

THEATRE ROBERT BEAUMONT

# Visual excitement marred by sound troubles

BY THE time one reaches December and the Season of Goodwill and all that, any theatre critic with a spark of humanity in him hopes that he will be able to comment in the usual glowing terms on the entertainments presented to us for our enjoyment during the festive trough.

As for us, the Nairobi City Players' production of that most musical of musicals, *Kismet*, is concerned it is a pleasure to be able to say that the choice of show is ideal and the choice of director (Larry Oaks) could not be better.

The stage of the National Theatre is transformed into a kaleidoscope of colour and movement. Mary Eason's shimmering costumes whirl and glide through the mistral pattern of people which Mr. Oaks has so deftly choreographed, and which have been vividly directed by James Falkland.

Visually, *Kismet* is the most exciting musical to have been seen in Nairobi since... Well, I think one would have to go back to that other musical show, *The King and I*, which was also a Nairobi City Players production.

However, visual satisfaction — while it may be enormously important — is not the beginning and the end of a musical.

What about the music, the singing, the acting, the story? The story in this case, as a simple one based on Edward Knoblock's famous play, it tells of a poor poet who dies a pauper, the king of the beggars of Baghdad. Emerging from the hands of a soldier's brigand and after a twelvemonth's wandering, the wretched Wazir of Persia, he ends up writing a couple of days a rich veigar and father-in-law to the Caliph. Meanwhile his daughter rises to a position of eminence in the harem of the Caliph as a result of having met the Al-Habibah by chance in a garden while that Exalted Personage was taking his evening constitutional (invented round his capital).

Robert Wright and George Forrester have set the tale to music using themes borrowed from Alexander Borodin. In particular his score, "Prince Igor" — and the result is an unusually tuneful score containing such hits as "Shades, Dances and Beauty", "This is my Beloved", "Stranger in Paradise" and "We'll Meet Tomorrow". But it is a score which needs loving to the full and which marred

heavy demands on an orchestra. The most notable shortcoming of the present production — particularly in the first half — is the imbalance between orchestra and singers. There are times when the orchestra, however powerful it may sound from the auditorium, because there are too many alternative, of opinion both as to time and key giving a sensation of insecurity.

Leaves the stage — beats them all! Mr. Thacker treats his part as if it were a "bright young man" in a 1920's Most Concord (proper). Following his way about the stage he "suddenly" acts, the "passion" of the moment — the "combat" — and the voice — that the role of Hajj demands. Where one might expect him to spring from the arches transcribing a scintilla in the best Douglas

However, having expressed some disappointments, let me qualify them. I saw the show of its second performance (which was an early hour) and there was undoubtedly a high degree of reaction among the cast after the excitement of the first night. By the time this review appears, Larry Oaks, will, I am sure, have made certain that everybody is tripping along in the manner to which he intends them to become acclimatized.



A PYRAMID of princelings. A scene from the Nairobi City players' successful production of "Kismet", which continues to run at the Kenyas National Theatre in Nairobi up to December 23.

NATIONAL THEATRE  
Nairobi City Players'  
Christmas musical  
**KISMET**  
TONIGHT AT 6.30 P.M.  
Booking today — book now

## THEATRE REVIEW

# SOME POOR ACTING— BUT IT'S FINE FARE

LIZA MCKINNEY

THIS year's Christmas show at the National Theatre opened with a marvellous performance on Wednesday of the City Players' production of *Kismet*. It is an Arabian Nights' fantasy set to music borrowed from themes composed by Alexander Borodin. Famous for such classics as *Prince Igor*.

My main criticism is basically in the weakness of the performance of Tony Thacker as Hajj — in my opinion musical and mis-interpreted — and the feeling that the dancing and singing had taken complete precedence to the acting.

As for the excellent characterisation of Omar by Burk Bonney and his performance of Hajj's wife, Marie, by Marie Docherty as Letame and Kate Richardson as Hajj's daughter, Mariash, the acting was fine and in some cases aesthetically absent.

Let me admit at once that I wasn't mad about this musical when I first saw it in London with its original New York cast.

The story is basically a series of coincidental happenings over 24 hours in the life of an impoverished "miser of rhyme" which, when he is mistaken for the rajah beggar Hajj, help him to end up as a rich man surrounded by benevolent friends.

The music is indeed magnificent and, although smaller in number than that expected for the score, the orchestra under the baton of Tony Davies gave a great performance.

Thinking of dancers, I hopped into line the other day when I hope may be able to give the National Theatre stage with her many talents during the year ahead. She is, Miss Lesley Butler. If the name is unfamiliar it's because, on this trip, she has only been here since September. But who could forget the superb dancing of Princess Zubodiyra in *Kismet*?

The music, designed by Chris Cook and James Falkland, and the lighting, enhanced this magnificent and colorful musical still further, while the stage management was of the highest order. Why, then, having said all this have I not mentioned the players themselves so far?

Without trying to find excuses for the City Players, it is perhaps unfortunate that it is necessary for the first public show, including the critics, to be in reality the second "night" and a mixture to boot.

The singing was less successful

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A GRAND MUSICAL

KISMET, the musical extravaganza based on the oriental fantasy by Edward Knoblock from the novel of Alexander Borodin, is currently being staged by the Nairobi City Players.

Tony Thacker plays the beggar poet who has a slight wonderful day becomes the Emir of Baghdad, and manages to right a few wrongs as well as arranging his daughter's love life to everybody's satisfaction.

Kate Richardson is Mariash, the daughter, and an old favorite of Nairobi, Beaumont, Edward Scott, appears as the Wazir, Marie Docherty and Tony Davies.

NATIONAL THEATRE  
Your last chance to see  
**KISMET**  
NAIROBI CITY PLAYERS'  
CHRISTMAS MUSICAL  
Tonight at 6.30 p.m.  
Running until December 23

## Glittering show with some first night flaws...

ONE of the most visually spectacular shows in Nairobi's dramatic history has arrived at the National Theatre in the shape of *Kismet* in which Nairobi City Players transport us to Old Baghdad.

NATIONAL THEATRE  
Nairobi City Players'  
Christmas Musical  
**KISMET**  
Running to December 23  
TONIGHT AT 6.30 P.M.  
Some Nights Fully Booked  
BOOK NOW

It is a fantasy woven around Hajj, a poor beggar who with his daughter Mariash is elevated to a position of importance — a mouth of diamonds — through a set of circumstances which are filled from various works of Alexander Borodin which together with his setting make it a splendid vehicle for dancing and colourful chorus arrangements.

Larry Oaks, who made such a splendid job of directing *Fiddler on the Roof*, has been the guiding hand behind *Kismet* and again the City Players are exhibiting a degree of professionalism which must be the envy of amateur groups everywhere and a challenge to set a few professional companies.

However, the acting is not all embracing. Despite admirable impressions, some fine individual performances and excellent scenery there were some disappointments, some of which are mentioned below.

The main fault lay in the musical arrangement.

Tony Davies in a solid musical performance and there is little to question about the ability of those under his baton except the overall impression.

Kate Richardson gives from strength to strength and does a first job of the part of Mariash, but again she has an excellent voice which she should use more widely in her role.

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# Theatre goers had good value for money



In my opinion theatre goers had good value for their money during 1971 from both professional and amateur companies. The high standard which has been maintained — and is to be expected from them — has been exceptional — and in some areas it has been improved.

Big productions are thought and directed and at least three minutes before the first night curtain time, and the finished production is the result of long-term planning.

The choice of plays, the availability of producers and directors, the preparation of the stage, stage management, costumes, make-up, lighting, sets, publicity and front of

house — every aspect is thoroughly planned by a hard core of hard working enthusiasts.

Some plays presented during 1971 were chosen because they were moving to the audience committee, "good theatre", whatever that may mean, but they did at the box office.

During planning, book actors and producers must never lose sight of the fact that they are playing for and to an audience — without this audience all their efforts are as nothing.

The publicity campaign also had to be planned all over the place with the names of the actors in large type in amateur groups this is not monetary and encourages a step system which has more worked in amateur theatre and more will. All that is needed is the name of the play, the author, and the dates and times of performances. The preparation of the press should be enough to ensure support.

The Theatre Group's production of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's great tragedy directed by John Tamara, was a technical triumph.

The stark white set with special "soft-focus" revolving back-wall, and the complex lighting design, together with the effects, made a memorable theatrical experience.

The play was directed throughout by the three-and-a-half-hour run by Andrew Warwick's playing of Hamlet.

It was well supported by Peter Wilson, Peter Lawrence and David Field in a notable cast which also included Penny Gossop and Humphrey Stone providing much

humour as the gravediggers. *Hamlet* deservedly played to full houses during its run at the National Theatre, and hundreds of school children enjoyed Shakespeare as an entertainment and not a chore.

*Filler On The Roof* presented by The Nairobi City Players was the outstanding musical of the year, which won many records at the National Theatre, Nairobi.

Larry Oaks, the director and choreographer, did a superb job of making a huge set into a viable and interesting whole. Tony Makenan, played by Frank Price, was an inspired piece of music. It was the best thing he has done in many years on the musical stage.

His music to God, backed in the place of a full-on spot, was a delightful piece of music. The musical director was Nat Kibby and the chorus director was Eric MacPherson.

Throughout 1971 many of the plays at the Donovan Meale Theatre were presented at the same time as the London production, the most successful being *Mousetrap* Over Mrs. Marlow.

This British farce brings a ten-year box-office record at the D.M., which was previously held by *Oliver*.

*Mousetrap* Over Mrs. Marlow was written by Ray Cooney and John Chapman, who were also responsible for *New York Darling*.

Ray Cooney has this to say about the local writer: "... he is solely concerned with maintaining his audience. To make them smile, chuckle, giggle and with some yelling down their cheeks, generally dig their neighbours in the ribs."

The D.M. team led by James Ward and Pamela Buckner did exactly that.

The Lavington Players began their operations in 1963, and they have grown in stature to the point that in 1971 they presented six productions. *Clay in the Corners*, *City of a Million*, *How Brown*, *Company* by Oliver Goldsmith, *Old Time Music Hall* in conjunction with the Railway Players, a pastiche, *The Doctor of Rivers*, and an all Christmas evening *One Clear Day*.

Nigel Stok, Henry Gossop, Wilfred Ferguson, Ken Scoring and David Bagnant have brought a wealth of experience and talent to the Lavington Players.

The commitment of the Players since ... the Lavington Players is part of the life and work of Lavington Church ... doing to pursue the study, production and presentation of drama and the art ... and the promotion of television and service to the community.

The Little Theatre, Chis. Mombasa, attracts talent from all over East Africa, and each production is notable for the appearance of newcomers to the Mombasa stage.

The first production in 1971 was

2007. *See* with Paddy Fouchan, a regular from the Theatre Group, Nairobi.

Norman Haide, taking time off from his duties as mine host at Whitehouse, produced *Pat McClelland*. Arthur Milner, though, directed *A Fire From the Ridge* was a challenge, but produced by Frank Bentley and Nick Harris proved a success.

In October *Rolling Stones*, produced by Verity Gilson, introduced a herd of air horses — Michael Paul, Donal Marston and Patrick Miller.

And tonight Robert Bole's fantasy *The Showing Of Berna* directed by him. The Little Theatre certainly believes that variety is the spice of life.

The Nairobi Players are the only amateur group who are producing regular plays at their well-equipped theatre.

*Doat De Awe*, the thriller by Paul Poppelew, was produced by Paul Poppelew at March.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the light fantasy by William Shakespeare, was given the modern treatment by the Players with the costumes in the last edition. They found the last with a delightful piece of music by Edward Lane. *The Two Men In The Parson's Pew*.



The Theatre Group's production of "Hamlet" was a technical triumph — a play dominated throughout by (picture left) Andrew Warwick's interpretation of the part.

Larry Oaks — a superb job in what was the outstanding musical of the year.

## NATION FEATURE / Time to look

IT IS usual at this point in the calendar for critics and writers generally to look back over the departing year and look out with palms and brickbats. Having got this out of their system they can then look confidently ahead to the good things to come in the advancing 12 months.

Lately I am in the position of not being able to deliver judgment on 1971 because I missed about four of the year's major productions for going on leave. There are, however, certain pleasures I might be allowed to recall: but as they are taken at random they cannot be considered an award of value.

For instance, the uncanny magnetism of the Miami play *Oh! Kentucky* and Jonathan Patten's performance in the Okendo production for the Kenya School's Drama Festival. And, much later in the year Robert Serungu's play *Mujariga* which earned plaudits of praise both for the writing and for his own performance as the licentious street entertainer.

One could put out the flag for the modern lift given to the Donovan Meale Theatre's repertoire by *Mousetrap* Over Mrs. Marlow when the company came to life and kindled us that the theatre was capable of re-

gaining its standard of the Sixties.

At the National Theatre there was the Theatre Group's human presentation of *Hamlet* starting the year off with a classical bang and a writer of gimmicks, and the production by Larry Oaks for the Nairobi City Players of the musical *Filler on the Roof* — which introduced a new style of musical and a new style of audience and a new style of sixth month.

There was also pleasure to be gained from Wilfred Ferguson's performance as a leading house-bound mother in *The Gift* at the Kenya Cultural Centre, Francis Leunga's beautiful phony group in *The Trials of Brother Jero* at the University. Kenese. Mamba's contrasting light as the father in *The New Boy* and the old lecher in *Gasterbury Tales* — and Pamela Buckner on almost everything she has played at the D.M. Theatre (whether rightly or wrongly cast) because she is an actress with a capital "A".

Generally, however, we've added lower standards of both acting and production than we had anticipated, and rather more disappointments than can be justified.

Nevertheless, on the offstage front, the National Theatre Drama School has made considerable progress in its bid to train new actors, and its ad-

I'M BEGINNING to wonder already whether 1972 is going to be such a "Good Thing" after all. Last week, looking ahead to the production we could expect during the coming year, I apparently let a cat out of the bag — and got muzzled.

It having been accepted for some weeks in theatrical circles that the Theatre Group intended to present *Alice* in THE PRIME OF MISS JEAN BODDIE during the year, I thought it among the soundest productions for the National Theatre. The statement apparently caused a flurry and a flutter in the hearts of the Theatre Group committee houses, as their chairman informed me on the phone, this little scheme is by no means definite. Oh well, what's more definite, more or less?

## out for better things

administrator, Tirus Gathwe, has blossomed forth as one of our most able producers since his course abroad early in the year. For the next, let us quietly and discreetly draw a veil over the year now just things in 1972.

January will bring a murder thriller to the Donovan Meale Theatre which will contrast well with the festive season's

medieval romp. It will be *Sweeney At Home* by Francis Durbridge who has written innumerable successful serials for both radio and television, notably the immortal "Paul Temple" series. That is scheduled for the 19th.

At the end of the month Joe de Craft will be seen at the National Theatre in the title role of *Orchestra*, presented by the Theatre Group and directed

by James Pakland. Mr. de Craft, at present on the staff of the university, is as far as I know here as a writer but in his native Ghana is in the forefront of his country's actors and directors.

February brings in a special presentation for which the National Theatre itself will be the impresario. This will be in honor of our guests to the All-Africa Trade Fair and will fea-

ture a re-creation of *Oh! Kentucky* in a double-bill with a mime devised by Tirus Gathwe. A Man Called Mr. Everything, for which narration has been written by Francis Imbo-cha.

Festivals of drama and music will have their regular place in the calendar — the School's Drama Festival in March and the Kenya Music Festival from the end of June to July 1.

The Nairobi Musical Society will be launching out with its first proper opera over the July-August period — *Humperdink's Hensel and Grisel*. And the Nairobi City Players plan two straight plays and a December musical. Not to be outdone, the Theatre Group's successor to "Orchestra" will be *The Prince of Miss Ann Boddie* with Alice Dale in the lead and Roger Winchester directing.

So it looks as if 1972 could be a good year — provided that everyone gives a good deal more thought to the acting and production and less to over-ambitious settings and gimmickry.