

OCTOBER 29, 1948

The Old Vic

WE may have seen longer and more patient queues than have followed the Old Vic Company through the Dominion, but it is not easy to think when. Nor can there often have been more disappointed people left at home. It is one of those cases in which it means something to say that the visit has been not so much a success as a triumph, and we owe it first of all, and most of all, to the British Council. Nor must we forget when we thank the British Council that we are thanking the British people, who can still spare time, money, and thought in all their distractions to pass on the fruit of British culture. The Council is the intelligent general staff which conducts these operations, but the money it spends is paid for by British men and British women who agree through their representatives in Parliament to be taxed for this high, remote, and often quite obscure purpose. We thank the British Council; but we thank the company too, who have never been professionals only, working for a fee and not caring where it came from, but profit-sharers in their art among themselves and conscious servants of the public at the same time. Whatever credit we allow our local societies for keeping the stage tradition alive in New Zealand, the fact is that the theatre for most of us means films only: or did until a month ago. If it now means more than that, the explanation is not merely that flesh-and-blood performances have been given, but that they have been given by a company which caught the public imagination and accepted the responsibility this imposed on it. Because they were human beings they were subject to all the strains that weariness and boredom brings, and to all the irritations of propinquity; but they went through every performance to the last with that contagious zest which separates art from mechanics. It has been a powerful reinforcement of the campaign for a permanent company of our own, paying their way when they can, but guaranteed by the taxpayer against extinction.

LETTERS FROM LISTENERS

THE NEWSPAPERS

Sir,—It was interesting recently to have the contrasting points of view of Professor Musgrove and Mr. Laird on the one hand and Messrs. S. G. Gapper and R. A. Melville on the other, on such questions as sensationalism in Press reports and indirect distortions of fact. Shortly afterwards there was published throughout New Zealand by the President of the Newspaper Proprietors' Association a complaint of the unhealthy tendency of members of local bodies to request reporters to exclude portions of Council proceedings. He also complained of proceedings "in committee" and of the issuing of "hand-outs." These various questions are closely linked. An examination of the practice of local bodies in regard to reports of their proceedings indicates that the practices which prove so irksome to the news gatherer have a justification. A simple instance in a minor key will illustrate this.

Borough Council A is refused by Borough Council B the use of a recreation domain for its municipal employees' picnic. The refusal is discussed by Council A and a Councillor says it is time the Government took over the domain to preserve its fine but neglected kauri trees. It is resolved finally to approach Council B again. Now if that unfortunate remark were suppressed, the chances are the whole thing would be adjusted amicably to the benefit of residents in both boroughs. But it is just the sort of remark which constitutes the only "news value" in a dull meeting. If it is "high lighted" it will reflect on the nature lovers in Council B and may amount to indirect distortion and sensationalism. One doesn't blame the paper for reporting it because it shouldn't have been said. But the Council has a duty to prevent that sort of report causing trouble, and if a newspaper does cause trouble the remedy lies in meetings in committee and in "hand-outs."

The right of newspapers to be present at meetings and give full reports is not in question. On the other hand a local body is master of its own procedure and as an elected body possessing the proved confidence of its electors it has a higher right than that of a private newspaper working for gain.

SMALL BOROUGH COUNCILLOR
(Wellington Province).

NEW ZEALAND WRITING

Sir,—The discussion of Dan Davin and Frank Sargeson on the above subject left many of us deeply interested, wondering how far they got in interesting the great bulk of their listeners. As an author and writer going back as far as 1890, I know there are many young authors who have little chance of showing their ability or making much out of what they write, because of our limited population, and the increase of free libraries, where one book may be taken out more than a score of times at a small fractional cost. For every book sold in New Zealand four are sold in Australia. Often books priced as high as 15/- have booksellers' distributing and publishing costs of 14/6. Making allowance for books for review there is nothing left for the author. The discussion was practical enough to give writers hope that there would be success at the end. At best authorship is illusive.

To express our ideas in writing must evidently be a difficult task, seeing how rare an acquirement it is, and how few even of the best writers have acquired perfect facility in the art. Most authors will tell you, after long practice, that they still find it nearly as difficult to write well as they did when they began to write.

W. K. HOWITT (Auckland).

EARLY TO BED

Sir,—It is with considerable surprise that I realise from some of the letters I have read in your columns how many people apparently suppose that if one lives in the country, one automatically goes to bed early. Several people have written from time to time to protest against radio plays being put on the air late in the evening. My own experience as a farmer's wife is that I am never able to sit down and listen to a radio programme before 9.0 p.m. Therefore I hear the news to start with and am always delighted when I find plays which start at 9.30 or later. Many

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country men don't finish work until nearly 7.0 p.m. Then there is bathing, dining, and the washing up to be done. We never hear any of the plays on the air at 7.30, and this also applies to the winter, even if the men are in a little earlier. They are incredibly clever at working in the dark. Doubtless there are some early country people or those letters wouldn't be written, but they are catered for by the 7.30 plays. The 9.30 or later ones also suit many late country people. I think the programmes are well planned in that way. I would be dreadfully sorry if I could never hear any plays; it would be a serious deprivation.

MIRA CROSSE (Patoka).

"DUEL IN THE SUN"

Sir,—Congratulations on your Film Critic's masterly review of *Duel in the Sun*. I had only been two hours from the theatre when I read the article and it expressed my feelings absolutely. If Hollywood spent six million dollars on that film it is time the moguls of the film world found some other channel for their surplus cash (and energy).

The sooner "Imperial Preference" is exercised on Hollywood films the better. Give us bigger and brighter British films. BRITANNIA (Johnsonville).

Sir,—I went to *Duel in the Sun* with an open mind. My women-folk refused to go, which made me all the more curious. The Press advertised it as the most controversial picture of all time. I thought the acting was most convincing. I expect that in the years before the railways crossed the prairies in America some pretty crude and primitive people lived there. I found it all rather entertaining though a bit too virile and lusty perhaps in places. I found it hard to fit in Joseph Cotten; he didn't seem to ring true. In other words he was rather an improbable character. But I thought Jennifer Jones as the half-breed did a very clever bit of acting. Her type would have been susceptible to whatever man was on the scene, at the moment. Barrymore, too, was well cast. I like

Gregory Peck at any time, I like his voice and his bearing. He's certainly no "ciss," if he could master a stallion as he did, or was it a "stand in"? The last scene was certainly gruesome and in bad taste. But taking the picture all round I enjoyed it. The old humbug of a cheap and nasty evangelist may have given offence to some. That was all too true to type, I thought. This generation wouldn't stand for such charlatans. In any case I'm sceptical of people who make the most show of religion.

Has your critic become too "refained"? The sessions were packed every evening and afternoon, which speaks for itself.

I think the general public like a bit of reality.

THE COMMON MAN
(Bell Block).

(We have no space for further letters on this subject.—Ed.)

THE NEW ART

Sir,—The climate of art is hard, and its rigours are salutary. If the spectator refuses to share these—he runs the risk of demanding that his art be easy and good for nothing." Thus Mr. M. T. Woolaston in your issue of October 8. I do not think it is so much a matter of refusing, as of inability to share—inability due to lack of temperament and training. Take the sketch portrait of "My Mother" reproduced with Mr. Woolaston's notes. A large number of people will probably regard this as a crude attempt at portraiture. My own impressions—for what they are worth—are that it is surprising that the artist, by means of two black blobs and a few lines, can convey a sensation of life and an expression of contemplative attention in a human face. The clasped hands, suggested with extreme economy of line, also convey an impression of repose. I cannot say that I admire the short slanting lines of the mouth. The artist's skill is demonstrated by making so little convey so much. The sketch has the "distinct, sharp, and wiry boundary line" considered by Blake to be as essential element in good art.

But it seems to me that modern art is too prone to fix just one transitory aspect of a subject and the ordinary beholder has an uncomfortable feeling that this specialisation borders on caricature. Beauty, like Truth, has many aspects, and each succeeding generation of mankind seems to pick on this or that aspect and emphasise it as of primary importance. As understood by the Pre-Raphaelites truth to nature was exact and precise detail; they painted leaves with almost botanical accuracy. The Impressionists, on the other hand, ignored detail, went in for broad and general effects and were accused of just flinging colours at a canvas and signing it. Walter Sickert dropped having his patrons for more than one sitting and asserted that photographs from many angles and by different lights provided him with all he needed to obtain a perfect portrait.

In these days, when intellectual and cultural barriers are down and the human spirit is battling in a kind of vortex, we need not be shocked if art in all its various forms provides us with some surprises. They will be interesting subjects for the contemplation of future generations.

J. MALTON MURRAY (Oamaru).