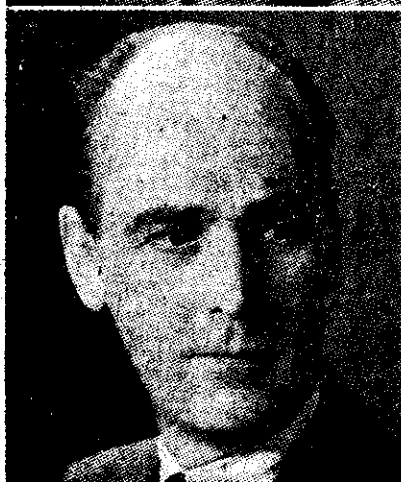


FULL-SCALE DRAMA ON THE AIR

New World Theatre Series Next Month



TWO years ago the NZBS presented *World Theatre*, a series of famous plays adapted for radio by the BBC. Because it included such masterpieces as *The Trojan Women* of Euripides, Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, and Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*—plays which took in some cases an hour and a half to broadcast—*World Theatre* represented a new development in radio drama in this country, and aroused wide interest among listeners. Next year the NZBS will broadcast a new series of *World Theatre* plays, most of them of even longer duration than before. The first will be heard in the middle of January, and they will continue through the winter months.

There are ten plays all told in the new series, the shortest of them, Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, being one and a half hours long, and the longest, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, running for nearly three and a half hours. Each play will be broadcast in full on one evening of the week, with a short intermission half way through. The ten plays comprise Shakespeare's four major tragedies—*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Othello*—as well as *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus* and *The Merchant of Venice*, Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, T. S. Eliot's poetic drama *The Family Reunion*, and Goldsmith's famous comedy *She Stoops to Conquer*. The productions of *Hamlet*, *Lear* and *Othello* each run for over three hours; *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* for two and a half hours; and *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Merchant of Venice* for one and a half hours. The recordings, which have been issued by the Transcription Service of the BBC, were made at the time of broadcast of the original productions in the BBC's Home Service and Third Programmes.

The Actors

Following the practice it established with the previous series, the BBC decided to call on some of the biggest names in the British radio, stage, and film world to make these productions, which were under the general supervision of Val Gielgud, the BBC's head of drama. Dame Sybil Thorndike, John Gielgud, Gladys Young, Dame Irene Vanbrugh, Donald Wolfitt, Fay Compton, Flora Robson, Robert Helpmann, Diana Wynyard, Sonia Dresdel, Bernard Miles, Celia Johnson, Bruce Belfrage, and Margaret Leighton are some of the leading players who take part, and Val Gielgud, Sir Lewis Casson, and Wilfrid Grantham are three of the producers.

The most interesting thing about the new series is that it includes seven of Shakespeare's greatest dramas. Although most of us have seen Shakespeare adapted for the cinema, and have either read the plays or seen them acted on the local stage, this will be the first time Shakespeare has been broadcast in full—and by some of the world's best actors.

SOME of the leading players in "World Theatre"—Left (from top), Margaret Leighton (*Desdemona*); John Gielgud (*Lord Monchensey* in *The Family Reunion*); Fay Compton (*Madame Ranevskaya*, *The Cherry Orchard*); Bruce Belfrage (*Coriolanus*)

Naturally the question of adaptation to a new medium arises, and to discuss this the BBC asked Sir Lewis Casson, one of the most distinguished figures of the British theatre and guest producer of *Coriolanus* in this series, to explain something of his methods.

The first point he made was that although theatres in Shakespeare's day were quite small, much of the dialogue was not intended for the general audience, but was written for lovers of poetry and probably addressed to the "gentry" who were permitted to sit around the edge of the Elizabethan stage. It was difficult to believe, for instance, that the impassioned murmurings of the Balcony Scene in *Romeo and Juliet* were meant to be bawled loud enough to be heard above the restless turmoil of the groundlings standing in the pit or inn-yard. But as theatres became larger a type of large-scale, stylised acting was developed which, although not really suited to Shakespeare, became regarded as "Shakespearean acting" by actors and public alike. Then the rise of a new type of naturalistic play in the 19th Century, and such improvements as better lighting, led to a new school of naturalistic acting and made the stylised Grand Manner of the past seem insincere and bombastic, even in Shakespeare.

Radio's Advantages

So the modern actor fell between two stools. He had to act in a large theatre, but having no tradition and little training in "large speech," he was often inaudible beyond the front rows, and generally unintelligible even there. Broadcasting, then, offered certain advantages. It restored not only the essential verbal continuity of the action, which was impaired or destroyed by scene-changing, but also the old dependence on the words themselves for the play's main effect. It also opened to a highly skilled speaker a range of delicate and intimate shades of tone and beauty impossible in a large building.

On the other hand, much was undoubtedly lost in radio—the "feel" and mutual stimulation of a live audience, for instance, or the sweep and majesty of full-voiced rhetoric in the great outbursts, with the answering thrill of an audience aroused to enthusiasm. Besides this, a strong emotion which might deeply move a highly-charged audience might be merely embarrassing to a fireside listener. On the whole though, plays which were meant to depend almost entirely on the words lost less than most, and this applied not only to Shakespeare but to a large extent also to *The Family Reunion*, which could be considered as a dramatic poem as much as a drama in verse, and to *The Cherry Orchard*. Even in recorded form

much was retained in these plays, especially when the recording was made, as was the case in *World Theatre*, from "live" performances in the studio.

Tampering with the Text

How far should a producer allow himself to tamper with text? was another question of considerable importance to Shakespeareans. Sir Lewis Casson found that some verbal alterations were necessary to avoid incessant interruption by a narrator to explain who is entering or being addressed, and so on. (Shakespeare was rather careless in this matter.) He also found some cutting was generally necessary, and that in this way obscure passages could sometimes be dealt with.

"But when the passages are essential," he said, "I have no compunction in making changes to avoid obscurity. It is a measure to be used with great discretion (and at the producer's peril) but in my view it is better, especially in radio, to keep the meaning clear and the thread of attention unbroken, than to leave such passages intact out of meticulous reverence for the text."

Finally Sir Lewis came to the question of the narrator. When Shakespeare or any other stage play is being broadcast, should the producer aim at the illusion that the audience is listening to real happenings, or to a stage performance?

"Personally," he said, "I favour the illusion of real happenings, invisible to the listener but visible to the narrator who narrates, *sotto-voce*, as much or as little of what he sees as is necessary for the listener to understand what he hears and to create his own picture. There should be no suggestion that the narrator is directing the performance, and his apparent emotional response to the play, though just noticeable, should be under rigid control." The device of the narrator is not, incidentally, used

(continued on next page)



SIR LEWIS CASSON
"I favour the illusion of real happenings"