

# "The First Few Years Are Bound to be Hysterical"

SIR JOHN MEDLEY talks about Television in Australia

SIR JOHN MEDLEY, Vice-Chancellor of Melbourne University, a member of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, and Chairman of the Victorian National Gallery Trustees, is at present on an unofficial visit to New Zealand, his first for ten years. He has been in an excellent position to watch the growth of Australian television, and when *The Listener* called to interview him recently in Wellington it was this topic that we discussed.

Sir John would not describe himself as a TV enthusiast, in fact, he is very much the opposite. "On the whole, I was a great pessimist about television at first," he said. "I still don't like it. It's part of the systematic erosion of my privacy which has been steadily going on for some years now." Then with some resignation he added: "However, I believe we'll all settle down to it in the course of time. The first few years are bound to be rather hysterical."

*Listener* readers will by now be fairly familiar with the way TV is run in Australia, with two commercial stations in both Sydney and Melbourne, and a national station run by the ABC in each, making six stations altogether. This pattern, Sir John told us, has developed as the result of rival newspaper groups deciding to operate their own commercial stations and so keep hold on their advertising. By contrast Sir John considered that here in New Zealand the newspaper groups were not so interested in TV, but that the pressure was coming mainly from the manufacturers' organisations. This competition in Australia had resulted in longer hours of television than were really warranted.

"Today the BBC televises 50 hours a week, seven hours a day, simply because of the competition from commercial stations," said Sir John. "In Australia we have six programmes and we'll soon be televising about 50 hours a week. Technically they're first class, all of them, both commercial and national. But, goodness, the cost of it all! In a sound studio you see two technicians

sitting at the control panel, but in a TV studio there are 10 or 12 of them sitting in a long row and innumerable other bodies crawling about the floor—all of them reasonably highly-trained in electronics."

"Is the cost of TV your main objection to it?"

"Partly. I do think it's a luxury. I don't think we asked ourselves carefully enough which things should come first. Is TV high enough on the list, when houses are short, our water supply erratic and so much general development is wanted? However, we've got it and I think we're making the best of it. Besides this it does tend to be an awful time-waster. It's like some malign influence. It'll need an immense amount of family control. I'm not so concerned with the moral implications of TV, for its time-wasting propensities seem to me far more important. These and its cost seem to be the only bad things about it."

Sir John thought it was extremely important to put the TV set in a separate room. "I know it can't be done in all houses, but otherwise it's a fruitful source of family squabble," he said.

"What things can you put on the good side, then?"

"Firstly, its immediacy. It's valuable for news and for sport it's superb—tennis, cricket, and athletics. It's not bad for trots; boxing and wrestling (if you like boxing and wrestling) are all right—for football I don't know."

"How about plays and specially written features?"

"It's too early yet to say," replied Sir John. "The main burden for doing anything along these lines will fall on the national programmes. We have a lot in mind. In drama there is scope, no doubt, but the trouble is that it costs as much to rehearse and mount a TV play as it does to do a long theatre run. One TV company overseas finds that their discarded sets accumulate so fast that they're combing the suburbs to find room to put them. I think TV

will do most for the visual arts. In Australia painting is the liveliest of the arts—a lot of good work is being done. It's not as exciting as it was a few years ago—much of it is derivative and pointless—but it is alive and people are buying quite a lot of pictures. It's easy enough to get an artist along to the TV studio to talk about his work. We've already had a few programmes based on the Melbourne Art Gallery, and they've been highly successful."

"Is anything similar happening in the theatre?"

"Well, we do have a lot of amateur repertory companies and there are several small theatres run by professionals. The manager of a Melbourne one, Ray Lawlor, recently wrote a very successful play, *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. It's about some Queensland cane cutters in Melbourne and the lasses they pick up. It's had a good reception here and will be tried out in London. The live theatre in Australia cannot be said to be flourishing—it doesn't flourish anywhere today, but it's very far from extinction. *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* is the most important thing that has happened in our theatre lately."

"Do you think colour TV is likely to come soon?"

"They have it in America, but the main thing keeping colour back is that colour sets need constant maintenance by experts, which makes it impossible at present. But it will come."

We asked Sir John whether he had seen the plans for the new Sydney Opera House.

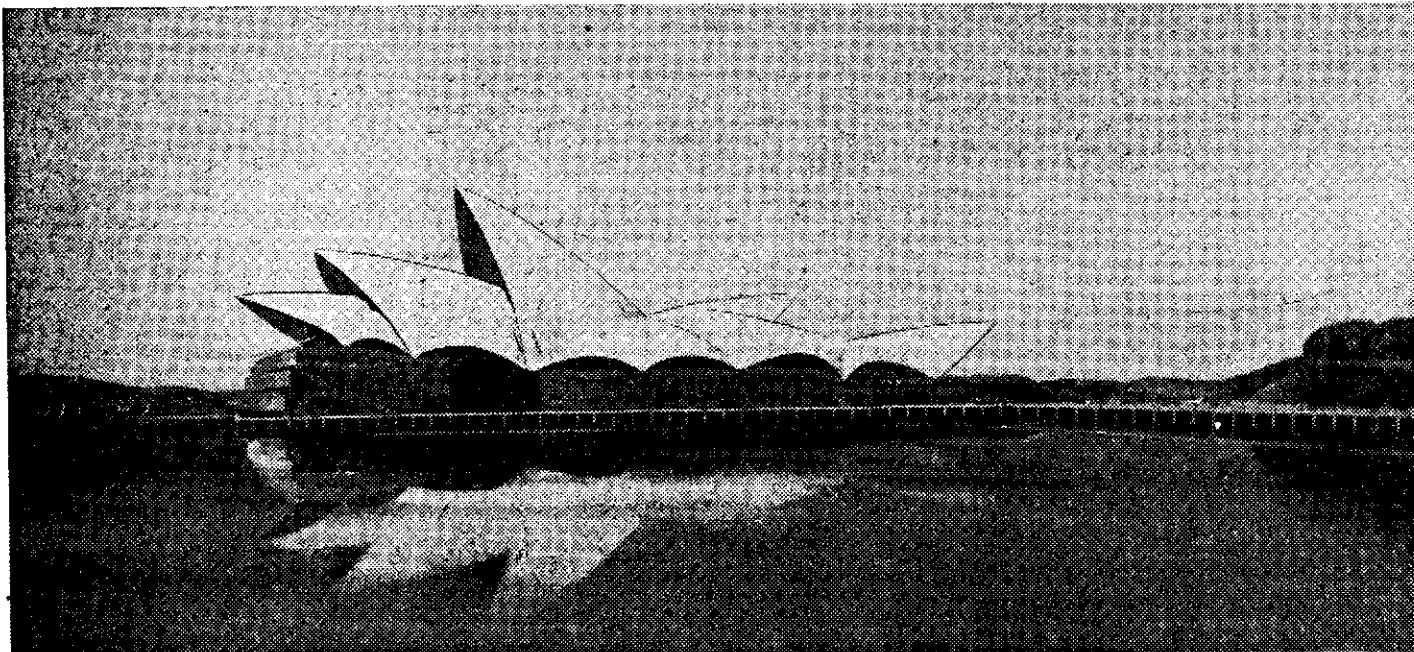


SIR JOHN MEDLEY

"TV will need an immense amount of family control"

"Yes, I've looked at them and they're very exciting. It's more than an opera house, as it includes theatres and can become a kind of cultural centre." He looked a little dubious and then added, "I still question whether it's right to spend three and a-half million like this."

Sir John is also deeply interested in the problems facing the University today; he has been visiting our University Colleges, and as Chairman of the Victorian National Gallery Trustees he has been keen to see our own galleries. His other main interest is forestry, and before he leaves New Zealand he will have been able to see the latest developments on the North Island's volcanic plateau.



"I still question whether it's right to spend three and a half million like this"—architect's sketch of the proposed Sydney Opera House