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WE sat for an hour or so the other afternoon in the star's dressing-room at the Wellington Grand Opera House — Jim McKenna, who has been connected with the New Zealand stage for 40 years, and a representative of *The Listener*. A performance was in full swing, the laughs of the audience floated up now and then, but the dressing-room was not in use; the star, that afternoon, was on the screen. The only furniture was two chairs and a huge mirror which has reflected the features—and the faces they made up — of scores of famous actors and actresses.

"Excuse my dirty hands—been having a bit of trouble with the fires to-day," said Jim, who now is caretaker of the theatre. "But they're all right now." The dressing-room was cold, but discomfort was forgotten as Jim McKenna warmed to his subject and recounted tale after tale of his experiences as call-boy, property man, mechanic, and actor. He has been at the Opera House since 1914, but was "in the business" for many years before that.

### "Lots of Funny Things"

"You want to know a bit about my doings? Well, I can tell you lots of funny things; some you couldn't print. I started out as a member of the chorus with Marris Brothers at the Auckland Opera House," Mr. McKenna explained. "And then Scott Inglis, who was playing *The Bells*, offered me a call-boy's job. Later I was promoted to 'props' and, including those with whom I worked a season, were Walter Bentley and Wilson Barrett, in the days of *The Sign of the Cross* and *The Silver King*. Later I was with Dix's Gaiety Company in the Auckland Town Hall.

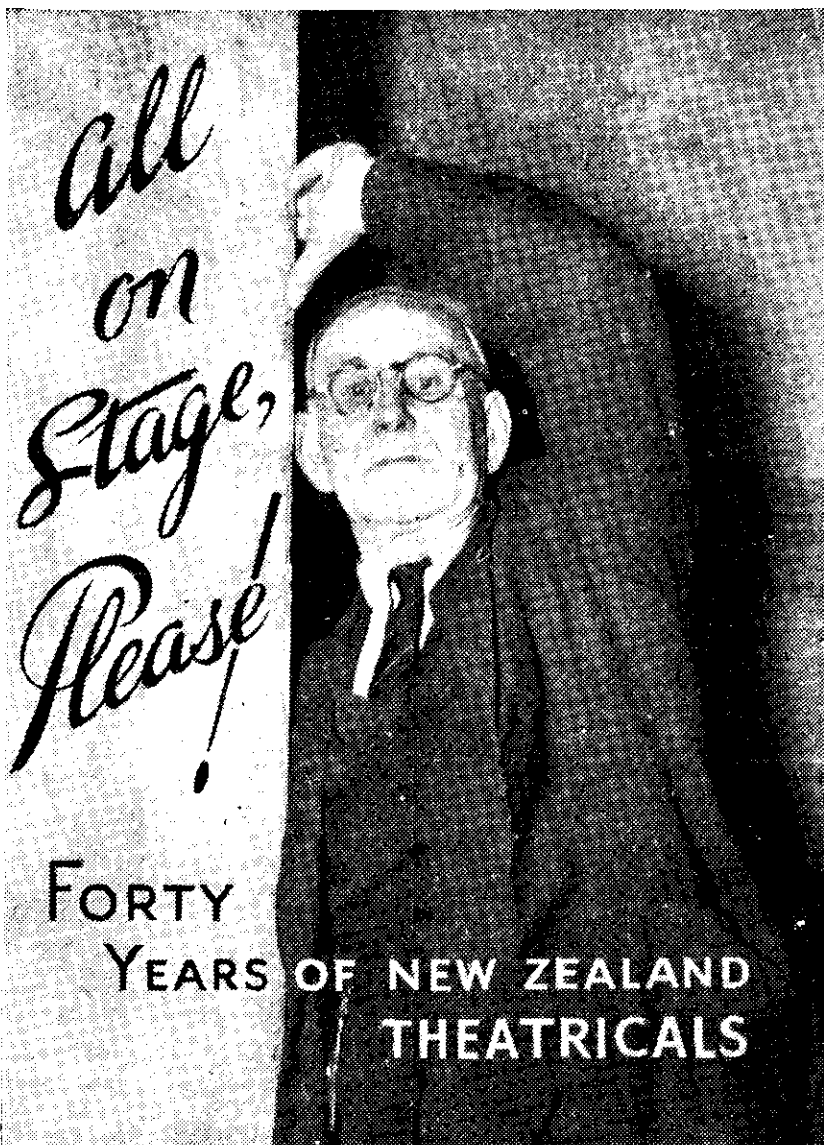
"But this is all routine stuff; you want to hear some funny bits, I guess," said Jim.

He took a leap across the years during which his work included a nine months' tour with Woods-Williamson productions and found himself a job as stage mechanist. Stage hands occasionally played small parts. "At least, when I say played, I mean we attempted to. The audiences of those days were very kind; they let us get away with it," he said.

He mentioned a string of names of famous people for whom he worked—including Nellie Stewart, Daniel Frawley, Tittel Brune, H. B. Irving, Fred Niblo, Andrew Mack, Julius Knight, and Oscar Asche; drama, musical-comedy, and pantomime and magic, which brought him to a position on the Opera House permanent staff.

### The Limelight Days

A colleague employed on the lighting side of stage work looked in and the topic changed to gas-lighting—the old "limes"—which, they agreed, were the most effective of all. It was much harder from a mechanical point of view, but it gave a soft and authentic appearance to clothes and costumes. "Do you ever see a woman choose a material by artificial light if she can help it?" they asked. "No, she prefers daylight. And lime-light was just like that. It showed up the true colours and patterns on the stage. But the players had to be careful. If one stood on the tubing from the compressed gas cylinders, there was a hiss and the lights went out."



★ JIM McKENNA poses for a photograph in the act of shifting a "flat" on the stage.

Not all the laughs are in the script. Sometimes the unexpected, unrehearsed, and accidental incident will produce the biggest laugh of a show. Jim McKenna has heard and seen plenty. It used to be the usual thing, in a certain type of drama, to deck the table in a setting of a working-man's home with a loaf of bread and a piece of German sausage. On the other hand, a set for the "nicer people" was decorated with a chicken and a bottle of wine. During a homely scene in *Work and Wages*, George Cross was the hero, Walter Dagleish the "heavy," and Ida Gresham the heroine. There had to be a shooting. The revolver missed fire and, in a tense scene, a loud voice from the audience called, "Hit him with the sausage!"

Various devices were used to mark the passage of time. In *Paddy the Next Best Thing*, a black cloth was dropped to show that a train was in a tunnel. On one occasion, through a misunderstanding, the cloth stayed up. The stage hands did not know this and the audience had a full view of the stage crew at work striking the set and struggling, with the aid of a "passenger," to haul the papier-maché railway carriage off the stage.

The portly Oscar Asche used to make a trap entrance in his *Chu Chin Chow*. Once the trap on the floor had been wrongly constructed and what the audience saw was Asche stuck half-way, yelling "Get me out!" Stage hands pushed

from underneath and he got through, to the delight of the crowd.

### 'Accidental Strip-Tease

Accidents can be extremely embarrassing for players as well as audience. Once when *Hamlet* was being played in Wellington a leg of the King's chair was planted firmly on the hem of the leading lady's skirt. When the famous actress playing the role of the Queen went to make her exit, her skirt came off entirely. There was shocked silence and stifled laughter. When the actress took her bow in a hurriedly-donned garment she was given a great reception, for she was popular and a consummate artist.

A company arrived very late to play an evening performance in a municipally-owned theatre in a northern town. Workmen engaged on drainage work kept their tools at the back of the stage. They returned from a late job, and during a scene with a darkened stage, marched across to return their pickaxes and shovels quite unaware that the play was on. The full lights went up and there was a row of men, complete with bowy-angs, in a baronial setting. A member of the audience was prompted to inquire loudly, "Now do you believe in fairies?"

The man who made his prayer to a rag, a bone, and a hank of hair, in A