

OFF-STAGE WITH THE OLIVIERS

IN two mediums of their art Sir Laurence and Lady Olivier have won the highest praise. Vivien Leigh is internationally famous as an actress of screen and stage; Olivier has been spoken of as the greatest actor of our day and has undisputed title for his combination of abilities as actor and director in the two fields of drama. In short, the professional status of the Oliviers is mightily impressive. By the time they leave New Zealand, despite the fact that nine performances a week will give them little opportunity for social activities, their off-stage reputation is likely to be no less enviable. At a small, delightfully friendly Press conference in Auckland, the Oliviers revealed their natural charm as host and hostess. After a few minutes of general conversation the party settled down into two groups, one about Sir Laurence and one around Lady Olivier, and although I found myself in the former group, I had sufficient time to gain a vivid and memorable impression of Vivien Leigh.

Both the Oliviers carry their years lightly. She has extraordinary physical beauty heightened by a mature intelligence and warm personality. He is as handsome as his films have led us to expect, but has other qualities, too, the conference revealed—sincerity, genuine love of the stage, considerateness.

While Lady Olivier was speaking to her group of her hobby (gardening), their home (a farmlet in Buckinghamshire), the food situation in England, clothes, and her favourite film star (apart from Sir Laurence—Greta Garbo), Sir Laurence was answering our questions.

"The English theatre has hit a bump," he said. "The war and post-war boom is over—the theatre felt it as soon as gratuities had been spent. It is now back on some very short runs indeed, and it is more nervous work than it has been for some years."

Turning from the British theatre at home to British artists abroad, Sir Laurence

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English are a completely mysterious people. It is very difficult to get inside their heads."

"You are quite sure that there's no trace of panic there, and none of despair? Those who are emigrating are not running away?"

"Oh Lord, no. You can't stampede the English. There is a certain strength, even if it is based at least partly in complacency, there which nothing will shift."

"Visitors call us complacent in New Zealand. No doubt we are. But we're getting worked up about Communism."

"There is something like that in England, too. I don't like it, but it is not getting out of control."

"It has not gone as far as in America?"

"The Englishman, and I hope the New Zealander, is not so subject to hysteria as the American. We prefer to wait and see. One of the reasons why the New Zealanders recommend themselves to the English is their habit of keeping quiet until they do see."

ence expressed admiration for the "brave and herculean task" being done by the British Council, and condemned the adverse criticism of a section of the British Press. He considered those papers which complained about 'poetesses for Paraguay' had probably never heard of the Boyd Neel Orchestra being sent to Australia and New Zealand.

In which did he find the greater satisfaction, stage work or screen work? The stage was the actor's medium; the film the director's. But films were nonetheless very interesting and gave an actor an excellent opportunity for self-criticism.

"I don't think the last word has been said about black and white," was Sir Laurence's first comment to the question why he had not screened *Hamlet* in technicolour. He added four technical reasons. The greater cost of a technicolour. The difficulty of obtaining movement with technicolour cameras—"they are like a large coffin to move about." The impossibility of getting a double focus. "If we shot you lads in the foreground," he told two of the reporters, "Vivien would be out of focus." (Lady Olivier was less than three feet away.) Lastly he mentioned the time factor involved in processing technicolour films.

Had he any plans for screening other Shakespearean plays? Nothing definite, though he had ideas about *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*. "But these things always happen suddenly with me. During the making of *Henry V.*, I had some ideas about *Hamlet* and then when we were both driven to bed with colds these ideas developed and within a month we had all the cuts made and the shooting script out."

Sir Laurence's interest in the Shakespearean tragedies were significant in view of his subsequent remarks, for in reply to a question as to whether he preferred tragedy to comedy he said: "When one is young it is the drama of tragedy that appeals, but as one gets on, I think, this taste gets dry and one leans towards comedy."

In an Australian interview Sir Laurence urged Australia to get a training school for actors and actresses going before they concerned themselves about a national theatre. Considering that there was no professional theatre here would he give the same advice to New Zealand? Sir Laurence replied that he had later amended his views when Australians had asked him where they were going to act if they did produce actors and actresses. "What I told Australia," he began seriously, then stopped, and grinned widely. "What I told Australia." He mimicked himself satirically. "I mean what I said to those who were asking . . . was this: 'Get your recognised leaders of the arts together to form a sort of national theatre company—the theatre exists in people rather than in buildings—and then call on the Government for backing, and I'm sure you would get it.' Meanwhile don't let any theatres be pulled down. The building of theatres seems to be an art we have lost."

Sir Laurence's advice seemed as practical for New Zealand as for Australia, but his further comment, I felt, provided us with real food for thought. "A national theatre," he said, "must be the culmination of a national expression."

—P.M.

[Photograph on page 24]

This is the lurk

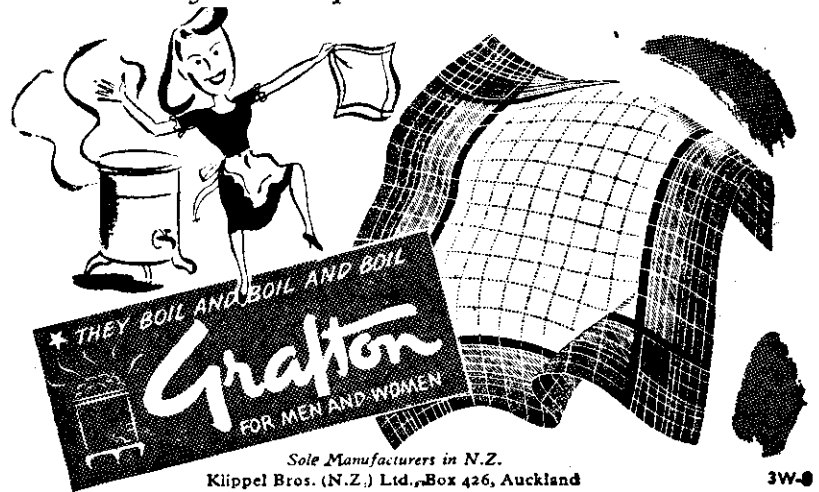
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