

DON JUAN IN EVENING DRESS

SOME five years ago, audiences up and down the United States waxed enthusiastic over a new theatrical experience. Four famous actors, Charles Laughton, Charles Boyer, Agnes Moorehead, and Sir Cedric Hardwicke, had formed the First Drama Quartette, and were reading *Don Juan in Hell*, the long dream sequence in George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*. Now the recording of this reading has reached New Zealand, and listeners to ZB *Sunday Showcase* on March 3 can share that experience. They will hear Charles Laughton as an ingratiating Devil, Charles Boyer as a philosophic Don Juan, Agnes Moorehead as the wronged Donna Ana, and Sir Cedric Hardwicke as the worldly Commander-Statue. Their battle of wits has been hailed as a "glittering dialectical floorshow."

When Shaw put the dream interlude into the middle of *Man and Superman*, the philosophical dialogue stretched the play to an unbearable length. He himself admitted in a letter to Charles Laughton that it was "nothing but a

pack of words. I don't see why you should want to do the thing on the stage." Must producers didn't.

But by late 1950 Charles Laughton had been giving readings up and down the United States for several years. He and Paul Gregory, his manager for the reading tours, got the idea of reading not just excerpts but a whole play. They chose *Don Juan in Hell*, and Shaw, after some reluctance, approved a read production. Charles Laughton immediately took charge of the direction, and chose his cast. He said: "We wanted not necessarily the best actor, but the best voices in America, and we found them." He recruited an old friend, Sir Cedric Hardwicke, "a born actor who knows how to speak an author's lines as if they were fresh from his own mind"; Agnes Moorehead, first discovered by Orson Welles, who "could act any kind of a female at the drop of a hat"; and Charles Boyer, "a master of the tirade, that difficult form of dramatic speech, and as such invaluable in our play." Boyer himself had some doubts as to his suitability, especially over his ineradicable French accent. Laughton persuaded him with a delicate compliment. "All right, Charles," he said, "please recast the show for me and find someone else to be Don Juan."

Once assembled, the cast rehearsed to perfect every detail. With a consummate sense of theatre, Laughton and Gregory left the production as a "reading" with actors in evening dress, seated on high stools before microphones, turning the pages of texts bound in dark green. The one brilliant colour was the bright pink of Miss Moorehead's dress; the true brilliance was in the dialogue. Such a production laid great stress on every pause and inflection in the voices, every single movement, and the smallest change of expression.

It was a daring interpretation of a wordy play. No one involved in it suspected that they had a hit on their hands. They never even considered opening in New York, but started their nation-wide tour in Stockton, California, on February 1, 1951. However, as *Time* magazine put it, "Audiences throughout the U.S.—in Oakland, New Orleans, Salt Lake City, Syracuse, and Williamsport, Pa.—have been eating it up. Busi-

nessmen and bobby-soxers, college students and clubwomen, have jammed theatres and auditoriums and high school gymnasiums to hear the Devil and Don Juan swap epigrams and arguments." After a one night reading at Carnegie Hall, the group drew enthusiastic notices from the major reviewers, and the reception was so overwhelming that they moved into a Broadway theatre. Finally the First Drama Quartette went to England to join the gala mood of the Festival of Britain.

The basis of *Don Juan in Hell* is the old Spanish legend that is also the source of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. The music, in fact, is mentioned several times in the play. Don Juan Tenorio of Seville attempts to ravish Donna Ana, the daughter of the Commander of Seville. She calls her father, but he is killed by Don Juan in a duel. A statue is erected over his tomb, and Don Juan and his servant Leporello visit it. When the statue is seen to move its head, Don Juan jestingly invites it to a banquet. The statue then comes, seizes Don Juan, and delivers him to the Devil.

Man and Superman is Shaw's treatment of a modern development of the legend, and Shaw says of it: "I have thrust into my perfectly modern play a totally extraneous act in which my hero's ancestor appears and philosophises at great length with the lady, the statue, and the Devil." Their story is over, and they now have the time to discuss the implications of their lives and the purpose of all life. The Devil acts, the part of the Greek chorus or public opinion, but he is no conventional figure. It is Donna Ana who is conventional, sincerely so, just as her father has a conventional hypocrisy. Don Juan is the one who thinks for himself. We watch four kinds of awareness at cross purposes, from the woman to the philosopher. Her business is childbearing—that is, embodying the life force. His is thought-bearing, or giving the life force direction and meaning.

The purpose of life is not the only theme of the play. The second theme, contrasting and clashing with the first, concerns the nature of happiness. Eager as he is for the Superman to come, Shaw cannot forget that we are individuals living now and making personal claims on the universe. He shows us Donna Ana, who has banked on future gains by one sort of self-restraint, appalled at the idea of being in Hell. But she can escape from it.

For Shaw believes that life is not preliminary to anything except possibly a more abundant life for our descendants. Heaven and Hell are here on earth, a permanently open choice. The blest are those who prefer effort to illusion and truth to enjoyment, who would live or die for an idea rather than live for their senses and in fear of death. The damned take the path of least resistance, avoid thought, and surround themselves with nice things. It is a conflict



AGNES MOOREHEAD
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about a real issue, and the problems are still vital.

Yet it would be a mistake to find the truth exclusively in the Don's speeches. There is some wisdom in what the Devil says, what Ana feels, and what bothers the Commander. They are all in the right. What Shaw has done is to make one character think, and this in turn upsets the other characters by making it hard for them to express their feelings through ready-made phrases. It makes it hard for the audience, too. They must respond in one way or another to this exhibition of some of the most witty and brilliant talk ever to be heard in a play. There are speeches on such diverse subjects as art and society, supermen and dictators, war and sex. It sparkles with epigrams and paradoxes such as "Hell is the home of honour, duty, justice and the seven deadly virtues. All the wickedness on earth is done in their name. Where else but in hell should they have their reward?" But Heaven, the statue complains, is full of Englishmen who are only there because they think they owe it to their position. The Englishman thinks he is being moral when he is only being uncomfortable.

Cedric Hardwicke is admirable as the statue who realises he would rather be comfortable, and Agnes Moorehead is an imperiously virtuous lady. But the Devil and the Don rule the play: a magnetic Charles Boyer pleads faith in humanity, while a smiling Charles Laughton condemns it.

PIPE BAND CONTEST

THE National Pipe Band Contest will be held in Wanganui on March 1, 2 and 3. Station 2XA will announce results as they come to hand, and the Main National Stations will broadcast them at 12.33, 6.50, and 11.15 p.m. on Friday and Saturday. The evening results will be repeated next morning after the "News" and "Weather" links. A programme that is expected to include the winners and runners-up in the A and B Grade Test Selections, will be broadcast by YA stations, 3YZ and 4YZ at 9.30 p.m. on Monday, March 4. Other stations will also broadcast winning performances by local bands.



TOP: Sir Cedric Hardwicke. BELOW: Charles Laughton (left) and Charles Boyer
—"the best voices in America"