

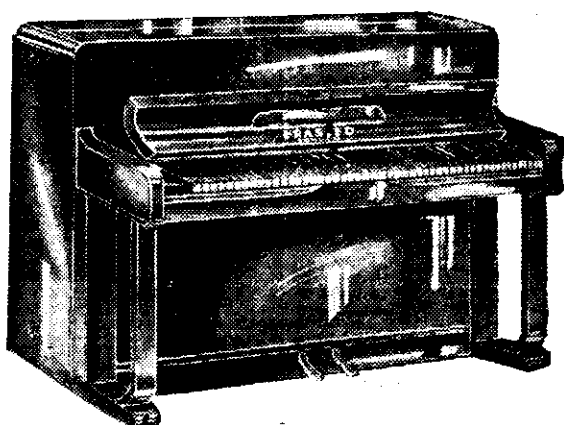
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First Night At The Old Vic

IT is a very long time since an Auckland theatre has heard such applause as that which marked the conclusion of the opening night of the Old Vic's New Zealand season.

It was a great occasion for everyone, but for those of what used to be known as the post-war generation it was particularly important. For many it was the first time they had ever seen a first-rate company of actors, and even for those like myself who are older than Sheridan was when he wrote *School for Scandal*, it was only the second time we had seen such a company, the last previous occasion being the visit of Sybil Thorndike in 1932. In 16 years—six

Another thing a film-accustomed country has forgotten is its theatre manners. So used have we become to chattering through the music played at the beginning of a film that we do the same through the orchestral music to a play. This was particularly noticeable on the opening night. After the intermission, the visiting conductor, Harold Ingram, raised his baton, but there was no responsive hush from the audience and even when he rapped his stand the babble of conversation continued, and went on through the music until the curtain rose. This was not only an indictment of the audience for its lack of theatre education, but it was also to be regretted in that it separated the music from the rest of the production, and, if there was one thing more noticeable than another in this initial Old Vic performance in New Zealand, it was its remarkable air of unity resulting from a uniformity of excellence.

From what limited theatre we have been able to see—mostly amateur—we have gone away from time to time enthusiastic about an individual performance, the direction, the play, or the scenery, but probably never before have we seen a production so completely finished in every respect. The Oliviers' performances did not stand out, not because they were not outstandingly good, but because all the other members of the cast came up to the same high level.



VIVIEN LEIGH as Lady Teazle

packed with the real-life drama of World War II.—the memory has lost much of what her company gave us—only *St. Joan* remains vivid, especially the epilogue.

But one theatre memory does not make a playgoer and even for those of older generations who can remember Marie Tempest and others of similar fame, live theatre remains something of a novelty. The stage has become largely an amateur one to be found in small halls, and much the same situation has apparently arisen in Australia. Consequently it was not surprising that Sir Laurence on his arrival here should refer to the lost art of listening, comparing the position with a race of people who had been going about "with binoculars strapped to their eyes. With "talkies" and the radio our main entertainment mediums, "people have forgotten how to listen without amplifiers." In Australia there were complaints from members of the audience that they could not hear and "there we were absolutely bellowing Sheridan's gossamer trifle."

Realising that in this part of the world the art of listening to a stage play has been lost, the Old Vic Company has made it a practice here of taking the opening scenes more loudly and deliberately than normal, and this, to those who had heard or read his statement of the previous day was noticeable, though, so true is it that we have lost this ability to listen, that I doubt whether it would have made any particular impression had I not heard Sir Laurence's remarks the evening before.

School for Scandal is as amusing to read to-day as it was when written 170 years ago, but a difficulty to be met with in putting it on the stage is the asides, which we have come to associate with satires in the style of *The Old Time Theatre*. The Old Vic cast, however, planted these among the audience in a manner which delighted at the time and in retrospect leaves one open-mouthed in astonishment at their skill.

To match the ability of the players was the artistry of the scenery and costumes, for which Cecil Beaton is responsible. Of course *School for Scandal*, in the splendour of its settings, particularly the rich costumes and pretentious wigs and hats, gives Beaton an opportunity in which he can revel. And how rare a treat it was for us.

The unseen technicians, too, impressed by the smoothness and rapidity with which we were transported from scene to scene. This was to be expected of a major company, but on the opening night any hitch might easily have been forgiven, for many of the company had stepped almost literally from their plane to the stage. The excuse, however, was not needed.

In short, the whole production, with its touches of individuality in direction, continued to delight from the moment the footmen, in time to music, set the footlights glowing from long tapers, until the finale, where the whole company danced on the stage. And the audience, who had had to check their appreciative chuckles to avoid missing following laughs, then gave full vent to their enthusiasm.

"Perhaps this Old Vic tour will break new ground," said Sybil Thorndike in a recent BBC talk, "and lead the way to more frequent tours of the Dominions by famous British companies. I hope so."

We can but express the same hope.

—P.M.