

SAND MAN

IN February, 1908, the famous American writer Theodore Dreiser wrote a feature article for a New York newspaper celebrating the completion of the first great tunnel under the Hudson River, which had been begun in 1874. In it he said: "Sandhog" is a word that does not suggest anything heroic, but it takes courage to be a sandhog and work in caissons under abnormal air pressure laying foundations for a man-made pathway over the East River. The lives of many men have been built into the piers and woven into the cables of New York's great bridges . . . without attracting more than passing notice from the millions in whose service lives have been squandered in scores." In the article Dreiser recounts triumphs of bravery and ingenuity by the sandhogs themselves, including the episode of July 21, 1880, when the waters broke into the unfinished tunnel. Twenty men were lost, among them Peter Woodland, who saved the lives of most of his crew at the expense of his own.

Dreiser also wrote about another sandhog, Richard Creedon, in his story *St. Columba and the River*. Creedon was blown through the roof of the tunnel and through the silt and mud of the river bed, shooting out over the river practically unhurt. It was reading these two accounts which gave Earl Robinson, the composer, and Waldo Salt the librettist, the idea for their opera *Sandhog*, which is to be heard in ZB *Sunday Showcase* on April 15.

Sandhog was three and a half years in the writing, and was produced in New York's Phoenix Theatre in November, 1954. The version that is to be broadcast on April 15, though, is not an original cast recording. In fact, there isn't any cast at all. Just the composer, Robinson, playing the piano, and singing, and the librettist, Salt, narrating. If that sounds like being promised

a meal and given only the sippets from the soup, take heart. The performance is most satisfying in its own way. When the recording was first mooted, it was planned to call it a "composer's run-through," but when the tapes were played back, the effect was so powerful that the term was obviously inadequate. *Sandhog*, in theatre performance, has ten major singing roles and a cast of about forty, but Earl Robinson was always a balladeer at heart, and Waldo Salt is a remarkable actor as well as a writer, so that this recording becomes

a dramatic re-creation of *Sandhog* in more intimate terms, especially suited for broadcasting.

New Zealand composers and writers might well take a leaf from Robinson and Salt's book. For a radio performance of this kind, all that is necessary is a story to be spun by the storyteller, and a singer to sing all the songs with piano accompaniment. In *Sandhog*'s radio version there is a small amount of technical wizardry in the form of multiple recordings, but in the main the performance is "straight." Two performers, maybe three if the pianist is no singer, a recording engineer, with his amplifiers and tape recording machines, and your radio theatre staff is complete—about five people, at the most, against a possible twenty times that number in the theatre.

The story of *Sandhog* concerns a young Irish immigrant, Johnny O'Sullivan, whose story is based on that of Richard Creedon. Johnny's wife Katie is forced to take a live-in job as a nursemaid until he gets a job as a tunneller. Then they are offered a roof over their heads by Tim Cavanaugh (based on the real-life Peter Woodland) and his wife in a tiny flat. Later on, in the tunnel, the rushing waters claim Tim Cavanaugh's life, and Johnny himself goes up in the world quicker than he had ever dreamed of doing.

Robinson's songs are witty, lyrical and imaginative. There is a striking, extended love-duet, "Johnny O," and an ingenious "Fugue on a Hot Afternoon in a Small Flat." The music is not chopped up into 32-bar refrains. It attempts to convey the flow, the sound and the flavour of street scenes as naturally as they occur, within the limits of dramatic unity. The authors used the children and wives of the sandhogs to



THEODORE DREISER

form a chattering chorus, aware of everything that goes on in the streets.

Earl Robinson's career as a composer has given him plenty of practice in writing this sort of "folk" opera. A song, "Joe Hill," of 1935, was his first popular success, and in 1939 his *Balled 'or Americans*, with Paul Robeson as soloist, was acclaimed. In 1942 he wrote his moving cantata on the death of Lincoln, *The Lonesome Train*, and has since written musical scores for Hollywood, notably the ballads and blues for the Lewis Milestone film, *A Walk in the Sun*. Waldo Salt worked on documentary films for the American Office of War Information and the Army during the war, and has since written scripts for several Hollywood films, including *Rachel and the Stranger* and *The Flame and the Arrow*.



LEFT: Earl Robinson and Waldo Salt (l. to r.) confer on the score of "Sandhog"