

JUST ONE WORD—

# JEALOUSY

## That's the bane of Amateur Dramatics

By KEN WARREN

**THERE** is trouble in the village halls and meeting places where Essex amateur dramatic circles meet to rehearse and produce their plays. The new interest that has arisen since the war now shows signs of producing unrest. Now there are so many societies that competition is inevitable.

Everywhere amateur societies are united in crying out for a theatre—a home for their own (and occasional Arts' Council) productions, with a decent stage, convenient dressing-rooms, good equipment.

In Braintree they have designed a theatre which will cost under £2,000 and yet seat more than two hundred. Co-operation is slowly coming from the local Council, though "Attlee's Axe" smashing down on capital investments may well stop the Council from purchasing land for the theatre site. Nowhere is the clamour more in evidence than Chelmsford. "We want a theatre," yell producers and actors to an apparently deaf Town Council. A packed Regent audience heard the Chelmsford Operatic Society president whipping up their enthusiasm for a "living theatre" in the town.

Nearly a thousand people were there. Sitting on their comfortable red plush seats they blinked, pondered, and settled more comfortably.

### First step

The first step to take, Societies must learn, is to show signs of less dissension in their ranks, both within each group and between Societies.

In Chelmsford, two dramatic groups were polished enough to show the same play in successive weeks. In Braintree, it has been alleged that publicity for one show was withheld by the producer of another.

Too often, as might be expected among more temperamental professionals rather than small town amateurs, there is an under-current of petty jealousy. The lead for many years feels his position is being usurped by a youngster, who in turn is intolerant of advice of the old hands.

*Trouble-makers are everywhere. Good intent is one of their distinguishing features.*

Each society has someone to fit these:

The "bright young thing" who looks wonderful, but whose acting is insipid as railway-station tea.

The "old ham" whose main delight is showing how so-and-so played a Dickensian character in a by-gone era.

The "belle-dame" who is instinctively good on the stage but is uncastable in most plays.

The capable producer whose great ideal is "do" Tchekov or a play by two friends—"who really are very good, you know."

The young man who starts off by making love like a wooden puppet, and ends up by being disturbingly amorous. He usually finishes the show by being condescending and quite useless for all future productions. Unfortunately his abnormal self-confidence will always bring him to the middle of the foots in future curtain calls.

The "ex-pro"; they know it all, and find the producer and everyone connected with the play under rehearsal "too naive about the real stage for words." Unfortunately it's in their blood and they will need to be in a play at least once a year.

Comedians among the amateur theatre world are always very good or very bad—to rest of the cast they are always the latter.

### Sentence

All these, except the first, who are impossible and the last, who are beyond recall, should be condemned to hear Hamlet's speech to the players twice nightly with Saturday matinees. Sir Laurence Olivier has made an excellent recording of this not well known passage from Shakespeare.

Producers, forgotten when it comes to the first night (except by friends who have been instructed to call them on stage to mumble

a few pathetic words) are the most maligned in our amateur theatre world.

Unfortunately they deserve it! They too frequently agree to produce a play about which they know nothing and possibly dislike intensely.

Why do they do it? Because, poor souls, they are the salt of the earth; probably the only ones who care deeply for the theatre. Always (as here, indeed) they are treated with scant respect and are usually abused when out of sight.

### Stooge

The most hard working amateur of all—more remarkable because there is absolutely no reason for his doing it—is the "electrics" who is sometimes also stage manager, make-up artist and general factotum.

The most he ever gets is perhaps a producer's cigarette and a crushing comment from the leading lady when she thinks a "prop" is wrongly placed.

Night after night he toils to build a set with cheap materials. He wanders around shops talking owners into lending the society a few pieces of furniture.

After all this the leading man says he can't make love on a sofa with his knees against his chin and the quest starts once again.

Perhaps that is why the Chelmsford Operatic and Dramatic Society are so successful. Despite the word "Amateur" which should put in their title, a great part of their work is done by professional stage people—Messrs. Charles Fox—the costumiers, experienced producers, and so on.

Add to that a cinema converted back to its former glory of being a theatre and there you have some of the ingredients for productions successful in the estimations of the majority.

Even these aids would be of little value if the play or musical were a poor choice.

### Bad selections

Bad selections I have seen recently in Essex ("bad" because they were beyond the cast's ability, the audience's intelligence or my

own mental grasp, or because my dinner did not digest easily) include Quintero's "The Women Have Their Way," "The Man from Toronto," "Night Was Our Friend," and there are others.

In the future, fellow playgoers, we have "Virginia" (1929 vintage and very dusty) which is a risky proposition for the Operatic Society (I suggest they go one morning in the Regent and look at all those empty seats!) "Gathering Storm" this week is an unusual play for the Marconi group to choose. They may "pull it off"—let's hope they do.

### Public at fault

It must be admitted even by my jaded self that there is great hope for the amateur theatre in Essex.

The British Arts' Council, are sending good plays well acted and produced even to Chelmsford.

In nearby Braintree it must be regretted "Doctor's Joy" received such scant public acknowledgement that the company's manager, it is said, wrote to the Arts' Council asking that Braintree should not again be honoured by a visit from Russell Thorndike or the like.

The St. James Ballet, however, drew large audiences (or are they spectators?) in both Braintree and Chelmsford. In the latter through poor liaison between the Operatic Society and the Chelmsford and District Union of Arts' Societies, their dates clashed with "Arsenic and Old Lace."

This, plus the excellent productions recently staged by, for instance the Felsted Village Club, the Braintree Shakespeare Players means that interest in plays and acting is growing all the time.

Good publicity work by the Societies themselves would help unanimously. Amateurs, it seems, fight shy of star-billings and prefer to wait until after the last night when enormous bouquets cross the footlights. The whole business rather resembles a school prize day.

In this atmosphere one tends to forget that most important is "the play is the thing."



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