

# A Great Production In Every Way

BY ALEC M. HARDIE

**T**HE Hongkong Stage Club opened their first production at the City Hall Theatre with amazing success—a great production in every way, and one that has set a standard not easily to be equalled.

Now we know that local amateurs can make full use of themselves, of the theatre, and of a good play.

I feared this first night as I thought the whole notion was beyond the available material. I was wrong and much new talent appeared last night under the direction of Nancy O'Connell showing more wit, humour, understanding and stagecraft than ever before. A compliment!

This is a good play to be enjoyed at many levels. Peter Ustinov has amalgamated fantasy with a serious undercurrent. Four Colonels of differing nationalities—American, British, French and Russian—are trying to collaborate with each other somewhere in Germany during the occupation. Nearby is the Castle where the Sleeping Beauty sleeps. How can they collaborate when they themselves are such a contradiction in time, when they dream of a past that bears little relation to the present?

**I**N true morality fashion the Wicked Fairy and the Good appear to allow them to live out their dream with the Beauty. Beauty is not so much in the eye of the beholder but a dream beyond the natural avarices and shallow hopes of man. He must have ideals in himself —

But this sounds prosy when we have a brilliantly humorous display of wit and satire. Eighteenth century comedy (a la Ashley Dukes?), Shakespearian drama (a la Fry?), American realism and Tchekovian misery are all wonderfully parodied in detail.

The four Colonels had vigour, power and individualities. Geoffrey Weeks

was British but did not caricature; he has great personality on stage. George Dovey held his own against him seriously as the Russian counterpart. Howard Stingle one particularly liked as the Spencer Tracy-like figure in the dream. Raymond Fry found this company somewhat overpowering and was not always sufficiently Gallic or audible.

I could not always hear Elinor Field as The Beauty. Generally she lacked the appeal, glamour and femininity that the part required. Her best episode was as a pseudo-Russian heroine of great misery.

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**T**HE Colonels' wives — particularly the Russian—carried their scene. They must be careful as their husbands have been so lively that they must not allow our attention to wander. Joe Woods interrupted with straight humour as the local Mayor with quietness, underplaying and so with delightful production.

The two fairies almost stole the evening in fierce company. Philippa Coombes played an unusual part for her with presence, restraint and conviction. A challenge which she accepted with her usual authority.

The burden lay on Richard Sheldon as the Wicked Fairy. A finished performance of great quality! I hope we shall see him again soon. Subtlety, wit, agility and clarity were all there; he is a great asset to Hongkong amateur players.

And more, we had Roger Williams sets that were the best and most "spectacular" that I have seen in Hongkong and the speed with which the changes were accomplished was almost professional and a good example.

Altogether a fast, delightful and a polished production of a play well worth seeing and well above the standard that we have seen recently.

Nancy O'Connell should feel pleased.

# —LOVE OF FOUR COLONELS—

## Splendid performance

### by Stage Club

By JOHN LUFF

**H**OW good it was to attend the opening night of "The Love of Four Colonels," presented by the Hongkong Stage Club in the City Hall theatre. For the play had run only some ten minutes, but already, the sweet smell of success was in the air.

Applause, polite and scattered, grew in volume, until as the evening progressed, every entry was clapped and every exit was an occasion for grateful acknowledgement of a memorable occasion.

For memorable occasion it was; a first night that proceeded with precision, when epigrams hovered in the air and exploded with the scintillating delight of a well timed pyrotechnic display; when every set fell into place, and embarrassment was banished entirely.

Yet who could tell? This critic went along with moody misgivings, knowing something of the play and its mechanics, apart from Ustinov's playful venom in his comment upon contemporary society. No need to worry, all was well, and in no time the house was rocking with laughter.

For in this play, Ustinov is asking, "Tell me where is fancy bred, or in the heart, or in the head?" Every one of the four Colonels forming an Allied Administration somewhere in Germany near an enchanted castle, carries with him the idea of a golden girl.

And opportunity is afforded by a wicked fairy for each dream to hold concrete form for a while, and at this we smile and mock, and jeer and laugh, yet beneath it all as the good and bad fairies wrestle for possession, we are perilously near to tears. For every member of the audience sees himself, although in a glass, darkly.



How splendid was the casting. In Geoffrey Weeks as the British Colonel, we have an actor of astonishing accomplishment, with a stage control and a sense of timing which is expert.

Howard Stingle as the American Colonel brought to his role a variety of emotions, a veritable box o' tricks, while his performance of the play within the play, a mixture of Elmer Gantry idealism with a dash of the hoodlum priest, plus a deadly dart flung at all psychiatrists, was beautiful to behold.

But Raymond Fry! How good to see this talented young actor blossom in a production in which he, as the French Colonel, took command of his scenes, and with Gallic logic stated his thesis, amusing, precise, the epitome of all we

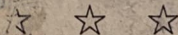
hold to be French gallantry and cynicism.

And George Dovey, as the Soviet Army Colonel, nourishing dreams of frustrated middle class life in the Russian provinces with all the irony of Chekhov's "The Seagull" and "Uncle Vanya."

Richard Sheldon, a wicked fairy, yet mixture of Puck and spiv, a ragtail Satan, a broken down Mephistopheles, a performance simply sparkling with wit and irony.

The good fairy, Philippa Coombes; from whom we expect and always receive, a finished role, expert with experience. Clad in the uniform of an A.T.S. yet parrying and thrusting in verbal conflict with the wicked fairy, a delight to watch, an occasion to hear.

Elinor Field in a most taxing role, as the Sleeping Beauty, appearing as each man would have her. An Elizabethan maiden, a Bronx virago, a French coquette, a Russian middle class miss with a turn for croquet and Slav mystic soul. Too much for one? Perhaps, but bringing off two scenes out of four, which pleased this critic immensely.



The lesser roles were adequately filled by Hubert (a Hubert come to judgment) Field, noisy and blase as the American wife; Simone Meredith as the Frenchwoman; accomplished Bernadette O'Donovan as the county type with tweeds to cover a multitude of sins; and Celia Simpson as the Soviet wife, silent yet with miming eloquence.

Then Joe Woods as the Mayor of the occupied German province. A nice performance, a mixture of arrogance and humility.

The costumes were just excellent, my once military eye ranging even over the decorations and medals on the uniforms; nothing here to be faulted. The sets . . . just expert . . . simply expert. The lighting, the music, the effects, timed to perfection.

A most accomplished production. A most enjoyable evening. A production which establishes, if it needed establishing, that in Nancy O'Connell, the Colony possesses a producer with theatre at her finger-tips.