

Nightmare on first night

"I'M glad I'm not you," said a theatre-goer I met at the end of Nairobi City players' *Canterbury Tales* on Wednesday. Implied was a relief that the speaker did not have to review it. My own relief, however, was that I was not one of those involved in the most disastrous first night that I have

By NIGEL SLADE

ever witnessed at the National Theatre.

Quite simple, the players went through three hours of nightmare! Not only were they exhausted from final rehearsals, which had detained them long at night (and nearly all of them have a day's job to do), but they were also beset and obstructed by every conceivable (and dreadful) technical trauma in a performance that just would not go right.

The real "hell" was that they were all potentially (many provedly) good enough to know for themselves that, on Wednesday at least, they were on a losing streak. Nothing is more



Two new discoveries, Andre Buitenrdag and Mireya Hyland who appear in "Canterbury Tales". Andre Buitenrdag is "positive throughout" and pretty Mireya Hyland, one of the youngest members of the cast, gives a mature performance beyond her years.

hellish for sensitive people, such as actors must be, than to struggle for a smile, however watery, when one's heart is as growing leaden as one's eyes.

Recognising this, I will not itemise much of what went wrong. NCP know — and may put most of it right. Suffice that it was a king-size shambles.

Did anything at all remain "standing?" The music, certainly. Paul Smith has made a solid combination from available instrument and voices. Songs are richly backed and projected. They are fairly catchy and some have great humour. The music was firm. So was the costuming that characterised Chaucer's time. Roberta Post's team has created a good

depth of tone and style here. Admirable work — and a lot of it!

Some individual performances stood up, and stood out. Maureen Turner and Benny Goodman vie goodnaturedly to steal the show. She is at the finest I have seen her as the wife of bath. A great performance of lusty good-nature, cheerfully challenging Jessie Evans whom I saw in the original production. Her soliloquy, even on Wednesday's dying night, wrung affectionate and sympathetic response.

Benny Goodman's compelling "throw-away" comedy comes through in a variety of roles. However, it was the wicket panache of his *If She's Never Loved Before* that actually won, and rightly, the evening's sole encore. Other "specials" were Andre Buitenrdag throughout in good-looking, juvenile roles (a positive newcomer this), a touchingly sincere old woman from Shirley Corke, delightful wantonness in Josephine Moore's miller's daughter, and the rounded rosinness of Rosemary Kempell's Nun.

There were others. If all get some sleep this week-end, they could cohere into something very lively. The show is bound to become much better.

Even so, has director David Kelsey not been too ambitious? The best production I have seen of *Canterbury Tales* was very simple, and does not Chaucer himself plead his own simplicity more than once? To aim for elaborate presentation (and one reason for Wednesday must lie with this aim) is self-destructive.

Story-telling depends on story-tellers. They need straight-forward settings, often self-created and no more. This show's folk are story-tellers, whose chief appeal is their own simplicity. To supply gigantic truck sets, for example, works against their very *raison d'être*. Kelsey, whose *Godspell* charmed us for its ingenuousness, has forgotten that here.

LIFE AND LEISURE

'Canterbury Tales' big disappointment

Theatre

by MARGARETTA
wa GACHERU

FOR ALL ITS SPLASHY pre-show publicity, all the fuss made over importing theatrical experts from abroad, one could not help but anticipate a Christmas musical production from the Nairobi City Players that was unprecedented in its excellence. (We were practically told to plan on as much.) Yet it was just because our expectations were taken so high that the City Players' interpretation of *Canterbury Tales* was such a big disappointment.

We had learned that the modern musical rendition of Chaucer's famous medieval poem had achieved indubitable success in select theatre centres in the west, especially in London and New York. What's more, the Oxford professor, Nevill Coghill's modern English translation of Chaucer was said to be brilliant. And when that was reshaped by the scholar, together with Richard Hill and John Hawkins into musical comedy, it all sounded like a stroke of pure genius.

But something seemed to get lost when *Canterbury Tales* was again translated into local terminology. Even with the combination of David Kelsey and Paul Smith's professional direction, the pace of the production often seemed to drag, and singing at times lagged behind the small, but exceptional orchestra that was convened and rehearsed by jazz trumpeter Charles Allen.

Even with an exquisitely simple scaffold-like set designed by the resident architect David Beglin, still and the scene changes were not as unencumbered as they could have been. The wheels on the moveable sets seemed to even squeak. And even with pretty period — piece costuming, designed by Roberta Post, and meant to reflect the epoch — the Fourteenth century in which the poet actually lived — still the clothes could not of themselves transform the City Players cast into medieval pilgrims on their way to Canterbury Cathedral.

Energy

What *Canterbury Tales* seemed to sorely miss was a compelling and constant undercurrent of enthusiasm — a good liberal dose of that "libido" energy to see the show through. As it was, that energy surfaced in rather rare, but sparkling moments, as when Nicholas (Andre Buitendag) made away with Alison (Mireya Hyland) in *The Miller's Tale*, when the Miller's daughter Molly (Josephine Moore) got caught up with two young Cambridge University students (Desmond Sandford and Andre again) in *The Steward's Tale*, and when January, the rich and foolish old merchant (Benny Goodman) made last minute preparations for a leap into his newly-made matrimonial bed with the young, unwilling maiden, May (Ingrid Ronsky), in *The Merchant's Tale*.

Goodman actually set the stage of the National Theatre aglow every time he walked on, either as the pilgrim or a

carpenter, a merchant or even an executioner in the various *Canterbury Tales*. Another character who came close to achieving the breezy buoyancy of Benny G was Maureen Turner who was frank, free and frivolous as the wife of Bath. The one other winning role — the one that made up for so much of the amateurism that we saw was Carol Johnson (the Prioress) whose beautiful voice was nothing less than angelic.

What remains of the seasonal specials is the Nairobi City Players' charming and cheeky Chaucerian musical, *Canterbury Tales* which is still running at the National Theatre through Wednesday night. Under