

DURING the week, two letters appeared in the DAILY NATION attacking the theatre critic for what she had said in her review of *The Beggar's Opera*. In both cases the writers were people connected with the group presenting the show and one of them admitted to being a member of the stage crew actively involved in the production.

The action of these two correspondents raises the question of the "Advisability of Retort". It has long been a tradition of the theatre that whatever a critic says about your show, however much you dislike or are hurt by his review, you do not reply. This tradition has not arisen as a result of either fear or courtesy, but as a result of common sense.

If someone writes disparagingly of you in a newspaper you are not likely — unless you have a twisted ego — to draw other people's attention to it. You comfort yourself, not unreasonably, with the thought that probably a large percentage of the readers have not noticed it; those who have are not necessarily careful readers, and all of them have put it out of their minds the moment they put the newspaper aside or move on to another item.

Looking at it this way, therefore, it would be foolhardy to rush into print in retaliation because, by doing so, you are immediately drawing attention to the very thing which you would rather the public forgot or didn't even notice!

Quite apart from this, it is impossible for anyone connected with a show to be unbiased about it. It has occupied their mind for some considerable period. They have come to look at it from a particular point of view — the point of view of an interested party intent on presenting the show in a particular way for public consumption.

For instance, within a company

Attacking critics: A two-edged sword

all the actors have firm views on the way they intend to play their individual parts — for the simple reason that they have studied them and visualised them from their own individual angles. It does not by any means follow that even one's friends in the cast are going to be in complete agreement with you on your personal interpretation of your character, because they must, as different human beings, have looked at your part from their own different angles.

How difficult it must therefore equally be for a person who is involved in a production and believes in the rightness of it to stand completely outside his personal convictions and look at it as a stranger — as the audience and critics will do — seeing it for the first time.

Another point which the managements and members of production groups would do well to remember is that the critics are invited by them to express their opinions. Having invited them it is best to accept them in good part otherwise someone is liable to call to mind the famous Somerset Maugham remark: "People ask you for criticism, but they only want praise."

After all, the prerogative of issuing the invitation lies with the group itself — if you don't want a particular person's opinion, don't ask for it.

What the writers of letters of protest often tend to forget is that the critic, like the writer, is a human being and therefore not infallible. He has his own way of looking at things (just like the actor I mentioned) and expresses what can only be — unless he spe-

cifies otherwise — his own personal opinion.

It would be a mistake to attribute to his reviews the importance of a pronouncement from the Almighty. It is seldom that any of us agree with other people's opinions of us — unless we are unusually honest, or unless those opinions speak as well of us as we do ourselves!

As the longest-serving dramatic critic in this country, I shall now allow myself the privilege and self-indulgence of adding a personal postscript to the matter. All the theatre critics who regularly contribute to our national newspapers and journals are known to me.

They are all people of the highest integrity whose love of and concern for the theatre in Kenya certainly equals — and probably exceeds — that of most of those involved in the amateur dramatic activities which the DAILY NATION critic has been accused of trying to kill off single-handed.

We all want the theatre to live and prosper. No critic that I know would "pan" a show for kicks. By the same token, no critic I know is going to be intimidated by petulant letter-writers into being any amateur group's unofficial P.R.O.

If a particular critic offends the sensitivity of a group, well, I have suggested the remedy. But it is worth putting on record that to refuse an invitation to a critic because you don't like what he says is just as sharp a two-edged sword as blubbing in the correspondence columns.

Here endeth today's Lesson.

I TRUST THEATRE FANS WILL SEE THIS PRODUCTION

I AM intrigued to know why your newspaper employs Liza McKinney as "drama critic". Her recent contribution on the Theatre Group and Music Society's production of the *The Beggar's Opera*, like most of her theatre reviews, was a telling insight into the mind of the critic, but as an assessment of the show was hardly worthy of consideration.

I would suggest that most people who read a review do so in order to obtain an informed opinion as to whether a show is worth seeing. Miss McKinney's views on this and many past shows by the Theatre Group are so clearly at odds with those of the remainder of the audience as to make them hardly worth reading.

Dislike

I cannot claim to be "a disinterested bystander" in this matter, as I am among the group's back-stage crew. From this vantage point it is most enlightening to observe Miss McKinney in the auditorium, wearing a look of determined boredom well before the curtain has gone up. Luckily, she overstates her feelings of dislike for the production, and her most personal criticisms of the cast to such an extent as, I trust, to make it most obvious that judgment — and hearing (that deafening harpsichord!)

were clouded by a dislike of the cast as people, and not their portrayals of the characters of the play.

That she should feel the need to display her malice so blatantly can surely only indicate that *The Beggar's Opera* will be an outstanding success.

I trust that Miss McKinney's transparent malignancy will not as so clearly intended, dissuade the vast thronging hordes of theatre-goers from seeing this production.

N. McHardy,
Nairobi.

● In fact this is the first Theatre Group production our critic has really panned. Since both Mr. Noad (yesterday's paper) and Mr. McHardy's are involved with the Theatre Group, either as members or stage crew, readers can draw their own conclusions from their letters.

With reference to Mr. McHardy's final sentence, one wonders why these theatre going hordes have not "thronged vastly" to quite a few productions this year despite good critiques from our much maligned critic! — Ed.

REVIEW OFFENSIVE?

I AM very grateful not to be in your shoes. I do not think I should like the ignominy of being responsible for the publication of so crassly malign an article as the review of *The Beggar's Opera* which appeared in the NATION on October 30, 1969. I find it difficult to forgive you, Sir, for a headline which was not merely hurtful but downright offensive.

For a theatre critic to be

unimpressed is perfectly understandable; but for a critic to revel in ignorance and lack of appreciation is inexcusable.

There is, I suppose, one small consolation. When amateur theatre in Nairobi has had to close down because audiences have been driven away by reviews such as yours, there will be no employment left for your present reviewer.

T. C. Noad, Nairobi.

Charity, so they say, begins at home. But it also seems to be gaining itself a considerable foothold in the theatre.

This has been worrying my critical colleague, Robert Beaumont, who has wrestled in print on occasions with the problem of whether critics should be charitable to shows in aid of charity — or whether they should say what they think.

Personally, I believe a critic should say what he thinks, on the theory that half the people do not believe what the critics tell them and that in any case those who are interested in supporting a charity, and getting something out of it for themselves at the same time, will go to see the show whatever is said about it.

However, I would join my support to Mr. Beaumont's for one type of charity show that seems to be becoming increasingly popular. This is the gala first-night which extracts as much money as possible from one night's audience and rakes in the takings before the critics have time to sharpen their hatchets.

This habit, which has been practised at the National Theatre for some time, has now spread to the Donovan Maule Theatre with,

appropriately enough, Mr. Beaumont taking part.

On October 7, the day before the official opening night, the "D.M." is staging a special preview of its next show, *Uncle Vanya*, in aid of the National Youth Council of Kenya.

It is the first time that the council has used this means of fund-raising, and in addition to the entertainment there will be free vodka and caviar and the opportunity to take part in several raffles with prizes including a free visit to Kilguni Lodge and a trip to the coast.

I am told that it will be a glittering social evening, with some very important guests, and it does offer customers the chance to see one of the world's greatest comedies — of which more next week — and do some good for Kenya's young people as well.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE ...CRITICAL

WHEN I returned the other day from a fairly extensive safari, I was a little surprised by the remark of a colleague — "Well, you gave that revue a good notice anyway." "Did I?" was my reaction (for I was convinced that, for reasons which I will explain, I had actually not committed myself). So I read the meagre lines again.

On re-examination I found I had stated that I had gone to see *Down To Earth*, that it was a revue, that it had been devised and performed by a handful of enthusiasts, and that the takings were being donated to the Flying Doctor Service.

I went on to explain why revue is a difficult form of entertainment to put across, and wound up with: "... despite the limitations of which the Revue Group is inevitably bound, they have managed to concoct a show which elicited from the lady in front of me the appreciative remark, 'Very clever indeed!'"

The last sentence said: "There was certainly no doubt that the more 'mature' members of the audience were thoroughly enjoying it."

Where — I now put it to you — was the "good notice"? The thing was not mine but that of a fellow member of the audience,

only comment on the proceed- That the older people present were enjoying it was not an opinion but a fact obvious to anyone with reasonable eyesight. But nowhere did I say I personally enjoyed it or thought it was good.

Now that the show is over and the charity for which it was presented cannot be harmed, I will admit that I thought it was feeble to a degree. But, by not saying so outright at the time, did I mislead the paying public, one or two of whom might have been influenced by the words of a critic?

I don't think so. Anyone who actually read what I wrote — as opposed to giving it a passing glance — will have noticed that I said nothing, and will have drawn his own conclusions as to why I said nothing.

The fact is that — as I complained some months ago — critics were put in the unenviable position of having to choose between four alternatives, none of which was the right one:

(A) to give a forthright opinion of the show (which, in this case, as far as I was concerned, would have been unfavourable and might well have reduced the benefit to the charity for whose good it was presented);

(B) to say it was good (which would have been untrue and dishonest, but might have helped the charity);

(C) to write nothing at all (a difficult course as one had been invited by the group to attend and was therefore bound to say something, and, in any case, one had gone in the sincere hope that the show could genuinely be praised);

(D) to make a statement of fact which expressed no opinion of the critic.

JUSTIFIABLE

I chose the last course and consider it was justifiable. But in future, having been embarrassed too many times in this way, I intend only to write a review of a show presented in the name of charity if I honestly believe that I can give a good account of it; otherwise — silence.

The alternative, which is perhaps even more to be preferred, is that any group putting on a show, the proceeds of the whole run of which are intended for charity, should not invite the critics to review it.

Shows which give only the proceeds of their opening night to charity — as I have said before — do not put critics in the position of being "morally blackmailed", since, whatever their critical opinions, they appear in print after the specific charitable event and can therefore neither help nor harm it.

In the name of honesty, I wish amateur groups putting on shows for good causes would realise this and appreciate it!

In a week that has brought me into contact with many schools and their drama activities, I was asked to sit in on rehearsals at Njoro Secondary School for their productions of four African plays which, in fact, took the stage of Nakuru Town Hall on Friday and yesterday.

Under the sponsorship of Rotary, the plays were presented to raise funds towards the installation of relay radio in Nakuru Hospital; and I have nothing but praise for the public-spirited efforts of Njoro.

NAIROBI CITY PLAYERS

announce that their next production in December will be
COLE PORTER'S
delightful musical

KISS ME KATE

Producer:-
BENNY GOODMAN
Musical Director:
NAT KOFSKY

AN AUDITION
will be held at
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at 5.30 p.m. on
Friday, September 19, 1969
for
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CHORUS
DANCERS
Newcomers very welcome

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We are particularly looking for
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Actors wanted

The Nairobi City Players are already laying plans for Christmas when they will be presenting Cole Porter's musical, *Kiss Me Kate*. The first of a series of auditions is to be held at the Cultural Centre at 5.30 tonight and there will be another at the same time and place on Tuesday.

The first night is expected to be on December 1 and will be in aid of the Amani Cheshire Homes. The production is in the hands

of **Benny Goodman** — the first time he has taken on this task. I am told the only other jobs he has yet to do in the theatre are those of wardrobe mistress and conductor of the orchestra.

As far as conductor is concerned he has been pipped at the post by **Nat Kofsky** who is recruiting the musicians for the show and would be glad to hear of any newcomers with experience. Brass and woodwinds are in special demand.

'Kiss Me Kate' auditions

THE Nairobi City Players have already held one audition for their next musical, "Kiss Me Kate", but for those of you who were not able to attend, there will be another, next Tuesday, at 5.30 p.m. at the Kenya National Theatre.

"Kiss Me Kate" will open at the beginning of December with the first night in aid of the Amani Cheshire Homes.

Benny Goodman will produce and Nat Kofsky will once again be the musical director.

There's news, too, of a musical later in the year — Cole Porter's *Kiss Me Kate*, which will open on December 1 under the banner of the Nairobi City Players. It's a camped-up version of *The Taming Of The Shrew*, with Alice Dale in the lead as the tough gal, and Tony Thacker as the man who tames her both on and off the stage.

There is a mass of new names in the cast list — notably Marlene Shaw from Zambia and Doug Cook from Mombasa — but you'll also be able to watch such successful familiars as Judy Swift, Ray Charman and Walter Hinds.

The production will be by that versatile fellow Benny Goodman, who will also brush up his Shakespeare in the character of a gangster, partnered by a more classically-inclined actor at present being cantankerous in *Uncle Vanya*.



ALICE DALE and Tony Thacker in a scene from "Kiss Me Kate."

"IT'S VERY good, but it's hardly what the Nairobi theatre-goer wants" — this is a common comment on the local theatrical scene. "Why don't they do one of the really popular plays or shows?" This is a common question.

Well, this time the Nairobi City Players have done one — Cole Porter's *Kiss Me Kate* (at the National Theatre). And the first-night audience loved it.

Doing a show like this presents enormous problems. One is tempted to invidious comparisons. To me, songs like *Why Can't You Behave?* and *So In Love Am I* are Ella Fitzgerald, and *Always True To You, Darling In My Way* is Peggy Lee. I don't suppose I'm very different from the rest of the audience in that respect.

The singers, therefore, faced an immense challenge. They met it fearlessly, and from the first rousing chorus of *Another Op'nin', Another Show*, it is clear that the show is going to be a hit.

The story, for those who don't know, is partly Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and partly a backstage comedy of crap games, gangsterism, show-biz and love.

Neither can be called the sub-plot, because each is an integral part of the other. It sounds complicated, especially in the programme notes, but in fact it is as easy to follow as a good musical should be.

Plot, costumes, music, song and dance combine to make *Kiss Me Kate* a joyful triumph for the City Players' 50th production. They say the amateur theatre is rather desperate for financial successes these days, but here's a show that should bring every potential theatre-goer to the National Theatre — and send him home humming.

The laurels, I think, have to go to Tony Thacker, who plays Fred Graham and Petruchio. He is nearly always on the stage, his singing is excellent, and his tremendous presence is one of the keys to the show's success.

All round it was a great jubilee production, and if this is not a huge success, then the amateur theatre in Nairobi must really be judged moribund.

If I have one reservation, it is about the apparent use of a claque (forgive me if I'm wrong) which reminds me too much of Nero's thespian pyrotechnics. And it was far from necessary, anyway. — **PETER DARLING.**

IT'S A JOYFUL TRIUMPH FOR JUBILEE SHOW



"Kiss Me Kate", as seen by Reynert Olsen, who has caught Kate (Alice Dale) in the act of administering a respite (Tony Thacker). On each side of them are Benny Goodman and Robert Beaumont, shown as they appear both on in the centre is Baptista (Brian Russell) and the couple canoeing on the right are July Swift, as Lois Lane, and Calhoun, who, with Alec Rait and Tony Walker, make up the trio of Bianca's suitors (kneeling), overlooked by the glasses.

AT THE THEATRE

'Kiss Me Kate' an entertainer's 50th production

Describing last year's production of *Gypsy* as the Nairobi City Players' best musical to date, I made special reference to Alice Dale, as the producer, and Benny Goodman, in a leading comic part.

Now, for *Kiss Me Kate*, these roles are reversed but once again it is fair to single these two out for their contribution to the show.

Kiss Me Kate does not quite reach the standard of *Gypsy* but it is thoroughly enjoyable and colourful entertainment and very good holiday fare. The City Players can be happy about this, their 50th production.

It brings Mr. Goodman to the producer's chair for the first time, having done just about everything else but play principal boy, and as one might expect the production is fast, slick and enhanced by a touch of whimsy.

He has worked hard on his principal actors with the result — not common enough in musical productions — that they come across loud and clear. To some extent he has sacrificed polish for

clarity, leaving a coarse finish on much of the show, but at least it is full of vitality.

Where the production is at its weakest is in the ensemble scenes where there are too many ragged edges and, in a few cases, poor discipline. This criticism, however, does not apply to the dancers from whom Peggy Tsoukas has coaxed a better performance than I have seen at the National Theatre for a long time.

Mr. Goodman also appears as an actor in a glorious double-act with Robert Beaumont, playing two gangsters who end up on stage in the show within the show. Their duet *Brush Up Your Shakespeare*, is deservedly a show-stopper.

Having complained of the lack of polish, I must give full credit to Miss Dale for a very highly polished performance in the title role.

One tends to think of her only as a comedienne, and this part

gives her plenty of scope in that field, but she uses it also to show that she can convincingly be more serious through the whole range of mood from high spirits to despair.

She plays the leading lady of a troupe of strolling players presenting a new musical version of *The Taming of the Shrew* in which she, of course, appears as Kate. Her Petruchio is the manager of the troupe and her former husband with whom she is involved in continual off-stage battles.

In this part Tony Thacker copes extremely well, not only keeping one jump ahead both as Petruchio and the former husband, where he has the help of the

script, keeping the music for her harmony. Epsom Gerry interest getting in the MacGlen Senator to back One that number advance number merited and at receive Other Players staged

'Kiss me Kate'

Kiss Me Kate, the Nairobi City Players' production, has been so successful that the run at the Kenya National Theatre has been extended until next Saturday.



Alice Dale (above), who plays the leading parts of Lilli Vanessi and Katherine, had to leave the show for a few performances last week because of a throat infection.

Her part was taken by the understudy, Maureen Good. Miss Dale has recovered and returned to the show.