

With their best show since their post-war revival - Edward German's "Merrie England" at the Market Hall, Redhill, last week-the East Surrey Operatic' Society gave the Borough's Coronation year festivities a very good send-off. An apt send-off too, for it is fitting that in the year in which Queen Elizabeth II is to be crowned we should be reminded, even in the romanticised manner of the operetta of the glories of the England of Elizabeth the First.

Elsie Rendell's production, as always on a stage never designed for chorus-laden "musicals," was a miracle of compression and though the compression inevitably led to some moments when disbelief was unwilling to be suspended (as for instance, when Raleigh and Essex clashed swords, almost literally, under their Sovereign's nose), the action flowed smoothly enough to give little cause for anxiety. A well-drilled chorus moved convincingly even in the most crowded scenes, the dancing was good to watch and had spirit in it, and the singing generally was on a competent level though one would have welcomed a little more refinement of tone on occasions from both chorus and soloists; even the loudest notes should sound musical.

Among this production's many pleasures one of the most satisfying was the return to the Market Hall stage of Letty Walters, whose Queen Elizabeth was everything that one expected of one of the most accomplished actresses in the Borough. From a superb entrance to the final tableau it was possible to believe on every occasion save one in this Queen Elizabeth, even when she sang, because, unlike one or two of her colleagues, Mrs. Walters was able to continue acting while she sang. It is the first time one has heard her sing; it was not a big voice but it was a musical one, and though there were more experienced voices in the company only one of them - the Essex of Jack Wyant - gave the same downright musical satisfaction that Mrs. Walters did in "O Peaceful England". She did not sing one slovenly note. As for her acting, the only occasion on which it left one other than completely convinced was when the jealous Queen crossed downstage to where Raleigh was singing to his Bessie Throckmorton and raised her fists as if to strike him, and for that presumably the producer was responsible - a pity since it caused the tension of a well-contrived dramatic situation momentarily to sag perilously. It says much for Mrs. Walters that her very next movement took us right back into the tense heart of the situation.

The Elizabeth was well matched by her Essex Mr. Wyant, a newcomer to the East Surrey, is clearly an experienced actor able to sing and act at the same time. Like the Queen he wore his clothes superbly, moved with ease, was never at a loss to know what to do with his hands, and sang, particularly his "Yeomen" song, musically and with confidence. Well as George Dewar played on Friday evening, one never felt that his Raleigh offered Essex much competition for the Queen's favours and belief in him as a serious rival was not helped by the costume allotted to him. Sir Walter, even outside the light-hearted history of Brahm's and Simon, had some reputation as a well-dressed courtier; his dress should have matched Essex's in splendour. Mr. Dewar sang pleasantly, albeit not always securely in the matter of intonation.

Gwen Davison as Raleigh's Bessie made his fondness for her credible and brought a touchingly pathetic charm to those moments when the course of true love was not running smoothly, as well as a pleasant voice that made "She had a letter from her love" mean something, but had not quite the firmness to "highlight" the waltz song. The "Jill-all-alone" of Shelagh Daniels had a moving degree of feyness, a lightness of movement, and a voice of satisfying quality, and the rather vixenish May Queen of Joyce Alderson was an admirably drawn portrait with dramatically effective shading.

The main weight of the comedy was carried by Godfrey Hill as Walter Wilkins, a player from Will Shakespeare's company, and he bore it along well with that versatile player William Malcomson as an admirable foil in the person of Silas Simkins, another of Shakespeare's players (looking, incidentally, rather like Bunthorne from "Patience"). Mr. Malcomson brought the lighter touch to his comedy but the two paired excellently and they were very satisfactorily supported in providing

light relief by E. Lovell Hewitt, Walter Thrift, Douglas Chantler and Don Nicol as tailor, butcher, baker and tinker respectively. As the Royal Foresters Michael Sammes and Charles Merriman acted impressively and they gave us singing that could stand comparison with that of the principals. and of the smaller parts competently played by Ray Jarvis, Sheila Sanderson, Audrey Waters, Paddy Hurdle, Pamela Tetherton and Duncan Little, the last named's Fool remains gratefully in the memory along side the Elizabeth and Essex; in its own right it was a performance in the same class as those two.

Stanley Collett conducted an orchestra, drawn from the ranks of the Redhill Society of Instrumentals, whose playing left the listener free of anxiety. From a seat half way back the balance between the orchestra and the people on the stage sounded right, except occasionally when the smaller voices were singing, though there was evidence that generally Mr. Collett was thoughtfully "nursing" these voices. The members of the orchestra were: First violins, Audrey Mayes (Leader). P. M. Vigers, D. Barkby; second violins, S. Edwards. C. J. Da Vall, A. Woolgar; violas, E. Moore, I. Nichols, J. Comber; 'celli, H. Bate, J. Welfare, J. Bate; bass, S. Gritton, F. Templeman; flute, E. Woolgar; oboe, H. Minchin; clarinets, I. Couchman, D. A. Nightingale; bassoon, W. Roberts; trombone, C. Ford; trumpet, D. Thornton-Smith; percussion. D. Francis; pianoforte, W. Castle. The chorus comprised:-Ladies: J. Boyle, R. Buckland, M. Colvin, D. Cook, E. Davies, G. Dunn, E. Edgar, M. Greaves, J. Grimes, D. Himsworth, A. Lilley, M. Lilley, E. Molton, J. Nightingale, I. Pinch, P. Rivers, S. Smith. G. Stanway; Dancers: P. Hurdle (solo), D. Barkby, A. Churcher, J. Cornwall-Walker, A. Hurdle, R. Weller; Gentlemen: P. Apted, S. Baird, H. Barber, P. Brett, F. Hazzard, M. Kellaway, R. Lilley, R. Nightingale, W. Norden, P. Smith, E. Stanwa., D. Stribbling, S. Strutt, W. Waters.-H.F.A.

The audience in a packed house on Friday night included the Mayor and Mayoress (Alderman and Mrs. H. G. Daniels), and in the interval the Mayor appeared in front of the curtain to draw attention to some of the other events that are to follow this auspicious opening of the local festivities in connection with the Coronation. He remarked upon 1953 as a momentous year in the history .of the British Commonwealth of Nations and said that the young Queen whom they were to crown this year and her Consort and their children typified the family spirit that is so typical of English life. It was right that her Coronation should be commemorated by the various events being arranged up and down the land and it was fitting that to commence the celebrations in the Borough they should have had such a delightful presentation of this fairy story of Queen Elizabeth the First's time. He was sure the audience echoed for the new Queen Elizabeth two songs they had heard that night - "God save Elizabeth" and "O Peaceful England" ' .

After listing some of the future events, the Mayor thanked the Society for giving him the opportunity of thus drawing attention to them, and felt that he could convey on behalf of the audience their thanks to the Society for the wonderful production put on for their entertainment that evening, and wish them every success in the future.