

"CHILDREN IN UNIFORM"

Difficult Repertory Play Two or Three Characters Save Situation

THE Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society, in presenting Christa Winsloe's "Children in Uniform," has apparently set a problem for its own members, and anyone else who may happen to drop in. One can well imagine that opinion is divided about it, not so much concerning the virtues of the play itself perhaps, as about the advisability of staging it, and the success achieved after having done so.

It is a play which comes well within the confines of repertory's field. It depends for its success on the cumulative effect built up over ten scenes, and on atmosphere more than action. It is perhaps a tall order to ask any producer to find over 30 women in the city to give the same measure of support to the play's atmosphere, as is given by one or two major characters. The play is obviously designed to tap the vein of high tragedy. The successful establishment of this atmosphere of tragedy depends not a little on the right kind of characterisation at the very beginning. The feeling of inescapable tragedy should be built up from the beginning, and should become cumulative in its effect as the play progresses. This may be inherent in the play as the author has conceived it, but it certainly did not evidence itself in the play as presented last night. For that reason the death of Manuela revealed in the last few lines of the play did not entirely reveal itself to the audience as something following logically out of what had gone before, although one could well imagine it doing so if the true Teutonic element in the play had been manifested more succinctly during the first two acts.

Incidents which should have been the driving force behind the action became, then, incidents which the audience was forced to attempt to explain why in the light of the dramatic verities. In such a school, for instance, how comes it that Manuela comes into contact with intoxicants at all? That may depend solely on the fact that it is a play German in its setting. Yet the Germanic element is never as strongly in evidence as it should be. Maybe it is almost impossible for any producer, and any cast that may be assembled by the society to produce it. But is it

ducer, and any cast that may be assembled by the society to produce it. But is it not an absolute starting point for the play's successful presentation? The uniforms of the mistresses are perhaps the only helpful detail in this regard. There was nothing in the characterisation to assist the producer here.

Fortunately the key to the inner strength of the play is preserved in the hands of one or two principal characters, who last night performed wonders. While a great number of women certainly behaved like schoolgirls, not very many of them got beyond the stage where they were still a replica of those "school girl complexion" advertisements. In the midst of this almost inevitable admixture of crude amateurism towered the work of Miss Nancy Rennick. She played the part of Manuela with some very subtle touches. She revealed the nervous sensitiveness of the character. Her strength lay not only in her moments of action or speech, but also in her moments of silence. In herself she did logically present that state of emotional turmoil which is consistent with the play's ending. During those silences she conveyed in her eyes and in her demeanour that sense of impending tragedy, and that feeling of intense nervous abstraction and nervous upheaval, which is not to be translated into mere words. If she failed at all it was in the fidelity and sincerity of those scenes in which she gave voluble expression to her intense love of Fraulein von Bernberg. There were many scenes when she alone appeared to be real in character, while all those around her were entirely out of character. Two other players achieved the same vital contact with their roles. One was Miss Esther Jones, who from the first moment she appeared, seemed to embody the fine upright sincere teacher, who placed discipline first, and her love of her pupils second. Here too the sense of impending tragedy was subtly conveyed by acting which was scarcely ever out of character. The other really strong characterisation was that of Miss Edith Jowett as the headmistress. She achieved that cast iron Teutonic sense wherein discipline comes first, second and last. Several other characters achieved some semblance of verisimilitude. Mrs. Ellis negotiated some French lines with fluent ease. Daphne Francis and Enid Berkbeck helped also by neither underacting nor over acting.

Miss Barbara Sisley's production was good, faced as she was by almost insuperable difficulties in presenting a play of such complexity with material which was, for the most part, essentially inexperienced. On the other hand she made excellent and effective use of the good material that she found at hand. The mounting of the play as a whole was scarcely creditable to the society. Decrepit scenery is unworthy of it, even though it did in this case convey a certain atmosphere of the drab.

The play will be presented again at the Princess Theatre, South Brisbane, this evening and to-morrow evening.

A.H.T.