



ABOVE: A scene from the Nairobi City Players' production "Hadrian VII" in which the "Pope," played by Donald Whittle (centre) meets Vatican officials Geoffrey Davies (left) and Brian Russell.

## THEATRE REVIEW

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# A CAT AMONG THE CARDINAL PIGEONS

"HADRIAN VII," the Nairobi City Players' current production at the National Theatre, is based on a biographical novel by Frederick Rolfe, in which a rejected priest dreams he becomes Pope.

Unlike the grisly fate of its author, the play adaptation has earned handsome royalties for its playwright, Peter Luke, pulled London's Mermaid Theatre out of the red and established the first "Hadrian," Alec McCowan, as a star.

Yet the novel's author, Rolfe who never earned even a half-penny from it, died of starvation and exposure in Venice in 1913.

The story of Rolfe's 20-year struggle to become a priest after twice being refused ordination on the grounds he lacked vocation, provides the foundations of the play.

While the dream in which he envisages becoming Pope Hadrian VII (inspired by the Vatican impasse over the election of a new Pope at the time) forms the play within the play.

Belligerent and bitter as Rolfe, he turns his hands to painting, photography, invent-

ing and finally journalism, using pseudonyms rather than sully the name by which he hoped he would one day be known in the priesthood.

Failing in all his endeavours and falling further and further into debt, Rolfe vents his wrath on the faithful and the clergy — "I loathe not the Faith" he once wrote.

## MATERIALISM

In his role as Pope, he puts a cat among the Cardinal pigeons when he attempts to get rid of papal pomp and circumstance, and tries to lead the Roman Catholic priesthood in general, and the Vatican hierarchy in particular back to the simplicity of Simon Peter.

Much of what he has to say and what angers him are echoes of today's youth and those who protest against materialism.

But it's far from heavy and long-winded verbiage. It is highly amusing, the dialogue is brilliant and cleverly satirical and the play is at all times eminently entertaining.

Its success is without doubt almost entirely due to Donald Whittle's singularly superlative performance as Hadrian and Rolfe. It is a part that only one move out of harmony or a wrongly emphasised word could irretrievably alienate the audience.

That he held the stage throughout and achieved so much and such a variety in his many moods and reactions shows the vast range of his acting ability.

The inclusion of the Choir of St. Thomas Aquinas Regional Seminary by the producer was particularly praiseworthy. Excellent support was given by Rurik Ronsky as Cardinal Ragna, Desmond Sandford as Rose, and Winifred Ferguson, whose touching portrayal as Agnes earned her special applause.

While the costumes designed by Agnes Price were in keeping with Frank Price's excellent production, the settings and lighting could have been more imaginative. After *Hamlet* and now *Hadrian*, I personally feel 1971 is going to be a much better year for the National Theatre. Don't miss it.