

WHEN STUDENTS PLAY IBSEN

"Peer Gynt" in Auckland

A DOZEN or so years ago a group of enthusiasts in Christchurch set about producing *Peer Gynt* and went as far as casting the play before they gave up. That, as far as I can discover, was the nearest anyone came to producing Ibsen's fantasy in New Zealand until this month, when the Auckland University College Drama Club, Dr. Frank Birkinshaw producing, played *Peer Gynt* seven times within a week to six full houses and one half-empty one. Opening night was an Auckland June night of uncertain rain and slippery streets and I felt sorry for the players who spoke their lines largely for an audience of empty chairs and cold-footed parents and friends. There were some players who succeeded in making their parts lively in spite of the weather, the chill audience, and the inevitable raggedness of such a first performance; this was so encouraging that it was no surprise to hear that later performances went with a good deal of verve and that the last night was pretty successful even, as an independent observer reported to me, to the overflowing audience hanging from the rafters.

A Mature Play

Whatever may be said in criticism of this production only praise may be said of the courage shown by those responsible for attempting it. It was explained to me that cold water, hail, snow and ice were all thrown on the idea of tackling such a producer's nightmare; and that finally the work of producing it

was wished on to Dr. Frank Birkinshaw, who had first suggested the idea.

"It seemed to me it was time a group like the University Drama Club produced a mature play, and that's just how I regard *Peer Gynt*," he told me. "But the important thing is to put it on straight without a lot of mumbo-jumbo and straining after effects, in fact without approaching Ibsen with held breath as if he's a god or some strange and awesome being. It doesn't matter a fig whether it's a morality play or a social conscience play or a romantic fantasy or what it is; the thing is to put it on and put it on fast and with as much liveliness and as little reverence as possible. I'm sick to death of this attitude of reverence and breath-holding towards Shakespeare and Ibsen and Eugene O'Neill. Let's get on with the plays and the dramatists and demi-gods can look after themselves."

The Club Made Money

One morning I went to have a look at the scene-painting operations and found people deep in pots of very bright colours transferring designs from an inch scale to a foot scale. I was startled to hear that the cost of the production would be about £200, but I have since learned that the Drama Club made money on its venture and has, in addition, some very good permanent costumes and properties, including the really exciting sets and costumes specially designed for the play.

The wardrobe mistress told me a few of her worries—such that the costume for *The Stranger* took eleven yards of

material, that the price of material ranged from about 2/- a yard up to 11/- and this after long tramping on her feet to find the cheapest and most suitable stuffs. "And," she wailed, "sequins cost so much a thimble and you should see the size of the thimble! One thimbleful goes nowhere at all."

"So it's not fun being a wardrobe mistress?" I asked her.

"No, I shouldn't define it as fun exactly—wearing on the feet is nearer the mark."

Organisation

At the top of a ladder someone was hammering; the back drops were huge and heavy and had wooden selvages. Three or four people moved cat-like among pots of paint and pulled and pushed a new scene into its storage place. The stage manager had a word with the carpenter about the position of the ship's rail.

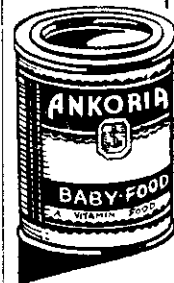
"My stage manager is a really magnificent organiser," Dr. Birkinshaw said. "Of course some things take longer than others to organise. Some properties have taken about 18 days and others, cushions and things like that, have taken about 18 hours. But I announced that we needed a keg of beer or a beer keg for the wedding scene and the response was quite marvellous. That keg of beer was not only organised but actually present on the stage in exactly 18 minutes. Oh no, not a beer keg; a keg of beer, all present and correct for the meantime."

I went along to a rehearsal a few nights before the opening and saw various scenes in no particular order; and

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