

SHOW BOAT: IT'S SUPER, IT'S COLOSSAL

1964

EVERYBODY is trying to get in on the act at the Regent Theatre, Chelmsford, where this week Chelmsford Operatic and Dramatic Society's production of "Show Boat" has a stage so loaded with cast that it bulges at the seams.

Nobody actually topples over the footlights into the orchestra pit, although one has the feeling they might at any minute.

It is, in the words of the Hollywood publicity men, a "super-colossal production."

With a cast of 80, 20 musical numbers, and 15 scenes it's all rather overwhelming. And as it rumbles, blusters and bounces along this version of "Showboat" leaves one feeling slightly out of breath.

Out of it all the colour, movement, and music emerge the fact that the singing and dancing are perhaps the best the Society have ever produced.

There is acting as well, if not in quite such large proportions.

LAVISH

For those who like entertainment on a lavish scale Show Boat is a winner.

But the very size of it and the huge numbers involved tend to make it something of a Slow boat. The opening night took 3½ hours.

It is a big, bold choice which needs to sell pretty well every ticket to be a financial success. But even if it does not make money, by the time it finishes the run tomorrow evening it will have given some 6,000 people more than their money's worth.

The orchestra is very good except when you are trying to hear what's being said or sung by the less powerfully voiced members of the cast. Then the 16 or so musicians, under the vigorously brandished baton of musical director Charles Clarke, definitely show they can make more noise than anyone on stage.

NEW TALENT

Perhaps the most striking thing about the show is the fact it is not, as so often in the past, a one-voice show. The Society have recruited a tremendous amount of new talent—and talent it really is.

There is Pat Viles in the female lead as Magnolia. Her clear and forceful voice carries comfortably to all parts of the theatre.

She's charming and never has one sitting on the edge of the seat wondering if she is going to reach the top note. She does so with absolute control and clarity.

Opposite her is another newcomer, bearded John Jemison, with as nice a voice as one could wish for allied with an easy and warm stage manner.

And the show also includes someone who can really sing "Old Man River." He is Bernard Smith whose rich brown voice does justice to the old favourite. But he looks a trifle over-immaculate,

as do the other negroes, with no signs of the sweat and toil he is singing about.

In the role of the Show Boat's Cap'n Andy is Freddie Costello less vocal this year, but as forceful and genial as ever, and as his wife Beryl Manaton gives a gem of a performance.

But to my mind the acting highlight of the production is a little knock-about scene between David Hawkins and Derek Fisher as gruff, rough, gun-toting backwoods-men, and Stan Parsons as the Show Boat comedian. It's a hoot.

There is also a strong comedy flavour from the performance of Pauline Connolly.

Among the cast are a number of able old-stagers and newcomers as well. They include Helen Eldridge, Jim Welham, Peter Smith, David Platt, Robin Sampson, George Bruce, Iris Ford, Bernard Smith, Terry Mullenin, George Davey, Kath Willsher and Julie Naumann.

The choruses comprise: Audrey Adler, Edna Bennett, Sally Briggs, Maureen Cave, Jean Clements, Anne Cooper, Sandra Cranfield, Marian Dann, Vivian Downs, Margaret Francis, Barbara Goolding, Maureen Gore, Pam Jackson, Maria Jones, Janet Lynn, Marian Martin, Audrey McAuliffe, Jean Mulberry, Rita Noble, Pat Page, Sheila Prior, Alma Rowley, Margaret Ryder, Muriel Sampson, Linda Smith, Virginia Smith, Pat



Leading lady Pat Viles, who plays "Magnolia" (centre), with other members of the cast.