

# Tidy, but not very inspiring

NAIROBI City Players' *Crown Matrimonial* by Royce Ryton at the National Theatre is interesting and intelligible, but also bland and flavourless. With its many fine features it captures attention — but not, alas, absorption. It has much going for it, but does not quite come off.

A major cause for shortcomings is the stage's size which is too large for this intimate drama. It is to director Annabel Maule's credit that as much projects as does.

Dealing with the British royal family's reaction in 1936 to the wish of the then uncrowned Edward VIII to marry an American divorcee (unthinkable for an English monarch!), it has much to say about natural impulse and duty. It teaches, too, that royal people may not be as other men: they are forbidden free emotion, if any emotion at all.

That is tragic: none of them asked to be what and where they are. But it cannot, must not, be otherwise. Let Edward argue forcefully and convincingly for his cause and against the system but the situation must remain inexorably so. Mary, his mother, makes this implacably clear, suppressing her own material feelings the while.

This is clearly brought out. We follow, and sympathise from afar with all that we hear, enjoying Ryton's moments of mild humour. The production has explored text carefully and authentically. One's thinking is satisfied.

There is also precise styling of playing, accent being on profile and posture. Perfectly acceptable.

But not enough! One's thinking may be satisfied. One's desire to be involved is starved. I left cold, and I know I ought to have left otherwise.

theatre  
by Nigel Slade



Rita Baker (centre) is vibrant as Elizabeth, Duchess of York, in this scene from the Nairobi City Players' "Crown Matrimonial" at the National Theatre, where she is pictured with Annabel Maule as Queen Mary and Tony Massie-Blomfield as Albert, Duke of York.

For involved we must be. We are taken into the bosom of a family who, be they kings or duchesses, are real people with a real problem stated and approached in exactly the language they would use. This does not happen.

It can't. Not with such a large gap between players and audience on an area that should and could have been reduced before a breathtaking set which, unfortunately,

dwarfs the figures in front of it.

Or could it? There is one exceptional section, when Elizabeth, wife of Albert, Duke of York (later to be George VI — yes, she's Britain's beloved "Queen Mum" of today!) assails Edward for his lack of consideration. Here was sudden electricity as Rita Baker, with powerful but restrained vibrance, brought an awaited

"feeling" to the stage. A thoughtful and commanding single appearance.

The same thing also nearly occurred (and should have!) when Albert breaks down at the news of a job he thinks he can't handle. But, Tony Massie-Blomfield was more convincing when Albert was not and less so when Albert was — and did not quite catch the whole character.

Annabel Maule's Mary is a detailed replica of her fine 1975 performance and I admire it so much. But the National Theatre's size robs her of the presence that the earlier theatre enhanced.

Only two people had presence, actually: Rita Baker, and a character who made an amazing most of his only line. Here I'm not being sarcastic!

Duncan Baker's Edward was earnest and clearly well thought out. But his voice lacked a light and shade that betokens inexperience and one could not forget that he was "acting".

Tidy, if uninspiring, performances came from Walter Hinds (Walter Monkton, K.C.) and Elizabeth Penny (Princess Royal). Anne Palmer usefully supplied continuity as one lady-in-waiting and I warmed to the discreet sensationalism of Stephanie Curtis as the other. Not a "Royal" show then, but a respectable one!