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ACTING IN SELF-DEFENCE

New Zealand Makes Its Own Plays

WAR is improvisation. What you can't buy you make or adapt; but you don't, if you can help it, go without. That is what has happened to the play-going section of the community. Visits from overseas companies are almost out of the question, so New Zealand is producing plays without overseas aid. It has, of course, been doing so for a long time, but not on the scale on which the thing has been done this winter.

The most important fact, however, is that New Zealand is writing plays as well as producing and acting them. What follows is by no means comprehensive. We have just talked to a few people who happened at the time to be accessible. But we have gleaned enough information to show that there is great activity in dramatic circles in New Zealand, and that the matter does not begin and end with entertainment.

AN AUCKLAND VENTURE

[N Auckland recently, Professor W. A.

Sewell wrote what he described as a New Morality, *No Man Stands Apart*. He produced it in the W.E.A. theatre with a cast largely composed of members of the Auckland University College Drama Club. It is a two-act play in everyday war-time language with quotations from the New Testament, Shakespeare, Donne, Blake, Mr. Churchill, and others. Seats for the hall for each of the three nights of the performance were booked out more than a week before; repeated requests were made to have the season extended; and finally people just went along and stood in the aisles and doorways, many of them for the whole performance.

The first act of the play has one scene, set in the living-room of a working-class house in a London district. The second act has two scenes, the first in an air-raid shelter and the second back in the living-room. The play begins before the outbreak of war and ends after the blitz. There are 10 characters in the cast, Mr. and Mrs. Smith and their sons Jack and Tommie and their daughter Jane, a priest, a Cockney commissionaire and two girls (met briefly in the air-raid shelter scene) and a neighbour. Besides these characters in what might be called the main play there are others who appear on a second stage behind and above the main stage in crowd scenes and scenes with symbolic importance. The actions and words of these secondary characters might be intended to be seen by the audience as if through the eyes and minds of the characters in the main play.

The theme of man's dependence on man—in the past as well as in the present—is presented to the audience firmly; first it is printed, 15 lines of blank verse, on the programme; then it is spoken as a prologue to the first act and, with slight variations, to the two scenes of the second act. Professor Sewell explained to us that he wanted to keep this theme steadily before the audience—the idea that we are not, cannot be, independent of our fellows and those who have lived before. They are all a part of us.

Later in the year, Margaret Barr, who produced *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, will produce *The Moon is Down*, with a W.E.A. cast in Auckland.

ESCAPE FROM ESCAPISM

[N New Zealand as in other countries there is a movement which aims to put drama to a political purpose. When we asked one member of the Wellington Unity Theatre group to tell us more

about it, he answered with a passage from a broadcast discussion between John Gielgud and Frank O'Connor, in which Gielgud said:

"The fashion of successful plays during the last 40 years has always had a tendency towards high life. Wilde and Pinero started it by showing a lot of actors in beautiful costumes looking more like ladies and gentlemen than the ladies and gentlemen who came to the theatre to see them. People will always pay money to see people beautifully dressed, sitting about in luxurious surroundings. The cinema after all—with exceptions here and there—has gone the same way. . . . Dodie Smith has starified her leading characters who, though they are supposed to be Mr. and Mrs. Everyman living in St. John's Wood, are really Fay Compton and Owen Nares sitting in twin beds looking their most glamorous. And that does to a considerable extent limit the scope of the West End stage. With few exceptions, like Priestley, Esmyn Williams, Ronald Mackenzie and Walter Greenwood (author of *Love on the Dole*) the playwrights don't give us a chance."

"This kind of thing hasn't been confined to England," our informant said. "We think it has been seen in the tendencies of amateur and professional productions in this country. We think that plays of this kind, though they may be well acted and well produced, ignore real human and social problems, and are too often chosen for their box-office appeal alone. It was in this mood that Unity Theatre was formed in Wellington in 1941. It took its name from a dramatic club in London, which was fostered by Paul Robeson, Sean O'Casey, Sybil Thorndike, Lewis Casson, and others. Its aim is to establish in Wellington a kind of drama which deals with realities, and reflects contemporary life. It is not concerned with plays which provide a dream world of escape."

NEWS OF REPERTORY

MEMBERSHIP figures alone tell something of the story of the Wellington Repertory Society. Ten years ago, we were informed by the secretary, George Swan, there were about 300 members; within three years there were nearly a thousand. Over the last few years it has been pegged at a thousand, but now a place with more seating accommodation is being used, and it has jumped up to about 1100. It does six major plays a year, and puts on an evening of "one-acters" every six weeks. From this field many promising recruits come forward, and every now and then some real talent shows up.

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