

Loss of life sets an elderly lieutenant on wooing path

LAST week, on two consecutive evenings I was overcome with mirth at the sight of an elderly gentleman deploring the loss of his wife and the next night saddened to the point of despair at a comedy. Both reactions I must add, were entirely within the author's intentions.

St Patrick's Day by Richard Brinsley Sheridan was presented at the Norfolk Hotel by Nairobi City Players. Jon Tarlton directed this delicious bit of nonsense with great confidence, having successfully done so at Galway, Ireland, in 1991.

From the very start of the evening, long before the after dinner entertainment began, the diners were intrigued to watch the actors being made up in the proper style of Restoration comedy, with dead white faces and painted-on features of eyebrows and lips and patches. Elegant wigs, designed and devised Mary Eson, were donned and the play commenced.

The slight story of an Irish Lieutenant's successful wooing of the local magistrate's daughter with the help of a scherning doctor made up a very funny hour.

The audience were immediately caught up in the tale as the actors moved among the tables, occasionally addressing a remark to the watchers and at one point enlisting the aid of two of the diners as stand-in soldiers to fill in for apparently "missing" actors, much to their discomfort and our enjoyment.

As the widowed Doctor Rosy, whose rlicenery outwits the determined father, David Evens stole the show with just the right amount of pathos to have us laughing helplessly at wistful memories of his "dear wife, Dolly."

Sheridan's wit was brought out by all the actors with five comic touches from the director. Shan Lick was never funnier as the daughters than when "entertaining us on her guitar" most ably assisted by John Freeman and Robert Ondruasak.

Edward Gleeson, Paul Davey and Jenny Dunnet, who also was responsible for the elegant pale cream costumes, never let up the comic energy for a minute and there was fine support from all those in minor roles. It was a refreshingly enjoyable evening. Thanks a lot, NCP!

The Gingerbread Lady by American writer Neil Simon, which opened last Friday at Phoenix Theatre is an altogether different story.

For those of you expecting a sizzling comedy, as well you might from seeing the author's name, I apologise that my warning was not published last week. For this is a sad and bitter tale of wasted lives and inadequate people.

There is humour of course — Neil Simon is the master of one-liners and bitingly witty dialogue — but the overall impression for me is of tragedy rather than comedy, saved at the end from being the former by a note of hope.

Evy Meera, a night club singer has just returned from a few months in a smart clinic "drying out".

Evy's two closest friends show up in her apartment determined to keep her on the straight and narrow path of sobriety.

But they themselves are losers and misfits.

ON STAGE

Elizabeth Wight

Both middle-aged, Jimmy is an out of work, gay actor with little talent and Toby is solely preoccupied with herself and her losing battle against "the ravages of time."

They mean well, but Evy has no delusions about herself and Neil Simon gets a lot of comic mileage out of these three leading characters.

The arrival of Evy's daughter, unwelcome and unexpected, with the reversal of roles which ultimately takes place as Polly has to take her mother in hand, adds another dimension.

James Ward who directs and plays Jimmy and Jan Cohen, Toby, are pathetic and amusing at the same time. One warns to them and their efforts on their friend's behalf.

Joanne Guskey makes Evy a rather tragic figure rather than bringing out the resilient character who laughs at herself, and the very shrill and noisy exchanges between Evy and her daughter depressed me more and more as the play went on.

Hanish Kirkland as the Delivery Boy and Hannah Burris as Polly, make their debut on Phoenix's stage very confidently.

I cannot say I liked the play, but certainly leaves an impression.

Top heart-throb returns to roots

STEVEN Spielberg once told Ralph Fiennes he could be the next Laurence Olivier if he didn't forget his theatrical roots.

Britain's new screen heart-throb certainly took the advice to heart. Feted by Hollywood, nominated this year for an Oscar, he has gone home to perform Chekhov's *Ivanov* at a tiny London fringe theatre for just 200 pounds (\$320) a week.

Tortured souls are his speciality, from the sadistic Nazi officer in Spielberg's *Schindler's List* to the love-lorn Hungarian count in *The English Patient*, which has won 12 Oscar nominations including Best Actor for Fiennes.

In between came an award-winning Hamlet in London and on Broadway from an actor torn in his private life between loyalty and love.

The 34-year-old abandoned Alex Kingston, his sweetheart from drama student days, after falling in love with 52-year-old Francesca Annis who played Hamlet's mother, Gertrude.

"She seems unnaturally fond of her son, caressing and kissing him with a warmth that would make Freud straighten up and polish his glasses," one critic wrote.

Stage set for powerful satirical performances

By MARGARETTA wa GACHERU

Three immensely powerful plays open in the next few days in Nairobi. There's Sami Gathii's *Women Warriors* which opens tonight (through March 17) at Kenya National Theatre, Nairobi City Players performing in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's uproarious "restoration comedy" *St Patrick's Day* tomorrow through Sunday evening at the Norfolk Hotel and Titi Wainaina's *Kumekucha* at the Goethe Institute from Friday through March 17.

All three are sassy social satires that use wily wit to assault (and seriously undermine) the prevailing status quo; they all expose social evils in varying degrees — be it ethnic bias in *St Patrick's Day*, gender bias in *Women Warriors* and police brutality in *Kumekucha*.

And all three tackle the troubling conditions created when patriarchs occupy seats of power for too long, to the point where they fancy themselves to be demi-gods!

Obviously, the "demi-gods" are different in each show, given that *Kumekucha* is set in an imaginary African state called Fragansa, *Warriors* in a similar albeit unnamed setting and *St Patrick's Day* (also sub-titled *The Scheming Lieutenant*) in 18th century England. Nonetheless, all have presiding patriarchs, each with his own brand of oppression.

In *Women Warriors*, for instance, it's the Mayor and his minion (George Otieno) who try to stem the tide of history by holding up forceful women like

Mama Maria (Mary Miremba) as well as her dynamic daughters, played by Mary Mwaura and Patricia Wambui — all of whom are "on the move" and keen to change the world.

In *Kumekucha* (staged by the newly-assembled Concern Theatre group), it's President Ngoromu (Titi Wainaina, who also directs and scripted the play) and his "total men", including Brigadier Utukutu (Shem Imbaya), who have been riding high for so long that they're adverse to social change.

So much so that it's only after a civil rights activist and former student leader called Kirujo (Emmanuel Mumelo) is killed in police custody, and after Kirujo's struggle for social justice is carried on by Kasuji (Mercy Mungai) that Ngoromu begins to lose his grip on absolute power.

In fact, it's only when a combination of forces — including a conscience-tugging priest (Jeff Kiilu Mwendwa), a heart-broken mother (Rose Terry Nzioka), and a band of irate farm workers led by Kasuji — converge at once on the Head of State that he is finally compelled (like the Mayor in *Women Warriors*) to consider the need for change — including changing his country's constitution (an issue interwoven in the script partly because *Kumekucha* was originally commissioned by one Human Rights group).

Meanwhile, the demi-god in Sheridan's *St Patrick's Day* is one of His Majesty's High Court judges, Justice Credulous (Paul Davey), a pompous prig whose bigotry — against the Irish and against the soldier caste — is the

butt of this rollicking "revolutionary" romp.

It's the judge's autocratic "home rule" that gets insidiously undermined as the so-called "scheming lieutenant" O'Connor (Edward Gleeson) — assisted by the local medic Dr Rosy (David Evans) — wage a wildly amusing guerrilla-war-like assault on Credulous' home.

The spoils of this "war" are nothing less than luscious Lauretta (Sian Linck), the judge's enchanting and impetuous daughter who's more than willing to defy her dictatorial father.

The lieutenant's charades nearly lead to his head getting shot off, but that "hot pursuit" chase scene is all part of the high hilarity that director Jon Tarlton helps to extract from his talented amateur cast (including Jenny Dunnet as Credulous' wife Bridget).

Now while it might seem surprising to find Sheridan writing a script so imbued with such revolutionary spirit more than 200 years ago, do take note that he wrote *Scheming Lieutenant* around the time when bewigged Britons (like those one will see at the Norfolk dinner theatre) were busy battling those impudent American upstarts who were intent on winning their own war for independence.

So it's conceivable that the playwright also picked up a bit of that irreverent revolutionary edge and infused it all his best satiric scripts, such as *School for Scandal* and *The Rivals*.

In any case, all three casts give rousing performances.