



Making up before the Merry Widow's opening performance. Left to right: Sheila Stirling, Phyl Hart and Stan Parsons.

Exciting widow has a touch of magic

FOR the Chelmsford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society's 80th production Ray Jeffery has come up with a sparkling production of *The Merry Widow* that is full of magic. I hope he's around to direct the society's 100th production!

From the moment the curtain rises on a dance and mime sequence in the entrance hall of the Pontevedrian Embassy in Paris to its fall three hours later on a stage a blaze of colourful costumes, Ray lets his imagination work overtime.

This show — at Chelmsford's Civic Theatre all this week — is a must for all who love colour, beautiful melodies of timeless beauty and a recreation of the pre-1914 brand of gaiety.

What helps to give the show style is the ease with which the cast handle their ball dresses and tails, what helps to give it interest is the way movement is used to underline character situations.

From an evening, especially strong in visual delights the can-can sequence in act three, the burst of virile dancing at the start of act two and the elaborate and superb job Mr Jeffery makes of the production number *Women! Women!* stand out.

TEASING

In Phyl Hart we have a *Merry Widow* who charms and teases all the men (offstage as well as on), a hint of roguishness accompanying her smiles and glances, and who sings *Vilja* with a wistful charm and brings a snap and jauntiness to her duet with Danilo (Russ Watson) *Driving In The Park With You*.

Mr Watson's performance has an air of distinction throughout, Sheila Stirling is a captivating *Valencienne* and Peter Smith gambols around like a puppy anxious to please as *Njegus*.

THE ORCHESTRA

Stan Parsons' *Baron Zeta* is bumbling absurd but never obvious — come to think of it this lack of the obvious overall is another reason why this is an exciting *Merry Widow* — nearly all the smaller roles are played out with power and conviction and none more so than *St Brioche* and *Cascade* (Robin Sampson and Brian Tollinsen).

The orchestra under Malcolm Boulter play a major part in the show's success. Some of the string playing in the last act is as silky in tone as anything I've heard come out of the Civic Theatre pit!