

Revival of comedy tends to drag a bit

THE *Man Who Came To Dinner* first visited the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Stanley in Mesalia, Ohio, a quarter of a century ago. One might, by now, have expected him to show some signs of age; but, like so many outrageous and colourful personalities, time cannot wither him nor custom stale his infinite variety. George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart hit on a winner then, when they caricatured Alexander Woollcott.

Their play brought immediate fame to Monty Woolley, the first interpreter of "Sheridan Whiteside" firmly established Robert Morley as the egotist *par excellence* of the English theatre (he even named his son Sheridan); and nine years ago in Nairobi, with John Ebdon in the central role, it unquestionably set the feet of the Nairobi City Players on the road to success — it was their second production — which they have travelled ever since.

Now, to celebrate their tenth anniversary, the Nairobi City Players present a revival of *The Man Who Came To Dinner* — their 40th production at the National Theatre — with Charles Ollington in command of Whiteside's formidable wheelchair.

Undoubtedly one of the funniest comedies of this century,

Theatre review by ROBERT BEAUMONT

the play is about an egomaniac who has condescended to dine with the obscure Stanleys while on a coast-to-coast lecture tour. As he enters the house he slips on the icy doorstep, injures his hip and remains an unwelcome and chaos-creating guest for a month. Secure in the opinion that everything he does and says is right, he convulses life around him, taking-over the house, confining the family upstairs, interfering in his secretary's love life, running up monumental telephone bills and being visited by a succession of eccentrics and extroverted artistes until Mr. Stanley, his unwilling host, rebels.

It is a play which needs to be taken at breakneck pace and handled with a featherweight touch, otherwise the characters — Whiteside in particular — become too impossible to be borne. Producers Edward Scott and Laird J. Dunbar have clearly realised this, although they have not quite achieved it.

This, I think, is because too many members of the cast have not had enough faith in Kaufman and Hart to get the laughs

for them, and show a tendency to labour points which might well be thrown away.

This may arise from a fear of losing even a second of their Big Moments, but it is significant that the most understated performance — that of Yvonne Helliwell as the dotty aunt — is by far the most successful although the part itself is minute. Granted Miss Helliwell is superbly cast, and has played the part before in the previous production, but this does not in any way detract from her accomplishment.

As the keystone of the piece, Charles Ollington brought some pleasantly genial touches to the generally insufferable character of Whiteside which humanised him just as I was beginning to feel I could stand no more. Possibly his early heavy-headedness was due to his obvious battle against a bronchial affliction; certainly something was slowing him down in the first act, particularly, and causing him to thump the soufflé with a sledgehammer.

However, once Whiteside settled down in the Stanleys' house, Mr. Ollington also seemed more at ease; although his interpretation throughout seemed a little ponderous for so mercurial a character.

A NEWCOMER

Nancy Roe is the secretary to the Great Man, suffering his machinations with an appealing sincerity which makes Maggie Cutler one of her best performances to date. And Dorothy Patience, the other star-wart from nine years ago, repeats her outraged interpretation of nurse Preen with all the efficiency one would expect of her calling.

A newcomer to the Nairobi stage, Sheelagh Forsythe, makes an encouraging debut as the actress friend of Whiteside, brought in to mess up Maggie's engagement to a local newspaperman, played easily and pleasantly by Sbish Trzebinski. And "Nibs" Needham-Clark waffles in and out most endearingly as the doctor who has aspirations to fame as an author. In the large cast there are also some nice little cameos from Winifred Ferguson, David Lascelles and Cynthia Webster.

However good value the play itself — and the first night audience obviously enjoyed it — the performance as a whole seemed to drag, particularly when producer Edward Scott as "Banjo" entered the fray with Whiteside late on in the play. Mr. Scott, disguised as Groucho Marx, lacked the punch which was needed at that stage of a long evening to inject new life into the proceedings. The joke had really passed its climax, and the need was for a crescendo to a frenetic finale.

But the drop took too much gathering up, and, unfortunately, instead of going out with a bang, the proceedings ended in a confused whimper, which even Sheridan Whiteside's coup de grace could not re-stimulate. It was an unfortunate moment for Mr. Scott to choose to act instead of concentrating on his production.