

'Show Boat' at Redhill

"Ol' Man River" went rolling merrily and wistfully along at Redhill Market Hall last week when the East Surrey Operatic Society played "Show Boat" to crowded and thoroughly appreciative houses.

To some of those in the audiences this serio-comedy of the Mississippi would bring nostalgic feelings for it was previously given by the society in 1939, before the outbreak of the war was scattered its younger members into the services and suspended its operations for rather more than the actual war period. Of that pre-war production the only survivor still actively attached to the society is its president, Mr W. D. Malcolmson (the "Steve" of 1939) and he is not now a playing member. The one element of continuity was provided by the producer, Elsie Rendell who served the society in that capacity for several of the pre-war years and who in her latest production proved once more her unwaning gift for bringing a mixed bunch of amateurs to a near-professional standard of accomplishment.

Amateurs most of the performers of course were, but a leavening of professional experience was provided by Angela Penfold whose performance in the role of Ellie, the aspiring comedienne of Capt Andy's Show Boat troupe, was outstanding in its vivacity and laugh-winning effect, and by Sylvia Beresford-Clarke a solo dancer and, briefly, as Kim, daughter of the heroine Magnolia. Mrs Beresford-Clarke is a newcomer whom all who witnessed her performance last week, radiating youthful charm and demonstrating consummate skill in using all her limbs in graceful movement, will hope to see again in many of the society's future shows. Another recruit to the society's ranks, Barbara Heighton, had only the minor part of Lottie in the World Fair scenes but her handling of it was full of promise.

Those who have proved their worth in previous productions did so again. Joyce Gascoigne-Pees, who came to the fore in the name part of last year's *Love From Judy* made an appealing Magnolia and was highly successful in making a credible transition from the love sick girl of the 1880s to the deserted wife of the 1900s. As her bosom friend Jukie, Mollie Greaves acted with the grace and poise and movement and sang with the sweetness that East Surrey fans have come to expect of her. Vocally the society is rich in the possession of Andrew Glass in the role of the gambler Gaylord Ravenal was convincing and his partnership with Mrs Gascoigne-Pees in the favourite "Lucky boy, lucky girl" song was one of the hits of the show. As Joe, there was not much for Fred Harrison to do but sing the theme song that, to many listeners, would recall the sudden rise to fame of Paul Robeson, and his rendering of "Ol' Man River" was admirable both in tonal quality and expressive effect. John Rapley and Sheila Hobbs were a thoroughly well-matched pair as Capt. Andy and his wife Parthy Ann, reacting on each other in a style that marked them as born comedians. Now among the society's old stalwarts, Douglas Chantler put feeling into his interpretation of the faithful Steve, and full justice was rendered to the other parts by Stanley Nightingale (Windy), Jack Brough (Pete), Gillian Hayter (Queenie), Godfrey Hill (Frank), Eugene Crawley (Rubber Face), Malcolm Howe

(Vallon) and by Paul Elliott, William Fry, Harold Dibben, Pamela Beare, Janet Hobson, Richard Nightingale and Robert Lilley.

A performance of *Show Boat* stands or falls by two essentials: the success with which the Hammerstein libretto is wedded to the music of Jerome Kern, by the slickness and timing of the comic business and the rendering of such well-known melodies such as "Ol' Man River", "C'mon, Folks", "Bill" and the rest of them; and the pulsating movement with which the action of the play is carried along. In both these respects, last week's production scored very high marks and when one praises the work of the principals, chorus, dancers and the orchestra conducted by Eric Gritton, one bears strongly in mind the extreme difficulty of staging what is at its professional best a highly spectacular play under the limitations the Redhill Market Hall imposes. And in this connection, very high marks indeed are the due of Stage Manager Osborne and the team of behind-the-curtain workers who handled over a dozen changes of scene with remarkable efficiency and dispatch. They contributed in no mean measure to the making of a thoroughly entertaining and enjoyable show.