

THE KELLY GANG

DOUGLAS STEWART'S wordy but powerful *Ned Kelly*, the story of the life and death of the last of the bush rangers, was a bold choice by the New Zealand Players for their second tour which began in Wellington recently. In a production notable for its lighting effects, and for the use of sets which could suggest equally well the vastness of the Australian bush or the sticky heat of a backblocks pub the outstanding thing was the complete naturalness with which the four young larrikins of the Kelly gang were represented on the stage by Roy Patrick (as Ned Kelly), Michael Cotterill (as Joe Byrne), Barry Linehan (Dan Kelly), and Keith Bracey (Steve Hart). This seemed to be due not only to the casting ability of the play's producer (Richard Campion), but to a feeling by the players themselves that they were taking part in a drama whose themes have a real significance in the life of this country.

Ned Kelly was first produced in Australia eleven years ago by the ABC in an abridged version for radio. Since then it has become accepted as an Australian classic and is a permanent part of the repertoire of stage companies across the Tasman. In this its first professional

New Zealand production the audience was not allowed to forget that the author is a New Zealander whose verse drama *The Fire on the Snow*, was broadcast a year or two ago by the NZBS. *Ned Kelly* is also written largely in poetic form: but its blank verse lines come across the footlights with the effect of a rich, emotional prose whose rhythms are in general as colloquial as those of everyday speech. Like the American gangsters in Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset*, the Kellys and their friends make continual use of slang and swear-words but they are words and expressions which most of us are so familiar with that we accept them without questioning their rightness on the stage.

The play's colonial atmosphere is set by the introduction of an Australian stockman (Bernard Shine) who walks on to the stage from the orchestra pit singing a bush ballad, as the curtain opens on an interior of the Jerilderie bank in New South Wales in the year 1879, a hot Monday morning. Two bank clerks, Living (John Carson-Parker) and Mackin (Desmond Digby) are counting the day's takings. Joe Byrne, an affable Irishman disguised in a policeman's uniform, enters at left with revolver in hand. With much amusing byplay ("Living, you'll soon be dead," Byrne



ROY PATRICK as Ned Kelly

is dragged out of his morning bath and clad only in a towel is forced to open the safe. Ned puts the money in a sack and persuades everyone, at pistol point, to come down to the pub and have a drink with him.

After a neat piece of scene changing in which the curtain is not lowered, but the flats moved around to the accompaniment of the stockman's balladry, Dan Kelly and Steve Hart are seen in the pub with the customers bailed up, shouting free drinks to all at the expense of the hotel-keeper (Willis Williams). Dan and Steve are portrayed as the lesser pair in the quartet, swaggering and oafish in contrast to the witty, high-spirited Byrne and the dedicated leadership of Ned.

says), the bushranger tells the clerks that the entire town has been held up by the Kelly gang. Ned Kelly, a tall, powerful, bearded man, also in police uniform, now strolls through the door, and the bank manager (John Gordon)

Shine) and Parson Gribble (Richard Campion) engage in a series of eloquent but overlong arguments with Ned and Joe Byrne which contain the moral core of the drama. Gribble cannot understand why Ned should have taken to the bush



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