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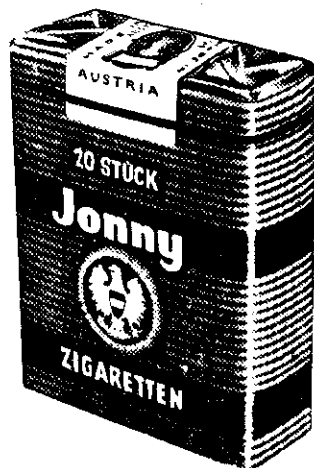
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Auckland Letter

FRAIL WOMEN AND TOUGH MACHINES

SOME time ago various Aucklanders had a piece of me for saying that perhaps we could not, locally, produce an opera with the verve and competence shown in Bruce Mason's offering from Wellington. I hope those patriots will now read on.

Auckland this week has staged, with local talent, a magnificent production of *La Traviata*. Forecasts were gloomy, so were omens. "He's flying too high," said pessimists of director-conductor Frank Poore. "It'll be like everything else in Auckland—the bridge that's going to be too small before anyone has a chance of crossing it—that first spirited move to save Judges Bay—the Festival—" etc. and etc. As to the omens: when Mina Foley withdrew because she felt she had not time to learn her part, and the whole burden of Violetta fell upon an untried 21-year-old, Mary O'Brien, the foresighted critics threw up their hands and condemned the venture to chaos.

Chaos it was not. I went on Thursday evening, and, with hand on heart, can honestly swear that I enjoyed it fully as much as the one and only other *Traviata* I have ever seen. This was in London, at Sadler's Wells when, in preparation for a long sojourn in the musical desert (Auckland), we took in as much opera as we could afford after paying for our passages. I'm told by a member of the Auckland orchestra that Thursday was one of their happiest occasions: there was a "feeling" in the air, that night; everybody played and sang as they had not done before. But I can't imagine that the delicious, fresh confidence of Mary O'Brien failed her at any time, or ever will. She sang like a bird; and died like a wounded bird, too. That, perhaps, was proof of her essential feeling for the part: the final scene in *Traviata* is a horrid test of sincerity and tact. At this deathbed, and in this production, only lovely woman remained lovely: we must give the last word to Goldsmith, not to that grating cynic T. S. Eliot.

Apart from Violetta herself, there were so many other good things in the

production that I am in the happy position of being unable to list them all. Enough that even the very critical musical person who was with me turned sideways in the first act, and said with warm appreciation, "This is good!" So it was. Auckland Can Make It.

SOMETIMES America can't (and I'm not going now to write about the Sputnik). As the weekend was doubtful, blowing and raining viciously, Philip and Johnny and I went to the flicks. We went, by common consent, to a film especially for Those Important People, the children. *Sitting Bull* was its entrancing title, and it was reputed to be all about Cowboys 'n' Indians. Well, it may have been, at any rate my Important People seemed quite satisfied that it was; but, as the sound track was practically unintelligible owing to some technical hitch which no one bothered to do anything about, and as the colour was fitful, the history ramshackle, and the piously inserted love-story a pain in the neck, Mum did not enjoy herself. Also, the manners of the young in the cinemas nowadays are not what she was accustomed to. When we went to see Charlie Chaplin in black and white, clutching our admission fees of threepence in our hot little hands, we certainly went unaccompanied, as many children nowadays do; but we equally certainly behaved ourselves. The parental hand, though busy at home in various other ways, lay heavy upon us; and, even had my sister and I been born of the tougher sex, we would no more have thought of stuffing popcorn down our neighbour's necks, or of spitting peanuts directly into their eyes, than we would have thought of flying to the moon. (Oh, dear, Sputnik again, it does keep cropping up, doesn't it?) I don't blame a parent sitting next to me, one of the few adults in the audience, who kept up a running commentary of his own while the film teetered on. "Aw, shut up! Let's try and hear what they're saying, you kids!" and so forth. If I had wanted to hear what they were

saying, I would have joined him in his Jeremiah for the dear sober days of our youth; but, as I never collected any interest to start with, there was nothing to lose except time, in the next hour or so. Only one complete sentence has remained with me. *Sitting Bull*, a probably phoney Indian whose face ranged in hue from brick red to a livid donkey-grey, according to the whim of the photographic process involved, said with a gusty sigh, "When the white man wins a battle, he calls it a victory: when the Indian does, it's called a massacre." Flatulently obvious, but none the less true.

The whole badness of this film, added to the remark of an official of the Parent Teachers' Federation recently, has set me wondering whether we don't get exactly what we deserve. We parents who demand something better for our children's rare



(C) Punch

N.Z. LISTENER, NOVEMBER 1, 1957.

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