

Desert Song has more than visual beauty

THE ARTS

by Peter Andrews

TO tens of thousands of musical comedy devotees The Desert Song remains one of the greatest examples of the genre.

I can't go along with that view because, although the music is magnificent, the melodramatic qualities of the book introduce a touch of the absurd into the proceedings.

But, by the Lord Harry, there were several times on Monday when the sheer eloquent persuasion of Ray Jeffery's production for Chelmsford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society — playing at the Civic Theatre all this week — almost convinced me otherwise.

Never afraid to play up the strengths of the Desert Song (even if it meant also exposing its weaknesses) Ray has created a show that is more than just a visual spectacular.

He even manages to make moments such as General Birabeau's horror when he finds he has ordered his troops to shoot down his defenceless son in the desert, convincing.

QUALITY

But, as in any Ray Jeffery show, it is the quality of his meaningful choreography in moments like the It number and the dance of the

Moroccan girls in act one and the opulent setting of the opening number of act two, that stand out.

And the drill formation sequence for the chorus in act one was as convincing a display of precision as anything I've seen on a musical comedy stage.

So, with all this plus musical director Ian Hayter's crisp account of the Sigmund Romberg score — the sensitive playing of the clarinet solos is especially outstanding — there is an awful lot going for this Desert Song.

True, not all the individual performances measure up to the magnificence of the overall production — Gay Jackson's metallicly bright Margo is too petite in style both musically and dramatically. Neville Shreeve generally makes General Birabeau insufficiently military and John Pyle cannot overcome the essential woodenness of the role of Captain Paul Fontaine.

But there are some splendid solo offerings and none finer than Angela Jenner's sexually supple Azuri, a performance of such

potency as to be almost overwhelming.

REPORTER

And in every other production of Desert Song the role of the reporter Benjamin Kidd has struck me as one of the least funny comedy roles ever written.

But Peter Smith, by making him a silly ass type of the mid-Twenties deservedly gets plenty of laughs, splendidly aided and abetted by Margaret Burgess, as his clinging vine of a secretary-cum-girl friend, and Lynette Bendall as an enticing Spanish beauty in the naughty number, One Good Boy Gone Wrong.

In the dual role of Pierre Birabeau and The Red Shadow Neil Michael starts on a restrained note playing down the crescendi in the Riff Song.

But he builds up his performance finely so that his virile singing of One Alone and his clever handling of the potentially maudlin final scene between his father and himself finally tied the two strands of the dual character into a convincing knot.

If, in the final resort, this show doesn't quite touch the supreme heights of My Fair Lady it is largely due to the fact Desert Song is in a lower league of musicals, but it still makes a damn good evening in the theatre.



Angela Jenner starts on her solo...