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LONDON TO OTAUTAU Overseas Players Tour New Zealand Backblocks

WHEN a theatrical company known as Whitehall Productions Ltd., of London and Australia, finishes its current tour, it will have played in 57 different varieties of New Zealand cities, towns and villages. And the unusual thing about it is that this company does not seem as anxious to make money as to take the theatre to the people—particularly the people to whom theatre-visiting is a matter of geographical difficulty. Before the end of the tour the company will make a recording of a play for the NZBS. This will be either *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (by Rudolph Besier), or *Autumn Crocus* (by C. O. Anthony, later known as Dodie Smith).

It was Kathleen Robinson, leading lady, founder, and a director of the concern who explained in an interview the reasons for her company's pioneering ventures in the outback of New Zealand.

"So," I said, "yours is really a tour to spread the culture of the theatre through good plays?"

"Yes, though that word culture has been oversaid and overwritten. Let's put it this way. You have asked me why we go to the out-of-the-way places. Simply because people cannot help living in them, and why should they be deprived of the theatre? They enjoy it; we enjoy it, and everybody's happy."

"Do you present the plays exactly as in the cities?"

"Exactly, with the same sets and flats which we can adapt to fit any stage. And we wear the same fine gowns."

"How can this pioneering effort, with all its transport costs, be made to pay?"

"Financially—well, it's all right. But it pays us over and over again in the appreciation for breaking new ground."

The Wrong Idea

At this point Richard Parry, a Welsh actor, and leading man in the company, joined us. "Some people get the wrong idea," he said. "At a dinner table near us in a North Island hotel, a man who had no idea who we were remarked, 'this show can't be much good or it wouldn't come here.' But though we have had many packed houses, and some not quite full, we are always asked to return, with promises of larger audiences."

The company visited Otautau, in the extreme south-west of the South Island. The town hall held 480 people. Garden seats were put in and people stood at the back. The company played to an audience of 500, from the town and surrounding district. "And what we like so much about this tour is the receptive mood of the people," said Miss Robinson. "They come along prepared to accept us and enjoy what we give them. They take serious plays very well indeed."

"Green Dolphin" Transport

Staging plays in small towns presents difficulties. The other evening, in the absence of a dressing-room, the company had to improvise quarters at the side of the stage—a communal affair. For transport they use their own hired bus, christened the "Green Dolphin." It's big and comfortable and takes them wherever they want to go.

Like some other actors who have visited New Zealand recently, both Miss Robinson and Mr. Parry deplore the absence of a national theatre here. They think that if all the many members of the amateur groups would add, say 10s. a year to their subscriptions, they could



KATHLEEN ROBINSON

"We enjoy it, and everybody's happy"

easily raise a fund to send outstanding performers for overseas study, or induce first-class producers to come here and teach dramatic art.

"If you had a national theatre, presenting the really good plays, you could say to the overseas people:—'So-and-so, one of our members, has been in this play or that in our national theatre.' He would have some status, the theatre movement being a sort of guarantee, a launching place. You could even, in time, send a whole company overseas," said Mr. Parry.

"Don't think we want to belittle what has already been done in New Zealand," said Miss Robinson. "Some of the repertory work is very good. But you could import somebody to teach the latest playing methods; make it a full-time job."

"What do you mean by latest playing methods?"

"Well, there's still a general view that an actor should never turn his back on the audience and move upstage. It's 15 years since that prohibition was removed in England. There is a way of doing it, yet still getting the lines home effectively."

Temperament—Bad Temper?

Both Miss Robinson and Mr. Parry were refreshing in their remarks about temperamental tantrums in an actress—or an actor, for that matter. It depended a good deal, they said, on the type of control of the company.

Mr. Parry: "It's often nothing more than showing off."