



ANN HOGARTH, and Muffin the Mule

PEOPLE who pull strings to get on in life are generally envied though not liked, but the work of the Bussell family, who pull strings for a living, has been loved in England, the Continent, South Africa, Australia and, they hope, will be enjoyed in New Zealand. The Bussells, you see, are the owners and manipulators of the famous Hogarth Puppets. *The Listener* talked to them just after they had arrived in New Zealand in the Monowai with their ton of equipment. For sixteen weeks the troupe (of eighty puppets) named after Mrs. Bussell, who uses her professional name of Ann Hogarth, will be touring this country.

"We'll be going to small towns from Whangarei to Invercargill, as well as the larger centres," Jan Bussell said. "It will mean a lot of hard work in the small places, where we'll be giving only one or two performances. When we arrive we have to hump the equipment in and set it up ourselves—the stage, the standing platform where we work, the puppets and the sound-effects gear—then the show goes on for a couple of hours, and after it's over we must pack everything up again and move on."

However, Jan Bussell, his wife, and daughter Sally look as though they thrive on this activity. He is a tall, spare, tanned man, with a greying beard, who looks as though he has more than a nodding acquaintance with leprechauns, pixies and similar supernatural phenomena. Ann Hogarth is a former actress who is now a famous BBC television personality through her fortnightly *Muffin the Mule* show. Their daughter acts as well, but she is also, in-between times, stage manager for the puppet theatre. "Sally has the very difficult job," her father said, "of feeding us props and puppets at exactly the right moment. She also works the sound effects, some of which are tape-recorded. She has got so quick at it all though that she sometimes reads a book at the same time and worries us stiff. How-

ever, she never misses a cue." Sally has grown up with the puppets. She even slept in a cellar with them during the war, and it is easy to see that the Bussells are completely immersed in their puppet world. "Puppets are a serious branch of the theatre," Jan Bussell said, "just as much as ballet and opera. Our puppet theatre, for instance, is 26 feet wide and has stage-boxes on either side with a puppet audience and an orchestra. We sometimes use as many as fifty puppets in a performance. Behind the boxes is the proscenium arch, then the stage itself, with our platform behind it. For artistic reasons we do all the dialogue ourselves, because working a puppet is essentially a piece of acting where you must get right into a part. Something of you goes down the strings, and besides that you get all the fun of acting many different parts in one performance. You have to have an agile mind."

The Bussells devise their own scenery, plots and personages as well. They have a small workroom with one man to assist them in making the puppets, although Muffin the Mule, their most famous character, is now mass-produced in a simplified, five-string form under licence. Their scenarios include imitations of variety turns, ballet and the circus. They play Shakespeare, and *Macbeth* is one of their most successful acts. They also perform a verse-play by Edna St. Vincent Millay and stories from Hans Andersen.

The Bussells like to experiment with their puppets. One new kind they have has a rubber face which is capable of changing its expression, and mobile feet—although it is a form of glove puppet. It also uses Jan Bussell's other hand as its hand. Shadow puppets from China are among the most interesting of the Bussell's collection. These are coloured and are seen through a semi-transparent screen. Jan Bussell talked about the work of the Czech puppet cartoonist Trinko in films. "It must be terribly boring to do," he said, "because each position is changed only about an eighth of an inch between photographs, so that there is no chance of any 'life' in the characters." He considered that electronically-controlled puppets or "Kine-

All Strings and Fancy Free

mins," which have been filmed in Germany and America, are just robots which also suffer through not being "live."

Ann Hogarth told us then about performing with puppets on television, which she has been doing for the past eight years. "Actually, it's rather dull," she said, "because all the time you have the feeling that you are performing for the technicians alone, and it's easy to get self-conscious as a result." Her show is done in mime with only three sets—a piano-top, a book-shelf and a view out of a window—and the puppets come to Miss Hogarth there. "One of the oddest things about it is the fact that the puppets are wildly out of proportion, and no one minds. There's a penguin about natural size, an ostrich and Monty the Monkey about the same size, and Muffin the Mule, who is very much smaller than these are. They do simple things like having a picnic on the piano-top, staging a pantomime, or else they go for a ride in a helicopter, and no one seems to notice that there's no ceiling to the room. We find that people just love to use their imaginations—adults as well as children. As for material—well, they do much the same things as our family does. If we move house, then the puppets do, and so on."

The Bussells have brought with them many hours of programme material which they will arrange to suit audiences of different ages. For their New Zealand tour Kirri the Kiwi will make his first appearance on any stage, and he, along with Muffin, Monty the Monkey, the Mandarin, and all the other charming characters of the Hogarth Puppets, should be assured of an enthusiastic welcome from children of all ages everywhere.



JAN BUSSELL, "tall, spare and tanned"



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