

THE NEW ZEALAND PLAYERS . . . by Bruce Mason

ON Friday, May 8, before Ministers of the Crown, Ambassadors and Consuls, leaders of amateur theatre, producers and actors, the New Zealand Players Company presented their first production, *The Young Elizabeth*, by Jeunette Dowling and Francis Letton. It was a historic occasion. Three hundred telegrams, including one from Her Majesty the Queen, testified to the warmth generated outside the theatre, and the storm of applause at the final curtain set a royal seal upon all these good wishes. Our first professional theatre company was triumphantly launched.

The Young Elizabeth is a play of some quality, competent rather than distinguished, a historical digest rather than a historical play. In twelve scenes, it shows us 11 years in the life of our greatest queen, that fascinating and enigmatic personality who has so seized men's imaginations for the three and a half centuries since her death. We see her first as a girl of 16 when her father Henry VIII dies; we watch her abortive passion for Thomas Seymour who has become her stepfather by marrying Katherine Parr, Henry's widow; follow her strained relations with her neurotic sister, Mary Tudor; pass through the maze of political and religious intrigue, denunciation and corrupt preferment, to the finest moment of the play, when couriers arrive to tell the young Elizabeth that she is queen.

I would mark against the play its 12 curtains, which half dispel the atmosphere the players have evoked, forcing them each time to create it anew. I fear that history students will find the religious controversies treated far too superficially. Students of acting will regret that some characters are so sketchy in the text, Mary Tudor for example, who, in her speeches, scarcely reveals the grounds of her infamous reputation. Can this psychotic old maid be the Bloody Mary of history? And one must finally regret the lack of any central core to the play.

True, Elizabeth is a central character, but she does not dominate the text as one would expect, and I think this is because the authors have decided to make History and Occasion the central theme to their play, idealising them in much the same manner as were *Virtue and Vice* in Victorian melodrama. Yet these reservations apart, the play does hold one, if not entirely absorbed in its action, at least continuously interested; and the historical parallel with our contemporary Elizabeth, of which the American authors cannot have been unaware, make it a neat choice for these weeks before the Coronation.

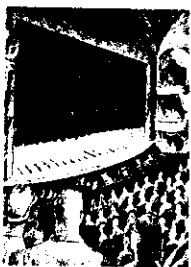
All these considerations were an added challenge to Richard Campion, his designer, and his players. In design, the production has a fine richness of style and most sumptuous colours, with the costumes for the most part in strong, vital shades, moving in agreeable patterns against the warm stone of the sets. Of the costumes, I found the men's entirely satisfying, but the women's less so. My impression, and I hope this is not too carping, was that the Princess Elizabeth wore the same dress for several years, as did her sister Mary, whether

queen or not, and that Elizabeth's servants, Parry and Ashley, did not change their clothes in eleven years. But these are small points; and to the designer, Raymond Boyce, I offer the highest praise.

As for the production, it has been planned with the greatest care and devotion, moving simply and logically from scene to scene, with each chapter dominant at the right time. Mr. Campion has always been a producer most alive to the visual aspect of a play, and he has missed no chance to make his play look effective. It is the finest tribute to his skill that one is not conscious of the production as such, which would be an offence in a play of this kind, but only of the drama smoothly unfolding. If I find defects, it is the fires of Smithfield, where Bloody Mary's heretics are burning, which, with its neon glow, is both too literal and too symbolic to be effective. And for a troop of horses, the feeble clip-clops on the first night were rather too thin to engage the imagination. Again, small points. And let me here express my admiration for the stage crew. The speed with which one apparently immovable set was replaced by another is already at an entirely professional level.

And lastly, the actors. Edith Campion brings to the part of Elizabeth that combination of intelligence and concentration which seems to obliterate the personality of the player, leaving another in its place, which is the mark of all good acting. She has a fine voice, and moves with unusual grace. Watch her develop from the wayward tomboy of the first scenes, to the young woman shocked by intrigue and violence, and her sad assumption of a blighted youth, to the close of the play where, as queen, she is suddenly and most movingly invested with nobility and a touching radiance. It is a performance full of variety and flashes of spirit, which, from the first remind one that here, in this young princess, is a great personality beginning to develop. Bernard Kearns, as Cecil, gives a most subtle, fluent performance, and perhaps, of all the players, he convinces most as a man of the 16th Century, whose garments seemed to belong to him. Rilla Stephens as Mary Tudor falls short of majesty, but does obediently all that can be read into an unsatisfactory text, and her hysterical harshness of manner works in excellent counterpoint to Edith Campion's clear, direct delivery of her lines. Michael Cotterill gives a fine period sketch as Lord Tyrwhitt, full of malice and a dry, mirthless evil of intent, and Gay Dean makes her small part of Katherine Parr memorable for its warmth and tenderness. These were all fully developed performances. The others I do not judge yet, on the basis of a first performance, as they seemed still to have some way to grow.

But far more than the individual excellences of the evening, was the passion and integrity of feeling which the company communicated to an audience, warm already, and made the first performance of the New Zealand Players a most moving experience. The Company is launched. It is already good, and will be better.



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