

# PORTRAIT OF AN ACTRESS

## *Maria Dronke Played Under Rinehardt*

**S**HE has soft brown eyes, dark hair drawn back on to the nape of the neck, a well-shaped, sensitive mouth. She makes little gestures as she speaks in a soft, musical voice with the faintest of accents. Meeting her as a complete stranger, you would know at once that she is an actress. To so few people is given the power of expression in the simplest things, a movement of lips, an inclination of head, a glance of eyes.

That is a picture of Maria Dronke, known to hundreds on the Continent as Maria Korten.

Now, high up in one of Wellington's biggest buildings in a studio decorated only by a few superb photographs by her husband, and a beautiful piece of stained glass, she teaches elocution, French and German.

As a young girl, Maria Korten, of Berlin, knew that she wanted before all things to go on the stage. So first she studied elocution and voice production under Professor Daniel of Paris, who was teaching in Berlin. Through Daniel's hands have passed many of the actors and actresses whose names to-day have become household words. Maria Korten became his assistant.

She became known, and newspaper critics suggested that she should go on the stage.

She has acted in a score or more famous theatres. In Berlin, in Vienna's Burgtheater, where only the great are good enough, at The Hague, and in Paris. She has played under the great producers—Max Rinehardt, whose Shakespearean productions have become famous, and under his famous colleague, Alexander Moissi. She gave recitals, read verse; and when Rilke, the lyric poet, died, she was invited to read his work at the memorial celebrations.

## "Passionate Feeling"

Of her poetry-readings it has been said: "The programme was astonishing; it gave testimony of quite outstanding literary taste and of extraordinary understanding; and of boldness, because it did not contain any concession to the audience. . . . Until now nobody has spoken to us with such passionate feeling. . . . She makes us hear the sound of a pure heart. . . . She has a heart which does not only feel with the poet, but is able to understand poetry, a wonderful alto-voice and an appearance which deserves to be

called beautiful in expression and gesture as well as in quiet."

## Understudy to Bergner

In those days she played in old and modern plays. She was Stella in Maugham's "The Sacred Flame," the young queen in "Barbarina," and had a part also in "Business With America."

In the realm of Shakespeare, she was understudy to Elisabeth Bergner as Juliet, played Olivia in "Twelfth Night" and Ophelia in "Hamlet." Continental critics are notoriously cynical, even harsh, but one said:



Richard Andrew, photographer

" . . . . The sound of a pure heart "

## Last Impressions of Germany

So perhaps that is why Maria Dronke says, with fine emphasis, that many of her friends in Germany would "welcome the English with open arms . . ." It is the reason why she and her husband and two young children were forced to fly from their country.

"My last impressions of Germany were very sad . . . There was a young blackshirt . . . not more than 22 years old . . . we had to leave everything . . . I do not like to think about it . . ."

But she says: "Even to have lost everything is better than that my husband should have to fight for Hitler."

So she and her small family escaped to England, and worked for a time at the Sacred Heart Training College for teachers at Newcastle-on-Tyne. After a year in England they came to New Zealand, and here she feels really happy. "Freedom is so wonderful when you have lived without it," she says gratefully, "and I think your Nature is the most beautiful I have ever seen."

Of a library of 2,000 books, they brought out 600 with them, but now books, and furniture, and Herr Dronke's five or six instruments (he is a keen musician, and once played double bass with a chamber orchestra in Cologne) and everything else are interned on a ship in the Dutch East Indies.



Richard Andrew, photograph

" . . . Here she feels really happy"

“At the moment when she (Ophelia), in her hesitating words, seemed to recognise her brother, Laertes, and her own suffering, she was of a greatness by far excelling her surroundings.”

But in Leipzig, Nazis pulled down the statue to Felix Mendelssohn because he had been born a Jew; and throughout Germany, a competition for the writing of a new, nice, clean Aryan score for "Midsummer Night's Dream" was begun.