

14 YEARS LATE BUT WELCOME

EAST SURREY OPERATIC SOCIETY'S "THE STUDENT PRINCE"

Promised for 1940, but cancelled, as was so much else by the events that Hitler precipitated in September, 1939, the East Surrey Operatic Society's production of "The Student Prince" reached the stage of the Market Hall, Redhill, last week. It proved to have been well worth waiting for. Some people who would have been in the 1940 production are no longer with the Society, but others were in the show last week, perhaps taking parts different from those for which they were originally intended. The one person who certainly did last week what was expected of her fourteen years back was Elsie Rendell. The Market Hall stage has remained constant over the years and nobody will need telling, in this 21st year of Mrs. Rendell's association with "The East Surrey" as its producer, that the degree of skill in compression which that stage calls for is a miracle that she works annually.

From a seat in a side block only three rows from the orchestra pit on the Thursday night one had more than the usual opportunity of appraising the magnitude of that miracle, gaining visible confirmation of impressions based on a limited personal acquaintance with the Market Hall backstage. Whether a member of the audience ought to be vouchsafed such glimpses of off-stage operations as one had from this seat is a matter which there is not room to discuss here where it must suffice to say that they were a salutary reminder of an efficiency on Mrs. Rendell's part that we are too apt to take for granted. The dances in the Stateroom of the Karlsberg Palace, the procession of the lords and ladies of the court to pay homage to the King, could have looked so crowded, yet Mrs. Rendell contrived an impression of spaciousness so convincing that it was not until later that one gave thought to the painstaking preparation that must have gone into it.

The producer's work was creditably backed up by principals and chorus alike. Douglas Chantler, as the Student Prince, burdened all too soon with the responsibilities of Kingship, and Molly Greaves, as Kathie, the innkeeper's niece, were as satisfying a pair of ill-starred lovers as one could hope for in an amateur production of this most endearing of the present century's sentimental operettas. Both sang well and contrived some convincing acting while singing; Mr. Chantler's conveying of the Prince's emotions on his first contact with Heidelberg, and his dawning appreciation of the charms of Kathie were particularly good, while Mrs. Greaves's portrait of Kathie was remarkably consistent and tugged at the heartstrings particularly in Act II in her preparations for the trip to Paris, and in Act IV when Karl Franz, now King, visited the inn for the last time. Together they made the most of the charming duet that Sigmund Romberg has given his lovers, "Deep in my heart", investing it with more than a hint of emotional animus.

There was also some engaging singing from Gwen Davison as the Princess to whom Karl Franz is betrothed for reasons of State, by Bryan Mason as Captain Tarnitz with whom the Princess "lightens" the dullness of a Court in mourning, by E. Lovell Hewitt as Dr. Engel, the Prince's indulgent and fatherly tutor, and by Eugene Crawley, as Detlef, one of the Heidelberg students. Mr. Lovell Hewitt's singing of "Golden Days" was remarkable for its truly nostalgic quality, an example of combined acting and singing that had particular merit though when he was not singing one found his projection of the loveable Doctor coming over, at times, uncomfortably larger than life. Mr. Crawley's tenor was a distinctive voice that made a particularly telling contribution to concerted numbers; his acting was competent and even more than that in the last act when he received his former student companion with that strict regard for the formalities that have to be observed when in the presence of the King.

The Society has never suffered from a lack of good "straight" actors and the strength of the non-singing parts in "The Student Prince" was a reminder of the fact. There were two particularly joyous portraits from Letty Walters and Jack Wyant, the former as the Grand Duchess Anastasia, the Prince's mother-in-law elect, and the latter as Lutz, the Prince's pompous valet. Need one say more of Mrs. Walters than that she was everything the title Grand Duchess Anastasia implies in

musical comedy, and that she brought to it all those qualities of expression, timing, and instinctive feeling for just the right inflections of voice for the delivery of every telling line, that stamp her as one of the best character actresses we have in this district? Mr. Wyant's Lutz, too, was a superb characterisation, and when Lutz and the Grand Duchess were together, particularly in Act III the comedy in this production reached its peak; but remembering Mr. Wyant's debut with the Society, last year, as Essex in "Merrie England" and his very good voice, one was a little surprised to find him cast for a non-singing part. Godfrey Hill, as Hubert, Lutz's personal attendant, made his own mark on the comedy as an admirable foil to Mr. Wyant

Others who made notable contributions to the acting were William Malcomson whose Prime Minister was a small part' played to perfection, Frederick Godden as the Innkeeper, Ethel Molton as the vivacious and aspiring Gretchen, Don Nicol whose Toni the aged wine waiter was a portrait extraordinarily moving in its sounding of quietly pathetic tones, and Sheila Sanderson whose few lines as the Countess Leydon were delivered with an incisiveness that brought this quite minor character startlingly to life. Others in a cast that nowhere fell below competent level were Eric Stanway, William Waters and Waiter Thrift as Court Lackeys, Harry Barber, Paul Plews and Richard Nightingale as Heidelberg companions of the Student Prince, Ivon Chisholm as Baron Arnheim, Michael Hollis as a very "green" Freshman, and Roy Jarvis as Kathie's future husband.

The ladies of the chorus (J. Boyle, D. Barkby, A. Churcher, S. Daniels, E. Davies, S. Dunn, A. Hurdle, P. Hurdle, M. Lilley, J. Nightingale, A. Porteous, P. Rivers, S. Sanderson, S. Smith, A. Waters and S. Weal) sang commendably well and contrived always to look attractive while pointing the different degrees of becomingness appropriate to Heidelberg lassies on the one hand and Court ladies on the other. The gentlemen of the chorus (P. Apted, S. Baird, P. Elliott, J. Gascoigne-Pees, R. Jarvis, B. Mason, D. Nicol, W. Norden, D. Nightingale, E. Stanway, W. Stewart, H. Stout, P. Tetherton and W. Waters) also drew their necessary distinctions and sang with some feeling for musical tone even in the students' more boisterous songs.

Seated so close to one end of the orchestra and getting rather more than an earful of double-bass and pianoforte (admirably played, one hastens to add), it was difficult to assess accurately the contribution made by the. Orchestra but one's impression was that Stanley Collett was getting a good standard of playing from the members of the Redhill Society of Instrumentalists who supplied the orchestra. There seemed, too, to be a satisfactory balance between the orchestra and the people' on the stage though one wondered once or twice whether some of Kathie's softer notes were reaching the back of the hall.

It would be nice for the operatic and dramatic societies using the Market Hall if something could be done to ensure the curtains meeting and staying together without the need for manual assistance from stage staffs who, in their pardonable anxiety to ensure an effective "curtain", are sometimes a shade too quick and so mitigate the effectiveness they strive for.

H.F.A.