

Jazz Opera Wins Durban's Acclaim

Review

"KING KONG," a jazz opera.

VENUE: Durban City Hall.

May 12.

THERE were few empty places in the 1,700-seater City Hall when "King Kong" opened its Durban season last night. The large audience had been attracted by news which had preceded the show; if its success in Durban depends on first-acclaim, then it is already assured.

The curtain rose on as difficult an audience as could be imagined: people for the most part unfamiliar with life in the teeming African townships of Johannesburg; people probably ignorant of the raw, virile culture which is being evolved in the shanties there.

Few could have left the hall unaware of having been touched by an expression of the irresistible aspirations of a race emerging from the melting pot of civilisation.

The story of the true-life King Kong, which inspired the production of this jazz opera, is overshadowed by music which at times approaches greatness. It ranges from wild, strident jazz to beautifully harmonised spirituals, reaching probably its highest moment towards the end when King Kong, manacled but still defiant, sings of his downfall as a chorus of policemen toll an obligato of doom.

HIS PEAK

When the story opens King Kong is approaching the peak of his renown among the inhabitants of the township. A giant of a man, he is a boxer for whom a future overseas is predicted. He swaggers through the streets and shebeens, idolised by the women and followed by a crowd of sycophants.

But in a brawl he kills a man and waits for months for his trial and acquittal. When he comes back to the township the fickle crowd—including his girl—have forsaken him.

His fall from the pinnacle of adulation is swift. He is beaten in a boxing match, the crowd casts scorn on him, he lunges about and in his frenzy kills his girl.

PULSATING

This is the rough, primitive stuff of which the opera is forged. It is given pulsating life by a cast of surprising talent. Nathan Mdledle as King Kong, Miriam Mabeka as his girl Joyce, and Joseph Mogotsi as Lucky, the man who contrives his ruin, head the company.

Backed by a dozen others, they meet the challenge of the music to which the story is set, they interpret with abandon the fine choreography. At times their voices are lost in the cavernous reaches of the City Hall.

There are occasions when the lighting effects are fussy and distracting.

But these things cannot detract from the excellence of a show which is certainly of national—and will probably prove of international—standard.

C.B.