

# Fast pace in French farce

Kenya Drama Festival

By ANN GREER

THIS year's Kenya Drama Festival opened in Nairobi on Tuesday with the chairman and festival organiser, Mr. Robert Butler, introducing the adjudicator, Mr. Peter Carpenter, Director of the Uganda National Theatre, to the audience.

Replying to Mr. Butler, Mr. Carpenter remarked gratifying it was that of the "groups taking part this year, five were African, one Asian, and five European and that four of the plays were originals.

Mr. Carpenter went on to describe the system by which he was expected to judge, but remarked that it was impossible to judge a work of art on a points system and that the rapport between players and audience, whether a play worked or not, was most important.

The first play of the evening was a 15th-century French farce, *The Farce of the Worthy Master Pierre Patelin*, translated from the French by Moritz Jagendorf.

This was presented by the Kenyatta College Dramatic Society and produced by Robert Grosshans.

In his comments at the end of the evening the adjudicator said that this was a good choice of play and that a splendid pace had been maintained throughout, as is required in farce.

But at times the action got under way too quickly so that the characters had no time to establish themselves.

He also felt that as the characters were dressed in 15th-century mode, the curtains used in the setting should not have been quite so modern in appearance.

He suggested that the play could have been set in modern Kenya and the whole play brought up to date by the producer.

Another African society — the Kenya Dramatic Society — presented an original play *The Happy Faces*, by Oliver Musilo Litondo.

## SINCERITY

A plea for peaceful co-existence, this play radiated sincerity on the part of the playwright.

But the adjudicator felt the characters were symbols rather than real flesh and blood and that the wrong kind of laughter was aroused because in symbols such as the old European man, the symbol was overdone.

The play needed greater subtlety in writing and the adjudicator urged the playwright to work on the play again.

Mr. Carpenter also suggested some improvements in positioning the characters.

The producer Mr. David Kalatto, took over the part of the political orator at the last moment when one of his cast, Duncan Kimani, fell ill.

The Nairobi City Players chose a blood-and-thunder 17th-century tragedy for their entry this year — an excerpt from Acts Three and Four of Webster's *The Duchess of Malji*, produced by Leonard Pierpoint.

This overdone horror story is redeemed by the language in which the story is told and the adjudicator felt the cast had made this difficult play work for a modern audience.

The adjudicator had a few comments to make about the use of music and the finer shades of acting, but said that Phina Simmance had given a moving performance as the Duchess and that the production as a whole was a difficult piece of theatre well-presented.

# Five awards won by single play

**F**IVE out of the ten awards given at this year's Kenya Drama Festival — and half of a sixth — went to the presentation of a "kitchen-sink" drama, "The Trap", which was staged by the Nairobi Amateur Dramatic Society.

The adjudicator, Mr Peter Carpenter, said it was a lot of awards for one production to receive, but he pointed out that a really well-produced play demands a great deal of good work from a great many people, and this particular production had not only been good as a whole but good in all its individual parts.

He judged it the best play of the festival and awarded its producer, Mr. Norman Montgomery, the Producer's Trophy. It was also judged the most popular play by the votes of the festival season-ticket holders.

Winifred Ferguson, who played the principal part in its cast of four women, was awarded the prize for the best actress and Yvonne Hellwell received the prize for the best supporting actress.

The "halved" award was the prize for the best decor, presented to Derry Shannon for her settings both in *The Trap* and in another festival play *Twika Buys a Wife*, staged by the Aquinas Dramatic Society, which shared third place in the event with the Nairobi City Players' presentation of an excerpt from *The Duchess of Malfi*.

The play in second place was the Railway Players' production of *A Miniature Beggar's Opera*. Mr. Carpenter said the final results had been a close thing with only one point between this play and the two in third place.

Kuldip Sondhi received the award for the best original play in the festival — a drama on the theme of inter-racial marriage entitled *With Strings*. Mr. Sondhi won this same award two years ago for a play about Africanisation called *The Undesignated*.

Sharad Rao won the best supporting actor's prize for his rôle in *With Strings* as the son of an Asian family who announces his intention to marry an African girl.

## Second entry

The award for the best actor went to Peter Pearce of the Nairobi City Players in *The Duchess of Malfi*.

The Mwadui Players of Tanzania, who presented two plays on the final night of the festival, won the prize for the best up-country entry with their second entry, an excerpt from *Sailor Beware!*

Mr. Carpenter specially commended this group for their effort in making the long journey from Tanzania to take part. He described their two entries as "an evening of entertainment provided by the flying actor service."

Summing-up the festival he said it had not been easy to pick the award-winners, particularly among the actors because there had been many extremely good performances.

It had been a very varied and fruitful festival, including

four original plays, of which two showed promise and two showed considerable achievement. Mr. Carpenter hoped that one day the original entries in the festival would outnumber the others.

The festival settings had been of a high standard and five had been of superlative quality. Costumes, particularly in the period plays, had been very good indeed.

It was obvious that a great deal of very hard work had gone into all the plays entered.

# Plays and players but no public

WHEN you come to think of it, the Kenya Drama Festival is a remarkable institution.

At a time of political transition and fluctuating public interest—and at a time when many up-country groups have vanished from the theatrical scene—we can still stage a four-day festival that boasts five European, five African, and one Asian entry, of which four were original plays.

We have little cause to be smug about the position of theatre in the cultural life of East Africa (let alone the position of the National Theatre)—but the Festival Committee, headed by Mr. Robert Butler, must be congratulated for its achievement.

The entries ranged from the slickly professional to the downright amateurish, but a good deal of hard work went into every production, regardless of the result.

This was especially true of the last two offerings, both presented by the Mwadui Players, who flew up from Tanzania for the occasion.

## Variation

The first of these, *Pygmalion and His Galatea*, was not a good choice.

Yet another variation on the Greek myth, it demanded a more stylised production, and nimbler playing, than it received.

Of the cast, only Ian Livingstone, in a robust performance as Phobus, came anywhere near the mark.

The second presentation, an excerpt from *Sailor Beware*, was much more successful, with the producer, Mary Foster, giving a virtuoso performance as the harassed, domineering Emma, and Joyce Morland providing a hilarious impersonation of the dithering aunt.

She would have been my choice for the Best Supporting Actress, but as it was, *Sailor Beware* carried away only one award, for *The Best Up-country Entry*.

In his final speech (and many of the performers could profitably have studied the adjudicator's immaculate sense of timing), Mr. Peter Carpenter commented on the change of scene since he was here four years ago—and had some very apt things to say about the festival as a whole.

He had already suggested that he would like to take two of the original plays back to Uganda for production there—*Twika Buys a Wife*, and *With Strings*.

For the latter, Mr. Kuldip Sondhi was given the East Africa Theatre Guild Award for the best original play.

## Timothy Bungey looks back at the Kenya Drama Festival

With *Strings* carried off another award when Mr. Sharad Rao was presented with the Best Supporting Player's Trophy for his performance as Mohan.

The Kenya Drama Festival Bowl went to Mr. Peter Pearce for his moving performance as Daniel de Bosola in the Nairobi City Players' presentation of an extract from *The Duchess of Malfi*.

This sombre exercise in the macabre trembles on the verge of the ridiculous, but is redeemed by the beauty of the language, and Len Pierrepoint's stark production, dooladen and darkly lit, had just the right touch of brooding tragedy.

The play that carried away most of the awards was the Nairobi Amateur Dramatic Society's presentation of *The Trap*—an essay in "kitchen sink" drama that was intensely moving and had some very true things to say about the subtle variations of mood in family life.

All Kathleen Ross's affectionately observed characters were done justice by the excellent cast, and Winifred Ferguson well deserved the Kenya Drama Festival Figurine for her truthful performance of the slatternly cockney housewife who tries desperately to hold her family together.

## Exuberant

Norman Montgomery received the Producer's Trophy; Derry Shannon was awarded the Kenya Drama Festival Cup for the best decor; and *The Trap* not only carried off the Kenya Drama Festival Challenge Shield, but won the Audience Award as well.

On Saturday the four winning entries were performed at the National Theatre—*The Trap*; an exuberant musical entertainment provided by the Railway Players, *A Miniature Beggar's Opera*; and the two plays that tied in third place, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *Twika Buys a Wife*.

But it was sad to see that the theatre was by no means packed. We seem to be in the odd position where there is no lack of theatrical activity in East Africa, but there is a considerable lack of public support.

Perhaps, instead of trying to find ways of encouraging local dramatists and actors, we should look for a way of educating the public into becoming theatre-goers.

## THE 1965 KENYA DRAMA

### FESTIVAL

THE adjudicator at this year's drama festival was Peter Carpenter, Director of the Uganda National Theatre, making a welcome return to the festival after an interval of four years.

Occasionally in the past, some drama groups, who had put an immense amount of work into their productions, have been met with such blistering criticism from the adjudicator, that it deterred them from making the effort again. Fortunately Mr. Carpenter's approach was entirely different. His remarks were always sympathetic — perhaps a little too much so at times — and full of the constructive kind of criticism which helps both producer and players to improve their standards — surely the object of any drama festival.

The winners of this year's festival were the Nairobi Amateur Dramatic Society with their production of "The Trap", a kitchen sink drama by Kathleen Ross. This production won praise of the highest order from the adjudicator, who called it "a beautiful combination between writer, producer and actors"; and it not only won the major award of the festival, but also those for the best producer (Norman Montgomery), the best leading actress

(Winifred Ferguson), the best supporting actress (Yvonne Helliwell) and the best decor (Derry Shannon). Pamela Bull and Carolyn Davies, the only other members of the cast, also won high praise from the adjudicator, and the public set their seal of approval on Mr. Carpenter's decision by giving this play the Audience Award — surely a record for any drama festival!

The play adjudged second in order of merit was The Railway Players' production of "A Miniature Beggar's Opera", an adaptation by Constance Cox of the 18th century classic by John Gay. Mr. Carpenter, who said that he enjoyed this production very much indeed, gave high praise to the producer, Andrew Warwick, to many members of the cast, all of whom sang delightfully and acted with obvious enjoyment of their parts, and to set designers Jim Stone and Harry Mayhew. Special mention, too, should be made of the splendid costumes, whose designers remained anonymous.

The adjudicator found it impossible to separate the next two plays, and gave equal third place to the Aquinas Dramatic Society's production of "Twika Buys a Wife", by Kenya playwright Ann Palmer, and "The Duchess of Malfi", an extract from a play by the 17th century dramatist John Webster, put on by the City Players and produced by Leonard Pierrepont.

Charles Ollington's production of "Twika" with an all-African cast won considerable praise from the adjudicator, not only for the producer and actors (among whom Lono Oyat and Consolata Kariuki came in for especial mention), but also for the setting, a most lifelike representation of a typical urban location. This was a thoroughly lively play, which the audience obviously enjoyed.

"The Duchess of Malfi" achieved its success for different reasons. A sombre play, too full of tragedy to be enjoyed, in the literal sense of the word, by the majority of playgoers, this presentation made its impact through good production and, apart from a certain lack of audibility, some very fine acting; an outstanding set by Meryll Evans, which was highly praised by the adjudicator, and most effective lighting and costumes, the latter designed by Mary Epsom. Mr. Carpenter particularly praised Phina Simmance's very moving performance in the title role, and also those of

(Continued opposite)

## KENYA DRAMA FESTIVAL

Alan Simmance and Peter Pearce, who won the coveted award for the best actor in the festival.

Space does not permit mention of all the remaining plays, but it would be impossible to conclude this review without recalling the Orient Art Circle's "With Strings" by Kuldip Sondhi, who won the award for the best original play. Producer Vinay Inamdar, said the adjudicator, had deployed his characters well, and the decor by Mukand Vyas was in the list of runners-up for this award. The play was well acted, Sharad Rao receiving the award for the best supporting actor in his role of the young Indian in love with an African girl—the situation around which the plot revolves.

Worthy of note among the remaining plays was Kenyatta College's production of that old favourite "The Farce

of the Worthy Master Pierre Patelin", whose producer, Robert Grosshans, was congratulated for the splendid pace he set. This was another play which Mr. Carpenter said he had thoroughly enjoyed.

I have left to the end the two productions brought all the way from Williamson's Diamond Mines in Tanganyika by the Mwadui players. To do this was really no mean achievement, and an act from "Sailor Beware", produced by Mary Foster, won the award for the best "up-country" entry, and was one of the highlights of the festival. Let us hope that we shall see more of these talented players. Perhaps their enterprise will induce some of our own up-country drama groups, whom we so sadly missed this time, to take part in next year's festival.

W.B.W.

# Festival suggestion causes dispute

WELL, well — my innocent suggestion that we should have done with awards at drama festivals seems to have stirred up a bit of controversy, although it does not appear that the powers that be have any intention of taking the suggestion up.

I do not propose to reopen this one, but my attention was caught by a remark made by the president of the East Africa Theatre Guild, Mr. R. Kingston Davies, in a letter on the subject.

He said: "We have good reason to believe that several groups, including some of our regular entrants, would cease to be interested if the stimulus of competition were to be removed."

Now there is a damning statement if you like. I am not

BEHIND  
THE  
CURTAIN  
with  
Peter  
Macdonald

sure to which groups Mr. Kingston Davies is referring, but it means that they have a completely wrong attitude to the festival and particularly to their role in it. It suggests that maybe we should reappraise the condition of the amateur theatre movement.

If a performance is mounted purely as an entertainment — such as *The Wizard of Oz*, of

which I have written below — then it is natural that the company should be looking for some reward, in the shape of at least recovering the expenditure of the production.

But I repeat, the primary purpose of a drama festival should be instructive, and if it is to be reduced to a pot-hunting event it might as well be scrapped and replaced, possibly, by a straightforward commercial presentation of one-act plays.

It will breed an amateur theatre whose members are only concerned to demonstrate their skill, rather than to seek to improve it, and once we reach that stage we have reached a dead end.

I think it is also worth drawing the attention of the Guild, and others, to the point made by Mr. Ezekiel Mphahlele, of Chemchemi Cultural Centre, about the need to attract — if necessary by seeking out — African audiences.

To move out of the sphere of controversy — the Nairobi City Players are hard at work preparing for their Christmas show, which is to be *The Wizard of Oz*, and they promise another "spectacular musical" running from December 9 to 23.

I am told that it is the group's most ambitious and costly production to date, and it has been chosen as being close to the pantomime tradition and therefore suitable for children. For this reason weekday performances will be at 6 p.m.

It has a cast of almost 80 with about another 20 involved in the various back-stage jobs. The producer is Robert Young who gave us *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*, with musical direction by Geoffrey Knight.

The cast will include Dorothy Mathews, in the leading role, Winifred Ferguson, Dorothy Patience, Pamela Bull, Julie Eames, Sheelagh O'Meara, Sheila McKnight, Robert Butler, Benny Goodman and Jack Highman, together with a large chorus of children and a corps de ballet directed by Jennifer Butler.

Mary Epsom once again is in charge of the wardrobe and the sets have been designed by Peter Chiarletti.

Booking opens at the National Theatre on November 22.

**L**EST recent comments should seem to imply that the Theatre Guild is clinging to the competitive type of festival against the wishes of entrants, critics, and even the theatre-going public, please let me assure your readers that we are only anxious to present our two annual drama festivals in Kenya in whatever form entrants and public like best.

We are aware that some would prefer a non-competitive festival, but we have good reason to believe that at least as many (including some of our regular entrants) would cease to be interested if the stimulus of competition were to be removed.

Some of the arguments against competitive festivals are, in my view, of doubtful cogency. It seems to be assumed, for example, that if marks are awarded and the winners and runners-up in certain classes announced, then no group can possibly enter the festival except with the sole object of winning this, that, or another award. Why?

If a group should want to enter a play which they think will stand little chance of winning an award, there is nothing to stop them doing so. They will still get what credit is due to them, for discriminating theatre-goers will be just as impressed by an adjudicator's respectful comments on some over-ambitious, worthwhile experiment as by his unqualified praise of, and award of prizes to, an easier piece which was obviously well within the compass of the group concerned.

Peter Macdonald's notion that competitive festivals cause entrants to confine themselves to "safe" choices of play seems equally hard to sustain. One group alone, for example, has performed, in the course of four competitive festivals, Sartre's *Men Without Shadows*, Exton's *No Fixed Abode*, Simpson's *A Resounding Tinkle*, part of Shaw's *Saint Joan*, part of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and part of Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*. If these are safe choices, I should be intrigued to know what Mr. Macdonald would regard as adventurous ones.

Then there is the idea that in a non-competitive festival everybody would be relaxed and care-free, having been (in Mr. Mphahlele's words) "liberated from the shackles of competition and the habit of engaging feverishly in rehearsals for that one performance in the year." But the fact is that nothing of much value can be achieved in the theatre without discipline, which is helped, not hindered, by competition. In my experience those taking part in a play can only begin to enjoy themselves and feel "liberated" after having endured a sufficient number of rehearsals (whether feverish or otherwise). To suggest that the absence of competition would make entrants feel that they need not bother about rehearsals any more may be true, but hardly seems an argument in favour of non-competitive festivals.

Nevertheless, we are always ready to consider suggestions, especially from entrants, for improving these festivals, and if ever a majority of entrants

should express a clear preference for a non-competitive event, we should be prepared to give the idea a trial. In the meantime, it might, perhaps, seem a little discourteous to the generous souls who presented the various trophies to withdraw these arbitrarily from circulation.

Rather, shall we seek to get the best of both worlds by retaining adjudication and the award of trophies for those who like them, while assuring those who do not that it is well understood by all concerned that the winning of an award (affected as it must be by such imponderables as the adjudicator's personal tastes and the state of his digestion at the time) is by no means the "be-all and end-all" of entering the festival, and that good work in the theatre, whether it wins or loses, may justly be regarded as its own reward.

To turn, finally, to Mr. Mphahlele's plea for a "more liberal" drama festival, he might be interested to know that we did try, this year, to introduce an international flavour into the festival by inviting foreign embassies, High Commissions, etc., to put in non-competing entries of a national character, which could consist either of drama, mime, dancing, or singing. Unfortunately, we could not offer to pay expenses, as this would have meant risking large sums which we did not possess on what would have been at best a highly speculative idea: and although there were some signs of interest, no entries of this type finally materialised.

It is tempting idea, indeed, to imagine Nairobi as the venue for an International Festival of Drama, Music and Dancing: but the brutal fact must be faced that such an event would be likely to lose money on a truly majestic scale unless full houses at, say, 20/- to 60/- a seat could be guaranteed for every perform-

ance. Still, one of these days...

R. KINGSTON DAVIES,  
President,  
East Africa Theatre Guild  
(Kenya).  
Nairobi, Nov. 2, 1965.

**BEHIND  
THE CURTAIN  
with Peter  
Macdonald**

Coward was on the point of ceasing to be an up-and-coming playwright in favour of having "arrived".

This play is set in the home of an ageing actress who feels the need to prove that she has lost neither her touch nor her charm. Her family consists of a novelist husband, and two precocious and "modern" children.

All four members of the family — without telling any of the others — invite a friend home for the weekend. The result is a disorganised and ill-assorted household playing a sort of romantic musical chairs with everybody at odds with everybody else.

Playing the family are Georgine Anderson and Elliot Playfair (who also produces) as the parents and Janet Waldron and Jeremy Conway as their children. This will be Mr. Conway's last appearance before he returns to Britain.

The visitors are Elaine Baillie, John Gardiner, Dennis Mayers and — making her first appearance with the company — Christine Le Brocq. To complete the cast there is Mollie Donovan Maule, as the servant who disapproves of the whole thing.



It seems that I stirred up more than I suspected when I criticised the set-up of the Kenya Drama Festival a few weeks ago. Having been roundly taken to task by a number of people for suggesting that it should be made non-competitive I am told off for daring to suggest that some companies chose "safe" plays to improve their chances in competition.

Some of the festival "regulars" tell me that they choose the drama festival as an occasion to put on plays which are not "box-office" and could not be put on in the normal way of things. How then can I call these safe?

In the first place I was not using the word in commercial terms. The reference was to the competitive element, and in this sense a "safe" play is one which provides the sort of situation or style which a given company knows from experience it can handle expertly.

Secondly, there have been instances where companies have suited their choice, either of play, or of the type of character.

The next best is any other untried script, and there have been more of these, and I hope many more to come in future — and then, perhaps, in the context of a Kenya drama festival it would be rewarding to take up the suggestion made this year by Peter Carpenter and in other years by other adjudicators for the adaptation of a classic into a contemporary African situation.

The point being that "safe" is a state of mind induced by the idea of competition, whereas the slogan of a drama festival should be "adventure".

acters portrayed, to the known, or likely, tastes of the adjudicator.

In neither case need the play be a safe box-office bet, and sometimes the result is something which is rewarding from both sides of the footlights — something out of the usual run of amateur production. But it is the attitude, rather than the product, which I was criticising.

If a play is chosen because it provides the company, or a particular individual, with a good chance of winning a trophy then it is a badly chosen play. If it is chosen because it is something to be tried out, to be made an experiment, chosen because it is new, because nobody knows quite how it is going to turn out but everybody is determined to make it interesting then it is a good choice.

The "unsafe" play *par excellence* is the untried, original script from an author who has got a new dramatic idea. I can think of two such plays in recent years and both took a hammering from the adjudicator but nobody seemed to mind.