

How the other half loves —twice

I HAVE been getting to know "How The Other Half Loves" (Alan Ayckbourn's play) with a vengeance. Seeing it on two consecutive evenings and still finding it funny says a lot for the culture of the piece. It also offers an interesting comparison in use of theatre resources.

I watched it first performed by the amateur company at the tiny Loft Theatre, Leamington Spa, and then by the professionals at the comparatively vast Birmingham Repertory Theatre.

It would be unfair to make detailed comparisons of individual performances. Suffice to say that the amateurs come off very well when the two are lined up like this.

The interesting factor is that I left the Loft knowing that a small theatre had been well utilised — not an inch to spare but not another one needed. I left the Rep wondering whether the use of all that space and sophistication had been worthwhile.

Topic

The size of the Rep stage is an old topic for argument but there is no doubt that a "small" play like this tends to get lost. That is true even though this show has been designed by Hugh Durrant, who has done so much successful work here.

But there is more to it than a physical imbalance between what is being said and the size of the operation saying it.

"How The Other Half Loves" wants only to make people laugh. That is no mean aspiration and it is achieved, but I felt that the Rep took a sledgehammer to crack a peanut.

Both productions enjoyed about the same amount of laughter although, interestingly, not from the same moments. What one throws away, the other latches on to.

At the Loft, Bernard Gooderick is the blustering, incredibly absent-minded Frank Foster and he plays it with a conviction that the man, despite his idiocy,

would be able to run some unspecified office department. Joy Oliver is ideally suited to the calm sophistication of Frank's wife.

But the evening goes to Pat Huckvale for her delightfully funny performance as the simple-minded Mary Featherstone.

Back at the Rep, Frank Williams—I have to say he is the vicar in "Dad's Army"—is in the driving seat of all the confusion and what an enjoyable experience it is to watch him.

He is superbly bemused, making absolute sense of the moments he walks up and down trying to sort things out.

Sebastian Breaks gives a tightly controlled performance, relishing the "dryness" of wonsaniser Phillips and Clare Sutcliffe is the lovely fireball of a wife.

And there is a lot to admire too in Simon Cadell's straitlaced William Featherstone.

Alan Ayckbourn, according to the Rep's programme note, is the first author since the heyday of Coward and Maugham to have four West End hits running at the same time.

It is easy to see why. His work is extremely funny, his theatre craftsmanship is so fine that when you are not laughing you can always sit and admire the way he has worked it all out.

Go to see either of these two productions. You will have a terrific time. I would not go so far as recommending seeing both — at least not on consecutive evenings.

Women are the better half

HOW THE OTHER HALF LOVES—Loft Theatre, Leamington, until September 21 (running time: 2hr, 15min.) LOOK round the emerging mass of concrete which is modern-day Coventry and you long for an architect with flair and imagination. Look round the theatre for a writer who can take the conventional comedy form and mould it into a meaningful shape and you'll find Alan Ayckbourn.

While others are writing themes around secretary birds "Boeing" in and out of songs, Ayckbourn is industriously and profitably producing play after play which demand attention and commendation for their artistic craftsmanship.

There is nothing about Ayckbourn's plays, however, which is exclusive. They are popular modern comedies with a broader, less acute appeal than those of Tom Stoppard.

Here, we are confronted with two households—the Phillips and the Foster—in a divided set, treated in Rodney Chambers' design and the play "B

By DAVID ISAACS

about misunderstandings. The measure of sexual infidelity is magnified by these misunderstandings and relationships are cleverly but honestly explored.

Dorothy Dillam's production has a welcome crispness and will lighten in performance as the run continues.

But where it goes wrong is in its failure to identify the play's basic characteristics.

Ayckbourn is writing about real people in a comedy situation—and the mixture of styles employed here tends to detract what is in many ways an enjoyable evening.

The women tend to emerge rather better than the men from this experience and Joy Oliver's sophisticated, slightly bitchy Mrs. Foster is a rewarding performance which is totally in tune with the playwright's intentions.

Thorburn's personable portrayal of a hard-drinking, wonsanising character, Mr. Foster, will possibly extend the scope of his performance as the tightening-up process takes effect.

Bernard Gooderick (Frank Foster) and John Penner both tend to play as though this were a farce. Mr. Gooderick settles into his role, but he is expending too much energy in ageing unnecessarily and in assuming that a silly walk is an aid to a comic performance.

Mr. Penner's imitation of Michael Crawford would fit well into a farcical context. It's a pity he's chosen to over-commit himself in this direction. If he can harness his admirable commitment with more restraint and better judgment he, too, could turn in a useful performance.

SEPTEMBER 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21

How the Other Half Loves

by ALAN AYCKBOURN

CAST:
 Frank Foster BERNARD GOODERICK
 Fiona Foster JOY OLIVER
 Bob Phillips MARK THORBURN
 Terry Phillips JOANNA LORD
 William Featherstone JOHN FENNER
 Mary Featherstone PAT HUCKVALE

DIRECTOR: DOROTHY DILLAM

The action of this play takes place in the living-rooms of the Fosters and Phillips.

ACT I: Scene I Early Thursday morning
 Scene II Evening

ACT II: Scene I Saturday morning
 Scene II Sunday morning

There will be one interval of 15 minutes between Acts I and II

Set Design Rodney Chambers
 Stage Manager George Howell
 Lighting Robert Watts, Ian Voce
 Sound Geoff Mountford
 Assistant Stage Managers Margaret Rees, Nancy Howell, Sue Moore, Joyce Welch, Peter Phipps, Chris Moore

Furniture by A. H. Hayes & Co. Ltd.
 Swivel chairs by Leamington Typewriter Bureau, 35, Warwick Street
 Miss Oliver's dress in Act II Scene I by Army & Navy Ltd., Leamington Spa

