

Hard Times for British Musical Comedy

IT is a long time since Charley's Aunt was new, but she seems capable of indefinite rejuvenation. News of the recent revival of the farce in London was brought to *The Listener* office the other day by John Huson, who played Sir Francis Chesney in this brand-new version. Apparently it is distinguished from most productions in that it goes straight back to the original book written in 1890, and includes even the traditional asides to the audience. More period flavour was added by Cecil Beaton's sets and costumes. It was at the conclusion of Charley's Aunt (which ran for 15 months) that Mr. Huson felt he had earned a holiday, and decided to come to New Zealand to look up old friends.

Mr. Huson began singing as a young man, and trained at the Royal Academy. But finding that (in his own words) he was no Caruso, he branched off into musical comedy, in time managing his own company. Then came the war, and after touring the garrison theatres with his company he joined the Air Force, rising from erk to Squadron-Leader. Most of his Service life was spent in the Western Desert, where he came in contact with several New Zealanders.

"My line was Air-Sea rescue," said Mr. Huson. "I was too old for ordinary flying."

After the war he went back to the theatre. "Things were so grim in Britain that almost the only thing you felt you wanted to do for people was make them laugh," he said. "Hence the

amazing success of *Under the Counter* and *Charley's Aunt*."

But he was not sanguine about the future of musical comedy in England.

"One of the troubles English musical comedy has to face at the moment is the influx of American shows. *Oklahoma* and *Annie Get Your Gun* were both flourishing in London when I left. This means there are fewer theatres available for British talent. I had an excellent operetta offered me. *The Olden Days* by Herbert Oliver, the man who wrote *Come Down to Kew in Lilac Time*, but I couldn't find a theatre for it. Most of the big London theatres now are owned by non-theatrical people, who are interested only in shows that are assured successes. And the rentals are usually too high for the ordinary manager."

"Aren't there any English shows in America?"

"There's a swung version of *Charley's Aunt* on Broadway called *Where's Charley?* and Cicely Courtneidge toured with *Under the Counter*, but that was a flop."

"What about the legitimate theatre?"

"That's in fairly good shape. The Old Vic has enormous prestige, and there's this new company of Olivier's coming along. It's the musical shows that are in a bad way. These young people don't need to sing any more. They've installed mikes in all the theatres, even the Savoy. And there's a continual drain of all the best talent to the films, because that's where the big money is. Most ambitious young actors plan for two good West End shows and then the films."

"Film salaries are higher than stage salaries then?"

"Much higher. Film salaries are going up and stage salaries down. Of course it's just a matter of time before the bubble bursts. The British film industry can't make ends meet because of high salaries, but no one is prepared to advocate cutting them."

Mr. Huson has done a little film work. "A very little," he says. His last appearance was in *The Passionate Friends* with Anne Todd and Claude Rains, directed by David Lean. (A good film, he tells me.) He was employed for five days, out of which he spent 10 minutes on the set. He sneezed at a critical moment when the film was being shown and missed his own appearance altogether.

Mr. Huson has heard a lot about the high standard reached by repertory societies in New Zealand and is interested in seeing as much of their work as possible. But most of his time here will be spent looking up the old friends aforementioned.



JOHN HUSON

"Young people don't need to sing any more"

NEW ZEALAND LISTENER, APRIL 29

BEWARE-

Winter Chills are Trouble Makers!

You can reduce the risk of a cold by -

ADEQUATE SLEEP:

Children need more than adults.



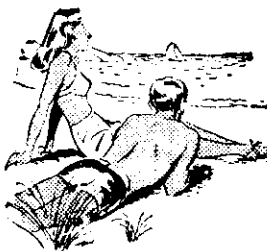
FRESH AIR:

Stuffy, overheated rooms are bad, so ventilate and open windows at night.



SUNSHINE:

Sunbathe in suitable weather, take codliver oil in winter.



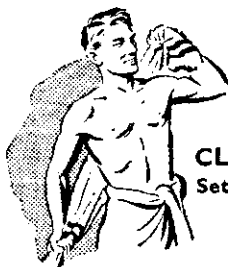
BALANCED DIET:

Adequate milk, dairy products, vegetables and fruits.



CLEANLINESS:

Set the daily bath habit.



KEEP DRY IN WET WEATHER:

Avoid chilling and wet feet.



To Prevent a cold:

Wear suitable clothing, boots and strong shoes. Dodge those with colds. Unguarded coughs and sneezes spread disease. Stay away from others, one day or more, at height of infectious stage. Cover your own coughs and sneezes.

If you catch a cold:

Rest at home in bed, warm and out of draughts. Drink plenty of water, fruit drinks, soups, etc. Eat light, nourishing diet.

See the Doctor if the cold doesn't go away in a few days.

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