

Phoenix in the Nest

TO prance out of the theatre into the welcoming night, at the fall of the curtain, looking for a pretty girl to hug or a fellow being to clap on the shoulder, is the sort of experience most playgoers with blood running in their veins are likely to enjoy; and according to one overseas critic that is the way audiences react to the plays of Christopher Fry. Wellingtonians who saw *The Lady's Not For Burning* staged by repertory recently found that there was something in this opinion. Highbrows who went along expecting a few private laughs discovered that the play had a wider appeal than they had expected. This fellow Fry was good fun.

Listeners are now to have a chance of hearing the delights of Fry's comedies in BBC productions, which include some members of the London stage casts. During the next few weeks all YC stations will broadcast *A Phoenix Too Frequent* and *The Lady's Not For Burning*. There will also be a talk by the playwright himself on the contemporary theatre.

Christopher Fry has leaped to fame in the English theatre in recent years, and *The Lady's Not For Burning* is regarded as perhaps the most remarkable of his poetic comedies. It is the fantastic tale of a young soldier of the 15th Century who is disgusted with life. He wanders into a market town to find a witch-hunt going on, and to divert attention he says that he has committed murder and wants to be hanged. But when he sees the unjustly condemned witch he begins to change his mind. In the production which listeners are to hear, Pamela Browne, for whom Fry wrote the part, plays the "witch," the soldier is played by Alec Clunes, who created this part in the play's original London try-out before it reached the West End, and other players heard in their original roles are Eliot Makeham, Harcourt Williams and Esmé Percy. The producer is Raymond Raikes.

In *A Phoenix Too Frequent* Fry turns his dramatisation of a Greek story from prospective tragedy to delicate comedy. It is based on the tale of Dynamene, a beautiful young widow of Ephesus, who is determined to show her devotion to her late husband by seeking death at the side of his bier. The edge is taken off her resolve, however, by Tegeus, a handsome young soldier. Dynamene is played by Joan Hopkins, who is heard and seen a great deal in television and films nowadays (her first big stage success was as Princess Charlotte in *The First Gentleman*, a part she took over from Wendy Hiller), the soldier by John Phillips, and Dynamene's maid by June Spencer. The producer is William Hughes. "Mr. Fry," one critic wrote of this play, "could make a ghoul laugh. . . He gets more cheerfulness out of coffins than most people would from the abolition of bread rationing."

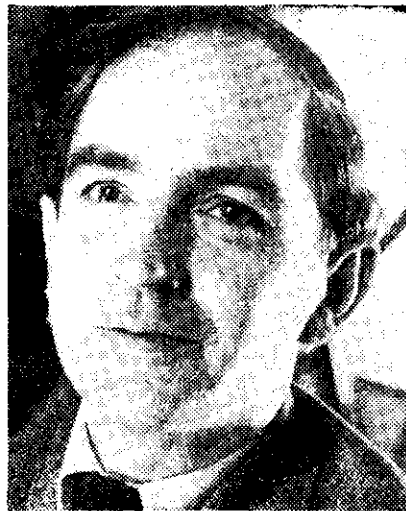
Fry's talk on the contemporary theatre, first broadcast in the BBC Third Programme, has already been heard from some New Zealand stations, but the few who listened before will not need to be urged to do so again. In it the playwright expresses his attitude of wide-eyed wonderment at ourselves and the

universe which he translates into theatre in his plays. He says: "If we stop pretending for a moment that we were born fully dressed in a service flat, and remember that we were born stark naked into a pandemonium of most unnatural phenomena, then we know how out-of-place, how lost, how amazed, how miraculous we are."

Aged 43, short, slight and dark, preferring tweed jacket and flannels to dinner jacket and first-nights ("I like to sit quietly somewhere at the back of the circle"), reticent but with a genius for making friends, Fry lives a rural life with his wife and son Tam in a farm worker's cottage on the windy slope of a Cotswold hill. His home is without electric light, and he normally works on his plays by candle or lamp light between 10.0 p.m. and 4.0 a.m., because there are no distractions during that time. He spent about eight months writing *The Lady's Not For Burning*, but has written some of his plays in less than half that time.

Fry was born in Bristol, the son of a poor architect who turned to lay missionary work in the slums. For most of his life he has not been far from poverty. He adopted his mother's Quaker faith and sends his son to a Quaker school. For the same reason he refused to bear arms in the war and worked cleaning up bomb rubble. He wrote verse and plays in his early teens, had two spells as a teacher, worked with the little theatre learning stagecraft the hard way, and wrote light songs. For two years he toured with a play which Dr. Barnardo's Homes commissioned. In 1936 he married Phyllis Hart, a journalist, and about two years after wrote his first important play, *The Boy with a Cart*. Other pageants followed. At the start of the war he became director of the Oxford Playhouse, where he made friends with Pamela Browne.

Fry's cascade of sparkling words was loosed on London by Alec Clunes, who



CHRISTOPHER FRY, whose verse plays, "*A Phoenix Too Frequent*" and "*The Lady's Not For Burning*," are to be broadcast by the YC stations



WILLIAM HUGHES, producer of "*The Merchant of Venice*" in the "World Theatre" series, is responsible for the BBC presentation of "*A Phoenix Too Frequent*"

asked Fry to produce a play at the Arts Theatre. At this time Clunes read *A Phoenix Too Frequent* and commissioned a play on the spot. *The Lady's Not For Burning* was the result. In the meantime *A Phoenix Too Frequent* was produced; and after that the conquest was easy. *The Lady's Not For Burning* was playing to capacity houses when it ended with just under 300 performances, because John Gielgud had to start rehearsing elsewhere. Of his plays, Fry himself likes best *Venus Observed*, which was commissioned by Sir Laurence Olivier. He seemed quite able to cope with his sudden fame and prosperity. He had a bathroom added to his cottage (sea shells collected by Tam replaced the marine decorations and under-water effects originally planned), and he rented a town house; but otherwise his life did not change much.

Fry thinks the public was ready for the vivid imagery of his plays after too long a period of clipped prose on the stage. He insists that verse plays should

not be regarded as a separate branch of the theatre and says he just happens to like writing like that. He has difficulty in finding plots and confessed to lifting the plot of *The Lady's Not For Burning* from a German short story. As he said: "Lots of playwrights have done so before."

Station 4YC will broadcast Christopher Fry's talk on the contemporary theatre at 10.0 p.m. on Monday, August 13; *A Phoenix Too Frequent* at 7.43 p.m. on Saturday, August 18; and *The Lady's Not For Burning* at 7.30 p.m. on Wednesday, August 22. These three programmes will be heard in the same order from 2YC at 8.0 p.m. on Friday, August 17; 7.30 p.m. on Saturday, August 18; and 7.30 p.m. on Saturday, August 25; 3YC, 8.10 p.m. on Sunday, August 26; 8.0 p.m. on Monday, August 27; and 8.0 p.m. on Monday, September 3. From 1YC these programmes will be broadcast on August 27 and 29 and September 5, at times to be announced later.

THE TRUE STORY OF CAPTAIN BLIGH

BLIGH OF THE BOUNTY, a BBC feature now being heard from several stations and soon to be broadcast from others, may help to correct the popular belief that Captain William Bligh, R.N., was no more than a bully and tyrant whose cruelties to his crew goaded them into mutiny. Recent research has thrown much light on Bligh. Dr. George Mackaness has written an authoritative biography, and *Rum Rebellion*, by Dr. H. V. Evatt, Leader of the Opposition in the Commonwealth Parliament, and former Australian Minister of External Affairs, is a sharply analytical study of Bligh's governorship of New South Wales. In the light of such material Rex Rienits wrote this new BBC feature.

Even in an age of adventure, few men led a more adventurous life than William Bligh. Though it is as Bligh of the Bounty that we know him best today, this was only one of many exciting incidents in his career—the most spectacular, perhaps, but far from being the most important. Bligh's greatest contribution to history was as Governor of New South Wales, then a convict colony, almost twenty years after the mutiny;

and for all the attempts that have been made, from time to time, to discredit him, Australians today generally regard him as one of their outstanding national heroes.

William Bligh, like so many other men of Devon, had a passion for the sea



CAPTAIN WILLIAM BLIGH

and was in the navy at fifteen. As a lieutenant he was in Cook's *Resolution* for four years and saw Cook killed. Later he was given command of an expedition to transplant bread-fruit trees from Tahiti to the West Indies, and his ship was the *Bounty*. It was on this voyage that the mutiny occurred. Court-martialled, Bligh was acquitted, was promoted to captain, and given command of a second expedition to Tahiti.

Bligh afterwards distinguished himself in several naval engagements; and during the mutiny of the *Nore* he was chosen, because of his popularity with the men, to negotiate peace terms with them. His success saved much bloodshed.

When Bligh was appointed Governor of New South Wales in 1805 the colony was in the grip of a monopolistic officer clique, who had introduced a system of using rum as currency which was turning the people into drunkards. After eighteen months of his uncompromising rule, during which New South Wales knew its first prosperity, the officers revolted against the curtailment of their privilege, arrested Bligh and proceeded again to plunder the colony. When

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