

Whites-on-top

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THE EXOTICA
MARKET

The London Revue Nymphs and Satires exploits African culture without commitment and in the old whites-on-top package.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN revue, *Nymphs and Satires*, which is currently playing at London's Apollo Theatre, is, to say the very least, a ghastly affair. Except for the contribution of the Manhattan Brothers or the ineluctable and persistent intelligence of Miss Joyce Grant, the show is monstrously vapid. Its commitment is a drip-dry attachment to fatuity. It is not only mindless and lacking in an over all style which might have acted as a unifying principle for the black and white members of the show, but lacks even the basic values which one would have expected a man of Leon Gluckman's talent to impart to this drifting, deleterious "black and white minstrel" affair. As a matter of fact its ethos is Braamfontein, Johannesburg, and one is surprised at how frequently the show insists on our recognition of this fact. Indeed, the whole point of this article is to acknowledge this fact which the show so everlastingly insists upon. Braamfontein it is then!

I suppose if one were pressed to choose between the nymphs and the satires (or satyrs) one would unflinchingly settle for the nymphs, especially the flawlessly beautiful West Indian actress, Helen Downing; provided, of course, that they were not asked to mouth the silly songs or go through the humiliating motions of some of the more distasteful sketches in this show. At least the girls are divinely pretty and sexually appealing — though not ultimately appeasing, at least, so far as the show is concerned.

If *Nymphs and Satires* should therefore suddenly disappear from where it nightly roosts let me at least explain why I, for one, shall not mourn its demise; why, in fact, I should celebrate it. It isn't just the fact that the show

represents no basic values which one can respect in the manner of certain satirical revues however failed and unachieved they finally prove to be: what is distasteful about this show is the desperate opportunism which inspired it in the first place.

Firstly, though finally it proves no such thing, one was led to believe that the show would be integrated. Secondly, by its deliberate exploitation of African material, one was led to expect a certain ethnic style and quality which, though not politically committed, would represent an educated point of view. For how can one exploit urban township material or any African material for that matter without revealing some very basic and fundamental attitudes to larger issues? In contradistinction to the attitudes of certain white South Africans who deny the very relevance of African culture to their lives, this show does no more than skim the surface of this culture while reinforcing the stereotypes of the blacks held by most white South Africans.

It was of course necessary to use the African material in the show as a minimum requirement for its commercial saleability, since most white South Africans find it difficult to achieve success outside South Africa without exploiting their assumed acquaintance with a unique African heritage whose novelty would act as a pull for European producers looking for exotica. This is not bad if such white South Africans identify themselves fully with the black majority of the country who are the main originators of this culture. In this show they do not. The blacks do not dominate the show, they are subservient. They act mainly as foils for the white members whose show this is.

Now I will give examples. *Nymphs and Satires* belongs properly to the social milieu we all know so well, in which it is generally assumed that every black woman is dying to go to bed with a white man but that no self-respecting white woman in her senses would want anything to do with a black man.

In this show, for instance, whenever the black boys are lusting after the white girls much point is made as to how dis-

tasteful white girls find this attention. But in the number called "Wow" the black girl is shown as feeling terribly flattered that white boys are making a pass at her. It must not be supposed that the show attacks or satirises these values in any way; on the contrary it embodies them. They are the values which the creative teams, all white South Africans, perhaps consciously or subconsciously hold.

IF YOU THINK THIS is a far-fetched example, though I don't see why, we will pass on to another example. Steve Perry, in one scene, is singing "Country Boy," and as he is about to end the song Walter Loate, the African boy, is seen walking by. Perry matter-of-factly kicks him on the backside. Why, one wants to know? What satirical point is being made by this ludicrous portrayal? None that I could see; but then here too the notion is steadfastly held by most white people that it is all right to portray a black man being kicked on the backside by a white person, but that for a black man to administer physical punishment to a white person on the stage is unspeakably ugly and embarrassing. Besides, no matter how badly treated by whites, the blacks are supposed to hold white people in honest and undying affection. If any blood is to be spilled on stage it is a black man's blood that must be spilled. That, incidentally, is the main reason why liberal white critics respond with such amazing ferocity to the current plays by the young Negro playwright, LeRoi Jones. For the first time a Negro playwright is making short shrift of the myth so beloved by some deluded white liberals that blacks love whatever is white almost instinctively and that they will not return physical violence with violence. By showing a black boy gratuitously kicked in front of a white audience without making any satirical point this show, in fact, reinforces the stereotyped thinking of people already accustomed to the idea that black people have an infinite capacity for enduring insult and that they can be kicked about at leisure.

Sketches like the rubbish bins, *I dreamt I was in Johannesburg*, or Joe Mokgotsi preaching a rousing sermon, are not enough to save this show. What is typical about it is the evasiveness of sketches like "Gone." Most English people who are insecure already about the presence of blacks in this country must have applauded the portrayal of blacks leaving, but since the point is hardly made with any force as to what happens afterwards in this country whatever satirical point was intended has no bite. I suppose the defence will be that the producers intended the show to be subtle. Most of us just think that it was evading the issue. This is a pseudo-African show in which white attitudes dominate — a splendid paradigm for what is happening in South Africa. ●