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BOOKS

THE ENGLISH THEATRE

A THEATRE FOR EVERYBODY: the story of Old Vic and Sadler's Wells. By Edward J. Dent. T. V. Boardman.

(Reviewed by NGAIO MARSH)

IT is doubtful if, in writing of the English, any foreign satirist has equalled the mordancy of the Englishman himself. This was sometime a paradox and is now become a bromide. The English, insists the Englishman, may be depended upon to do the right thing in the wrong way and the wrong thing in the right way. Our greatest achievements, we are fond of exclaiming, arise from impulses that do not anticipate them and from enthusiasms for irrelevant ideals.

If the theatre is to be considered, the English satirist is presented with an embarrassing surfeit of illogical behaviour and magnificent results. If D'Avenant had not concocted his incredible travesties of Shakespeare it is probable that Garrick would have fallen short of his greatest achievement. It might even be argued that if Shakespeare had not desired the status of a gentleman, or had been born gentle, the greatest tragedies in all dramatic writing would have remained unwritten. It is certain that if a plain, somewhat illiterate, spinster had not been visited with an apostolic rage against gin-palaces and vice, the English would have been denied, for a time at least, the only "national" theatre they possess. Indeed, but for Miss Emma Cons and her cockney niece, the indomitable Lilian Baylis, those iron churchwomen, those unyielding upholders of purity, it is more than likely that the greater number of contemporary playgoers would have remained ignorant of the works of Congreve. The Old Vic and Sadler's Wells theatres, as Edward Dent makes perfectly clear, were born, not of an aesthetic urge to uphold our classic drama, but of the religious zeal of a female social worker. Miss Emma Cons, horrified (as well she might be) by the squalor and vice of Victorian Lambeth, looked about her for some blameless counter-attraction to the gin-palace and the brothel. Her eye fell upon the quondam Coburg, then the Victoria Theatre and in 1880 she re-opened it as The Royal Victoria Coffee Hall. There she provided "refined entertainment without drink" to the extremely tough local populace. She succeeded. She recruited her musical, pious, and vigorous niece. Presently the Old Vic was born, the "home of Shakespeare" and, by way of a strange sequence of events, and an unbroken history of enthusiasm, poverty and inspiration, we may read to-day of Lawrence Olivier in *Richard III.* and of Ralph Richardson in *Peer Gynt.* Out of this queer background and under the same impulse, emerges the new Sadler's Wells: England's national home for opera and the ballet.

To the English player the name of the late Lilian Baylis is as familiar as Big Ben. To the New Zealander she is comparatively unknown. About that thickset, implacable cockney there has grown a legend with attendant anecdotes that Mr. Dent no doubt considers too hackneyed to repeat. There is, for instance, the story of Miss Baylis kneeling before her roll-topped desk and

praying: "O Lord, send me some good actors, cheap." There is the occasion when, knocked down and lying semi-conscious in the Waterloo Road, she was recognised by a policeman. "Why," he told the crowd, "it's Miss Baylis of the Old Vic." Miss Baylis opened one eye. "And Sadler's Wells," she said raucously.

Embarrassed by the Lord Chamberlain's rules which, in their early days, might have been the authentic compilation of a Mad Hatter; hag-ridden by lack of funds and inspired by evangelical zeal, Miss Cons and Miss Baylis were the daemons of the most significant theatrical impulse of the last sixty years. Mr. Dent, with acerbity, warmth, and sound judgment, traces the history of their two theatres up to the present day. To one New Zealand reader at least, the frontispiece brought a pang of almost unbearable nostalgia. "The Old Vic after a raid—from a painting by Roger Furse." There is the shell of that dingy, warm, unparalleled playhouse with the well-remembered arc-light still hanging from the shattered roof; there are the O.P. boxes and the orchestral well up whose steps the soldiers of Malcolm and Macduff climbed to the stage. It stood alone, the Old Vic, and it stood, in the last analysis, for a proletarian response to the work of great dramatists that has remained, almost unbroken, in the poorer quarters of London, since the days of Shakespeare himself.

In his final chapter: "The Prospect Before Us," Mr. Dent discusses the future policy of The Vic and The Wells. Should the companies, now triumphantly on tour, return to their old playhouses when these are available? Should this, the only established classical theatre in London, be state-subsidised? Should it remain a people's theatre or turn westwards, still under its present board of governors? He writes with temperance and wisdom. Oddly enough, much of what he has to say is pertinent to our problem of a theatrical vacuum in New Zealand. The book should be read by all who hope to see a professional dramatic movement of integrity in this country.

One is left, as one began, with a sense of glorious incongruities and with an itch to place this movement beside its foreign counterparts. Mr. Dent reminds us that continental "national" theatres were, for the most part, the gifts of princes and that modern schools of German acting stemmed from royal or aristocratic sources. One thinks of the Compagnie de Quinze, that compact, finely-tempered and orderly band of French players. One turns to Russia and finds a multiple people's theatre: organised, fiercely ideological, solemn, exhaustive, scientific; to America where, out of a welter of commercial enterprises, Serious Drama rears its well-coiffeured head; to Italy where opera has been, and will again be, a leading industry. One returns to London and there, trailing in the wake of two female ghosts of unimpeachable propriety and no culture, we find a company of players beset by poverty, bombed out of their theatres, with a queer past and an uncertain future; giving—it's a fair bet—the soundest contemporary performances of British classical drama.

If there's a moral we might do well to fog it out in New Zealand.