

Black comedies

A Parade of Cockeyed Creatures
George Baxt (Cape, 21s.)
Hebdomeros
Giorgio de Chirico (Peter Owen, 35s.)
Seven Days At the Silbersteins
Etienne Leroux (W. H. Allen, 21s.)
Lieutenant Okino

Hugh Hickling (Hutchinson, 37s. 6d.)
OBSCURE avant-garde experiments are of great social value, and we should never tire of asserting this fact. All the black comedies and kinky happenings enacted in dark cellars packed with five people have brought new vitality to the detective story, and countless citizens will be entertained because a handful of vanguard artists experimented with new material. *A Parade Of Cockeyed Creatures* may not be as good as George Baxt's previous story in which the Negro detective was a homosexual who fell in love with the murderer, but it's still punchy enough to stimulate.

When one thinks of the old house-party detective novels, with Lady Cynthia and Major Muldoon and porky policemen getting on the blower, one really can relish Mr Baxt's school-mistress who keeps a class in order by threatening to tear out the illustrations from their hygiene books, and the frustration of a policeman who is trying to beat a

confession out of a suspect only to find that his victim is a masochist, and the countless other ways in which the gay plot thickens.

Of course yesterday's avant-garde may seem a bit of a non-marvel because it has done its work and the innovation has become too general a currency. However it was worth reprinting *Hebdomeros*, which first appeared in France in 1929, as an historical document, Chirico's only novel, although the dream-state writing is now commonplace. *Hebdomeros* and his companions drift around — at one point imagining themselves in a perfected, if not yellow, submarine — seeing views from windowless rooms and listening to recitals on a soundless piano, and encountering old stone men or perhaps an angel as bare as a tree in autumn.

You know it all? Yes, but it has its point for the art student; and, because Chirico was a considerable magician there are still some moments which retain their spell, some nights with the echoes of waterfalls and the shuddering trees drifting to unknown shores, some visions of men at the end of a street suddenly turning to the left with the well-known movement of fish in glass bowls.

Etienne Leroux is a titular member of the avant-garde, having founded the "Sestigers" group in South Africa in the fifties; but his novel reveals lack of confidence, and much of the moralising about good and evil is cautiously conveyed in conversations which are not integrated into the surrealist parties in the great house of the South African estate which stands for a way of life which is a way of death. A young man goes to the house to meet a rich girl whom he has been ordered to marry, but he is not immediately introduced to her. He is told that being human is an abstraction from the herd life of making money, and he must learn herd ways. Alas, no new door is opened by all the parties he has to attend; and the main interest — political, the problems, revealed by compromises, of an author who tries to be avant-garde in the stifling South African scene.

Certainly the support we should all give to the avant-garde, because of its great social value as cutting edge of the mind, does not mean that we should deny the entertainment of writers who believe that to be orthodox is to inherit, and Mr Hickling does inherit all the good will created by other rattling good old stories about white men and women being pursued through the jungle. He sets his version in Borneo in 1942 with the British Resident and a small party, including missionaries with pig jaw chat, being chased up the river by the Japanese. The author has held a variety of senior legal posts in the Orient; and he has made a splendidly cosily readable recapitulation for relaxation.

OSWELL CLARKE