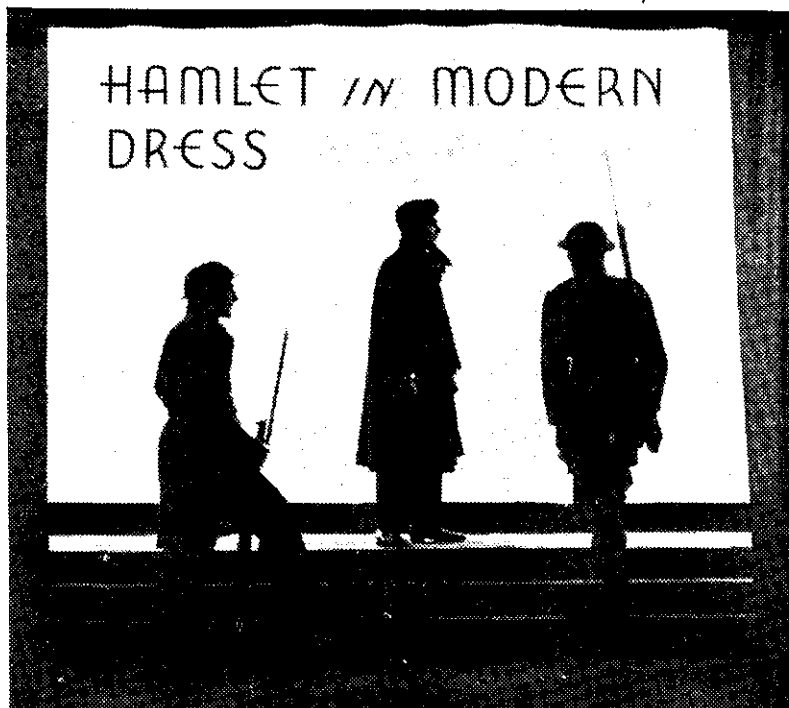


THIS is the record of one who went to see "Hamlet in Modern Dress" in Christchurch, and to write something mainly about the modern dress, but came away inclined (though scarcely qualified), to write at length on "The Present Greatness of Shakespeare." How absurd to dilate on the effects of the modern dress, and dishonest, too, as if the real and significant event were not "Hamlet" himself. As if it were not in New Zealand literally the chance of a lifetime to see staged that little-known play by an obscure and partly-discredited author. I am not being funny. I seem to remember some recent arguments about Shakespeare in *The Listener*. Somebody said, or was quoted as saying, that Shakespeare didn't like the Workers.

"To the best of our belief," said the programme, "this is the first time in the Southern Hemisphere that *Hamlet* has been played in modern dress." Not doubting the importance of the occasion for the Southern Hemisphere, I was more occupied with the thought that for me—and I suppose for a good few others in the Little Theatre at Canterbury University College that evening—it was the first time *Hamlet* had been played at all. The prospect of modern dress, therefore, both attracted and repelled. Repelled, because it seemed we were to be bothered at a critical moment of experience by a controversial addition which the university college Drama Society might well have spared us.

For the rest, Douglas Lilburn had composed music for strings specially for this production; Miss Ngaio Marsh and Dundas Walker had had a considerable hand in it. On the fourth of its five nights the play had again overfilled the small house — well over 1000 saw it — and there was more talk in the town about *Hamlet* than about any current Repertory Society effort for the sub-intelligentsia, not quite hot from London.

IF you want to justify modern dress for *Hamlet* you say that the play in its essentials is timeless; that "period" dress (11th century Danish? Or Elizabethan?), puts all the fusty associations of a bad tradition between us and



"As on some New Zealand coast defence post, so at Elsinore"

Shakespeare; that to the end of the 18th century they always did it like that; and that it has been done successfully abroad in recent years. These may be good and sufficient reasons, but this Christchurch production needed no appeal to them. Laertes' burberry, Bernardo's battledress, and the King's dress-

ing-gown doubtless had a part in producing the total splendid effect. But if the sun that is Shakespeare, broke through, wakening and warming us, as in fact it did, "modern dress" was by no means the only cause. In a cast inevitably uneven in merit — from the really outstanding Hamlet, Laertes, and

Polonius to the less impressive Horatio and Ophelia — there was not one of these students who did not seem to understand and love the part. And the whole was brilliantly organised; the action swept forward through a series of commandingly staged scenes. There were 17 scenes, the play being "cut to half its published length in order to fit the standard acting time."

ELSLINORE. A platform before the castle. Francisco at his post, in tin hat and army greatcoat, armed with service rifle, bayonet fixed. As on some New Zealand coast defence post, so at Elsinore. "Enter to him Bernardo"—similarly accoutred. So the very first scene gave us the literal extreme of modern dress. Against a blue-lit cyclorama the figures looked larger than life on the small stage. The familiar challenge and reply came with heightened reality—was it "modern dress" that did it? The worst fear was past, at all events. Shakespeare's lines and New Zealand's Army having proved so little incongruous, Hamlet might wear plus-fours, an he pleased.

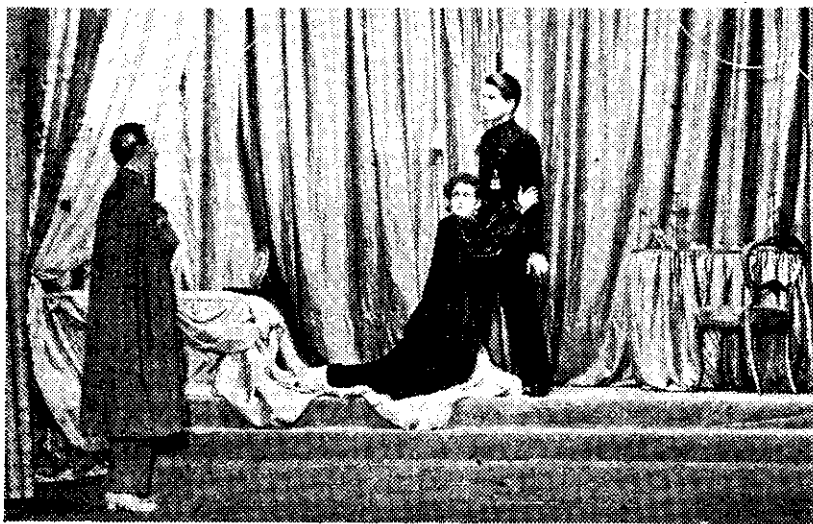
Hamlet, in fact, wore belted black jacket and black slacks. Here was a compromise with modernity. The King, the Queen and Polonius also compromised, with an approximation to the court dress of some small principality: bright uniforms covered with insignia. A Ruritanian touch was inevitable; but it seems that the society, lacking coupons for the purchase of costume materials, had to depend on local resources in the way of wardrobe. The Ghost, of course, had no modern precedent to guide him, but Dundas Walker made himself a most stately shade "in form and manner like the King that's dead."

AFTER the triumph scored with battledress, modern dress had still some really difficult tests to pass. The burial of Ophelia, with the women following in modern black day clothes and heavy veils, might in anticipation have seemed doomed to falsity; but again it succeeded. Shakespeare by that time was so utterly in command of both audience and cast, that cremation might almost have been substituted without disaster. The duel, that is,



"ALAS POOR YORICK. I knew him, Horatio": The scene with the grave-diggers

(Continued on next page)



THE GHOST, THE QUEEN, AND HAMLET: "A compromise with modernity"



THE DUEL SCENE: "Lost nothing by representation as a correctly played fencing bout"