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THE RED SHADOW IS BACK

EAST SURREY AMATEURS IN “THE DESERT SONG”

The Red Shadow is back in the Borough after more than two decades and a world war have passed since his former visit, and his mysterious comings, goings and doughty deeds are providing entertainment for a new generation of playgoers - along with some few, probably, who remember his .advent in 1934 - as "The Desert Song” is chanted afresh by members of the East Surrey Operatic Society in the Redhill Market Hall this week. It is a welcome return to lovers of romantic 1ight opera, for, although it is possible to suggest that in this particular work Sigmund Romberg made a few haunting numbers go rather a long way, there is in it plenty of music, that is more than moderately good of its kind, there is a wealth of colourful spectacle, and a story whose unfolding is attended ·by .any amount of lively movement and romantic glow. Incidentally, recent events in North Africa have given a touch of topicality to a play whose scene is set in French Morocco.

In this week's presentation our local amateurs are again fortunate in the services of Elsie Rendell as producer, and with a troupe which includes several who have built up the Society’s reputation in the post-war years, the outcome of skilled coaching and obviously of sedulous rehearsal is an evening's entertainment of sterling all-round quality.

The part of Pierre Birabeau, alias the Red Shadow, the French Governor’s son, who slips in and out of :his disguise as the Robin Hoodesque leader of a sort of : Moroccan resistance movement, is safe in the practised hands of Douglas Chantler. His voice is heard to fine effect in the "theme song" of the opera and other familiar melodies, and he makes a gallant, dashing figure both in his banditry and his lovemaking. Once again the leading lady of the production is Molly Greaves (née Larkin), who combines natural charm and developing confidence as an actress with a singing voice of attractive quality to make her rendering of the part of the adventurous Margot another emphatic success. The role of the hellcat Azuri is given its full measure of passionate force and sinister allure by Audrey Nightingale, and Frank Tatham is suitably pompous and insensitive as her discarding lover and Margot's undesired suitor, Capt. Paul Fontaine.

As Benjamin Kidd, the egregious Paris newspaper man, Roy Williamson has not so much scope for comic character portrayal as he had, as Solomon Hooker in last year’s "Rebel Maid", but he clowns it indefatigably and suits capering gesture, and facial drollery to an unhesitant flow of inane chatter in irresistibly mirth-provoking style. No East Surrey show would seem quite complete without E. Lovell Hewitt in an engagingly senile role, and he is thoroughly convincing in that of, General Birabeau, father of the masquerading Pierre, and uncle of the unbiddable Margot. John Rapley, makes an impressive figure and, sings sonorousy as Ali Ben Ali, Pierre’s Riff chieftain friend, Ethel Molton is a sprightly Susan, and Patricia Page's demonstration of “It” as the Spanish Clementina is as provocative as could he desired. A real contribution to the vocal quality of the show is made by Eugene Crawley as the Red Shadow's right hand man, Sid El Kar, and other parts ,are worthily handled ,by Godfrey Hill and Richard Nightingale as members of his band, Don Nicol and Joyce Gascoigne Pees as a Riff farmer and his spouse, the former ,also appearing with Harry Barber as .officers of the Foreign Legion, and Hazel Mepham as Margot's friend Edith.

The chorus singing, and the disciplined evolutions of those concerned, maintain the Society's standard in this department, and a troupe of dancers perform the annual miracle or rhythmic and intricate movement with a minimum of space on which to deploy. The kaleidoscopic hues of feminine wear make a feast for the eyes both in Caid Ali’s well stocked harem and in the less exotic surroundings of the Governor’s house. The orchestra drawn from members of the Redhill Society of Instrumentalists, is under the musicianly direction of Stanley Collett.