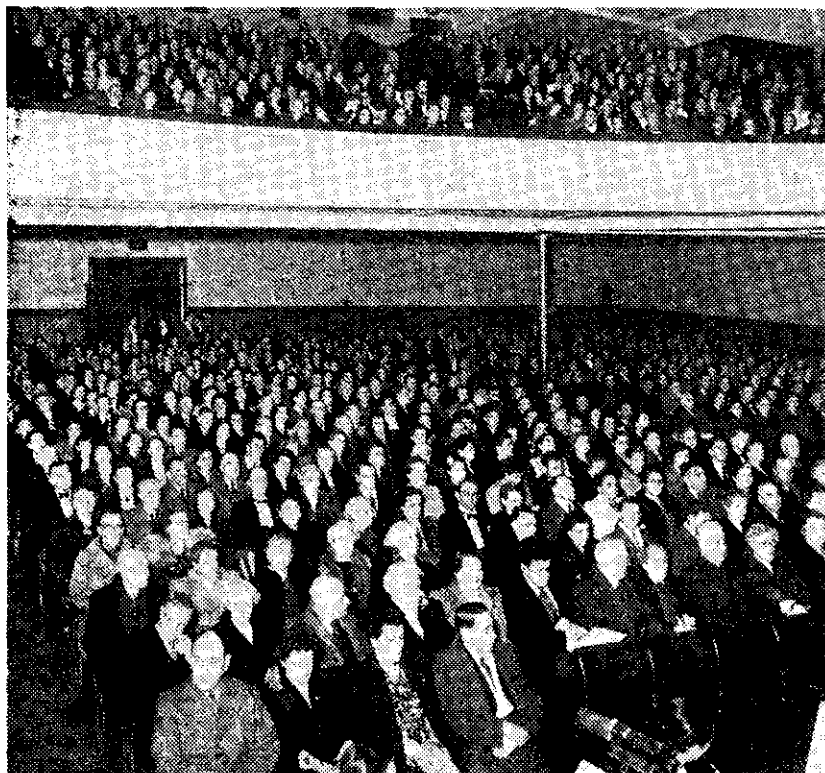


"Carmen" First Night in Dunedin



MANY a member of the New Zealand forces had his first taste of grand opera in Italy during the war. The large majority savoured it, found it good, and longed for more. New Zealand had had few visits from full-scale companies, and only at long intervals, though local societies, at times, presented their own productions. Bizet's *Carmen*, with the two stars imported from London by the NZBS, some really capable minor principals, a chorus of 65, and 45 or so members of the National Orchestra of the NZBS, opened to a Dunedin audience which left no seats empty in His Majesty's Theatre. The first-nighters took their opera seriously. Some of the women paid the occasion the compliment of wearing evening gowns and furs; a few men made pre-war studies in black and white with dress suits or dinner suits.

But for this account of *Carmen*'s opening to a tour of the four main centres, *The Listener* went back-stage, from the final dress-rehearsal to the curtain-call of the first night.

At the final dress-rehearsal—C-night minus one—Janet Howe was worried. Her costumes had not arrived from the pressers, and it was starting-time. Arthur Servent was making up in his room on the other side of the stage. The stage-manager was in charge, leaving the producer to sit in his stall, watch, listen, and occasionally shout a direction. Sitting on an upturned box, the property-man (an old professional) whispered, "This is definitely my last show, and believe me, I'm right up to concert-pitch." So was everybody else. There is a stage superstition which has

it that a bad final rehearsal is a guarantee of a good show. But both, in Dunedin, were good enough for the artists to congratulate themselves on their work and the audience to express its satisfaction excitedly.

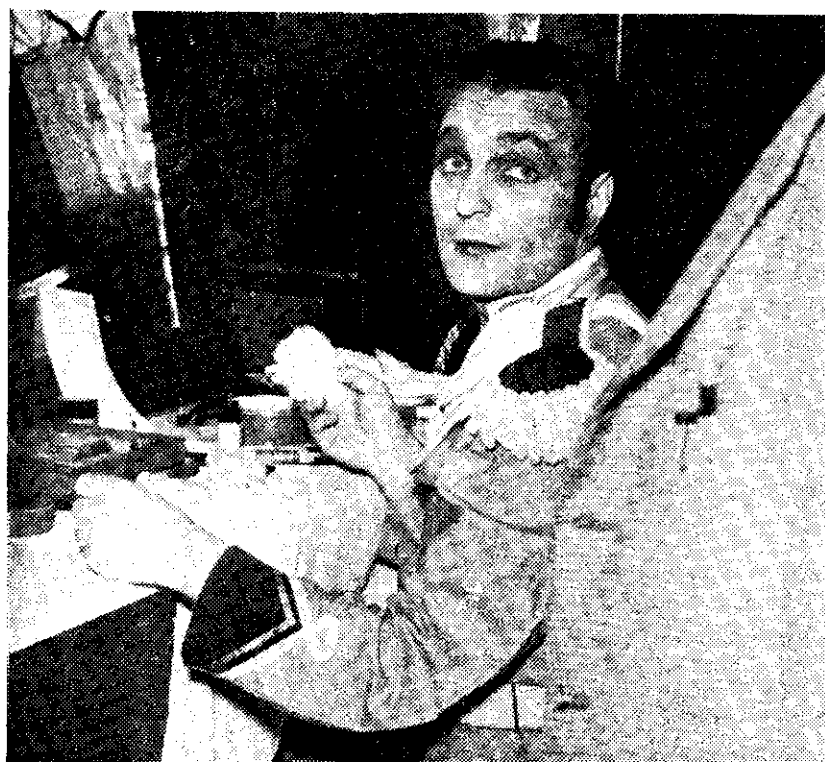
His Big Moment

In one scene a gunshot is required. This was the property-man's big moment. His gun, with a blank cartridge, was ready, but he took no chances. Alongside he had a chair-seat and a slab of wood—"Rifles are a bit iffy, you know, mightn't go off." (But on the big first night the first pull of the trigger startled the chorus, stagehands, and everybody else except the principals.)

To the theatre-goer whose experience is confined to the auditorium, a back-stage scene is one of apparently wild confusion. *Carmen* soldiers tighten up their shako-straps, gipsies tighten their earrings, and those not required immediately slip outside for a smoke. The musical director has a word with the furnace-man, "Don't get the theatre too hot; it affects the pitch of the instruments."

A stage-hand peers around the wings to see that his carefully built campfire for one of the scenes is smoking effectively. "I always use rock-lime, you know; it soon steams up with the warmth of the lights."

After a satisfactory rehearsal, everybody was sent home with the injunction to have a good sleep and be on hand early next night. With a full house the atmosphere of the theatre was changed subtly by the excitement of a first night. Patrons enjoyed the anticipatory



AT TOP: A section of the Dunedin first-night audience waits for the curtain to go up. BELOW, LEFT: "Beginners" move on to the stage from the wings in readiness for the first scene. RIGHT: "Your call, please, Mr. Servent"—Don José prepares to go on-stage