

"SEE NAPLES AND DIE"

A Dramatic Cocktail

Beryl Telford Scores

THE Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society decided some time ago that its members were due for a good laugh. They therefore selected Elmer Rice's "See Naples and Die," and placed it in the hands of Dulcie Scott for production. That statement may be misread as an imputation against Miss Scott's production, an imputation which must be corrected immediately. For, from her point of view, it seemed that everything possible that she could do was done to ensure a successful performance. She had one of the most difficult tasks any Repertory producer had had to face for a considerable time. On the one hand she had a play which has those two great virtues—comedy of line as well as comedy of situation, with a dash of unadorned and unashamed melodrama, verging sometimes on to farce, to help it along, and on the other she had interpreters ill-equipped to make the best of these things. It was a cast too which for the most part showed a gross misconception of those charming characteristics which go to make up the Latin temperament.

Fortunately for her the Latin temperament is but one of the ingredients in this dramatic cocktail. The caste reads something like a League of Nations assemblage. And she may blame Elmer Rice for some absence of definite characterisation since he obviously meant his characters to appear something like those shapeless daubs of paint which some artists call inspiration. If you stand far enough away and look at them long enough you may possibly decide what they really mean. Even now there must be people who are wondering precisely what kind of a half-wit Prince Ivan Ivanowitch Kostoff really is. Mr. Andy Hirst succeeded in looking like a Russian prince most when he was out of sight and the revolvers began to crack. Mr. Luvodick Gordon should have used the Nazi salute on his entry to let us know that he was a German, and one extremely black shirt "placed" another member of the cast. Not by word or deed did these gentlemen give away their nationalities.

Miss Nancy Fowles, rejoicing in the name of Kunegunde Wandl, appeared to be an abandoned person of mid-European origin, or was it just ordinary Italian? At all events the hot sun of Italy had not yet warmed her blood sufficiently to make her the ardent Neapolitan that one suspects she should have been.

But all this is a little unfair, because the play was amusing, and towards the end highly diverting. One must admit that in

play was amusing, and towards the end highly diverting. One must admit that in the first act up to the entrance of Miss Beryl Telford, one kept on asking why on earth the society had selected the piece for performance—unless it was that they happened to have on hand a really good back curtain representing the Bay of Naples. With the appearance of Miss Telford we had our first glimpse of a real human being, and one sat up and took notice, for she handled some extremely bright and entertaining lines with a touch of real gusto. The motion picture screen has taught us to beware of those American witticisms commonly known as "wisecracks." Miss Telford bleached the part of its worst American features—we may thank Heaven that she did not go to the length of developing that nasal whine so dear to the American throat and nose—and brought the natural wit and absurdity of the part to the surface. Since her behaviour on stage was so convincing her lapse, if it be a lapse, in regard to mere diction, can be forgiven. If there was any other fault it was that she did not wait for the laughs long enough and some good lines were missed. We also may thank Kathleen Radford, for she, too, achieved a great deal more fidelity in characterisation than most of her colleagues.

The curtain of the first act left us with our pseudo-Russian Prince bowing punctiliously to his unfriendly American wife. The curtain rose on the next act with the bow still in progress. This act hinted that the society might have been right after all about selecting the play. It gave Mr. John Cover, one of these big athletic heroes with a broad athletic smile, but not quite an athletic kiss, a chance to display his athletic propensities on the Russian. In the first act Mr. Cover had left us rather cold. But in the second he actually seized this Russian by the throat and knocked him down. He kept a masterly control over himself, for the blow was delivered without the dilation of one blood vessel. It was the coolest, calmest, and most composed display of real temper seen during the evening. The whole audience envied him his composure.

But the real fun was reserved for the third act. Here Elmer Rice began to show his hand a little, and the subtlety of his comedy became more manifest. All evening the audience had watched two immobile woolly-faced gentlemen seated back stage playing chess. They smoked many cigarettes and at hour intervals moved some of the chessmen on the board. They seemed to be mere stage adornment, a bit of local colour perhaps. But Elmer Rice knew what he was doing. It would be shameful if we were to disclose the final move in this chess game. But all chess players who love and revere their ancient game are warned not to see what followed. More than one strong man may weep.

The fun became fast and furious, with all the players putting much more life and enthusiasm into their work and with something really exciting happening. There were glimmerings of light as to the merits of this comedy. The chess episode had some part in flavouring the dramatic disc, but the final touch was exquisite. Throughout the

in flavouring the dramatic disc, but the final touch was exquisite. Throughout the second and third acts sundry explosive noises off stage were meant to convey the fact that racing motorists were tearing along the road just outside the hotel balcony. Then in the third, after two men had been shot in cold blood and an enormous disturbance held up the race, our entire cast was unceremoniously bundled off to prison for interfering with the race which was dear to Mussolini's heart. It is possibly the first and last play in which there is a happy ending, and in which, at the same time, all the characters are bundled off to gaol.

In the end, the Society was forgiven for staging such a trumpery piece, for in truth, it was not quite so trumpery as it at first appeared. In the cast a number of people carried more than their share of work. Miss Vera Tighe made the most direct and eloquent appeal to the senses. Many people will keep an eye on this young lady. At least they did so last night. But the most effective characterisations of all were perhaps, those of the chess players. What masterly immobility!

The play will be repeated this evening.

A.H.T.
