

THE OLD VIC

THE OLD VIC Company has come and gone and we can breathe again. The tumult and the shouting has died and most of us can look back on their visit as the biggest event in New Zealand's theatrical history. The manager of one of our most gilded palaces raised in honour of Hollywood has been quoted as saying, "The public has just gone mad. It's a form of hysteria. All this queueing . . ."

Perhaps to eyes sicklied o'er by too many glimpses of Betty Grable's legs or Frank Sinatra's tonsils, the spectacle of men, women and children queueing up for 15 or 16 hours in order to see the Old Vic company might be just a shade mortifying, and I suppose it does ask for some form of explanation, because the interest roused when the visit was first mooted, right up to the last night of the all-too-short season has been on the grand scale. No niggling here. No qualifying "I'll go if I can," but a determined, "I'll go if it takes the last penny and the last ounce of shoe leather."

New Zealanders, we have been told so often and so often, have no culture. True, we have as yet no Art Galleries worthy of the name, no endemic school of painting or writing, very few composers; but send us a Boyd Neel Orchestra and we troop to hear it; our local and often excellent repertory societies can almost always be sure of full houses; every little country district has its drama circle; give us the Old Vic and we storm the portals of the booking offices long before opening time. So, if we have no national culture, at least we have the spirit that ultimately brings it about. If we can't as yet perform ourselves, we can appreciate to the full those who do.

Standing in my own place in the queue which trailed in from the streets through the men's wear department of a large city store, I looked at the people around me and wondered just what the Oliviers meant to them. It was mid-afternoon and most of the queueers were women. This was understandable enough as the men, one would imagine, were busily earning the money to pay for the seats. I listened in unashamedly to what the women were saying. None of them, as far as I knew, were members of the local drama groups.

By the time we had shuffled alongside the gents' natty suitings, the lady in the pink hat had said to the lady in the brown with the feather that she was so excited, she had been looking forward to this for months.

A pair of sturdy, torsoless legs (clad in bathing trunks and standing, on a show case) stood over us when the girl in the grey costume said to the lady in the slightly raffish blue hat that she

wanted to see *Richard III*. more than any of the others because "After all, it's Shakespeare—Shakespeare in the flesh." I knew exactly what she meant.

We were rounding the corner and passing a rack of reduced-in-price sports coats when a meek little woman who hadn't spoken before told anyone who would care to listen that she didn't care what she saw, but she thought Vivien Leigh just lovely in *Gone With the Wind*.

THIS last started another train of thought which brought us practically within yodelling distance of the booking office itself. How many of these people

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would have been so interested in, or would have even heard of the Oliviers if they hadn't seen them in the movies first of all? One out of every ten was my estimate. And the answer to that one was that it didn't matter. What did matter was that, having seen them in the movies, they knew them for the artists that they are, and so counted inconvenience and boredom as nothing in an endeavour to see more. My queue would not be an isolated one. Its counterpart must have been enacted up and down New Zealand during the season. That in many cases there has been a "form of hysteria," a certain aspect of mob-mind which must be in the swim at all costs, is not denied, but we get this at every Chamber Music recital, at every play, at every Art Gallery first night and at every murder trial.

But above and beyond this, and far away from some of the adulatory and tasteless newspaper interviews which treated the Oliviers as existing somewhere between Deity and Royalty, the Old Vic Company had something to offer New Zealanders which New Zealanders were more than anxious to obtain.

Judgment is usually tempered by comparison. I cannot balance Laurence Olivier against anyone else but I do not need this to tell me that he is the first "great" actor I have seen. From the first sight of the misshapen figure in *Richard III*. to the last despairing cry, he had us enthralled.

Most of Shakespeare's heroes labour under some arbiter of their fate which lies outside their ken. Hamlet is storm-tossed on the waves of mother-love, mother-disillusion, and the desire for revenge. Othello is prey to his own hatred and jealousy. Macbeth is haggard before we meet him.

Richard, on the other hand, deliberately shapes his own destiny, and we are never conscious of an intangible, brooding, inescapable fate, larger than man, larger than life. Right up to the end we feel it's a fifty-fifty chance whether Richard or Richmond will win the field. Sir Laurence Olivier's portrayal of Richard was a masterpiece of virtuosity, wit and intelligence.

The curtain rises on an empty stage. A door opens and we see the back of a crutch-supported figure in a green doublet. After the first roar of welcome, he turns, limps towards us, and takes us into his confidence. "Now is the winter of our discontent" is given as no murmured soliloquy to the clouds or the battlements or the wings, but goes straight back to the Elizabethan tradition of telling the groundlings all about it. We know right from the jump what to expect. A crooked body houses a crooked and resolute mind, heady with ambition, arrogant in the knowledge that his is a higher intelligence than that displayed by the men and women he intends to use in the bloody game of making himself a king.

After this there is no waiting, no delay, but attack, attack, attack. We are in, boots and all, and we follow Richard to Bosworth Field through all the ramifications of plot and counterplot, alarms and excursions.

IN a part which practically begs to be overplayed, Olivier's disciplined gestures and movements kept the character in check, but he never missed a stage trick, as witness the twisted hand up-flung in a farewell gesture at Clarence on his way to the Tower, held long enough to be theatrical, but short enough to be theatrically right; or, while the others talk, wrangle and moan, the quiet, seated figure, watchful, waiting, the bad foot turned inwards, the eyes never still; or the nervous pushing back of the limp hair, now adorned with the Crown of England, when the news of Richmond's advance is learnt; the "I am not in a giving vein" with Buckingham, when, knowing Richard for the villain he is, we still want to tell him to stop the cat and mouse game and give the scheming lord his due lest worse befall.

With Richard on stage we are conscious of a certain sustaining excitement and strain which is absent when Richard is absent. We even miss him dead. Because of an injury to Sir Laurence's knee, the death of Richard had to be off stage. The presence of Richard's lifeless but still, we would imagine, malevolent body would have given more point to Richmond's victory. The contrast between the living, youthful, bouncing figure of Richmond and the crumpled body of his adversary would have rounded out a performance which will stand in the memory of all who saw it as a piece of acting the most illuminating and exciting that they have seen.



RICHARD III
"A masterpiece of virtuosity, wit, and intelligence"

But, given riches, we are asking for more. Why quibble when the doomed man's last cry, "A horse! . . . a horse!" still rings in our bewitched ears?

The smaller parts were filled with the ease and dexterity of training added to talent. Buckingham, Hastings, Clarence and Richmond came to life nobly and competently. Margaret of Anjou in her cursing was more than effective, but apart from this the women did not come across to any real extent. But what could you do with such a trio of ranting beldames? *Richard III* was one of the earlier plays, and Rosalind, Beatrice, Portia and the like had not yet appeared. Even Vivien Leigh's porcelain beauty and polish could do little with Lady Anne. Her portrayal was of a highly intelligent, resolute, fearless woman, and her apparent trance towards the end of the "Put down, put down thine honourable load" scene could not make her capitulation acceptable. The only way to deal with Anne is, I think, to make her a bewildered, stupid woman — a whiner, a complainer—a sort of Shakespearean Zasu Pitts! Then and then only could we accept her incredible volte face with any degree of placidity. Miss Leigh made Anne too noble, too definite ever to be taken in by Richard's hypocritical love-making.

Sets, costumes, music and lighting were all in keeping with the excellence of the production. The use of a modification of the Elizabethan inner stage was only one of the manoeuvres to link the many scenes into an imminently coherent whole.

AFTER the deep notes and drum rolls of the battle piece, the measure and tinkle of the minuet. After the dagger and the sword, no deadlier weapon than the tongue of the scandalmonger. After

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