

NAT "KING" COLE WAS A SHY YOUNG SOUL



JUNE CHRISTY AND NAT "KING" COLE
The audience shushed

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Michell. As everyone knows, they have joined the company for a short season from Stratford-upon-Avon. Their disciplined technique carries the play if not to heights, because they cannot do it alone, at least to a safe landing. Miss Jefford looked superb, and she moves with a most distinguished grace. Her voice has not a great range, but within it, it is beautifully sensitive and controlled. Her phrasing is exquisite, and her feeling for lyrical verse profound. Thomas Mendip is reportedly weary of the world. Mr. Michell chose to interpret this as a chronic exasperation and he made this reading entirely plausible. He plays with wonderful zest and panache, and he fills the stage. His voice is rich and full, with the sardonic cutting edge of the modern heroic actor: Sir Laurence Olivier comes to mind. And both Miss Jefford and Mr. Michell share the arresting gift which perhaps only comes with experience: an inner calm and repose which irresistibly claims the attention. Many of the New Zealand Players fuss your attention away from them. It is not our visitors' fault if they dominate the production far more than Fry intended of his leading characters.

So if I say, go to *The Lady*, it sounds as if I mean go to see Miss Jefford and Mr. Michell. Do: they are more than



RICHARD CAMPION
"His eye has always been good"

worth your money. But despite my carping, enough of the play's iridescence and heart survive to make it important to go. It makes you happy, it makes you bubble, and hence takes you briefly to the heart of things. There I'll leave it.

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"THERE he is! There he is!" rose the high-pitched scream.

"There he was," came a gruff rejoinder in a real Down-Under accent. "Don't be scared, Nat," it declared.

"King" Cole the Shy popped his head round the stage door and as quickly withdrew it. The crowd pushed closer. Two policemen and three traffic cops did their little best.

"Come on out! We want Nat!" the chorus continued.

"We won't eat you," said the gruff voice again. At those kind words the Shy One took new heart. Already his colleagues had run the gauntlet. Why not he? Why not now?

So it was that Nat "King" Cole, America's top-line vocalist and pianist, stepped into Auckland's limelight for the last time. He was tugged and pulled, his hand shaken, the sleeves of his jacket stroked as you might stroke a kitten.

And did he send them? Not quite, but his driver tried. With engine revving and doors locked tight, the cab brushed aside the would-be hangers-on, and sped down Queen Street, the traffic by-laws notwithstanding.

SO ended a memorable night. Auckland was grateful for the two-day stopover and expressed itself accordingly. The audience was young and colourful—one that was easily excited. But for a jazz concert it was surprisingly well behaved.

It was reminiscent of a much more serious occasion the way the audience shushed the grating of a chair. One unfortunate latecomer faced a fire of burning glances when the door behind him accidentally slammed. He was hushed and hustled to the nearest seat. They were not all occupied.

Some patrons stood in the aisles and against the walls the better to see the performer they considered great, the closer to approach him.

There was no opportunity, nor, was there time for the cats to call. The applause and shouting had barely started before Cole's drummer led the orchestra into the introduction of the next number. The show moved fast.

The orchestra, conducted by Auckland's Crombie Murdoch, was (but for a few lapses) good. Dan Rowan and Dick Martin had no trouble making a New Zealand audience laugh. Judy Kelly's dancing gown was but the prelude to lesser things. Indeed, her acrobatics made her scanty costume most necessary (or such was the excuse offered).

Blonde and sultry June Christy ("Sister, she slays me!") scored a push-over, in spite of the fact that her audience was 60 or more per cent female. Still they came back for more, as ballad followed bop in quick succession. There was no hip-wiggling lest tight short frock should burst at the seams. But there were gestures, illustrative, suggestive; and a smile which took in the audience at a mouthful. When she spoke her deep, husky voice was full of emotion—as were the kisses tenderly bestowed on compères Rowan and Martin, who presented her with flowers.

Then came Cole. ("Get hep, Man!")

TALL and rangy, with big, broad shoulders (natural) Nat "King" Cole might well have been Notre Dame's star full-back, or Jamaica's crack athlete.

But his movements on stage were slow and casual. When the applause became threatening he would slink away with hardly a nod, much less a bow, thereby conveying a sense of shyness. His showmanship was of such a retiring nature that hearts warmed to him.

As he sang Cole's white teeth gleamed against the background of his matt-black skin. His mouth, wide open, seemed to be on the verge of eating the microphone at one bite. Yet this same microphone, weighted in the base with lead, he picked up like a toy, carrying it about the stage as he applied his charms first to one section of the audience, then to another. Illuminated as he was in all his ballads by a solitary spotlight, both he and his sonorous voice seemed to fill the hall. A long drawn-out sigh was heard every time he entered the top-pop market with such favourites as *Answer Me*, *Mona Lisa*, *Too Young*, *Unforgettable* and *Dinner for One*, *Please James*. And when he sang *Tenderly*, his movements matching perfectly the mood, so silent were his listeners that Lee Young's brushes drummed like a rasp.

THE bright numbers brought out a new, gayer Nat "King" Cole. He would frequently desert the microphone for his piano, where, in comic fashion, he would run out of keys and play on the wood instead. Two instrumental items which displayed his undoubted virtuosity at the keyboard, also gave an opportunity of watching the style of the trio. Bassman Charles Harris grinned and capered as he plucked at his strines, and seemed much, much too interested in a precocious young thing in the circle. John Collins, guitarist, was a human statue. Only his beating foot betrayed him. Lee Young took credit for some fine solo work on the drums, but more particularly for the sharp eye he kept on the orchestra, which never missed a cue.

It was hot work while it lasted, but it didn't last long—just an hour and three-quarters, with Cole taking some 45 minutes to himself. But that was long enough to convince Auckland jazz-fiends that Nat's a real nice guy.



COLE ON STAGE
Sighs and top-pops