

DRAMA IN THE BACKBLOCKS

(Written for "The Listener" by DOROTHY ANN BEAVIS)

IT was winter when I went to the backblocks, officially to lecture on dramatic art, though the subsequent classes could never be described as mere lectures. Neither did they consist of various groups of people who met together merely for the amusement of attempting a few amateur theatricals. Rather they developed into a series of particularly active study circles, in which we all took part.

They have built themselves excellent halls, these people of the backblocks, and they are keen to use them. Keen, ready to learn, and really interested. They all came along. The farmer with his wife and family, and the "rouseabout," together with various stray members of the community, and still more various stray dogs. We fitted the dogs in where we could, but they seemed a little vague about cues.

There is talent in the backblocks, unsophisticated and delightful talent. We stood solemnly in rows and did voice production exercises. We not only did them within the halls and at the actual classes, but we did them high among the sheep runs of the mountains, and in backyards; at least they did, and hereby hangs a tale. A tale destined to become one of those time-honoured, almost hereditary jokes, treasured and preserved by the district to which they belong.

An old farmer, hearing strange and disquieting noises issuing from the paddock behind his house, and envisaging a certain prize ram in dire distress, betook himself hastily to the spot, only to find the oldest, most staid and reliable of daughters, glassy eyes fixed on the

far mountains and hands held stiffly to solar-plexus, ejaculating at measured intervals "BOO! BOW! BAW! BA! BAA!"

"Eagerness to Know"

To me, the outstanding characteristic of these very likeable people was their eagerness to know. I suppose the true measure of a man's greatness lies not in the knowledge he has, but in his desire to attain more. I was quite astonished at their ability, not only to take the training seriously, but to assimilate it. It was such a joy to find people who didn't think they knew everything to begin with. These people were so sure that they knew nothing. But there was much which I learned from them.

Tackling movement first, with the aid of a gramophone and some good records of Grainger and Eric Coates, we swept round those halls like the wind, or crept furtively about in villainous silence. Movement is a lovely thing. Watching folk propelling themselves along Wellington pavements, you will not agree; but if you had seen that quite unconscious, quite delightful movement, at least you would have been surprised.

Reading Plays

Sitting round great roaring fires upon the trestles and chairs of the supper rooms, we read plays: A. A. Milne, Miles Malleson, Drinkwater, and a little Barrie; and having grasped the gist of these, trooped back into the main hall to wed action to words. We didn't pretend that it was polished. It wasn't, and the technique was decidedly shaky at times, but it had life! It was dramatic: Though it was astonishing how much really good stage technique they all managed to put into practice before the course came to an end.

Snow fell, and roads were bad. I would as soon find myself at sea as in the back of any modern car upon those twisty thoroughfares; and I am alas a poor sailor. But this didn't deter us. We all turned up upon the appointed night, coming from this direction and that, stamping the snow from off our boots as we entered, breath frosty in the beam of approaching headlights, as, slipping through the snow, more car loads arrived.

We tackled mime, too, and as King Midas swept to his coronation, regally attired in the best of bedspreads and the satinest and tightest of pants, courtiers bowing and whispering around him, with white wigged and astonishingly graceful duchesses and ladies-in-waiting adorning the background, one ruminated upon the true fitness of things, and there came a catch in the throat, not for laughter, but for tears. They have a dignity these people. A dignity all their own. A dignity not readily come by in towns.

Wigs to Order

I have mentioned white wigs; they deserve a paragraph all their own. There have been times when I have been able proudly to place upon my programmes "Wigs by Clarkson," that master wig-maker of Wardour Street. But I believe that when I am very old it is these others which I shall remember, together with their creator, a small wiry woman,



who came regularly on horseback through all the winds and weathers of that rigorous altitude, cars being useless over her particular bit of country.

She was adamant that the coronation could not go forward without wigs, and despite a family who had to be washed, ironed, cooked and mended for, she hied her to the fences and gathered wool. Washing and combing, she prepared it, fashioned foundations of old stockings, and with those work-lined fingers of hers, placed the wool upon them in side curls and back curls, finishing them with the indispensable black bow. I shall remember those wigs and her with grave affection and esteem.

In three months I taught much, but learned much more.



INTERVIEWED RECENTLY during Gran's session from 1ZB was Mrs. H. Pooley, of Auckland, who, at the age of 80 flew the Tasman by flying boat. A note about her appears on page 25

FRIEZES TO MATCH

(By L.J.S.)

SHOULD you decide on a frieze when papering your room, it is as well to remember that it is not only a matter of matching the wall-paper, but also of matching the actual lines of the room—a point that is often overlooked by deciding on colour alone.

Perhaps the dining-room is plainly furnished with a collection of old prints and etchings framed in black and white. To enhance the effect of this room, the border should if possible consist of plain horizontal lines which will run parallel with the level of the picture frames. A zig-zag or wavy frieze would take away from the "tailored" appearance of the room and cut into the horizontal lines.

Such a border, though, would be admirable in a room where there are chintz furnishings and a few light water-colour paintings with no formal arrange-

ments. Avoid a geometrically designed frieze here, and choose something that repeats the colour and arrangement of the chintz. A floral or leafy design, perhaps, in soft colourings.

A small room will not stand a very deep frieze. A border from three to six inches in depth, and in the lighter shades, would be best. Anything heavier would look clumsy and also detract from the value of other articles in the room.

On the other hand, depth and weight of design and colour is necessary in a large room, where it is needed to balance the size of the walls and heavier furniture.

A nursery frieze, of course, has many possibilities; in fact it is here that a frieze can add most interest and character to the room. Illustrated nursery rhymes, animals from books or other favourites, or perhaps best of all Walt Disney characters. Any of these arranged in a fairly deep border round the nursery walls would delight the hearts of most small children.