

THE PLAY IS NOW THE THING

ON the evening of May 19, 1949, students of Victoria University College presented a French play (in French) and a Russian play (in Russian), for the entertainment and wonderment of friends and visitors to the College Jubilee Celebrations. White-chalked arrows on notice boards directed the way through the maze of corridors, doors, stairways and connecting bridges that led the determined traveller from the bottom-most ground level to the newest ground level of all—the fourth, known variously as The New Clay Patch, The Huts, and The Little Theatre Block. All the arrows encouraged the visitors that May night to follow with the cosy words Little Theatre: and, with little French and less Russian, many of the visitors followed the arrows and found the bare brand new L-shaped block which contains the Little Theatre. There they settled for two hours of largely vicarious enjoyment as they watched students—and one or two lecturers—having the romp of their lives in fair to fine French and fair to cloudy Russian.

For Victoria University College it was an occasion; not because for the first time a Russian play was presented in Russian, but because for the first time there was a place within the college grounds where a play—English, French, German, Russian or Greek—could be presented with benefit of stage, entrances, exits, lights, cyclorama, and hot and cold water in the dressing-room. This was something new, something to talk about.

Canterbury University College has had its Little Theatre for so long that it has arrived—with the help of an indefatigable producer in Ngaiio Marsh—at the stage of exporting its talent: first the New Zealand tours of *Hamlet* and *Othello* and later *Macbeth*; and then the adventure to Australia with *Othello* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. That too, was something new, something to talk about. But Canterbury had, at the very least, a quarter of a century's start in the field of Little Theatre.

Even now, strictly speaking, Victoria University College hasn't a Little Theatre. What it has is a large lecture-room in a temporary block of buildings shared for lectures with students of the overcrowded Wellington Teachers' Training College. This large lecture-room has at one end of it an adequate if not magnificent stage (the width is a little over 30ft., the depth 25ft.); the forward part of the stage can be walled off with draught-proof partitions, bolted in place, to form a lecturer's booth or possibly a small platform for the performance of chamber music.

The observant playgoer in the front row sees before him two doors in the vertical front of the stage and trapdoors in the floor; if he is early enough perhaps his curiosity impels him to lift the trapdoor and peep: he sees steps leading steeply downwards to the large basement workroom and prop-room where stage props may be stowed during lectures, where furniture may be passed in and out at ground level, thus saving much cartage through passageways and doors and up and down steps within the building—and where devils, underworld characters, stage cats or other innocents

may await their cues to emerge by discreet trapdoor to the giddy glare of spotlights, the generous glow of footlights.

Footlights, Spotlights . . .

Footlights? Yes, though they cast what might be termed a beam of contention for the technically-minded to worry over—and almost everyone in the game of drama is technically-minded, as anyone who listens to a rehearsal can tell. Spotlights? Yes, indeed; and perhaps these are the prize toy and joy of all concerned, coming magically as they do, from a bridge above the heads of the audience.

This door to the left, and this to the right, up the steps? They lead to the stage, of course? They do; but come this way, left into the corridor. Now directly ahead of you is the dressing-room—cupboards, bench with mirror over it, the other side sink, hot and cold water and the rehearsal-essential teapot, cups, sugar. Now right, up the steps, past the switch-board, there, you see, entrance to stage via corridor. Now you see the cyclorama and understand why its curve and its soft bluish-grey throw up, with change of lighting, an hour of brightest morning or a cold night in the hills. And trapdoors in the stage; one on either side for more activity of underworld characters, steps going steeply down and everyone warned to take care. And last, from this side, the curtain, properly called curtain, though everything else looking like a curtain in a theatre is sure to be a drop. This curtain is in two halves that go sideways (and even if they stuck the first night, they do now go sideways); so future critics should be wary of writing "The curtain went up, disclosing a domestic scene. . . ."

Clay-Eating Bull

It seems only last month, instead of last year, that the deafening noises of hill-carving were heard by residents living near the new clay patch; then it was simply a humpy and rough hill-side, menacing the army huts with wet-weather slips. Day after day, Saturdays and all, an enormous creature careered across the surface eating huge meals of clay; the creature bore the notice "bull-dozing"—and neighbours hanging out their washing were heard to speculate

about the amount of noise he might be expected to make in his sleep, if this was what he could do in a sunny morning doze. At last he had eaten away enough clay to leave a large level of mud and pools, the fourth level or step up Kelburn Parade to be prepared for V.U.C. buildings. Immediately men arrived with drills and iron and magic cement, down went the foundations, and at once it was clear that the place of character and personality was the deep oblong pit which would become the workroom, store-room, prop-basement under the stage.

The Lions

A few days or a few weeks passed and there were the walls, the roof, the floors, the stage, and the sickle-moon skeleton of the cyclorama. Soon the steps went in from the traps to the basement; and there on a Saturday afternoon I saw a large notice chalked on a board beside the hatch-way in front of the stage: "Lions fed daily 3.0 p.m."

A day or two later, a slight adventure on the stage; the traps were open, the steps leading down but the doors not fitted yet. Said a carpenter: "They'll have to watch those traps—easy to step backwards into them. Good setting for an Agatha Christie, eh?" With which he himself stepped neatly back bang into the middle of one. He was, fortunately, a long and leggy man, and therefore he did not go through that trapdoor right to the basement; he stuck with one arm and another leg, and straddled there, luckily not seriously hurt, with good humour thought of something practical: "You'd better have the lids painted red for danger." His carpenter's mate thought of a difficulty: "No, you need the holes painted red for danger and the lids painted green for all clear."

There were, as every old hand will know there would be, hitches of all possible kinds before the curtains parted on the domestic scene at the opening of the old French farce "Les Trois Bossus" (O, the sad fate of the three hunchbacks, the jealous husband, the domestic scene, indeed), produced by Frances Huntingdon; but in the end the two spotlights worked (and every producer hankers after six); the footlights glowed; the cyclorama marked the hour;

and the Little Theatre had a pleasant house-warming from the laughter of the audience and the enjoyment of those taking part in two old comedies. The Russian play, helped along by English explanations arranged by the producer, Dr. N. I. Danilow, was *Gore of Uma* (Woe from Wit or The Misfortune of Being Clever), a 19th Century comedy by A. S. Griboedov.

The theatre is controlled by the Little Theatre Committee, with James Bertram (English Department, V.U.C.) as chairman, and with representatives from Modern Languages Department, V.U.C., V.U.C. Drama Club, Teachers' Training College Drama Club, Adult Education, V.U.C. students, and W.T.T.C. students; it is to be used by Victoria University College and its societies, Wellington Teachers' Training College and its societies, and Adult Education, including W.E.A. and Arts Council.

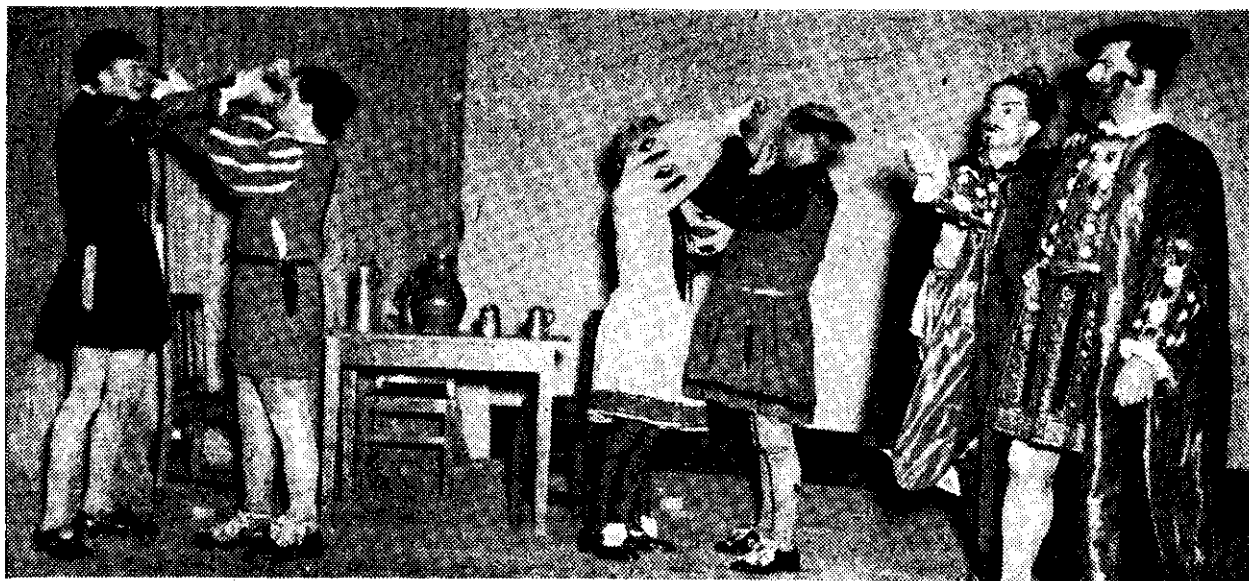
"Out it All Comes"

Since May the following plays have been presented: V.U.C. Drama Club, *The Wedding* by Tchekhov, produced by Pat Evison, and *A Phoenix too Frequent* by Christopher Fry, produced by Chris Pottinger; W.T.T.C. annual production *The Old Man of the Mountains* by Norman Nicholson, produced by Pat Lowe; Arts Council, *Arms and the Man* by Bernard Shaw (Community Arts Centre production from Auckland, filmed in part by National Film Unit in the Little Theatre); and V.U.C. German-speaking Club, four scenes from *Faust*, played in German for the Goethe bi-centennial, and produced by Dr. Joachim Kahn. Besides these full-dress productions there have been regular readings, particularly of classical and restoration plays.

After the German-speaking Club students' presentation of the *Faust* scenes last week (with the help, it should be said, of several German-speaking members of staff), Professor Ian Gordon said:

"Who'd have thought it? A French play, a Russian play, several English plays, and a German play put on within four months. Give them a theatre and out it all comes."

—J.



A SCENE during a presentation of Goethe's "Faust" at the Victoria University College Little Theatre