

"The Lady's Not For Burning"

The N.Z. Players' production,
reviewed by BRUCE MASON

LET me at once enter the lists, lance at the ready. I have small patience with those who dislike *The Lady's Not for Burning*. I suspect them of forgetting that they were once children; many of us do, standing on what we are firmly convinced is the all too solid ground of adult life, but the best authorities from Christ to Freud have assured us that we forget our childhood at our peril. Mr. Fry not only reminds us of that lucid and deliciously enervating climate: he transports us from the sparse, unfriendly copses we inhabit, to the enchanted wood where every leaf glistens with a golden intelligence. If that is a purple patch, then let purple be worn, for Mr. Fry splashes barefoot through coloured puddles. His play is the most compelling answer to those who would keep life within bounds. *The Lady* is a river which bursts its banks, overflows and can overwhelm us, if we will let it, in a beneficent and fructifying flood. Art thou weary, art thou languid? Be baptised, confirmed in Fry; make it, if you will, a total immersion.

Enough rhapsody: what is the play about? Mr. Fry tells us in the foreword to the printed text. He speaks of "human intelligences in a dance together, of inconstant April sunshine, of sunset, twilight, and full moon. The comedy is a climate of damp and dry, of spirit and matter, playing April with each other,

and the climate is the comedy." There is a woman suspected of witchcraft, and a browned-off soldier sick of the world demanding to be rid of it; there is Established order, guardians of things as they are, the Mayor and the Justice; two innocents, Richard and Alizon; a housewife, harassed, yet filled with a vague, uncomprehending wonder at the strangeness of the world; two louts, one sprightly, one slightly vicious; a chaplain incoherent with the astonishment of existence, and an alcoholic rag and bone man. These characters in jigs, pavaues, courantes and galliards, with speech cascading from them, make us the play. The plot has been dubbed in: thin it surely is. Why worry? It is less preposterous than *A Comedy of Errors*, less tedious than *Twelfth Night*, more substantial than *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The play is a dance, and steps are allotted. On these steps the characters improvise. It is enough: the play is there.

Except for the two chief characters, the play could be styled a comedy of humours, each person following a given attitude to the universe from which they do not depart. They are absorbed in the April climate of the play. The soldier, Thomas Mendip, and the query witch, Jennet, are not absorbed in it; they quest and dart about, they comment, they accept nothing. They must seek their true situation, where the others have been given one. Their situation



★ BARBARA JEFFORD, as Jennet
—"She moves with a most distinguished grace"

proves to be simple enough: Thomas is a man, Jennet is a woman. They are the protagonists of romantic comedy, laying against the comedy of humours, a double concerto for bass viol and viola d'amore, with an ensemble of stringed instruments behind them.

Now the production, by the New Zealand Players. Mr. Fry asks for an English April, which we cannot provide. We can offer instead our tentative September, with its fumbling and false starts towards summer. The climate of Mr. Campion's production seems late summer, and New Zealand April. Summer is breaking up. There is fitful sunshine, gusts and bluster, and flat calms. The pace of the whole production is somewhat fitful and jerky, only rarely settling to a rhythmic flow. In Act I, this jerkiness clogs the action and takes all the shine out of the verse; the actors do not seem to be at home with their humours, stamping and shouting, sometimes simultaneously, a tiresome device. Act II has the coherence of the long duet between the principal characters, and here the play settles somewhat; but by Act III, the gusts are back and persist to the end.

Mr. Boyce's décor is sumptuous, and for me, over-elaborate. It has at times, the effect of crushing the text. I question his wisdom in setting so much of the action in a refectory set far left; the front pillar is distracting and obscures the vision. The window through which Thomas nods in is of cathedral proportions and wonderfully lit, but it is set several feet above the actors. This removes Thomas from the action, and one feels that to enter it, he should not

★ KEITH MICHELL as Thomas Mendip—"He plays with wonderful zest and panache"



nod in, but leap. Mr. Boyce is, however, happier with his costumes than ever before. One feels that this is a period for which he has a great affinity. The brilliant costumes moving against the warm stone of the set have the delicacy of colour and something of the spirit of a painting by Giorgione. And Mr. Campion, as we all know by now, is a master lighting man, and it is exquisite in *The Lady*, beautifully keyed to suggest the mood of every scene.

Visually, then, the play is a delight. Mr. Campion's eye has always been good. But that his ear lags far behind is made uncomfortably obvious by this production. Fry's verse is difficult—not to follow, as anyone can see from the text—but to give it that essential sheen requires great skill. It is lyrical, colloquial, highly compressed by turn, with the sudden shaft of bathos that rips the stuffing from an over-stuffed image, and needs actors trained vocally much more than the New Zealand Players can yet provide. A disheartening number of comic lines were thrown away; delivery was often muddled and all too frequently inaudible, and even the meaning of the lines seemed sometimes to elude them. In a Fry play this is a defect so crucial that no amount of technical accomplishment in the other departments can remedy it. And hence the climate of the play faltered, and no climate, no comedy. Some of the play was, frankly, dull.

None of these strictures applied to Miss Barbara Jefford and Mr. Keith (continued on next page)