

"The Shifting Heart"

ON Friday, October 4, the world premiere of a new Australian play, *The Shifting Heart*, was given at the Elizabethan Theatre in Sydney. Its author was a 29-year-old Melbourne actor, Richard Beynon, who has spent most of the last ten years acting and producing in England. Crowds flocked to the theatre, many of them probably hoping to see a successor to Ray Lawler's phenomenal *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, the last Australian play to be performed there. They were not disappointed. *The Shifting Heart* was given an enthusiastic reception by audience and critics. Before its first stage presentation it had won first prize in the Sydney Journalists' Club Award and third prize in the London Observer World Play Competition, and the success of its premiere seems to promise still more honours.

The theme of *The Shifting Heart* is the need for tolerance towards "New Australians," and it shows how a lack of understanding causes tragedy in an Italian migrant family living in Melbourne. It is set in the Bianchi family's backyard, where drain pipes project from the back walls of two slum houses and rubbish tins are propped up against broken-down fences. When the play opens Poppa Bianchi is sitting playing his mouth organ. A gutted fish comes flying over the fence from an unsympathetic neighbour on the left. Poppa puts it in an already bursting rubbish tin which brings Leila Pratt, a rumbustious Australian from next door, through the fence to complain.

The happiness of the Bianchis is shattered when their son Gino, who is just 21, arrives home on Christmas Eve with his face slashed. He has been in a fierce brawl at a dance-hall which would not admit "New Australians." Gino has been the victim of intolerance and misunderstanding. His search for security and help has been unsuccessful, and an appeal to his brother-in-law to take him into his transport business was cruelly rebuffed. Gino's death forces everybody to search their consciences. The play ends with a change of heart on the part of the brother-in-law, who sums up many of the Australian attitudes towards migrants and towards life itself.

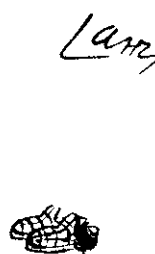
It is a boisterous play, full of fun and earthy Australian humour. It is not meant to be analysed intellectually. The plot is quite simple, the characters uncomplicated and unsophisticated, and its strength lies in the warm, friendly feeling it arouses. Its tragic aspects were difficult to take seriously, for they resembled at times a good serial or up-to-date scenes from a Victorian melodrama. The more violent parts looked like O'Neill or Tennessee Williams, but one felt that the playwright was experimenting with his characters to see what he could make them do. His sure sense of theatre and stagecraft prevented a complete collapse, for when the play's tension was dangerously weak he would retrieve the situation by quickly returning to comedy or in the last resort by bringing down the curtain. Some of the curtain lines were

extraordinarily bad, but they were probably the result of a frantic search to leave the audience with something to think about. The third act proved the most difficult to manage, and its level of interest flagged considerably.

However, Richard Beynon, who played the part of Gino, has written an entertaining play. It will be interesting to see in which direction his gifts will develop.

A FEW notes on the organisation that presented this play, the Elizabethan Theatre Trust, may be of interest, as it is the most influential cultural organisation in Australia. The Trust is a complex organisation, a kind of National Theatre and National Opera, with its headquarters in the newly re-conditioned Elizabethan Theatre in the Sydney suburb of Newtown. It was founded to commemorate the visit of Queen Elizabeth and is at present directed by the English producer, Hugh Hunt. Its links with England are strong and are apparent whenever one visits the Theatre, for seats have been donated by Vivian Leigh, Laurence Olivier and other English stage personalities.

Like most Australian organisations connected with the arts, its activities have to be spread over the whole Commonwealth, which at times stretches them to breaking point. Even in Sydney there are periods when the Theatre is shut while the Company tours elsewhere. The Trust's main achievement



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so far has been to gather the best available Australian talent into an operatic company and a theatrical company. This year the Opera Company is giving a season of grand opera with Joan Hammond and Elsie Morrison as guest artists. They are now touring the main centres, using the ABC orchestras in the various States. Hobart and Perth have had to be left out, but the Trust makes up for this by subsidising operatic productions in these cities. The Theatre Company has performed *The Relapse* and *Hamlet* with the visiting English actor Paul Rogers. Their greatest success was *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, which the original cast took to London. *The Doll* has now become a legend—Sydney—London—New York—Hollywood. Richard Beynon must hope his play will take the same path.

The Trust gives every assistance it can to the amateur theatre. It provides producers and technical assistance and by setting high standards for the parent companies hopes that this in turn will tend to inspire and so raise the standards of the amateurs. Soon some kind



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