

Drama at Chelmsford

POISON PEN LETTERS

INSP. BOCKING SOLVES A MYSTERY

Chelmsford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society are this week presenting Richard Llewellyn's three act drama "Poison Pen" at the Regent Theatre—and let it be said at once that it is without question one of the finest productions the writer of this notice has seen from a band of amateur performers, and they number many.

Seldom does one meet a cast of such uniform excellence. The demand made upon most of the players is exacting, but by sheer ability they win the day. Couple with that ability a perfect presentation and pleasure is complete.

As there is a request, the full plot of "Poison Pen" will not be divulged here. Not that the identity of the hand that wields the pen in any way spoils the enjoyment, for the recognition will have come to the discerning at an early stage. Suffice to say that the story dramatically and often humorously illustrates the turmoil and distress which comes to a quiet Devon village with the arrival of the letters, designed at the breaking of happy homes in a spirit of revenge.

When trouble comes to a country parish the Rector is usually the Good Samaritan and Donald Leech is no exception. As the Rev. John Rainrider he has the most exacting role of all and puts it over with a conviction that strikes reality from beginning to end. He is the complete parson, in speech and in manners, so much so that one almost feels he missed his vocation. We have all met, too, the Col. Cashelton of Frank Page, the local J.P. who calls in the police to solve the mystery; as the ex-Army type of country squire and church warden he gives the utmost satisfaction.

DETECTION

For the part of Inspector Colclough, who solves the mystery, the choice was obvious—that stalwart of the specials, Supt. Bocking. Though demoted from real life he takes most kindly to it and throughout he has the role in his complete custody. The casting of his aide de camp, Fullergrave-Rees, the handwriting expert, however, demanded more consideration, but in Frank Morgan we have one who can couple a natural Welsh tongue with all the fussiness required.

Most of the light relief is provided by the women. What a delight for instance, is Dorothy Cox, as the Inspector's wife and who better than Peggy Green could provide a village tittle tattler, ably backed by Beryl Keable? That Peggy herself should in the end become a victim of an unexpected circumstance adds much to the audience's joy. As one of the Poison Pen suspects Connie Fately (Ann Massey) impresses with her realism and we are as sorry as the rest when tragedy confines her to Act 2. A role which almost equals that of the Rector in importance is taken by Jane Stocks as his sister Phryne and it gives her ample opportunity of exploiting her undoubted ability, particularly in the last scene. Equal tribute is earned by the rest of the cast—Rose Rainrider (Rosemary Gornall), Mrs. Harboard, housekeeper at the Rectory (Amy Warren), Badham, the sexton (Jim Welham), Malcolm McCleod, Rose's fiance (Ken Warren), Mrs. Cashelton, the Colonel's wife (Mary Leech), Sam Hurrin, labourer (Jack Long), and Len Griffin, village grocer (Nick Carter).

In a final tribute there must be praise for the new producer, Joyce Waddy, whose contribution to the general success, the cast are the first to acknowledge. Others assisting include: Hon. Prompter, Major F. W. M. Powley; Hon. Props. Master, Mr. Douglas Catt; Hon. Perruquier, Mr. Percy H. Russel. Hon. Call Boy, Mr. W. J. Turner. Incidental music arrangements etc., Mr. N. C. Stokes (of the Chelmsford Gramophone Society).

At the close of the first performance, the acting President, Dr. John F. Taylor, was introduced and the Mayor, Alderman A. W. Andrews, also spoke.

The production will continue to-day (Friday) and to-morrow (Saturday).