

# HAPPY RETURN

## Canterbury Student Players Home Again

THERE are several ways of establishing good relations when interviewing; one of those not recommended is to borrow money from the person who is to be interviewed, especially if the person happens to be a lady. I had a second-class ticket from Lyttelton to Christchurch. I talked to Miss Ngaio Marsh in a first-class carriage. I had no change and neither did the guard. Miss Marsh lent me the extra sixpence, and a good relationship was immediately established, which says a lot for Miss Marsh.

Miss Marsh was on the last stage of her return journey from Australia, where she had produced and toured two plays for the Canterbury College Drama Society—*Othello* and Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. The Society had presented *Othello* in New Zealand during the long vacation of 1944-45; three of the cast were still available and there was less building up required than for the other play, which, Miss Marsh said, was a shot in the dark. *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is a difficult play.

It was first produced in 1921, causing immediate and intense controversy. It is, said Miss Marsh, the direct begetter of the many contemporary plays which ask us to examine the conventions and absurdities of the theatre. Pirandello did not want his audiences to accept illusion as reality.

The play breaks rules; there are long speeches full of close argument which make terrific demands on the actors' diction and technique. Success depends on pace, bold experimental movement, and what Miss Marsh calls orchestration; that is, playing as a team. Once these are established, through earnest study and hard work, the play goes well, and it is not so difficult as *Othello*, into which one may dig for years and never touch bottom.

The hard work which had been put into both plays was appreciated by Australian audiences and the Press, said Miss Marsh. The audiences were well mannered, enthusiastic and without what Sir Laurence Olivier called attacks of the rheums. If they coughed at all they coughed silently. The Press was perhaps extravagant in its praise. All its criticism of the company was on the professional level. Time and again Miss Marsh felt constrained to point out that this was a student company, but the fact was seldom mentioned by the papers, and if it was, only in a tone of amazement that students could act as this company did.

MISS MARSH gave some account of the work which went into making the tour a success. She herself did three months' work on the scripts of the plays before the casts went into rehearsal. She delved, thought and discussed. What was the author's intention? How could it best be put over to the audience? What stage settings, lighting, pace and costume would help the author's intention most? It is the producer's duty to concern

himself solely with the author's intention, not with tinkering and personal embellishments. Find the anatomy of the play, said Miss Marsh, and then articulate orally and visibly.

The cast started rehearsals straight after their university examinations were over. Most of them had jobs. They rehearsed after work for seven weeks, seven nights a week. They built a solid groundwork of diction, mime and movement, the rudiments of which many of them had learnt at a summer school Miss Marsh had conducted in Wellington earlier in the year. They had long sessions of individual coaching and discussion of particular problems. Miss Marsh explained that the more she produces the less she demonstrates. The best way to express the author's intention in a particular situation is not found by the producer

saying, "Here, do it like this," but by discussions and trials with the actor concerned, so that in the end the solution of the difficulty comes from the player in consultation with the producer, rather than from a simple imposition of the producer's ideas on the player.

Gradually the plays were built up, stage by stage, until producer and cast, having established a solid basis, could stand on it and view the plays as a whole, and concern themselves with flexibility of pace, the building of tension at climaxes, and the subtler pieces of business.

This sounds like a lot of work. It was. But it must also be remembered that the cast on tour was not pampered and served by vast armies of stage hands. They had to do their share of set building and striking, packing, attending to their costumes, and the million other little irritating details that crowd upon a touring company. Team work extended beyond the production of the two plays. The cast as a whole lost weight. Sometimes there was time for sleep and sometimes there wasn't.

MISS MARSH was not able to see any Australian repertory work, except the Sydney Independent Theatre's interesting production of *Measure for Measure*, but she did meet individual society members.

She mentioned particularly the Tin Pan Alley Players of Melbourne University, who are lucky to be able to put on their plays in the best small theatre in Australasia; the Melbourne



CANTERBURY PLAYERS on tour—Brigid Lenihan (right) as Desdemona with Pamela Mann as Emilia

Union, and the Mercury Players in Sydney, a group run by a refugee producer. Both these groups have a serious and questing approach to their theatre, and are willing to put in the hard work necessary to make something good out of their productions.

The conversation turned again to money, this time in the shape of official aid to the theatre. Drama is taught at Melbourne University by official tutors. This means that student actors can put in more time on their acting, because it is a subject which goes towards the gaining of a diploma, than can the New Zealand undergraduate whose theatre work is extra-curricular. However, there is dissatisfaction over the standard of acting reached at Melbourne University. Miss Marsh thinks that the appointment of tutors is crucial, and while they may be fairly well off for qualified people in Australia, there is a dearth of them here.

The same might be said about the Victoria State travelling theatre. Equipment is lavish, but it is not easy to get a good producer to work with the equipment.

Unassisted New Zealand student theatre, Miss Marsh thinks, is ephemeral. Nobody is at university more than a few years and it is impossible to get continuity of effort or build up a high, fixed standard of production. However, change is no bad thing. It means that a clique cannot for long strangle a society's activities. Fresh faces appear; talent develops a little, and then moves on. The talented ones go out into the community and join a local repertory society, sometimes bringing with them a ferment of new ideas.

So we came back to the projected, discussed, longed-for National Theatre. Miss Marsh was succinct. A very good thing, she said, on three conditions. It needs a first-rate director, money, and a free hand. And, one might have added, hard work.

—G. le F.Y.

## An Invisible Export

(Written for "The Listener" by  
HOWARD WADMAN)

THERE are several observations that might be made about the recent Australian tour of the Canterbury Student Players.

The bald facts of the tour are now common knowledge. Produced by Ngaio Marsh and under the business direction of Dan O'Connor, a number of young people, most of them students at one time or another of Canterbury College, toured for nine weeks in Australia with Shakespeare's *Othello* and Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. In all they gave 40 performances and had a total audience of 20,000. Their work was highly praised by the critics, and in one city where they clashed with an English company also presenting *Othello* the general opinion was that the New Zealanders had the best of it.

I should imagine that this is the first time in our history that we have sent a theatrical company out of the country (I am not prepared to count the *Kiwis*). So the first startling fact is that we now have an invisible export, so to speak, other than scenery. That export is culture. Dozens of theatrical companies have come here from Australia; we have just arrived at reciprocity. They send us *The Maid of the Mountains* and *Arsenic and Old Lace*. We send them one of the most famous tragedies of all time, and one of the most important dramatic experiments of this century. Is there symbolic significance in the exchange? It would be nice to think so.

Of course it is not fair to compare the plays presented by a university company with the offerings of a commercial concern whose aim is to fill opera houses. Nevertheless, I think it is typical that when New Zealand has anything to offer at all it should be first-rate. For it is true that this country is characterised by a seriousness which sometimes deserves to be called "high" seriousness. In moments of depression, one is inclined to think of New Zealanders as

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