

CECIL BEATON WRITES A PLAY

By W. A. DARLINGTON

LONDON.

EVER since the Prince Regent made it fashionable at the end of the eighteenth century, Brighton has liked to think of itself as London-by-the-sea. Theatrically speaking, it can seldom have lived up to that name more completely than on July 16 when its Regency Festival began, with the production of a play set in that period and written by Cecil Beaton.

Both as a rather too sophisticated stage designer and as a society photographer, Mr. Beaton is violently fashionable and his first attempt at a play, "The Gainsborough Girls," was treated by his friends and admirers as an event in the same category as a Noel Coward first night in the West End.

Up went the curtain on a charming scene in Gainsborough's London house in 1774 with the painter's two pretty daughters, delightfully dressed, busy hanging papa's pictures. The setting was free from Mr. Beaton's usual extravagances and showed a respect for the eighteenth century which he had never paid to the nineteenth. In that moment there was good reason to hope that we were in for a rewarding evening, if Mr. Beaton should prove to have any grasp of the art of writing.

The Workmanship

But when the play began, that hope quickly died. Mr. Beaton not only had no grasp of the art of writing but seemed blankly unaware that any such art existed. His dialogue proved to be an indiscriminate mixture of modern slang and clichés with an occasional eighteenth-century phrase thrown in, presumably in the fitful hope that a period flavor would somehow arrive. The total effect was of a flood of schoolboy jargon in which such assets of story and characterization as the play possessed were swept away. I listened to it in growing astonishment that the qualities which Mr. Beaton's ear conspicuously lacked should be just those qualities for which his age is famous—sophistication and a sense of style.

In London itself the only production of first-rate importance during the month has been the revival of Pinero's "His House in Order" with Godfrey Tearle, to which I made passing reference in my last letter. This has settled down to having a middling success, not at all compatible with that of "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray" last year. The difference lies not in the acting but in the direction. "His House in Order" fell into the hands of a man too young to understand how the play looked to the Ed-

wardian audiences and incapable therefore of transporting himself and his own audience imaginatively into those straight-laced days. Instead, he tried to have the parts acted so as to be intelligible by modern standards to a modern audience, which is, of course, impossible. Even so, the play is a very effective piece of stage machinery.

New "King Henry"

It was left to Stratford-on-Avon to give us the most satisfactory night's entertainment of the month. This was the production of "King Henry V," the last of the series of four of Shakespeare's historical plays which Anthony Quayle has presented this season as a continuous whole. Even over this I cannot go into ecstasies, for it is overshadowed by the production of the same play which has been the highlight of this year's Old Vic season.

All the same it is a good all-around piece of work and has a special importance because it sees the emergence of a new young leading actor in Richard Burton, who played the king. Some of my critical colleagues who, like me, have been hoping for great things from Mr. Burton ever since he made much of a small part in "The Lady's Not for Burning," profess themselves disappointed in his Henry; they say he is not kingly enough for them.

All right—let it be so. My answer is that, kingly or not, Mr. Burton's Henry is a leader of men. As I watched him at Harfleur and Agincourt I felt that here was a general whom soldiers would cheerfully follow to the death. Mr. Burton may have lacked some of the historic graces but he showed me how Henry won battles against odds. I do not ask more than that of a young man in his first big