

ENTERTAINMENT

# Goodbye to an 'easily met, hard to forget' man

VERY soon Nairobi says "Goodbye" to one whose fondness for, and service to, her theatre has been regarded as not so much distinctive as distinguished. This is Peter Pearce, of whom once it was said "easily met, hard to forget."

Peter's contribution to Nairobi theatre for the last 30 years or so is hard to measure. In addition to fulfilling neatly (he is, almost notoriously, neat!) his own

Theatre, By Nigel Slade

business and career commitments, he has found considerable time, and devoted admirable energy to, a very real love.

Hard to measure perhaps — but impressively easy to observe! Gifted with a supreme sense of organisation and a flair for diplomacy (which never loses sight of practicality and purpose), Peter can alone amongst us claim to have been chairman of not one but two of the finest groups in Nairobi.

The first was the Nairobi City Players, still the most prestigious amateur group of all. He was not a founder member but in 1958 joined shortly after NCP's foundation, coming soon to chair a group

that quickly recognised his value. He discharged this responsibility for several years, during which NCP rose to enormous heights. On stepping down, he still retained a deeply affectionate association.

Active too — as it always was! Many NCP "greats" had his name prominent on their cast lists, nearly always in strong parts.

His best remembered (I daresay his favourite!) was as the king in *The King and I*. He played this role twice (opposite the same lady) in production's 17 years apart. Nairobi loved him!

Many NCP veterans, however, still prefer his *tour de force* as Dylan Thomas in that poet's immortal *Under Milk Wood*. Says one: "This was Peter at his subtlest." Other notable roles included the Turkish general in *Ross*, the fanatical Sant in *Hadrian VII*, the hotly proud Marco in *A View from the Bridge*, and the imperturbable Crowford in *The Masters*, to name a few.

He is also a capable comedian, making a special score in Noel Coward's *Red Peppers*. Fully fluent in Hindustani and having spent his early career in India, he is adept at Indian imitations, which have delighted Indian viewers most of all. His "Rumburger Uppershortant" was a highlight of the well-remembered NCP *Minstrels*.

In 1982 he gave his support to a tiny group that was emerging very tentatively from the ashes of the collapse of the Donovan Maitic Theatre. This was Phoenix Players. Preferring not to side with the smartly dismal "jimmies", who were smugly predicting a future of a few months, he swung in with the "fittings jimmies", James Falkland and James Ward (to name two), together with Kenneth Mason.

He became founder chairman of Phoenix, which has accordingly grown into the real "force" that it is today. He found time to perform in three plays too. One was an Australian play, *Travelling North*, and Australia is whither he is now bound.

What has always impressed me most about Peter has been his thoroughness. In his rigid concern for even the tiniest detail of correctness he is an



Peter Pearce as he appeared in the comedy "The Grass is Greener for Phoenix Players" in 1985, which was the last of many distinguished stage appearances over more than 30 years in Kenya.

example. With this is a wonderful affability and ready cheer. Peter is always delighted to see, and spend time with, any acquaintance. He loves company and enlivens it with his wit and warmth. I have never encountered him but I have been the fresher for it.

Nairobi theatre has been the richer for this precisely mannered, highly talented and endearing happy man. To him and his wife, Joan, a lady of good companionship and gentle wisdom, *Kwaberiri na Asanteni*