

PRESENT
LAUGHTER
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The greatest applause goes to the set...

SHOW PAGE

by

Jack

Allcock

WEEK'S RUN

J. B. Priestley's *Time and the Conways* commences a week's run at the Ashcroft, Croydon, on Monday, June 14, starring Dulcie Gray, Morag Hood, Michael Culver and Linda Thorson. The play is directed by Michael Denison.

Comedy night

Richmond Community Association Players are presenting the comedy *Good Night Mrs. Puffin*, by Arthur Lovegrove, at the community centre on Friday and Saturday, June 18 and 19. Sid Huggett directs.

THE BEST thing about the revival of Teddington-born Noel Coward's 1942 comedy, *Present Laughter*, by Teddington Theatre Club, currently at its Hampton Court theatre, is the set designed by Jeff Beauchamp and Melanie Wood, which received a spontaneous round of applause at curtain-up on opening night.

The next best thing is the secretary, Monica, of Heather Godley, who alone brings a measure of sanity and integrity of playing to the proceedings.

For the rest — only modified raptures, I am afraid. Not that everyone, or almost everyone, does not work terribly hard (perhaps a little too hard?).

But this cannot disguise the fact that this is a rather dreary "souped-up" comedy about dreary surface people — definitely not a *Hay Fever* or a *Private Lives*.

The root of the present production's problem may well lie in the direction of Harry Dawes, who does not seem to have kept a tight enough hold over some members of his cast.

As matinee idol Garry Essendine (the lead) on the face of it Questors' fugitive, Alan Drake, is an obvious choice. He is tall, suave, good looking and positively exudes charm.

In the event, however, he

seemed less than perfect on the opening night, display remain still at any point of the action and somehow not ing a propensity not to coming over quite as effectively as one might have wished.

Of the supporting cast, Chloe Crabbe and Philip Hickson both contribute more or less acceptable little comedy vignettes, although I suspect the latter part was not originally intended by the late Sir Noel to be quite as presented here.

I also quite liked the Lady Saltburn of newcomer Melinda Rigby and shall look forward to seeing more of her in the future.

Gabbling

In the key role of Garry Essendine's long-suffering and understanding wife, unfortunately, because of a car accident to the original incumbent of the role, that very capable actress Susan Doyle, taking the part at very short notice, was thereby reduced to a word-gabbling, which was a pity, as I feel, given proper rehearsal time, she could have made quite a meal of the part.

Incidentally, the opening night included one of the worst missed — or late — entrances it has ever been my misfortune to witness, and one which I certainly would never have expected to see in a TTC production. However, these things happen to the best of us.

The rest of the cast were, I thought rather flat champagne and I have seldom heard so much gabbling in a show. I also felt it was a mistake to have two very tall gentlemen in a cast that included several very short girls. Susan Bell, as Joanna Lypiat, I found difficult to hear at times.

Life with an idol

Having already seen a disastrous professional updating of Noel Coward's **Present Laughter**, I approached Teddington Theatre Club's production at Hampton Court Theatre last week with some caution.

It is, after all, a period piece, its values and dialogue are of the forties. But it is possible to update without causing too much damage, provided you don't make it too obvious. Director Harry Dawes didn't make it too obvious.

Jeff Beauchamp's and Melanie Wood's opulent, solid-looking set struck just the right balance between good taste and extravagance. It also won the admiration of the audience before the play had even begun.

The audience the night I went was quick to respond warmly to each and every one of the characters, from Fred, the cheery valet, played in fine jaunty style by Stephen Malton, to Garry Essendine himself, the part originally played by Coward and played for TTC by Alan Drake.

It's a huge, demanding role, requiring tremendous stage presence, panache and a strong distinctive voice. Mr. Drake is lucky enough to possess all those qualities and, more importantly, he revealed the vulnerability which is so much a part of Garry's nature. More than an ego-centric actor striking ridiculous attitudes, this Garry was a human being too.

or the men in Garry's life, Mr. Dawes cast two newcomers to TTC—David King and, making his first appearance, Ken Conington, of whom I trust we shall be seeing more.

Chloe Crabbe, one of TTC's much-loved veterans, made a delightfully solemn Miss Erikson, the Scandinavian spiritualist maid, and newcomer Melinda Rigby was a formidable Lady Saltburn.

In short, a stylish and accomplished updating, of which you felt Coward himself would have approved. He would have liked the incidental music too—an instrumental version of "Mad About the Boy".

The play could be subtitled "A day in the life of a matinee idol", for although it is high comedy and not meant to be taken seriously, it does show the pressures and hassles that would probably have beset a Coward or an Ivor Novello in their heyday.

Apart from his professional commitments, Garry is burdened by his inability to say no to any reasonably attractive female who flings herself at him, like young Daphne (Laurie Coombes) or not-so-young but ever-so-predatory Joanna (Susan Bell).

He is also wont to give appointments to budding playwrights, like Roland Maule, who comes from Uckfield and is remembered more for his handshake than his literary output. Phil Hickson, sporting a frizzy wig and Levis, presented a caricature of Maule which I found unconvincing. It was more a comic turn than a funny performance.

The two women in Garry's life for better or worse were, on the other hand, very convincingly played by Heather Godley, ideally cast as the astringent secretary, Monica, and Susan Doyle, who took over at short notice to play his estranged yet familiar wife, Liz.

As the business associates,

NOEL COWARD wrote "Present Laughter" for himself and the leading man, Garry Essendine, is like a caricature of the Teddington-born playwright. An actor who plays Garry usually finds himself impersonating Coward. In Teddington Theatre Club's production, which runs from June 5th to 12th at Hampton Court Theatre, Garry will be played by Alan Drake, relatively unknown to TTC audiences. In the picture (by Ivor Jones), the dressing-gowned Garry is accosted by an over-zealous Roland Maule, played by Phil Hickson. Harry Dawes is directing and the supporting cast includes Heather Godley, Sue Doyle and Susan Bell.

