

Excellent acting by Kusum Haider in Yerma

By Our Drama Critic

At the National School of Drama's open-air theatre on Friday, a breezy evening and, under the restlessly clapping leaves of a large peepul tree, on an exquisitely contrived stage setting of huts, streets, prickly crows, flaring lights, and Spanish music in the background, Lorca's hauntingly passionate yet elegiac play, *Yerma*, brought home to us in a seizure of considerable power.

When the stage is dressed in light, a shepherd passes silently across, the bells on his long staff twinkling. A figure, unnoticed so far, leaps up from the ground where it has been lying huddled up, races to the shut gate after the shepherd, rushes back to the hut, and calls to her husband as the taut wind would call to its seed. We recognise Yerma, the Barren One.

ABOUT STERILITY

Lorca's play is about life and sterility, which is the negation of life. Yerma is the self-aware channel through which courses the urge to procreate and give life: thwarted, this urge turns crabbed and bitter, ending finally in destruction: in killing the husband who would not give her a child she kills her son who never was, and



thus herself.

The power of Lorca's play is in the symbolic characterisation of Yerma, as well as in its poetry. There is harrowing economy of speech and incident here, sterility and death in the midst of lustily burgeoning life, a taut and violent dialogue between laughter and tears.

The National School of Drama's production, under E. Alkazi's sensitive and endlessly detailed direction, caught the laughter and the death on their wing of poetry, as it were. From that first leap off the ground, Kusum Haider's was a Yerma doomed by her own passion to give life. This was no ordinary woman but the life-urge itself, bursting at the edges of her passion like a pod.

She flings herself at her hus-

band as though the force of her passion would make him yield the new life she craves; not finding it, her desire for maternity turns desperate, riding her now like a wind: through that strangely mocking scene with old Emilia, through the brief yet lost tenderness of sitting with Victor with desire stirring in her, on to the explosion at the house of Dolores, the anguished prayer for a child, and the elegiac and manic power of the final killing. This is a physically frail Yerma, but unmistakably haunted by the power of her passion, with the gift to set that passion alight.

Of the others, Joyce Rangarajan's earthy Emilia, running with fertility as a stream with water, made an excellent foil to Kusum Haider's tormented Yerma; though I did wonder at the wisdom of Emilia being spoken so close to cockney. Richard Oppenheimer made a good and innocent husband, the unyielding stake to which Yerma is tied; Rajiv Sethi was good as Victor. The Village Women, especially in the utterly delightful scene at the river, offered a bawdy armsful of lust; the peasants whooped, courted, and prayed with gusto. Two more performances: strongly recommended.