5-7 May 1955

THE RIVER LINE

SHE BROKE DOWN THE WALL

ONE PLAYER BROUGHT OUT DRAMA

"This is not an easy play to act or produce," comments a programme note to Teddington Theatre Club's production of Charles Morgan's "The River Line," being staged at York House, Twickenham, with the last performance to-night.

This rather defensive observation could, of course, be applied to practically any play of pretension or ideas, but there is considerable justice in the club's misgivings.

"The River Line" is difficult in a quiet way. So much is left to the actors to say through their personalities, and the danger lies more in over-statement than in reticence.

On the whole, this is a successful production, but it lacks acute definition. There is a fuzziness of interpretation which almost certainly stems from failure of complete comprehension rather than lack of subtlety.

It contains some surprises. The danger spot in this account of an incident during the escape of four British officers through the French Resistance comes with the very last scene, a scene superfluous to the action and requiring very great contact with the audience to avoid disastrous anti-climax.

On Thursday evening there had been a wall between players and audience right up to this scene. Yet entirely due to an excellently calculated performance by Mrs. Maisie Sharp as the girl the wall disappeared and drama came to York House for the first time that night.

The reason for the lack of atmosphere during the bulk of the play can be traced to a certain stageyness in the production of Mr. Edward Sinclair, who has unfortunately been prevented by illness from seeing the results of his many weeks of hard work.

This stageyness reveals itself largely in the small actions, the turn of a head, the abrupt steps, which appear so calculated as to remove belief.

Within this convention, the performances are of the standard expected from the club. Miss Jennifer Oscard makes a very interesting person of Marie Chassaigne, complex but understandable; Mr. Jack Sinclair, despite an irritating droop to his voice when trying to sound casual is adequate in a rigid personality, and Mr. Peter Ripper, although miscast by reason of build and appearance as Heron, successfully introduces the touch of mysticism.

TEDDINGTON CLUB IN TENSE DRAMA

"The River Line"

The Teddington Theatre Club rang down the curtain on their 1954-55 season last week with a very fine production of Charles Morgan's thought - compelling play, "The River Line," at York House, on Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

Like all good plays, from "Hamlet" to "Man and Superman," the story is secondary to the author's main purpose: the expressing of views and a philosophy on a given subject. In "The River Line," Mr. Morgan has used a gripping story of the French Resistance in the last war, and the passing of Allied sympathisers from captivity to safety, through post to post, "down the river line," as a vehicle for searching into the hearts of men in their battle with life.

The production of such a play not only calls for the tense excitement of the thriller and the escape story, but also for the conveying to the audience the subtlest shades of thought and emotion as felt and expressed by the various characters. The producer, Edward Sinclair, in a large degree, succeeded. The tension of the drama was well maintained. Unluckily Mr. Sinclair was unable to be present owing to a last-hour indisposition, but he left the mark of his work firmly imprinted on the performance. The only flaw was a degree of inaudibility to those sitting in about the middle of the hall, especially when the players were performing at the back of the stage.

A Tour de Force

Jennifer Oscard played Marie Chassaigne, afterwards Mrs. Wyburton, the Resistance leader at the post in her father's farmhouse "in the river line." As a young Frenchwoman, filled with the passionate hatreds and loyalties of those times, Miss Oscard—so well-known to club audiences—assumed a very effective French personality as to bearing and accent. Her calm, reflecting, poise when, later on, as the wife of one of the men she helped save, she looks back on all the tragic happenings of the war, was most moving. She ordered, mistakenly as it happened, her future husband to kill one of their number, "Heron," on suspected treachery, and it is her, and the others' reflections on this grim episode that forms one of the chief *raisons d'être* of the play. The whole of the second act, in which this scene occurs, was a *tour de force* for Miss Oscard. In an extremely lengthy script, she never faltered nor lost the slightest grip on the dramatic situation. Her gestures were not always so Gallic as the other features of her make-up.

Jack Sinclair played her husband, Commander Wyburton, R.N. (Retd.) with dignity and assurance. The scene where he stabs "Heron" in the back was very dramatic: well acted and produced.

Peter Ripper was Major Lang, known as Heron. Only appearing in the middle act when the clock is turned back, Mr. Ripper added all the tension and drama the scene required.

The other chief escaper was a young American, Philip Sturgess, played with transatlantic effectiveness and sincerity by Philip Cook.

Maisie Sharp was in the difficult role of the Heron's sister, Valerie Barton, an ethereal character obsessed with her brother's death, the cause of which is unknown to her until the end. Miss Sharp played it charmingly and gave it just the right tone and poise throughout. It was all the more pity she was difficult to hear at times.

Skilled at Character

Anthony Eva gave a perfect little portrait of a French farmer, Marie's father, with mannerisms and personality to the manner born. Remembering his American father recently, Mr. Eva is evidently a very skilful character actor.

Cliff Broad—another escaper—and Chloe Crubbe as Mrs. Muriven were also highly successful contributors to the successs of the show.

All who helped on the production side are to be warmly commended. The two sets, especially the granary, were most realistic. The club can be unreservedly congratulated on its season's work, and should feel confident of further successes in 1955-56. I hope Mrs. Oscard's appeal for new members will not go unanswered.

MAURICE REEVE

AMATEUR THEATRE

TEDDINGTON THEATRE CLUB'S SUCCESS IN A DIFFICULT PLAY

TEDDINGTON Theatre Club proved once more last week that they are capable of tackling anything. Charles Morgan's play of the French Resistance, "The River Line," has such a literary flavour and such complex psychology that it is exceedingly difficult to put over effectively. Nevertheless, they succeeded to an exceptional degree.

The opening scene, with its long philosophical speeches, presents difficulties from the start, but it was beautifully played and led easily into the second act, the most difficult of all, the scene in the granary in France where Heron, the wrongly suspected traitor, is stabbed to death.

Producer Edward Sinclair had clearly taken great pains to understand the play and to communicate that understanding to the audience. It was unfortunate that he was suffering from bronchial trouble, but I hear that after being absent on the first two nights, he was able to see the result of his handiwork on Saturday.

Most complex character is the poetic Heron. If Peter Ripper was not entirely successful in conveying his high-mindedness or his personal magnetism he went some way to achieve it.

Jack Sinclair, unfortunately, was miscast as Commander Julian Wyburton who has to carry out the killing. He has not the solidity or the authority of the experienced naval officer. Cliff Broad, too, did not suggest the nerviness of Dick Frewer in the granary scenes.

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JENNIFER OSCARD, however, gave a most accomplished performance as Marie Chassaigne, the Resistance leader. Here, we could imagine, was a girl who could command men, whose word was law, who could give an order to kill without flinching. Moreover, in the garden scenes she was able to draw a perfect contrast, revealing the character's essential [illegible]ininity and warm sympathies. She also maintained the French accent fairly well.

The part of Valerie Barton, Heron's half-sister, was beautifully played by Maisie Sharp. The scene where she paints a picture of her adored half-brother and finally realises that he and Heron are one and the same was deeply moving. Maisie has had bigger parts than this, but she has never done anything finer.

Philip Cook gave an assured study of the American, Philip Sturgess, in love with Valerie, although it is a part that offers few opportunities. He did not always sustain the accent, but it was sufficient.

Anthony Eva impressed with his character study of the old French farmer, Pierre Chassaigne, Marie's father, but Chloe Crabbe was not quite equal to the part of Valerie's godmother.

The granary scenes might have been better lit. At times it was difficult to see who was there. It was a pity, too, that the tree branches from the garden scene had to be left in place, giving the impression that the granary had no roof. Philip Cook's decor for the garden scene, however, was most pleasing.

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On "The River Line." Putting up the scenery for the garden scene in Charles Morgan's play of the French Resistance which Teddington Theatre Club have been giving at York House. Left to right: Edward Sinclair (producer), Dorothy Oscard, Peter Ripper, C.O.M. Johnston and Dick Penn.

SCENERY FOR 'THE RIVER LINE'