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“EUROPEAN RENDEZ-VOUS”

When on holiday in Switzerland I often heard of the excellent cabaret of Voli Geiler and Walter Morath. I hoped for an opportunity of seeing one of their much-talked-of shows, but they were a most elusive pair, always on tour somewhere or other and never available where I happened to be. I am sure many Swiss here were in the same position and therefore welcomed the announcement some weeks ago that the two artists would appear in London in an intimate revue, “European Rendez-Vous”. The credit for this arrangement goes to Madame Daeniker, the wife of the Swiss Ambassador, who, as chairman of the organising committee, was indefatigable in her efforts to make the show in aid of Swiss charities in London a success. The Ambassador kindly gave his patronage, and the two artists made their début on 13th June at the attractive theatre of the Institut Français in Kensington. The first evening was taken over by Swissair and the Swiss National Tourist Office, who presented the show to their travel agents. On the two subsequent evenings the Swiss Colony and many friends, English and of other nationalities, had a chance of seeing the two famous stars in 2½ hours of brilliant entertainment.

In a programme of such variety it is obviously not possible that every item could be perfect to such a varied and critical audience. Some fancied the numbers which had a strong element of vulgarity in them, like the temperamental Italian sketch “Qui Toni — Qui Maria”, or the satirical French duet “Cocteau Cocktail”. Others preferred the two pantomimes: In “Premier Bal” the artists portrayed two gauche teen-agers of the Edwardian era at their first ball. The “Symphony for kettle-drum and flute” was a superbly mimed skit on two elderly musicians. The incidental music played on the piano by Mr. Heinz Zager (Berlin) was particularly striking for this number, though excellent throughout.

To my mind perhaps the weakest number was the parody on the talks of excellencies at an international conference “On the Highest Level”. It had great scope, but the monologues were not quite convincing in spite of adroit acting. Incidentally, Miss R. E. Pool was responsible for some of the translations, whilst continuity was by George Mikes.

Opinions were also divided regarding the solo chanson “Anna - the Tea” imitating an old Russian Society woman who in her reminiscences over a rich past created a mixture of “grande dame” and lonely old soul, both alluring and pathetic.

Special attractions were the short introductory solo parts the artists presented while the stage was set for the next number (costumes and scenery were cleverly changed at lightning speed). Some of these were serious and gave plenty of food for thought. With captivating simplicity Mr. Morath read the “Common Principles” from the Atlantic Charter as an introduction to the “Yiddish Song” which portrayed the wanderings of the Jewish race. It showed the two artists in serious acting, and the audience appreciated this aspect of the performers’ versatility, but I felt this item did not come up to the high standard of impersonation shown in most other items.

Throughout the evening many a home truth was spoken, partly in jest, partly in serious vein, about mankind in general and some individual nation in particular.

The Swiss love of democracy and their business acumen where tourists are concerned were made fun of in the opening number, “Welcome to Switzerland”. The British stock subject, the weather, even at the most inappropriate moments, was held up to ridicule in an apt caricature of a Swiss girl who is in domestic employment in this country.

One of the outstanding performances by both Miss Geiler and Mr. Morath was given in the sketch “Die Nacht am Rhein”. This portrayal of “Wirtschaftswunderkinder”, a German couple typical of the economic resurgence period, was extremely witty and showed the actors’ capacity to perfection in word, mime and gesture. It took them through the whole scale from bombast to pathos, from sentimentality to mock-seriousness, and found an appraising public even amongst those whose knowledge of German was scanty.

The programme ended with an operatic duet, “Festival”. This frivolous piece of delightful nonsense, highly dramatic in voice and action, gave both artists an adequate outlet for their love of lampooning. The audience responded most enthusiastically.

Thus ended — three nights running — a very clever performance by two versatile Swiss artists. Miss Geiler, with her sparkling personality and outstanding gift of caricature, is usually the favourite. But, if one can make a choice at all, I should pick Mr. Morath for his acting ability. He never over-acts the part, not even in the grotesque.

Miss Geiler comes from Winterthur, Mr. Morath from Basle. For more than a decade the two stars have worked together in their highly original show. They are equally at home in dramatic acting, singing, miming and dancing and perform in several languages. With these assets it is not surprising that they have been acclaimed in many countries. Their success in London has opened the door to other engagements in Great Britain.

When Madame Daeniker took on the considerable task of organising this show it was with this in mind, but above all with a wish to help the Swiss charities in London. As a result the Churches, the Welfare Office for Girls, the Benevolent Society, and also the French Hospital, which is always ready to assist our compatriots, will benefit handsomely. This would not have been possible without the help and support of a great many people. Miss Geiler and Mr. Morath were prepared to forgo their fees. Monsieur and Madame Daeniker themselves gave generous hospitality to Mr. and Mrs. Morath and Miss Geiler for the whole of the week, whilst Mr. Bonvin, of the Montana Hotel, kindly offered board and lodging to the pianist and stage manager. The Swiss National Tourist Office, Swissair and the Swiss Bank Corporation deserve thanks for their help and co-operation. Due to Madame Daeniker’s efforts, supported by the committee, a great many English friends, too, as well as members of other Embassies, took tickets and gave donations.

In addition, the Ambassador and Madame Daeniker gave a reception at the Embassy to English friends and foreign diplomats following the performances on two evenings. The guests greatly appreciated the chance of meeting the two artists, who were as unassumingly modest off stage as they were impressive when “in action” in their “European Rendez-Vous”.

Mariann.