

Blueprint for New Zealand Theatre

(A recent talk by GORDON CHATER from IYA Auckland)

AFTER touring your beautiful country in probably the most extensive theatrical tour since the coming of the cinema, I find people hungry for straight theatre. We have had hundreds of inquiries from men and women under the age of 25 as to how, where, and when they can make a start towards a professional career in the theatre; and the public everywhere demands to know how quickly straight plays will be returning to New Zealand. All this makes me want to shout what I have been saying quietly for five months: "Why haven't you got your own professional theatre in New Zealand?"

Let me approach the obstacles and defy them. Miss Ngaio Marsh said to me in Christchurch: "If we had a National Theatre would we be able to get the theatres to play in?" I replied: "Why not?" If, in the centres, theatres aren't available, then go and play in the country where there are Municipal Theatres—theatres owned independently—and Town Halls. There isn't another country in the world which for its size and population can boast so many playable theatres for straight shows as New Zealand does. Take Otautau, for instance. Otautau has a town hall which seats 500. Admittedly half that number have to sit on wooden benches; but they were quite content to do that—even when our own powerful lighting we carry round with us fused the entire district's lighting system twice in the evening, which meant that they sat there for four solid hours to see Theatre. Not one person left the hall that evening—although it is true that we had some community singing to while away the waits. And again Otautau has good lighting equipment of its own and clean dressing rooms—a great deal cleaner and more comfortable than some I can think of in much larger theatres!

Talent and Money

Then there is the difficulty of organising a company. But there's a centralised Drama Council in Auckland in touch with every Repertory Society in New Zealand. Let them make it worth while for a well-known British man of the theatre to organise, first the Drama Council itself so that it becomes as efficient as possible, then the foundations of New Zealand Theatre. Let him judge the choice of plays—appoint good journalists for publicity—and deal diplomatically with possible interference by unprofessional and self-made experts. If necessary let him launch the first production—though I suggest it would be better to contract an established and superlatively good overseas producer to do that; for if New Zealand talent is to be used (and though a nucleus of overseas artists at the start would be desirable, it is equally desirable to give New Zealand Theatre a national flavour and impetus of its own)—then that New Zealand talent must be developed; it probably hasn't had the opportunity of studying the technique of acting and stage management—and a great deal of teaching would have to be done during the very birth pangs of professional New Zealand Theatre.

Last, but most important of all the difficulties, is money. Let no one think

that Theatre is so much an art that it can disregard filthy lucre. No theatrical show, with all the artistry in the world, is any good unless it eventually pays for itself. Good Theatre is primarily entertainment. Its instructive—or thought-provoking—power should affect its audience quite subconsciously. But if it is good entertainment—slick, real and enjoyable whether it is hilarious comedy, spine-chilling thriller, or tear-jerking tragedy—it will very quickly stand on its own feet. Nevertheless no theatrical organisation can start from scratch without backing.

Comparison with England

In England the British Council is authorised by the Government to finance the Arts Council to the tune of £150,000 a year—for the first-class production of first-class plays. This makes the pick of actors and actresses available and the best directors available—directors who make dramatists like Shaw, Shakespeare and Ibsen (dramatists we probably thought rather dull at school) live with clearness, vitality, and physical action. Scenic artists who would normally wait for the financial guarantee or prestige value of a sponsoring name like Cochran can be put under contract. All the Government demands in return for its cultural patronage is first-class Theatre for the People—theatre of International Value produced as magnificently and entertainingly as the best brains and artists in the land can do it. It even excuses patrons of entertainment-tax and the reward has been a series of productions none of which has failed to draw packed houses throughout the country. The Government never interfere with the productions in any way. Drama is a cog in their national programme. They are experts in policy and finance—but they leave this essential cog to its own experts. Through the

Arts Council (formerly CEMA) we have seen Dame Edith Evans and John Gielgud in a dramatization of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, John Clements and Kay Hammond in the *Kingmaker*; Gielgud with an array of famous names round him in such diversely entertaining plays as Maugham's *Circle*, Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet*, and that roaring restoration farce by Congreve, *Love for Love*. Then again there are Olivier's plays. *Peer Gynt*, *Richard III*, *Arms and the Man*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Henry IV* (Parts one and two), *Oedipus Rex*, and Sheridan's *Critic*—every one of these plays drew audiences as big as the ones which kept *Quiet Wedding* and lighter if thoroughly entertaining and ephemeral plays of that calibre running one or two years. And they drew those audiences because they were slick, real, clear, and entertaining: infinitely better entertainment—and of course theatrical entertainment is something quite different—than the majority of stories told through the medium of shadows on celluloid—because they are played by real people, in colours truer than technicolour: and a thousand times more appealing to the eye, ear and humour of the people than—shall we say—a film like *Getting Gertie's Garter*—or a hundred films a year with a plot which is an almost identical repetition of that one.

Repertory in America

But that is England—and I readily admit that New Zealand hasn't the population or yet, perhaps, the demand, for a rich abundance of Theatre to merit such national expenditure. How, then, can the money be raised—and is it really necessary to approach the Government for any part of it? I have recently been reading the Sunday Supplement of the *New York Times* on the subject of Eve Le Gallienne's American Repertory Theatre. As you know, repertory, anywhere but in Australia and New

Zealand, is a professional concern. Miss Le Gallienne formed the American Repertory Theatre, which in America is comparable with the Old Vic Organisation in Great Britain, quite independently of her Government. When she started planning two years before they opened last December she reckoned 250,000 dollars would be needed. That's about £80,000 in New Zealand. And by a sort of Gallup Poll she discovered that members of a far and wide public were quite prepared to become shareholders in an American Theatre Company. When the wheels for a public subscription were set in motion it took only three months for 250,000 dollars to be raised. Among the shareholders are a lighthouse man in Greenland and any number of soldiers in the occupation forces of Europe. One solitary dollar was not too small to be acceptable. And apart from share selling it was made possible for supporters to subscribe in advance for regular tickets throughout the New York seasons and the subsequent States-wide tours. With such backing she gathered around her ten players of note and a small experienced stage staff—and about 40 inexperienced but trained small-part players and technicians. They were given two-year contracts and settled down immediately to hard work. Her initial season opened in New York last December with three plays: *What Every Woman Knows*, by J. M. Barrie, Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, and Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. The American Repertory Theatre has already been received by the public with acclaim and support in spite of a cautious press.

America is America with 140,000,000 people and New Zealand is New Zealand with less than two million. But individual wealth is generally greater here than there. It does not, therefore, seem invidious to suggest that a similar private subscription should be made for a New Zealand Theatre. Or better, because I understand that each Repertory Society in New Zealand already contributes funds to the Central Drama Council in Auckland, why not increase this contribution generously, and of course, willingly, for the unselfish sake of Theatre, and allow the Drama Council to be the financial and artistic executive? It would be pointless to ignore a machine which could perform the necessary duties when it is already in existence.

By this time you may well be saying, "What a messy blueprint!" But until public feeling and enthusiasm bursts from smouldering interest into the flame of definite and deliberate action, however clearly I can see what I would do personally, I can only make suggestions with limited detail.

A Question to Schoolboys

Perhaps I can precipitate the importance of your necessity for professional theatre in New Zealand by repeating a question I asked an audience of boys at Scots College, Wellington—boys ranging from 10 to 17—when I was asked to speak to them about Theatre. "Supposing," I asked them, "one of you found you were happiest when you were expressing yourself in the performance of a school play? Supposing you felt, after you'd performed in one or two that you were and would be more talented at acting than at any other occupation—that for personal happiness, if

Behind the Stage Curtain

THE notice, "Resting, do not disturb," carried by old-time actors for hanging outside the hotel bedroom door, is not included in the property basket of Donald Sharp, a busy young actor now touring New Zealand. When he is free from rehearsing and acting he writes for the radio. He called on *The Listener* the other day to tell us that while his company is in the South Island he will record three interviews with other members of the cast.

Before the war he was on the staff of the Tasmanian Public Service, at Hobart, doing radio work in his spare time for the local division of the ABC. Then, with the RAAF, he saw service in Singapore, and as soon as he got out of uniform he took up the stage and radio as his profession. His voice will be familiar to those who listen to *Prisoner at the Bar*, heard from the NZBS.

Recently, he said, Leontine Sagan, who during the war directed

Ivor Novello's musical shows, went to Australia to stage *The Dancing Years*. She held auditions and cast him as the juvenile lead. He has also played the part of Pal Green in *The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse*.

His recordings, which will have the general title of *My Friends from the Theatre*, will be heard later from the main National stations. The first interview will be with John Wood, who will discuss British and American films. Wood has appeared in 15 productions, with Clark Gable, Errol Flynn, Basil Rathbone and others. The second will be a talk with Gwenda Wilson, who will speak about the Australian stage during the war, and the third interview will be with Reg Newson, on "Great Stage Figures of the 'Twenties and 'Thirties.'" Newson will have something to say about Noel Coward, Gertrude Lawrence, and other notables of the London stage.

