

"If It Will Settle Any Arguments— I'm 66"



Katie Towers, With The
'Fresh Fields' Company,
Was Born At Thames.

(Written for the "Radio Record.")

THIS story is distinguished by the fact that that I had the cheek to ask a woman—an actress, too!—how old she was. And, just as remarkable, she answered me truthfully and without anger—66 last birthday.

Katie Towers, the fine old actress who is half the fun in the J. C. Williamson Comedy Company now presenting "Fresh Fields" and "Night Must Fall" in New Zealand, was the woman, and my query was mainly prompted by the number of rumours that had floated round Wellington about her age. In the stalls of the Grand Opera House the other evening two women were talking after the first act. "Katie Towers is an old marvel for her age, isn't she? I hear she's 78 and that her husband's 83."

I told Katie this story while we sat on a benzine case on the stage of the Wellington Opera House the other morning. She laughed, "Lord, there's been as much talk in Wellington about my age as there has about the 40-hour week. By this time some

of the people here have got me well past the century mark—I'll be as old as Westminster Abbey soon."

Sixty-six-year-old Katie Towers was born at Thames, where her father ran a theatre in conjunction with an hotel. And a pretty thriving business it was, too, with Thames enjoying a minor gold rush and the prospectors ready to spend their money on entertainment of all sorts—even to paying 15/- for the privilege of watching the Towers's show from the top of a kerosene box!

"I come of a theatrical family," said Katie. "My grandfather, Johnson Towers, had the Old Vic in London 'way back in the dim and distant past, and there were many names famous in London vaudeville in the theatre's programmes. My dad arrived in New Zealand at the time of the Maori wars—and he made a nice bit of money out of the combined theatre and hotel in Thames. Of course, I don't remember it—I was only knee-high to a grasshopper, and my earliest

stage memory was when I played in a pantomime in Liverpool. I think I was five years old, and we had left New Zealand a couple of years before.

"Then we travelled out to South Africa, where I played in quite a few children's parts. Good old melodrama it was with me as an orphan, or a little chee-ild with a cruel stepfather. Funny when you think of it now, but it made the tears flow in the good old days. 'East Lynne' was a favourite then, too.

"After a turn in the bigger towns in South Africa we came back to Australia and my father made a lot of money out of the old Gaiety Theatre in Castle-reagh Street. It was later turned into a boxing stadium, and now it's a store or something. We left the Gaiety a year or two later and went to India, where my mother and father died. My older sister managed the company and we had a lot of adventures there. I'm proud to be able to say that I've sung in the Taj Mahal, and we even played in the Khyber Pass, where we had to have an armed escort going to and from the theatre.

"Rosa—that was my sister's name—and I came back to Australia, and later on I joined J. C. Williamsons. My first part with the Firm was as leading boy in a pantomime—that'd be about 35 years ago. Couldn't imagine myself as a leading boy in a panto, now, could you?"—and Katie Chuckled merrily.

Like all good actresses Katie Towers has a favourite part—the role she played as a Southern mammy in Guy Bates Post's version of "The Nigger." It was a sad part—but people who remember the play say that Katie made a wonderful job of it.

"Then there were all the good old plays," she continued. "I came round several times with Julius Knight, and there used to be queues halfway down the street whenever we played 'The Sign of the Cross.' 'Royal Divorce' was another very popular play. And then there were Muriel Star's (Contd. on page 58.)

KATIE TOWERS is what the Americans would describe as a "grand old trouser." In the story on this page she traces a theatrical career extending over 60 years. She's done broadcasting, too—our photographer caught her at the microphone the other day.