

ENTERTAINMENT

KENYA DRAMA
FESTIVAL

Barbara Phillips sums up

Another Kenya Drama Festival is over, distinguished by a new play which won the audience award, the same play being judged the best in the Festival by the adjudicator, Miss Frances Mackenzie.

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Did it deserve the accolade of "best" play of the Festival? It seems fairly certain that **Saint Joan**, for which "Reporter's" T.V. critic, Bob Cheetham, won the best producer's award, ran it a very close second indeed.

Now for a quick look at all the plays and the full list of awards:

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The Roar, by Eugene O'Neill (The Railway Players, produced by Betty Brock). A melodrama which needed strong theatrical acting, and got it. In the adjudicator's opinion, the actors went all out, but should have held back in order to build up an atmosphere of brooding savagery. She praised the set and the costumes.

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The Undesignated, by Kuldip Sondhi. (The Orient Art Circle, produced by Harish Dave). This playwright had a strong sense of theatre and had written with compassion. The producer had brought the play to life and brought out its dramatic values. The adjudicator felt that it fulfilled the theatre's need to reflect contemporary life, and she praised both the sets and the lighting.

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Saint Joan, by George Bernard Shaw. (Nairobi City Players, produced by Bob Cheetham). Hailed as the first costume play of the Festival, and the one with the biggest cast, this was praised as a good choice which had needed a lot of work.

The sets and costumes were both good, and the production possessed style, intelligence and pace, and had achieved both clarity and characterisation.

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Awards:

Best Play — 1. **The Undesignated**; 2. **Saint Joan**; 3. **The Lesson**.

Best actor — Alan Simmance as the Archbishop in **Saint Joan**.

Best actress — Dorothy Patience as Middle Paradock in **A Resounding Tinkle**.

Best decor — Sanat Trivedi for **The Undesignated**.

Best producer — Robert Cheetham for **Saint Joan**.

Best supporting actress — June Parker in **The Lesson**.

Best supporting actor — William Dann in **The Parrot**.

Best original play — Kuldip Sondhi, for **The Undesignated**.

Audience award — **The Undesignated**.

'DOCTOR AT SEA'

Crisis at the Maule

As a play by Ted Willis, this is not the hilarious joke it is intended to be, although the Donovan Mau'e company get as much out of it as they can.

They suffered a first-night crisis when an actress in a leading role, Christine Frost, was rushed to hospital within hours of the opening curtain, forcing the postponement of the first night for 24 hours. Anne James, a popular local amateur actress, crammed the lines and stepped competently into the breach.

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TOPICAL KENYA PROBLEM THEME OF FESTIVAL PRODUCTION

THREE very different plays made the third stage of the Kenya Drama Festival "a splendid evening", the adjudicator, Miss Frances Mackenzie, said.

The first play of the evening was a new play by Kul-dip Sondhi called *The Undesignated*, presented by the Orient Art Circle. Miss Mackenzie gave an enthusiastic welcome to this play which deals with the question of Africanisation as it affects non-designated Kenya civil servants.

She said it fulfilled the theatre's need to reflect contemporary life and had been written with compassion and understanding.

It had been produced by Harish Dave — with great skill which brought out its dramatic values. Among the actors she particularly praised Pratap Kapila, as a young and emotional civil servant, for being "a tremendous asset to the play" and for bringing out the comedy of his rôle which had not been apparent from the script.

This play, and an excerpt from Shaw's *Saint Joan*, the second entry from the Nairobi City Players, were the first entries to include large casts, and therefore set bigger problems than had previously been tackled.

Miss Mackenzie commended the choice of *Saint Joan* — "a very great play" which would be remembered even if all

Shaw's other plays were forgotten. It had been presented colourfully with a good eye for detail.

She admired Robert Cheetham's production for its style, intelligence and clarity and the remarkable characterisation that it achieved.

In the title rôle Nancy Roe gave a performance that was "very good indeed" in its simplicity and sincerity. Miss Mackenzie said. Peter Pearce, as a fire-eating French knight, gave a well-sustained and vigorous performance and Alan Simmance, as an archbishop, won praise for "particularly good characterisation," combining authority and dignity.

The remaining play was *The Cat and the Cream*, by William Dinner and William Morum, presented by the Gilgil Garrison Players.

Miss Mackenzie disapproved of their choice, which she described as "an all-time low for absurdity of plot."

The actors seemed to be unhappy with it — "and I don't blame them," she said.



City Players stage Shaw

BACKSTAGE at the National Theatre, members of the Nairobi City Players (above), make up for their parts in Shaw's "Saint Joan" from which they presented an excerpt as the second of the group's two entries in the current Kenya Drama Festival.

Their colourful mediaeval costumes, designed by Mary Epsom, received a special word of praise from the adjudicator, Miss Frances Mackenzie.

On the left is a scene from the only original play presented at this year's festival — "The Undesignated" by Kul-dip Sondhi, presented by the Orient Art Circle.

This play, which deals with the sensitive problem of Africanisation as it affects the non-designated officer, won an special commendation from Miss Mackenzie. In this scene a Government Minister drops in on a party at the home of a non-designated officer.

KENYA DRAMA FESTIVAL

It went with a swing

THE Kenya Drama Festival at the National Theatre got its "second wind" on Wednesday night. Blessed with a fuller house than hitherto, both players and adjudicator seemed to blossom forth, and the evening went with something of a swing.

There were three entries, the first of which was a new play by Kenya author Kuldip Sondhi, presented by the Orient Art Circle — *The Undesignated*.

This, as its title implies, was a moderately topical play which was described by Miss Frances Mackenzie as a welcome contribution to the festival.

It had, she said, a certain distinction in the writing of the dialogue; although there was a danger that the first scene might become too much of a debate.

It had been produced with skill; and the author, indeed, owed something to his producer for the way in which passages which might have become academic had been given a theatrical lift.

The adjudicator praised the cast for the way it had played together as an "ensemble" — as she described it — making particular mention of the performance of Pratap Kapila.

His interpretation of Majid, she said, was an asset to the play because it contributed comedy where, in the mere reading of the script, she had not foreseen it.

Miss Mackenzie was not so happy about the choice of the second play, *The Cat And*

By ROBERT BEAUMONT

The Cream, presented by the Gilgil Garrison Players — because it "hit an all-time low for absurdity of plot, and the only hope for the actors was to get on with it — whizz!!"

This, unfortunately, they did not really do, being so spread across the vast width of the stage as to make playing together (and therefore pace), a near impossibility.

The best bit, the adjudicator thought, was when Mrs. Peggot and Peter fell into each other's arms at the end — "with obvious relief."

The Nairobi City Players provided the first costume play of the festival with their excerpts from *Saint Joan*. This was a good choice; the setting was good and the costumes colourful. It was, in fact, an example of how a group could benefit from working on a good text.

And, while she thought the general standard of the acting was good, she was especially impressed with the simplicity and sincerity of Nancy Roe's performance as Joan, and the performance of Alan Simmance as the Archbishop of Rheims.

Having, indeed, given a very sprightly and amusing demonstration of the adjudicator's art, Frances Mackenzie rounded everything off by describing the third session of the Kenya Drama Festival as "a very splendid evening."

The Kenya Drama Festival

THANK YOU, MISS MACKENZIE!

by Muriel Walker

POSSIBLY the happiest man at the recent Kenya Drama Festival was Mr. Kuldip Sondhi of Mombasa, author of the play, "The Undesignated" which took no less than four awards, more than any other production. This was not because the play was so very remarkable or startling, but is an encouraging proof of what can happen at a Festival, given the right combination of circumstances.

Mr. Sondhi first collected the award of the East Africa Theatre Guild for having written the best original play. It so happened that there were no other entrants, but had the play not been of a high standard (which it was) this award would not have been given at all. Arising out of this, The Festival Challenge Shield was awarded to The Orient Art Circle as the society which presented "The Undesignated" and the audience themselves enthusiastically added their support to this display of local talent by electing the play the best in the Festival. Finally, Mr. Sanat Trivedi's two sets were awarded the Festival Cup for the best decor. And what was the play all about?

It dealt with the position of Kenya's civil servants who, after many years' service, must now expect to be replaced by Africans, sometimes of lesser ability. Kuldip's sister, Krishna is a government servant and she played a small part in his play (though her name does not appear on the programme). The play was rather too long; possibly two of the characters could have been omitted as they did not take the action forward in any way and Kuldip side-stepped — admittedly, most cleverly — the issues he had raised! Nevertheless, it was still an enormously interesting play with dialogue about as sprightly as one could have wished and many flashes of delightful humour which the audience loved.

Good production and pleasant acting, as well as the sets already mentioned, contributed to the artistry. Like his African hero, Solomon Ohanga, played by Jonathan Karlara, Kuldip is an engineer. Next year I hope Kuldip will enlarge his horizon and write not merely a Festival piece, but a

play capable of survival. It would be wonderful indeed if, in addition to ranking as Kenya's own playwright, Kuldip could take his place with the best of the young playwrights contributing to the modern theatre.

I think everyone was entirely in agreement with Miss Mackenzie's choice of the best actress, Dorothy Patience, who played in "The Resounding Tinkle" is a lesson to poorer actresses who mumble. Mrs. Patience is, in fact, totally incapable of a really bad performance and she has delighted many people during her years with the Nairobi City Players, but year after year she has come within a hairsbreadth of the award, which someone else has carried away. At last she has achieved the success which her name implies always comes in the end. As Miss Mackenzie so wisely remarked, there is no absolute measure-stick for creativity.

Alan Simmance was awarded the Festival Bowl for being the best actor. I had already marked him down as being in line for the Best Supporting Players' Trophy but, again to quote Miss Mackenzie, "How can you judge a supporting actor in plays where they all appear to be leading men?" Mr. Simmance played the part of the Archbishop of Rheims in the two scenes taken from Shaw's "St. Joan."

★

Until the Wednesday evening when the Nairobi City Players presented "St. Joan", it would have seemed almost certain that "The Resounding Tinkle" which Denis Patience so admirably produced, would win the producer's award. It never does to forecast. "St. Joan", produced by Robert Cheetham, took first place. A costume play, using a larger number of players and covering two quite different scenes, raises far more problems than a play with a few players in a domestic interior. I wish I could think of something more stimulating to write than that the costumes by Mary Epsom were "exceedingly colourful", but the fact is there is so much to take in whilst watching this play which, however many times one sees it, always seems refreshing, that I did not give the costumes the attention they certainly deserved. All I do know is that the Nairobi City Players must put on "St. Joan" in its entirety in the near future.

At this point Nancy Roe must be mentioned, although she did not win an award. Miss Mackenzie would have liked her to have played Joan with rather more earthiness: I would have liked rather more passion, yet the truth

is one can probably no more agree about how Joan ought to be played than about the interpretation of Lady Macbeth, Miss Roe certainly played the part with the authority and assurance I feel is essential in this rôle and her face with its broad cheeks and lovely, wide-spaced eyes (even though make-up helped here) was the right kind of face. The spot-lit tableau at the end of the second scene was very moving.

★

Another popular winner was Miss June Parker who played the part of the maid in Eugene Ionesco's "The Lesson", presented by The Nairobi Arts Theatre. This comic drama, as it was called, concerned a professor who becomes the victim of his own eloquence, being somewhat carried away by it during his lesson to his pupil. No, he does not seduce her. That would have been far too commonplace for Ionesco. He stabs her to death, and apparently the girl was his fortieth 'accident' that day! Miss Parker's clear, ringing voice and her ability to get from every line the suggestion of impending menace, helped to give shape to this production. I understand Miss Parker is a school-teacher, so perhaps this gave her excellent practice!

The professor, by the way, was played by Don Gent and at the beginning his performance was brilliant, but it seemed to tail off as though he had lost interest in what he was saying. This can hardly be wondered at considering that the learning of such a part must have been a prodigious task. Phina Simmance acted the part of the young pupil and her appearance and manner were most convincingly that of a very young girl. Unfortunately, her rich, mature voice was not so suited to this part.

William Dann, a young boy who took the part of the son in the play, "The Parrot" by Harindranath Chattopadhyaya won the award for the best supporting actor. I liked this play, which seemed more in the tradition of India, but I feel the adjudicator judged here solely by Western standards of stage-craft. At times the language was extremely poetic and it had much charm, though this was not consistently so. Was this the result of a faulty translation, as Miss Mackenzie suggested it might be? It is true that up to the time of Tagore Indian plays suffered quite appallingly from translators. But consistency in language is not something we have come to expect from our Asian colleagues and friends, is it?

The wife of Vyjyanti might have been more forceful in resisting her drunken husband from a dramatic sense, but would this, in fact, have been more believable? The mention of the Festival of Lights on the eve of Diwali was very topical. The brilliant costumes against the terra cotta décor was very impressive. If only this play could have been produced by Harish Dave, who produced "The Undesignated"

There was no award to the Best Up-Country Society, for the simple reason that none competed. Apparently, for one reason or another, several societies had to withdraw from the Festival.

It seems obvious that on the emotional level, theatricals by amateur societies can be as pleasurable (if not more so) than those by professional companies: on the purely artistic level this can rarely be the case. To compare work by amateur actors and actresses with that of professionals is as wrong, to my mind, as to compare the work of a Michelangelo with that of a Henry Moore (though some do try). This is not to imply that amateur theatricals are on every count inferior. The finest amateur societies have sometimes shown a selfless devotion to the theatre hopelessly unpractical for professional companies. But standards of criticism must be different — intelligently different.

There is no doubt that Miss Mackenzie has gained a true wisdom in this respect. She was never for a moment vitriolic and sneering, but valued the labours presented for her consideration and her criticism showed insight of the tremendous hard work which goes into each and every production. Occasionally she went to great trouble to explain not only the fault, but how this could be remedied for the future. For instance in the all-African play, "Dawn" there is supposed to be a terrific blast at the very end which annihilates the entire cast. What came forth was — *A Resounding Tinkle*. Miss Mackenzie explained how this sound effect could have been increased and how the impression of the sound of falling masonry could have been produced. In passing, she spoke of the honest sincerity of these players and though the play lacked a good producer, 'one or two of the cast showed marked acting ability, particularly John Kitchwen.

As for other faults in other plays, they were roughly the same crop which turn up year after year: fidgeting and shuffling about, addressing the audience instead of speaking to each other and voices which cannot be heard. Another failing is that of actors placed at extremes of the stage who, like lost souls, call to each other across infinity. Then there is the matter of lighting, a great blaze of battens when a carefully placed spot-light or two is all that is called for.

★

But all these are faults which can be corrected. It is no sign of amateurism (I use the word in its more modern and deplorable sense) to fail to achieve perfection. This can happen just as easily to professional actors and actresses as they merely have great resources, a keener team spirit and rather more tricks up their sleeve! It is definitely a mark of amateurism to be unable to accept criticism and not to profit by it, especially when it is given in a kindly manner as it was by Miss Mackenzie.

I said to her that I feared there had been too much harshness in the past and she replied that she could see no reason for it as it achieved nothing. Constructive criticism, tempered by a few words of encouragement can do so much. The chief thought of the not-so-fortunate should now be, "Next year, I'll jolly well show 'em!"

MEINARD DONKER takes a look at the KENYA DRAMA FESTIVAL

GOOD VALUE FROM BOTH THE JUDGE AND THE JUDGED

KENYA'S Drama Festival traditionally divides its interest in two—that of the plays, and that provided by the adjudicator. The latter is often better value than the plays—and Miss Frances Mackenzie proved, no exception in this respect.

She started off with an air of gentle drollery which enlivened all her adjudication summaries and stemmed, I like to feel, from her first reading of the programme in which she was solemnly described as an MA (Oxen) — an agricultural degree, perhaps?

Slated

In the past, adjudicators have been slated for going to extremes of understanding kindness or testy unpleasantness. Miss Mackenzie appeared to prefer the golden mean of objective comment — but when she did criticise strongly the effect was not lost by her gentle approach.

She proved that one can be positive without being bitchy, a lesson which some previous adjudicators of this and other festivals would do well to learn.

Her comments on the plays struck an admirable balance between wise generality and detailed comment. For example: "I did feel, didn't you, that the dreamlike quality (in *The Rope* by the *Railway Players*) would have been heightened if the backdrop had been less an exact representation." A point which might seem academic but could indeed have helped to set the mood and affect the whole play.

On some occasions her remarks were so relevant to the present climate of theatre in Kenya that I glanced round at the audience, vainly hoping to see a face or two from our professionals drinking at the fountain. Perhaps I just did not spot them.

And so to the plays themselves. The first night saw two, both of significance. *The Resounding Tinkle* — a nonsense piece by N. F. Simpson — was boldly presented by the *Nairobi City Players*, and brought Dorothy Patience, I thought, well into line for the Best Actress award.

Speculation

(This review is going to Press before the final decisions are announced, and I may perhaps be forgiven for a little idle speculation on the results).

The Rope followed, a rather grisly little piece by Eugene O'Neill, which called for the difficult achievement of shallow characters acting from deep motives and received as treatment a sustained yell of anger from all involved.

Make no mistake, this was not ineffective, but the play does give opportunity for contrasting depth of mental shadow which it did not receive. Taking my cue from Miss Mackenzie, I plunge unashamedly into detail and declare that the sack of 1,000 silver dollars should have been a great, heavy thing — to land on the stage with the thump of doom.

Slow

The second night of the Festival brought us two of dross and one of gold. *Down*, from the *Nairobi African Dramatic Society*, was far too slow to grip in the melodramatic way it was intended by the author, and the pace never altered to give tension.

April Dawns, chosen by the *Woodley Club Drama Group*,

was a morsel which would have been worth doing only to see the parts gleaming under professional elbow grease. They did not.

The gold came at the end of a long evening, with *Nairobi Arts Theatre* and *The Lesson* by Eugene Ionesco, a should-be chilling sketch of human non-communication and resultant violence.

That it did not chill sufficiently hardly detracted from my admiration of Don Gen's seamanship in the oceans of words through which he had to race; nor from the student of Phina Simmanca — so French in her response to the undercurrents of the situation, in her dreamlike acceptance of the bizarre; nor from the suggested set.

Only in production could I have hoped for more — and more would have been to sweep the whole festival triumphantly before it. As it was, I give Phina Simmanca the Best Actress award.

Ghostly

Panting from a marathon of late nights, the faithful audience assembled in front of the National Theatre's ghostly coloured curtains on Wednesday to see the first locally written play, by Kulegip Sonchi, called *The Undesignated*, presented by the *Orient Art Circle*.

Here, theatre fulfilled its function both of comment and of entertainment — taking the complicated sameness of our local scene and weaving it into something that had a universal application. Mr. Sonchi is definitely an artist.

I think the cast made great deal of the play, and would not be surprised if

puerile plot or the snazzy ending which nearly ended my evening with a walk-out. My sympathies lie with the actors.

That I did not leave was because I expected *Shaw's St. Joan* by the *Nairobi City Players*, to be worth seeing. It was.

From this rich and moving production by Bob Cheetham I expect an outright win — a "Best Producer" and probably a "Best Actor."

I am, unfortunately, not able to include *The Parrot* or *The Recco* in this review, and from these may stem the surprises which would upset my prognostications. But to do so they would have to be really good.

I feel our thanks are sincerely due to Miss Mackenzie for her intelligence, her humour and her expertise. I hope she enjoyed it.

best-supporting actor award came from this production.

Why on earth the *Gilgil Garrison Players* chose a load of rubbish like *The Car and the Cross* by William Dimer and William Morum (one man would surely have been enough to author this disaster) I will never understand.

No award could possibly be won by the idiotic lines, the

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Best actress — Dorothy Patience as Middle Paradox in **A Resounding Tinkle**.

Best decor — Sanat Trivedi for **The Undesignated**.

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Best original play — Kuldip Sondhi, for **The Undesignated**.

Audience award — **The Undesignated**.

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Etiquette breach feared — but play award stands

After Kuldip Sondhi's play **Undesignated** had been awarded first prize in the Kenya Drama Festival an objection was lodged against it on account of alleged breaches of the rules, it was learned yesterday.

No changes are to be made in the awards, however. A spokesman for the East Africa Theatre Guild said that after consultation with the adjudicator, Miss Frances Mackenzie, it was decided that the Orient Art Circle should keep the awards presented.

It was thought there had been a breach of etiquette but this was an internal matter affecting the guild alone and did not warrant action being taken against the society.

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DRAMA FESTIVAL OF CONTRASTS

WRITING about the 1963 Kenya Drama Festival a few days ago, I said that it promised to be interesting. It was — if only for its contrasts. Things were either good or bad; there was no mediocrity to speak of. The things that were good were almost of the same high standard; the bad could only have been worse with difficulty.

What eventually made the festival interesting was not the performances by the various groups but the work of two individuals whose personalities finally dominated everything else.

The first was the adjudicator, Miss Frances Mackenzie.

As "a Daniel came to judgment" she surpassed any adjudicator we have seen in Kenya. Employing no pyrotechnical devices, she held her audience enthralled every evening. She analysed every play, remarked on every performance, dissected each production fully and thoroughly, teaching as she went.

Every criticism had its reason explained, every fault she found was given its correct alternative. With kindness and good humour she must have taught more about the art of the theatre in four evenings than previous adjudicators have done in ten years.

It is to be hoped that the

contestants — and prospective ones in the audience — will have taken careful note of everything she said.

And I would — in all humility — suggest to the East Africa Theatre Guild that great encouragement would be given to those who might enter for next year's festival if Miss Mackenzie could be invited to return to continue her good work in 1964.

The other personality who emerged from the festival was an author.

ORIGINAL

Hitherto regarded primarily as a writer of short stories, Kuldip Sondhi entered the theatrical arena on Wednesday night with his play "The Undesignated."

One's interest was aroused in the first place because this was the only original play in the festival. But it proved to be more than just that. It was also the stepping-stone to three awards to the group which presented it, the Orient Art Circle.

"The Undesignated" showed that Mr. Sondhi has a talent for dialogue which can serve his actors well. But there are occasions where verbosity takes pride of place over action — and then the author becomes dependent on an inventive producer. However,

By

ROBERT BEAUMONT

Kuldip Sondhi is a prolific writer, and this first play was a clear indication that it may not be long before his work finds its way into the greater theatrical centres of Europe and America, just as his stories have already created an interest abroad.

On reflection, the 1963 Drama Festival was disappointing on two main counts.

The standard of acting, production and design was considerably lower than it was, say, two years ago; and the use of lighting is a side which

seems almost to have been ignored altogether.

The other disappointment was the extraordinarily poor support given to the festival by the theatregoing public. Too many "Theatricals" may seem a triviality to be indulged in by the crackpot few. But, in fact, the Theatre has been the backbone of cultural activities in every country in the world over many centuries. Have we so much culture in Kenya that we can afford to ignore it?

These are the Festival awards:

Kenya Drama Festival award for the winning entry: "The Undesignated" (The Orient Art Circle).

Best Actress: Dorothy

Patience in "The Resounding Tinkle" (Nairobi City Players).

Best Actor: Alan Simmance in "Saint Joan" (Nairobi City Players).

Best Decor: Sanat Trivedi, for "The Undesignated."

Best Producer: Robert Cheetham, for "Saint Joan."

Best Supporting Actor: William Dunn in "The Parrot" (Artists' Welfare Guild).

Best Supporting Actress: June Parker in "The Lesson" (The Nairobi Arts Theatre).

Best Original Play: Kuldip Sondhi for "The Undesignated."

The Audience Award: "The Undesignated" by Kuldip Sondhi, presented by the Orient Art Circle.