

MUSICAL COMEDY IS HER LINE

—But Drama is Her Ambition

BAREFOOT on the London stage for four years . . . it sounds like an ordeal. Yet for Muriel Smith it has meant winning a tremendous public. She was Bloody Mary in the London production of *South Pacific*, and now is the Siamese lady Thiang, favourite wife in *The King and I*. For a short spell in between the two shows she went into high-button shoes and a vivid orange frock to reach an even wider public as the can-can Negress in the film *Moulin Rouge*.

Special from London
by NORMA COUPER

Few who saw the film will forget the lusty violence of her dance-floor fight with La Goulue. Neither will they forget her voice, for it was she who sang for Zsa Zsa Gabor's pretty mouthing of the popular theme song of the film.

Muriel Smith is a New Yorker, but a willing expatriate now that London has given her success. She came to London fresh from a number of small triumphs in serious New York plays, and a resounding one as the star of the Broadway *Carmen Jones*—the film version of which is now showing in New Zealand.

A product of the famous Elia Kazan Theatre Group, where she was a student with Marlon Brando and Arthur Kennedy, Muriel Smith still cherishes the longing to play only heavy dramatic roles. Her happiest moments on the stage were with the Kazan students and she remembers with rueful pleasure playing *Phèdre*—rueful because tragedy finds a limited audience.

So firmly set was she on making drama her field that the rebuff of a New York drama academy—scorning her because of her colour—merely added fuel to ambition. She wrote to Sir Laurence Olivier and Glen Byam Shaw, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre and Old Vic directors, diffidently seeking study in England.

In return, in two charming letters, she was told that her colour was unimportant and that the only prejudice she was likely to encounter in the English theatre was against an American

voice. Sir Laurence inquired gently whether she was going to need much tuition in losing an accent.

As it turned out, her soft, unaccented voice was first given the opportunity of scaling a raucous register and her colour became important indeed for her debut in England. And she still hasn't been to classes in drama here; the chance to play Bloody Mary was too tempting to resist.

So Muriel Smith, who longed to follow the tragic muse, was given a role that called for comedy and semi-drama in the broad and bawdy vein. Her success in the part (played on Broadway by Juanita Hall) made her the darling of London audiences, and her recordings of "Bali Hai" and "Happy Talk" became best-sellers. Today, a little doll figure of Bloody Mary, made by her dresser and presented to her at the end of the show's three-year run, is perched over the mirror of Muriel's dressing room at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane.

As the elegant Lady Thiang in silks and satins, but still barefoot, she has a role far different from her *South Pacific* one. It calls for a large speaking part, but only two songs in her beautiful mezzo-soprano voice. The critics have enthused over her voice in reviews that have all but damned the show.

The King and I appears to be one of those shows that confound the critics. After more than a year it still plays to packed houses and that period has been one of spasmodic comment in the papers on the mystery of casting in a musical two stars who cannot sing.

Valerie Hobson, who plays Anna (it is based on the experiences of Anna Leonowens, governess to the children of King Mongkut of Siam), had not sung before in her long stage and screen career. Her voice is slight and uncertain but her beauty and fine stage presence carry her through. Herbert Lom as the king is required to sing very little, and when he does it is more with disarming vigour and expression than with tune-fulness.



MURIEL SMITH: She wants to act with shoes on

Muriel Smith, therefore, her name third on the star billing, has an advantage. In an exquisitely mounted show, her voice is a highlight.

Moulin Rouge was her first experience in films, but she hopes not her last. Her main reason for wanting another film part is a purely practical one . . . money! She wants to live in London; Hampstead is her favourite district; houses in Hampstead are expensive, and film salaries are better than stage ones. As soon as she gets a house or a bigger flat her mother is coming from the United States to live with her.

When I called on Muriel Smith at her small flat at Cadogan Gardens she had just given herself a hard-boiled egg shampoo—inadvertently. Told by a friend that a raw egg massaged into the scalp before the last rinsing was excellent for giving the hair gloss, she decided to try it. The rinsing water was too hot, with the result that there were blobs of yellow and white through her thick, black hair and a disconcerting smell of sulphur clinging like a halo. A complete new shampoo was necessary.

Her flat is a mirror of her personality and interests. As well as the sober-shaded period furnishings that belong to the owners of the building (a gracious Georgian place) there are many modern effects in gay and unconventional colours.

On one wall is an oil painting of a Riviera town with a mixture of fuchsia, yellow, turquoise and jade tones and below it on the mantelpiece is a collection of china horses in the tones

of the picture. The horses were a gift from Valerie Hobson. Her own paintings are scattered about, and here and there is a scrap of paper with musical notation on it.

She was awaiting publication of a song she has written in collaboration with George Wreford. Called "Mayonnaise and Marmalade," it is a cheerful jingle about her own flavour discovery. One day after practising hard at the piano all morning she searched in the cupboards for some food. All they yielded were a few crackers, mayonnaise and marmalade. Her story is that the mixture was successful; the music agent's story was that the song would be, too.

Her appearance on television just a year ago when she sang in two moods—first a musical comedy number and then the spiritual "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?"—brought a flood of requests for further programmes. But *The King and I* keeps her too busy for other commitments, though she did fly home to New York for Christmas with her family.

Between her last two shows, Muriel was the featured star at the Bagatelle, one of London's most chic night clubs. She has also done radio work in England. Such versatility as she's shown over the past eight years or so might yet bring her success in heavy stage tragedy. She hopes for that or even just the chance (in her own words) "to walk across that historic Theatre Royal stage with shoes on!"



"The lusty violence of her dance-floor fight with La Goulue"

MURIEL SMITH SINGS

Songs by Muriel Smith will be heard in ZB's "Sunday Artist" programme at 11.30 a.m. on May 22