

'House By The Lake'

A Confusion

BY ALEC M. HARDIE

"Why can't the English learn to speak?" As the opening of the new City Hall draws near, this is a sad question to have to ask.

Our local companies are about to be offered a wonderful opportunity. I can hardly believe that the same company played last night at Loke Yew Hall as scored such high marks in "A Five-finger Exercise."

Here we had a play obviously written for a "star" actress and without that star the whole weak fabric collapsed.

"A House by the Lake" is a bad play; more than two thousand years ago a dramatic critic advised playwrights not to write for individual actors. It is a corruption and last night The Stage Club confirmed somewhat belatedly that the old sage knew his craft.

A combination of the drawing-room comedy technique with the pseudo-psychological 'who-dun-it' motive, this play, with a cast who hardly knew where to place the emphasis and a producer who clearly knew not how to direct his point, was a confusion.

To return to my opening quotation I could scarcely hear the first act and the flat, monotonous, unphrased conversation was a woeful disgrace to a company which has achieved such distinction in previous productions.

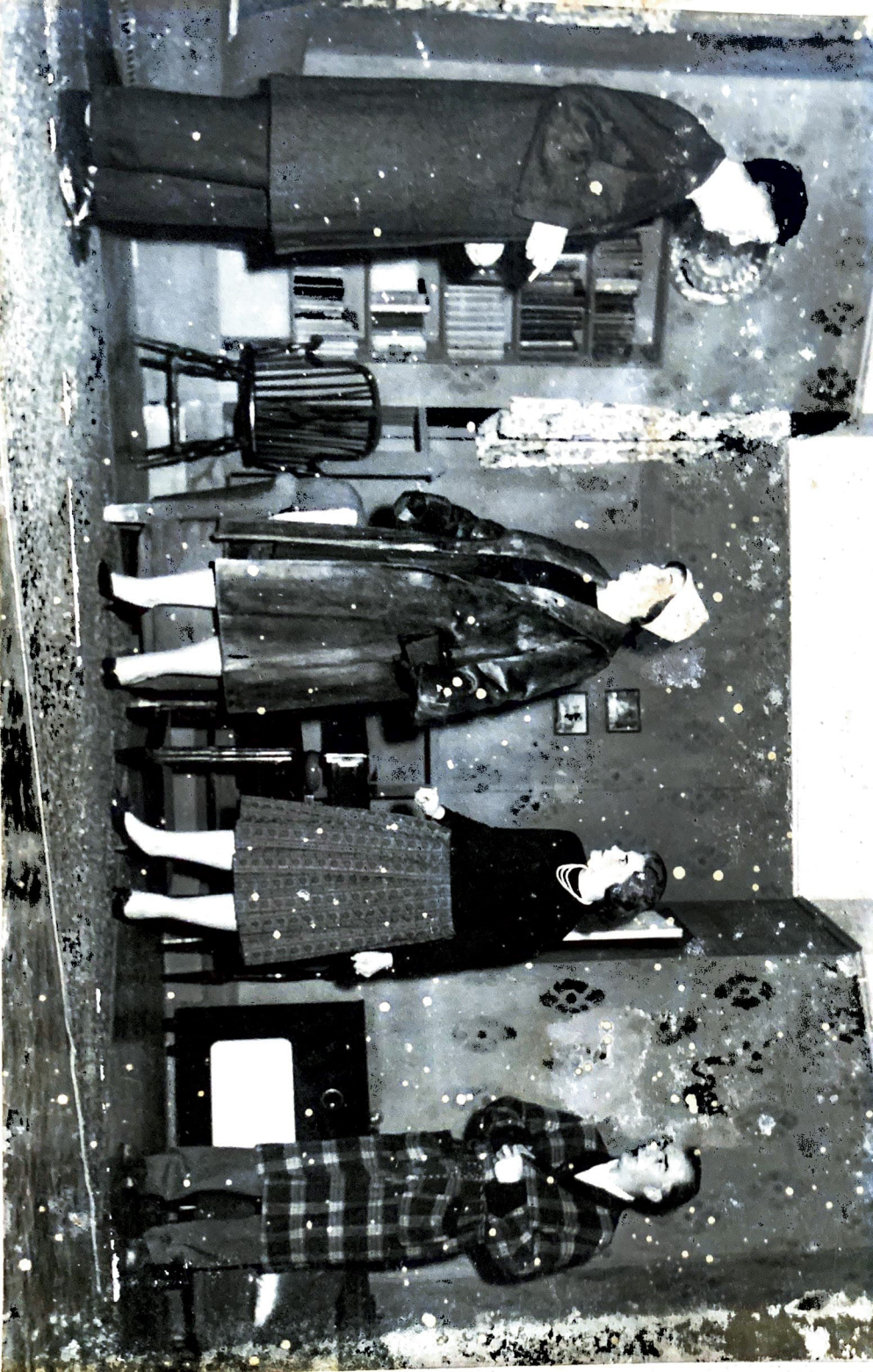
With such flimsy writing and such a weak theme everything depended on the emotional depth of voice and concentrated course of direction and this cast could not achieve the

necessary dramatic tension. Tension? It was completely lacking; perhaps the high-pitched tone of the leading actors did not help a very unbelievable situation.

All the old ingredients were available, including obvious startling moments, a long bare last scene that the actors could not sustain—neither could the author. Old melodrama returned in full force.

I wish I could say something in praise of this production. I was never thrilled, never fearful, and never held. This company is a good one—so be on guard before the new theatre opens. A dreary set did not improve the atmosphere and the drab costumes wearily contrasting with the mass of red walls was not encouraging.

I would like to believe that tonight's performance will be happier.



CONTRIVED NONSENSE

Last night's first night

By JOHN LUFF

IN the second scene of the third act of "The House by the Lake," presented by the Hongkong Stage Club at the Loke Yew Hall last night, the leading lady is involved in a Svengali-like scene.

For her husband, a discredited psychiatrist suggests she shoots herself, after a count-up to forty. This made me really indignant, for it was so unfair. After all she is not responsible for the play. Justice demands that it is the author of the play who should be shot.

Never, I repeat never, in all my life, from the time I played truant to see Edna Best in the Constant Nymph, and including the E.N.S.A. shows which a cynical authority sent to lighten our bleak military lives, have I seen so much contrived nonsense set down in any one script.

Even now, I do not think that this **you-know-who-dunnit** was to be taken seriously. Certainly the audience did not, and I must say in fairness that slight though the plot is, and as artificial as a ten-cent ring, the audience lapped it up and gave it a rousing curtain call.

However, the play has its good entrance, and I must say that when Miss O'Donovan entered and began to tell the neighbours what a so-and-so her husband is, it really reminded me of the scandal without which our better class suburbs cannot exist.

Then Guy Richards: he has a fine stage presence, and it was easy to see that he is by no means new to the stage. For all his movements, and up and down stage conventions were minutely observed.

Eileen Wilson, now so typed in our local drama, gave a nice performance, and there you have it.

One asks, at least I do, what the character, Colonel Forbes is doing in the play; except there is always a Colonel in these plays. Tony Reading handles this role. Sheila Stead and Eileen Burbidge are allotted the roles of Stella and Janet, respectively.

Geoffrey Eden takes over the male lead as the psychiatrist in disgrace, a wholly unconvincing role, if only because the playwright has not even bothered to explore the limitations of hypnotism.

Michael Tyler is the stage detective, complete in rain coat, and hatless as they are these days. He hints and snorts at all kinds of clues and red herrings, and is forced by the script to make an entrance that is sheer large chunks of ham.

Enid Eden has a small role as the perky district nurse, and is very perky to boot. The production is terribly laboured, and at times the characters merely stand and pose.

I hate to say it, but it is true, and that is our amateur players are very much in the doldrums, and just as the City Hall Theatre is at their disposal.



"House By The Lake"

(To the Editor, S.C.M. Post)

Sir,—The review of "The House By The Lake" which appeared in Friday's Morning Post is not a responsible piece of journalism. I will not argue with Mr Hardie's views on the performance or on the play, since as a critic he is obliged to express the reactions of his taste, but I feel that the manner of his expression and the tone of his writing deserve comment.

It is certainly invidious to compare the performances of one group within a company to those of another. I fail to see that Mr Hardie's approval of the recent staging of "Five Finger Exercise" is germane or constructive in a discussion of the play now being presented.

It is grossly impolite to fail to mention the names of those persons who have devoted so much time and effort to the production. Even if Mr Hardie believes their merits to be such that they were better left anonymous, common courtesy demands that he acknowledge by name at least the producer and principal actors.

Mr Hardie remarks that the "dreary" set and "drab" costumes were not "encouraging." A perusal of the script would show him such a set and such costumes are specifically provided for, to provide a sombre, restrained atmosphere for the drama. To criticise a thing for what it does not intend to be is hardly fair.

STEPHEN WAILES.