Perhaps this is because Anne James is miscast as Irma. Perhaps the fact that no one can believe that Miss James could possibly be a prostitute falsifies the whole production. If so, I don't mind at all. I found it much more fun knowing that Miss James was only fooling us, that she was really dispensing bonbons to all these ardent lovers.

And if the four "mees" really thought we believed them capable of the repulsive trade of the pimp they were vastly mistaken. They are all quite delightful fellows. They never do any pimping, they are properly appreciative, of the virtues of Nestor, and of the beauty of Irma, they sing, dance and fight so cleverly, and they only draw their flick-knives very occasionally.

The Police Inspector is very naughty, immoral and corrupt, but we forgive him because Peter Walker gives him such a delicious accent and plays him so well.

Bob-le-Hotu is so smooth, urbane, so human, you might say, and Peter Pearce never lets him become just vulgar. Brian Eysom tries hard to make us believe he is loathsome, but he's really rather fun.

In fact this is a lovely fairy story about delightful people all pretending they are pimps, prostitutes and degenerates. An odd fancy, but very amusing.

I tapped my feet all through. How refreshing it was to hear music that was European (as distinct from American). The orchestra exploited the changing moods of the music perfectly. I particularly liked the wistful nostalgia of "Irma la Douce", and the strangely moving quality of "From a Prison Cell."

EXCALIBUR.

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MEINARD DONKER AT THE THEATRE

'IRMA' MADE ME MARVEL

THERE is nothing like a spicy trial to make one's reputation." This line, spoken by Irma in *Irma la Douce*, brought a mighty roar of laughter from the first-night audience at Nairobi's National Theatre last week.

Strangely enough, though, the sour taste which undoubtedly surrounds the ancient profession these days, both in Kenya and London, has not rubbed off at all on the Nairobi City Players' *Irma*.

A sympathetic audience giggled, guffawed and awarded call after curtain call to the hard-working, enthusiastic cast of yet another ambitious Players' production.

I came out of *Irma* marvelling at the flexibility of theatre. Here was a musical envisaged and written with the pneumatic figure and throaty voice of a Paris prostitute as its storm centre. Cast in with a minor key puzain, one would have thought, and it would fall flat on its Anglo-French visage.

And here is the mystery. Miss Anne James is most definitely minor key. 'Lust? It is invisible and unfelt. Vulgar? Never would it enter her genteel little head. Passion? As underdone as a biftek. And yet the play survives and, even more, livens and entertains.

Fulcrum has shifted

For the fulcrum has shifted. With *Irma* among the supporting cast, the evening swings gaily from the mobile faces and agile limbs of the four Mees (pimps to you), Nestor - le - Fripe - Irma's double-lover and Bob, the proprietor of the bar and gently ironic master of revelries.

Peter Pearce plays Bob magnificently, holding the piece together, pointing its amorals, translating kindly and humorously the underworld argot and customs for a never-been-there audience!

Sbish Trzebinski put over one of the most effective performances I have seen on the Nairobi stage with his masterfully uninhibited *The Week of a Mec*, in which like some crazed company director-cum-charcoalman, he laments with wild gestures his physical inability to keep up his schizophrenic deception.

An unfulfilling joy

His voice is surprisingly pleasant, and if one became a little unconvinced at times of the reality of his double role, I have some suspicion that this "falling" merely served to make the character he portrayed more human and endearing.

The Mees themselves were an unfulfilling joy. For me, the high spot of the evening came in their beautifully timed fight with the forces of law and order which ended with the whole cast stretched out flat on the floor after a ballet-battle.

But perhaps the high point was when they rushed back to their perennial card game after some devilry. Or maybe when they sang *Le Gristou*. I'm sorry, I cannot choose. They were **MAGNIFIQUE**.

Production was imaginative and tight. Sets, effective and well-finished. Supporting cast a real support to a successful evening.

IRMA LA DOUCE

Off-beat musical

Congratulations to Nairobi City Players who would appear to have pulled it off once again. Although they chose an unusual play and changed producers in mid-stream, owing to Robert Beaumont's illness within the final fortnight of rehearsals, it seems they have another winner.

Irma La Douce (music by Marguerite Monnot, book and lyrics

INMENT

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by Alexander Breffort, and adaptation by Julian More, David Henker and Monty Norman) was first produced in Paris in 1956 and three years later was playing simultaneously in Paris, London, Milan and Madrid.

Bob Young took over the City Players production, assisted by Bryan Epsom, who also plays the boss-Mec. It is a pity that French plays sound so horrible when described in the unfeeling British language, for a *Mec* is a ponce. There are four others in the play, but all Mees are not quite equal, for only boss-Mec Epsom rakes in the lolly.

Who earns it? Why *Irma* (pronounced "Earma" and not to rhyme with firmer) *la Douce*, the naive almost innocent Christine Keeler of the Pigalle. Young love appears on the scene in the shape of Nestor-Le-Fripe, a law student, and they settle down to live together in Irma's bed-sit. The only dark cloud on his horizon is the fact that they are living on her earnings.

Sugar Daddy. And then, the master plan! He invents a character, a Sugar Daddy, who pays so lavishly that Irma has no need for other customers. Indeed, the older, shyer, richer Oscar pays at the rate of ten men. Irma is delighted but Nestor grows half crazy with jealousy over this millionaire he has created and resolves to remove him in no uncertain manner.

If this all sounds confused, then see *Irma* yourself and work it out. Anne James is a delightful Irma, with an attractive voice, face and figure all used to good advantage. Sbish Trzebinski plays Nestor, a performance rich in comedy and tragic despair.

Both their performances are matched by Peter Pearce as the boss of the bar and the raconteur who takes the audience through the story.

All the other major parts, which include Bryan Epsom as Polyte, Peter Walker as a Police Inspector and the 4 Mees (Ian Lawrence, Clive Mulley, John Landon and Robert Butler) are skilfully handled, and the dance scenes are superb.

There are several moments as hilarious as anything ever seen on the Nairobi stage, and some of the scenic effects are extra-ordinarily clever. Watch, in particular, for the nightmare sequence.

The sets have been excellently executed by a team of City Players under the Stage Director, Jack

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Longford who is also lighting adviser. Stage Manager is Mac Spence. Crowd scenes are well handled and there are some very catchy lyrics in the play. One final word about the music! Much publicity has been given to the fact that the score calls for unusual instruments. Certainly a fair number of unusual sounds issue from the orchestra pit, but all well-coordinated by Eric Royston-Prince, the Musical Director.

This is not a distasteful play although it may sound it from a description. The City Players do suggest that it isn't suitable for children under 14 (who wouldn't understand it anyway). It is also unsuitable for the average maiden aunt. Almost anyone else, unless they are prudish, will greatly enjoy this "slightly off-beat and highly original" musical.

LOCAL SHOWS

THEATRE — By Margaret Morgan



GIVE US MORE OOMPH PLEASE, IRMA!

● ANNE JAMES

... She must be more sexy.

LET'S make it obvious at this point: Nairobi City Players' presentation of *Irma-la Douce* is very good entertainment and it deserves to pack the National Theatre throughout its run.

It floods the stage with sharp humour; it has remarkably crisp performances from Peter Pearce and Ian Lawrence; Robert Young's production is brisk and includes a few most imaginative effects; Eric Royston Prince's music men get a Gallic touch from the score; and the lighting is superbly professional.

But — and it's a **BIG BUT** — Anne James isn't my (or Elizabeth Seal's or Heather Lloyd-Jones') idea of Irma.

She's a Parisian prostitute and the London and Johannesburg producers saw her as a lusty, tavern-type wench who fairly bellowed her songs. Miss James' interpretation has Irma as a dewy-eyed, sweet-voiced Alice.

Mr. Young and/or Robert Beaumont, who was in charge of production before falling ill, seemed to have realised this, for the song *Dis-Donc*, usually Irma's floor-thumping show-stopper with several reprises, has been limited to a single weakish airing.

What's more, this Irma hardly deserves the queue of men outside her boudoir; she might as well have done

without the slit in her skirt. ... Oh, let's be frank, she's not sexy enough.

Its real strength is in the characters secondary to Irma and Sbish Trzebinski's Nestor. There's Peter Pearce as the bar proprietor-cum-raconteur — a shrewd, studied performance which holds the play together. There are the four ponces — Bryan Epsom, Ian Lawrence, John Landon and Clive Mulley — whose verve and vitality caught everything the script demanded.

There's Peter Walker's police inspector with his own interpretation of the law in the amoral backstreets of the Pigalle.

What about Mr. Trzebinski? I'm not sure. At times, he mastered the mood of the moment with some powerful, meaningful singing; at others, he fumbled as he tried to fathom the sex-schizophrenia of his dual role of Irma's law-student lover and Irma's older, businessman lover.

But these are comparisons with the very highest standards.