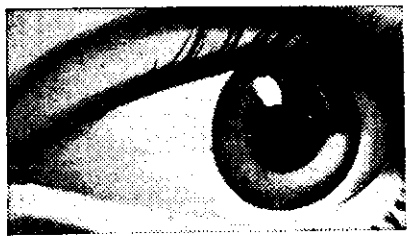


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COMMUNITY DRAMA IN N.Z.

The Play is Less the Thing Than the Playing

"THERE'S genteel comedy in your walk and manner, juvenile tragedy in your eye, and touch-and-go farce in your laugh," said Mr. Vincent Crummies to Nicholas Nickleby on the memorable occasion of their first meeting.

This seems a fair enough quotation to start with. The New Zealand Branch of the British Drama League, now celebrating its sixteenth anniversary, manages at its annual festival of one-act plays to present a bill which usually contains as much variety as Nicholas appeared to possess.

During this year Drama League festivals have been held in Waikato, Rotorua, South Taranaki, Manawatu, Wellington, North and South Canterbury, and Otago. Areas in Tauranga and in Motueka will probably be formed and an attempt is being made to revive or establish other areas as soon as the response is great enough. This year there will be a North Island final in Palmerston North on September 20 and a South Island final in Dunedin about the same time. Next year it is planned to hold a New Zealand final.

The Standard is Improving

Interest in the Drama in New Zealand shows signs of an intensity which might become almost a revival. How much of this is due directly to the Drama League I do not know. Educational and psychological aspects beyond my powers of analysis are making New Zealanders play conscious. No one organisation can be credited with the whole inspiration, but the Drama League is at least helping it along in a very marked degree, as its influence touches many country districts which are out of touch by the very nature of things with the general trends of most art movements. The important thing is that the Drama League as it is now constituted has the machinery already set up to make the most of whatever ramifications have provided the impetus in the first place.

A fairly close study of Drama festivals over the last few years seems to show that the standard of production, acting, and general intelligence brought to bear on the different plays is improving. There has been a greater feeling of "theatre" in some of the productions during the last two or three years. More imagination is being shown as regards production and less reliance is placed on the letter of the playwright's instructions. There is more use of lighting and less of cluttering up the stage with furniture and fittings in a laudable but misguided attempt to achieve atmosphere. Mr. Vincent Crummies, if we can quote him just once more, was very enthusiastic regarding the introduction of a real pump and two washing-tubs into one of his productions, but Mr. Crummies, valiant trouser though he was, would not be acceptable on the modern stage, and it is a good sign that in some cases at least the pump and washing-tub technique is being discarded and more reliance is being placed on suggestion and on the audience's co-operation to get the desired effects.

Choice of Play

There is still a lot to hope for and not the least is an improvement in the standard of plays chosen. So far, the

Written for "The Listener" by
ISOBEL ANDREWS

general run of plays presented has not been of a very high standard. There are several reasons for this, some of them insurmountable at the present time. One is that many groups are not yet "up" in plays enough to be able to use much discrimination or artistic selection. Another is that Choice of Play is often limited by the numbers and capabilities of the individual group, but the greatest factor of the lot is that good one-act plays for amateurs are very hard to come by. The amount of tosh written under the guise of the one-act play is appalling, and it is a producer's nightmare when looking for a suitable play for his particular group, to have to wade through the dozens of mediocre and often bad scripts. This year at the Wellington festival nine plays were produced. Of these only three had any



"A sight which makes me squirm"

kind of excuse to be called good theatre, good plays or good anything. These were William Saroyan's *Hullo, Out There!*, Naomi Mitchison's fairy story in verse *Six Nought Nothing*, and J. M. Barrie's little joke *Shall We Join the Ladies?* The rest of the nine, irrespective of production or acting, and judged solely as plays, had very little to offer the serious follower of the drama. Most of the plays stocked here are English, and most, due to some accepted form of snobbery, or to a definite attitude of mind of the run-of-the-mill English playwright, have, for New Zealanders at least, a completely false set of values. To see a group of New Zealand amateurs, quite often with obvious New Zealand accents, trying to play butlers and countesses, or at the other end of the social scale, cooks and slaves, is a sight which makes me squirm in agony, not because of production or acting, but because of the sheer incongruity of the whole set up.

A Native Theatre?

The New Zealand branch of the Drama League is endeavouring to form some sort of native theatre by offering awards for one-act plays written by New Zealanders. So far the results have not been electrifying, but if in the course of a few years the League can bring forward even half-a-dozen reasonably well written plays by New Zealanders for New Zealanders, it will have justified its efforts, even though the Mecca of a native theatre still lies far ahead of us.

It may be that we will never have a truly native theatre. The traditions and circumstances which made the Abbey Theatre or the Birmingham Repertory possible do not exist in a country which has been colonised for only 100 years.

The century which has introduced the steam engine, hydro-electricity, radio, talkies, television, and aeroplanes, has annihilated the problem of distance to such an extent that there are few places in New Zealand that are not accessible from the nearest big town in a day. With this accessibility the tight little communities which lived to, by and for themselves and of necessity took on their own local colour and characteristics, do not exist or are becoming more and more rare. With insularity gone we have nothing in our tradition to compare with the Irish Village or the localised culture of the small English town. Our problems are not the ones which assailed the peasants of Synge or O'Casey, nor is our social outlook that of the great mining and industrial towns which inspired some of the best English plays. With the conquest of space and with wireless and newspapers now daily amenities, even our most remote farming communities have taken on something of an international colour, and although the New Zealand outlook is still formed to a certain extent by the New Zealand environment, our problems of modern living are those shared by the rest of the world, so that the conscientious New Zealand playwright is not so easily served with purely local themes as were those who wrote for the Abbey Theatre in its heyday. This is not to say that good New Zealand plays will not be written, but they will probably be isolated individual cases rather than part of a movement.

Is Competition Good?

The question of whether the competitive approach is a good or a bad thing is one which exercises a number of Drama League supporters. Should we play all the time for Top of the Class? As long as this is, ostensibly, the object in view, will not each group, naturally enough, choose a play with an eye on the judge and his probable reactions, rather than one which gives opportunities for all who wish to take part? Will it not make regular use of its best players who can be backed to win the extra few marks necessary for first place? Could not the competitive spirit be equally well served by the encouragement of working for the highest certificate? The Village Theatre Group in England, for instance, does not go for Top of the Class. It contents itself with presenting plays before an adjudicator who awards the A, B, or C certificate as he thinks fit, but who does not have to decide which play must win. One reads of an instance of a tragedy and a comedy equally well acted and produced. Both plays, in their different fields, were well written. The tragedy was finally given three extra marks not because it was better than the comedy, but because the judge had a bias towards tragedy which he thought the higher medium. A system of awarding certificates alone would obviate this state of affairs and would do away with a number of disappointments, bad feeling, and prolonged post-mortems which sometimes take place after the decision, no matter how fair and open minded the judge has been. This scheme would do away with the finals, but, to crib the local advertising slogan, are they really necessary? The plays have already been produced, the working together for the common cause is already achieved.

(continued on next page)