

DRAMA IN THE BACKBLOCKS

SOME of the smaller towns and villages in the North Island are now seeing living theatre for the first time, brought to them by the mobile unit of the Auckland Adult Education Centre's Community Art Service Theatre. This is already well under way on the most extensive tour it has yet undertaken, and its first venture outside its own province. The present tour began in North Auckland on June 14, and by



CECILY COLLIER

One of a cast of experienced amateurs

the time it ends, at Taumarunui in mid-August, nearly 40 rural centres scattered throughout the North Island will have been visited.

The repertoire, excerpts from which were recently broadcast by 1YA during the Women's Hour, includes a special matinee for schools, called "Drama Through the Ages," and consisting of selections from mediaeval, Elizabethan, 18th Century, and modern drama, while the major work for evening presentation is Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*. The organisers are Owen Jensen and J. F. McDougall, and the producer, Harold Baigent. Costumes are by Raeburn Griffiths, and the cast "of experienced amateurs" has been drawn from Auckland, Wellington, Waipukurau, Hamilton and Tauranga.

Stimulus to Local Activity

The provision of entertainment is, of course, one of the functions of the Service, but a minor one incidental to the main aims, Mr. McDougall told *The Listener*.

"We hope to stimulate local community activity in country districts, to develop interest in drama and the arts, and to provide opportunities which might not otherwise be available," he said. "Many members of our audiences are seeing theatre for the first time—country townships don't usually attract commercial shows. But we are trying to prove there is no need to rely on visiting entertainers, and the cinema alone. Even very small communities can form successful drama groups, and many people are finding there is keener pleasure to be gained in taking part in the production of a show than in watching passively with the audience."

At each performance of *Arms and the Man* a short talk is given explaining how everything is done. Afterwards we are inviting members of the audience to meet the producer and members of his cast to discuss production, staging, lighting, and other problems.

"By making a special effort for the schools we hope, in time, to bring children to an acceptance of flesh and blood shows as a normal part of the entertainment world. As normal as the cinema. This should help to build a sound foundation for the future of drama in the country."

One of the biggest problems facing the theatre in the country, The Community Art Service has found, is the almost complete lack of suitable buildings. On the present tour Garrison Halls dating back to the Boer War, high school classrooms, cinemas, council chambers, and in one case a converted passion-fruit pulp factory have all served as auditoriums. None of them was intended for plays, and none was really suitable. Mr. McDougall believes the final solution is the local construction of community centres or halls incorporating a small theatre.

"Doesn't the need for mobility create other problems for you?"

"Many of them. We use two vans and a car, and carry our own scenery, costumes, furniture, lights, drapes and cyclorama, but every presentation calls for fresh improvisations in staging and assembly. The whole show must be taken down and packed after the evening performance so that we can be on the road again by eight next morning. The play itself is only a small part of the day's effort; we are working, on the stage, or travelling from 8.0 a.m. until midnight or later. Thus the tour seems to develop into an endless cycle of packing, travelling, unpacking, assembling, tearing down, packing and so on."

Looking Ahead

"Some of our theatre space problems may be eased by new methods of staging. Next year we plan to experiment with arena or central staging in which the acting area becomes part of the auditorium, and the audience, like Elizabethan audiences, is in much more intimate contact with the players. This method has been very successfully employed in Russia and in the U.S.A."

"Do you feel you are succeeding in your aims? Is the effort worthwhile?"

"I would give a decided Yes to both those questions. Our first major tour was in 1947 and the aftermath of letters to C.A.S. was proof of a keen interest. From the experience gained then, in subsequent smaller tours and in the present tour, we believe the North Island alone could support two small units for at least six months of the year. There is so far no similar unit in the Wellington Adult Education area. Eventually we think it will be possible to develop a full-time drama unit in which young New Zealanders who want to make the theatre their career may find an opening. Incidentally, no National Theatre movement could be truly national unless it served the small, even the smallest, country districts, and not merely the major towns."

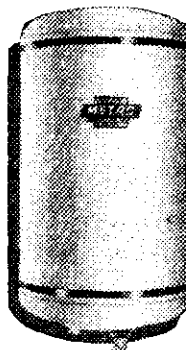
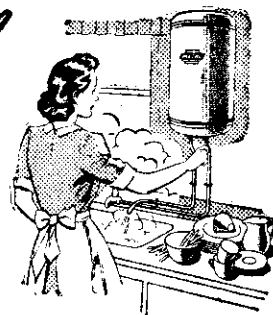
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