

THERE have been more polished productions of Edward German's "Merrie England" than that presented this week at the Regent Theatre, Chelmsford, by the Chelmsford Operatic and Dramatic Society, but few can have been more enjoyable.

It is an ambitious effort for any Amateur Society to stage "Merrie England."

Monday night's packed house gave the cast of 80 the warm applause they deserved for a colourful, fast-moving show with very few dull moments.

German's plot is admittedly a shaky vehicle for the lovely music, and it needs a vastly experienced cast and chorus to overcome some of the awkward pieces of writing, specially at the end of the second act.

But the big moments of the show—the rousing finale to the first act, Essex's "Yeoman of England," Raleigh's "English Rose," Bessie's Waltz Song, the typically English chorus singing and dancing, and Queen Elizabeth's entrance which must surely be the most impressive in all light opera—are performed so well as to make the show worth going miles to see.

Individually, Alfred Nice took singing honours. As Raleigh, his tenor voice and control were a joy to hear. With more stage experience his acting will become freer and more than just adequate.

Diane Lawson, in the part of Jill-All-Alone, practically stole the show with her acting as the frightened girl of the woods, condemned to die as a supposed witch. Her use of her eyes and expressive actions were nearly perfect. Her singing was delightful, but whether her small clear voice was quite strong enough for the large auditorium was doubtful.

Vera Warner made a most impressive Queen Elizabeth. Her singing of the lovely "O Peaceful England," accompanied with care and taste by choir and orchestra, would not have been out of place at Drury Lane. She needs a slightly more imperious speaking voice to match her regal demeanour.

Edward German's comedy is sometimes laboured, but Frank Morgan's deft handling of Walter Wilkins, the Shakespearian Player, was timed to a nicety. He could not be blamed for an audience which had quite rightly come to listen and not to laugh.

Unexpected encore

But I cannot quite forgive him for "muffing" slightly the delightful "King Neptune sat on his Golden Throne." A more experienced chorus, too, would not have been caught on the wrong foot by an obviously unexpected encore to this jolly number.

Essex and Bessie were well

played and sung by Maurice Bond, a late import from Colchester, and Dorothy Cox, an old favourite with Chelmsford audiences, while June Gisby sang nicely as the May Queen and acted with commendable pithiness.

Kay Amery's accomplished jig and the dancing of the chorus in the second act were specially applauded. Long Tom and Big Ben made an engaging couple in the hands of Kenneth Collins and Nick Carter, and the Four Men of Windsor, Fred Gisby, Tom Taylor, Peter Smith (a most dithery baker) and Jack Clark, with William Rondel as Simkins, gave admirable comedy backing to Mr. Morgan.

There were a few 'blank' spots, but as a whole the show went at a good pace. Musical Director George Horry is to be congratulated on his competent handling of the orchestra and singing. His accompaniment never intruded and it is a credit to the company that only twice were there any hints of a lack of liaison—and then only temporary.

Good production

Producer Robert Vernon has every reason to be pleased with himself for a good production.

Criticisms, probably purely personal, of his side of affairs, include a slight dilatory "build-up" by the chorus at Queen Elizabeth's entrance, with some disconnected shuffling and cheering by the chorus. Another was the somewhat irritating effect of some obviously crowded and mechanically inefficient "counter marching" by ladies of the chorus as a background to the stirring "Yeoman" song of Essex.

But none of these minor distractions could take away the grand effect of the whole. With a special word for the truly fine choral and solo singing which thrilled the whole audience at the end of Act One.

Others in the cast were: Herbert Heisterman, Cicely Harris, James Michael, Patricia Coward, Jeanne Hann, Reg Cornell, Raymond Lower, Christopher Udall, Joyce Bungay, Pam George, Eileen Malden, Carole Thompson, Tom Eldridge, Len Lawson, Peter McKenzie, Les Sharpe, June Davies, Beryl Goulden, Joyce Manfield, Pat Smith, Elsie Sweetman, Betty Wager, Jane Andrews, Barbara Braun, Gladys Brookes, Audrey Brown, Margaret Burgess, Flora Cook, Sheila Cottee, Patricia Coward, Elizabeth Dutton, Sylvia Easton, Helen Eldridge, St. Helen George, Beryl Keable, Ellenora Kent, Norah Taylor, Elizabeth Thompson, George Betts, Sidney Collicott, Kenneth Fox, George Harvey, Tony Lawson, John Morella, Terence Mulrenin, Stan Parsons, Victor Perry, George Pheby, John Richardson, Tony Richardson.

JOHN PARKER