

# AUTUMN IN PARIS

ROME may be the capital of the world; but Paris is still the capital of civilised Europe. And arriving at Paris is always exciting, even in a cold and misty November dusk. A foreigner could get out of a train in any London station and sit beside his trunks for ever, for all the notice anybody would take of him. But Paris sucks in the expectant traveller like a vacuum-cleaner.

Before the train has stopped a porter is banging at your window; before you have clambered down from the carriage your bags are dancing nimbly along in the far distance, and outside in the welter of klaxons and police-whistles taxi-drivers surge up at you like brigands in the Pyrenees. We fell into the hands of a leather-jacketed southerner; our suitcases wouldn't go into his tiny Citroën, so he dashed off to get a *voiture-a-bagages* which looked like a provincial hearse. We swept splendidly down side-streets crowded with foot-passengers, crossed the river by Notre Dame, and edged our way towards the Latin Quarter—less from motives of picturesqueness, I may say, than of economy. The official list of Paris hotels is comprehensive and up-to-date, but it is better supplemented by a personal recommendation. The cheaper hotels are alike only in the immense respectability and correctness of the ground floor; upstairs may be anything.

We had just under a week in Paris—and Paris in the month of Brumaire wasn't looking its best. So we spent a good deal of our time indoors, visiting galleries and museums and theatres; and travelling by the very convenient *Métro*—which seems very slow and sedate after the London tube. But this must be about the cheapest transport in any great city—and Parisians certainly appreciate that. I don't know how anyone who isn't a pregnant woman or a crippled war veteran ever gets a seat in the Paris *Métro*; but once you've learnt the knack of it and memorised the various *directions*, it is far and away the best method of getting around Paris.

The Louvre, where everyone must begin, has something of a new look since the war: the Long Gallery is still

probably the finest single collection of European painting anywhere, and the supporting rooms have been very well rearranged on the good principle of large paintings in large rooms, small ones in small rooms. And one most notable recent addition—on loan merely for a few months—has been part of the famous "Treasure of Vix," perhaps the most celebrated archaeological find of this century.

I don't know if anything has been published about this in New Zealand: it is one of the great romances of patient local research on a promising site, and the results have already thrilled classical scholars and historians all over the world. Very briefly, the find—in the *Mont Lassois*, near a little village on the borders of Champagne and Burgundy, up near the source of the river Seine—was the grave vault of a young Celtic princess, which contained an enormous bronze wine-jar, a superb gold diadem, and various other objects which date the burial at not later than 500 B.C. Some of the workmanship is Greek, some perhaps Scythian, some certainly Etruscan. The gold diadem is unique, and has already set a fashion in Parisian jewellery; but Châtillon-sur-Seine, the little town near Vix which was half-destroyed by bombing in the last war, has only released its treasures to Paris for restoration and examination, and is keeping a place for them in its own local museum. The Louvre has riches enough of its own; but in 1953 the *Trésor de Vix* was perhaps its most dazzling single exhibit.

Paris theatres have been rather having a lean time lately; and even the Comédie Française has been closed because of strikes earlier that autumn. But I was lucky enough to see a couple



By JAMES BERTRAM

of first-rate performances of classical French plays—Molière's *Misanthrope* and Racine's *Britannicus*. The *Comédie Française* has two regular theatres, the *Salle Richelieu* at the *Palais-Royal* and the *Odéon* near the Luxembourg Gardens. Both are fine old buildings, real

theatrical museums in themselves; and the acting of this subsidised State company is of the highest standard. Your seat may not be very comfortable, and you will probably be shown into it by a venerable she-dragon in black who will sniff very loudly indeed if you don't respond with an adequate tip. But once you are settled in amidst red plush and gilding, and three tremendous knocks have announced the rising of the curtain, you will know you are in for a rare theatrical experience.

The tradition of French classical acting, as most of us understand it from the books, is a bare stage with a few chairs, and a good deal of formal declamation. The reality—at least, in Paris today—is rather different from that. The plays are very well mounted indeed, often with considerable imagination. And until you have seen and heard them, it is quite impossible to imagine the speed and subtlety of Molière, or the extraordinary power and dramatic tension of Racine. *Le Misanthrope*, for example, is about as well-worn as any stage piece could be. But here the actor playing Alceste—taking a hint from the old tradition that Molière put a good deal of himself into this part—was made up and dressed to resemble the Molière of the portraits as closely as possible: a swarthy, gloomy, enigmatic figure rather like the Lely portraits of Charles II. Célimène was a dazzling, heartless blonde, played with true Parisian elegance and charm; the two *marquis* were brilliant caricatures; more important, the solid supporting roles of Philinte and Elieute were superbly cast. And this is the great virtue, of course, of such a standing company—minor parts are much more strongly

acted than they ever are, say, at the Old Vic, or even at Stratford.

To me, the Racine was even more impressive than the Molière. *Britannicus* is hardly an appealing tragedy—it is second-grade Racine; and to read, alas, it is frankly dull. But it was presented in a permanent set with an enormous crouching statue dominating one side of the vast stage—a superb suggestion of a Roman *Götterdämmerung*; and from the first entrance of Agrippine, the play glowed with suppressed ambition and passion. I can't imagine a more ungrateful part for any actor than the young Nero of this tragedy. But again, faithful to the author's intention, he was played as a fallen Lucifer rather than as a monster of depravity—so he became both more human, and more interesting. There are few great *tirades* or set-speeches in *Britannicus*, compared with some of Racine's finest tragedies. But what amazing poetry there is in them—a true poetry of the theatre, for it is always concentrated on the psychological situation of the moment, and is never a mere decoration. I should perhaps add that this severe Roman tragedy, which most people would consider good value for any single programme, was immediately followed by a knock-about Molière farce, *Le Mariage Forcé*, which put everyone in a good humour, but seemed, to foreign tastes, rather like porridge after meat.

Now by contrast, a brief impression of modern experimental French theatre. Last year's biggest hit in Paris was the new piece by Jean Anouilh, *L'Alouette*—a satirical tragi-comedy about Joan of Arc. In Montparnasse one found a very different atmosphere from the Palais-Royal; and it certainly looked as though about half the audience were there just because it was the thing to do in Paris that autumn—I've never seen people in the stalls less attentive or worse-mannered. The play itself is nothing marvellous. Anouilh, of course, is a superb craftsman who can make good theatre out of anything; but this play is pretty superficial, and it owes more than most French people will believe to Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*. It is saved by its wit, its topical allusions, and the really brilliant acting and production. This was avant-garde drama at its liveliest—a constructive set, playing-card costumes, trick ending and all. And the acting of Suzanne Flon as the Maid was quite breath-taking. She is small, and she looked very tired on the night we saw her; but I would certainly put her in the front rank of contemporary actresses anywhere. She has the most enchanting play of expression; and that rarest power, in a serious player, of switching in a moment from grave to gay and back again and carrying her audience everywhere with her. *L'Alouette* is a Parisian play if there ever was one—one shivers to think what it might become in other hands or in another language; but no doubt we shall be seeing it on the New Zealand stage before very long.

Can anyone try to sum up, in a few words, an impression of Paris? This restless, eager city that has been through so much in these last years still makes its old, irresistible appeal to the eye, to the mind, to the palate, and to the conscience of the civilised world. But France, these days, is very sick indeed; and Paris, behind its nervous vitality, runs a pretty high temperature. The values Paris represents are values we

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JEAN ANOUILH



SUZANNE FLON