

"BITTER SWEET"

EAST SURREY "OPERAMATEUITs" BREAK FRESH GROUND ARTISTIC AND ENTERTAINING PRODUCTION

From last year's revival of medieval romantic and 'melodrama in "The Vagabond King", the members of the East Surrey Amateur Operatic Society turned for their five night "season" this year to the modern melange of romance, sophistication and mild satire presented by Noel Coward's "Bitter Sweet", and their ambitious enterprise in taking on a work with so many complications and so much tricky music has been crowned this week with a substantial degree of success. The opening performance, on Tuesday night upon which this notice is necessarily based was not miraculously free from minor blemishes and awkward moments, but these will probably have been overcome as the week progresses and the company adapt themselves to the limitations of the stage and the acoustics of the hall. Of one thing Tuesday's performance gave abundant evidence: the expertness with which the Society's producer Elsie Rendell, had taken the measure of the cast and the spatial limits within which they had to manoeuvre, and arranged the grouping of scenes in which most of the company were taking part so as to provide a satisfying pictorial effect while leaving room for the lively action which at times was required.

In the leading soprano role of Sarah Millick later Marchioness of Shayne, Molly Larkin had the highly difficult task of representing a character insuccessive stages of her life, from youth to old age and in this she scored distinct success, giving an attractive performance as the eloping Sarah of the eighteen seventies and a convincing characterisation of the old Marchioness. She exhibited a voice of charming quality in the singing of the now familiar "theme song" "I'll see you again," both as a solo and as a duet with Douglas Chantler as Carl Linden. The latter from the first held the audience's sympathy with his rendering of the part of the young Viennese musician whose death in a duel with his wife's insulter provides the tragic climax of a play which, apart from this, runs upon conventional light opera lines. An outstanding performance was that of Gwen Davison as the little French comedienne, Manon: a performance full of vivacity in expression and movement, her singing of the French lyric "Bonnee nuit, Merci" in the cafe scene, and the execution of the lively accompanying dance, being marked by a graceful verve which made it one of the high spots of the whole production.

Eileen Brownlow made full use of the opportunities afforded by her appearances in the two modern scenes of the play, as Dolly Chamberlain, the Marchioness's daughter whose amatory vacillations set the old peeress's mind ranging into her troublous past. She put much spirit into a quarrel with her lover, and was adequate to the difficult test of gesture and expression in the touch of poignant drama upon which the final curtain fell. A capital piece of broad comedy was provided by Frederick Godden as Herr Schlick, the affable but anything but scrupulous cafe proprietor, and C. Stevenson Dennis made brief but convincing appearances in the "villain of the piece" of Captain August Lutte. An old stalwart of the Society, E. Lovell Hewitt, completely looked the part of Sarah Millick's elderly and ardent wooer, the Marquis of Shayne, and in clarity of diction set a commendable example to the rest of the cast.

A play of the "flash-back" order to which "Bitter Sweet" belongs necessitates (for an amateur company at any rate) a good deal of "doubling" of parts, and in this week's production one experienced member of the Society, Willie Castle, appears in no fewer than three characters, while several others have two. Of those who contribute their share to a bright and entertaining performance, it is possible only to mention by their own names Eric Lotty, Doris Himsworth, Letty Walters, George Dewar, Richard Nightingale, Don Nicol, John Richardson, Willie Jarrett, Norman Young, June Bret, Maude Harley, Ivy Wright, Betty Martin, Diana Miller, Shelagh Daniels, Waiter Thrift, Katie Lavelle, Ambrose Shelton, Audrey Lilley, Joan Nightingale, Jean Small, E. Van Loock, H. Vance and Eric Bromell.

The singing of the chorus was as pleasing as the melodic quality of some of Noel Coward's music gave it scope to be, and the boisterousness of the Vienna cafe scene was conveyed in relishable style. Particularly entertaining was the rendering of the "Tokay" chorus, with Ambrose Shelton giving a resonant lead as Lieutenant Transisch, and the inconsequent "Green Carnation" quartet in Act III was given with diverting abandon. A special word of commendation is deserved by the dance of the Prater girls in Act II.

As usual, the musical quality of the show owed much to the good work done by an orchestra over which Joyce Hooper hovered as conductor, and which was led by Robert Chew. The orchestral accompaniment was almost uniformly harmonious, and never overweighed the voices of the soloists or chorus. Altogether "Bitter Sweet" has not only broken entirely new ground so far as the local society is concerned, but has unmistakably added yet another to its long list of successes in the field of popular and artistic entertainment.