

**"EIGHT BIRDS"** — *President Hotel Gold Room.*

**BIRD-WATCHING** is an esoteric occupation (unless, for "birds" you read "girls"), and Robert Kirby's satirical excursion into the field is aimed at a sophisticated audience. While there is plenty of tastefully dressed corn and even a soupçon or so of spice to divert the uninitiated palate, the general tone of the offering is subtle and highly intelligent.

It is the stuff for the connoisseur. Presented with verve and a refreshing touch of originality, Kirby's material is both witty and pungent. His well-aimed barbs spare nothing and nobody, but are tempered with an understanding that comes near to compassion.

He has a flair for observation that parallels that of Fugard; the types he depicts are never just types. They are painfully recognisable as real people. Beneath the cruelly incisive, embarrassingly trite, tones of the abandoned wife of "Without Him" (superbly delivered by Maureen England), there is the poignancy of genuine tragedy, ennobled by courage and endurance. "You don't have to be happy (to be gay)" is a clinical look at the homosexual in (Johannesburg?) society, which might be vicious if it were not tinged with pity.

This is satire of the highest order: unflinchingly direct and uncompromising, yet always in the perspective of human foible and frailty. It is possible to like the protagonists even while you're laughing at them. Like the eight birds that represent them, they are victims of their own conditioning.

The performances are of the virtuoso calibre, so much so that a cast of three carries the show with infinite variety and interest. Ian Hamilton is splendid as a pontificating bishop and, as a "mod" revivalist. Maureen England sings superbly and shows a rare aptitude for mimicry.

The Chris Barnard sketch, which concludes the programme, is marred by crudity but remains a pertinent and funny commentary.