

Turning a soufflé into suet pudding

PINERO's "The Magistrate", which opened at the Kenya National Theatre on Thursday, was written 85 years ago — though one would hardly believe it. The situations in it are perennial; the wit and humour are so modern as to have hardly dated; and the craftsmanship of the author is so complete as to be always admirable.

It is in English — as opposed to French — farce; and this implies that, although the height of ludicrousness may be attained, the impossible is not suggested. The most outrageous remarks and situations are rationalised. And the characters manage to remain real people, however over-emphasised, rather than symbols of humanity.

Nevertheless, in presentation on the stage, this quality of believability cannot afford to be strained by too-leisurely playing. Pace in performance and production is the indispensable ally of even the greatest farce writers, and one which no author can entirely create for himself without assuming to a certain extent the proficiency of his human interpreters.

It was this lack of pace, however, artfully controlled, that marred Rurik Ronsky's production of the play for the Nairobi City Players on the first night. There were moments of pedestrianism (particularly in the second act) which combined with

the heat of the auditorium to produce a soporific effect.

In the main this was a fault of execution by the players rather than of intention by the producer — a droning of voices which lulled one's appreciation. But it was unfortunate because it turned to suet pudding what had been created as a soufflé.

As the magistrate of the title, Nigel Slade gives his best performance to date — sometimes a little out of his depth, as in a long soliloquy in the last act, but always sympathetic. The "punch" of the production is well delivered by Tony Thacker as an over-age 14-year-old, and by Bryan Epsom as Mr. Bullamy; and there is a delightfully skittish performance of the hungry, jilted Charlotte by Marlene Shaw.

If Godfrey Herbert's "Colonel Lukyn" got a bit more of a move-on, he would be a riot. However, he has very stiff competition from Iain McGlashan and Walter Hinds and they pip him at the post.

"The Magistrate", despite some shortcomings of performance and the uninspired way in which the production has been set and lit, emerges nevertheless as a very funny play which can provide a pleasant evening's relaxation. And no one should be put off by the idea that it's a "period piece" — after the first minute or two you'll never believe it.

— ROBERT BEAUMONT.



HUMPHREY and Nigel Slade. Like father, like son.

AT THE THEATRE

MISDEMEANOURS OF A MAGISTRATE

One of the problems of playing farce is that everybody has different ideas about how it should be done.

One of the problems in the Nairobi City Players' production of *The Magistrate* is the obvious difference between the various members of the cast on this point.

The result is not so much a farce as a demonstration of the application of a selection of theories on farcical technique.

Fortunately, Pinero wrote the play at a time when farce, as an entertainment for the more discerning theatregoer at least, was more closely allied to straight comedy than it is today. Pinero therefore had to rely more on wit and subtlety in dialogue and plot than the average contemporary farceur. And he was a craftsman.

This means that *The Magistrate* is intrinsically funny and wears well for its age. In fact its age is an advantage because the "period" background helps to create the impression, so necessary to farce, that reality has been suspended.

So to quarrel with the patchwork effect of the interpretations given to the characters in this production is not to say that it is not amusing. It is to say that the whole thing could be more satisfying given more cohesion and discipline.

For this the producer, Rurik Ronsky, must take a fair share of the blame. There is no doubt that Mr. Ronsky has done a lot to make

the humour of the piece stand out and to keep his cast on the go so that there are few dull moments. It is really only in personality that the production lacks continuity.

Nigel Slade, as the magistrate who gets unhappily involved in shady doings, plays him as a rather uncertain nondescript man, excellent for certain "character" parts in middle-class comedy, but rather light for such a lengthy role as this. Particularly, there is room for much more contrast in the magistrate's demeanour, before, during and after, his misdemeanour.

Bettie Dodds, as the magistrate's wife — also seriously involved — impropriety, however innocent — tackles her part much more full-bloodedly and in the style that probably suits this particular farce best. Tony Thacker, as her school-boy son by an earlier marriage, closely matches this style in an enthusiastic performance with appropriate overtones of *Boy's Own*.

Credit, too, to Iain McGlashan who stepped in to the cast at only a few days' notice, to give a most appealing performance as a rather effete and highly misunderstood military man.

David Field also took over a part at short notice, in addition to his original place in the cast, and plays both with considerable skill.

Settings, designed by Imre Rozsa and constructed by Gordon Purcell, and costumes, designed by Mary Epsom, help to make the evening a colourful one.

P. B. M.

THEATRE

Liza McKinney

SLADE SAVES 'THE MAGISTRATE'

NAIROBI City Players' latest production at the National Theatre — *The Magistrate* — heralds the return to theatrical circles of Rurik Ronsky as a producer and Humphrey Slade as an actor. I only wish I could say that the evening was as successful for the former as it turned out to be for the latter, who saved the show almost single-handed from turning into an *andante* in A flat.

The play to me is somewhat reminiscent of Feydeau's *Hotel Paradisio*, both plays having a respectable pillar of society — in this case a Magistrate — falling from grace due to circumstances almost beyond his control, after a night of high jinks in a seedy hotel. Even the final denouement runs along the same lines with husband discovering it was his wife dining a *doux* in one of the hotel's private rooms and the wife that her spouse was neither at home asleep or at his club! Add to the ingredients the wife's son by her first marriage and whom the naughty lady had passed off to her suitor as 14 instead of 19 years old to make a better impression and you have an excellent mixture for good farce.

Unhappily, having got off to an extremely pacey and hila-

rious start, thanks to Bryan Epsom in a side-splitting characterisation of a fellow magistrate friend and Humphrey Slade as Wyke the Magistrate's servant, the pace dropped and with only occasional bursts of speed plodded through to the end.

In some respects the leading lady was partly to blame for the Magistrate's wife, (Bettie Dodds) appeared at times to be playing regardless of the rest of the cast and she could have done with a lot more life. The same could almost be said of Nigel Slade giving the first negative performance. I have ever seen from this talented actor. Yet at times Nigel's professionalism came across and one could understand why Alistair Sim in this part has kept the London version of the show going for so long.

This play seems to be one of those few occasions when the supporting roles are provided with excellent opportunities for showing what they can do. In this respect two noteworthy performances were Marlene Shaw as the Magistrate's sister-in-law and Iain McGlashan as her lispng fiancé — incidentally Iain had had less than a week to rehearse, having taken over from one of the casualties at short notice.