

Queen Victoria on the Boards Did Not Amuse as Highly as She Was Priced

By "SARI"

MISS Fay Compton's celebrated company of English mummers, as you may have noticed in the newspapers, appeared in Housman's "Victoria Regina" at the Wellington Grand Opera House on Saturday night. Ten yards away across a lane, Miss Anna Neagle, unfortunately unable to thank the audience as neatly as Miss Compton at the curtain, was also valiantly trying to make everyone believe she was Queen Victoria. Miss Compton, of course, is as different from Miss Neagle, who could only arrive in Wellington in a tin box anyhow, as Camembert from Cheshire. But she shared with Miss Neagle the distinction of appearing in a show chiefly remarkable for the fact that the subject matter has been taboo for 35 years.

But where those with no affectation of patriotism might have no compunction in giving the talkie their personal "raspberry," most people vowed to high heaven that nothing, animal, vegetable or mineral, would keep them from Miss Compton's performance.

Such singular obstinacy, of course, is peculiar; or it would be peculiar if it were not so usual. For one was talkie and one was legitimate stage; and, come hell and highwater, the stage show must be attended. Drama, my dear, is so much more satisfying.

Put On The White Tie

LET me digress a moment. It is a peculiarity of the talking-theatre public that it has a pretty good eye for a pretty good picture; a show like "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town," for instance, is

what the theatremen term a natural. Which means that somehow, remarkably, quite unaccountably, four-fifths of the theatre public recognise that Mr. Deeds is a wonderfully fine, completely satisfying show. They have not even seen it; but they sense it. And they go in multitudes.

But put on the white tie. For a celebrated company of English mummers are appearing on the stage, actually in person, in Wellington. Remember Nellie Stewart, remember Sybil Thorndike, remember Margaret Rawlings? Gad, sir, you cannot possibly compare the stage with the screen; the stage every time, sir.

That's how the theatremen, the showmen who pilot English mummers through the country, interpret, with reasonable accuracy, the public attitude. It is true, of course, that the English mummers visit New Zealand infrequently. But things are none the worse for that; rather the better, because it means that we are not completely isolated at any rate.

Showmen Should Wake Up

THE Legits pride themselves on carrying on a line of flesh-and-blood shows handed down from the worthy days of the troubadours strolling through Europe. They appeal to our sentiment, they tell us that fine tradition demands that we must, we simply must, support the theatre. And the annoying part of it is that most of us are so thoroughly conventional that we believe it implicitly, without ever trying to reason for ourselves just why we must attend every flesh-and-blood show which comes to town.

That has been the attitude for years. But I rather think the time is coming when the public will demand that merit be met with equal merit.

I suggest that, so far as Miss Fay

Compton's celebrated company of English mummers is concerned, if it were not for their appearance, their actual appearance, flesh, blood, arteries and all, they would find opposition over the lane a trifle disconcerting.

For the truth is that there is an unevenness in the cast which is seldom found nowadays in shadow shows costing less than one-quarter as much to see as the stage "Victoria."

I shall name no names. I shall merely affirm that very poor players are there. I shall suggest that showmen must begin while there is yet time to recognise that competition from the films must be met with something finer from the theatre—as we know it in the benighted Dominions.

Fay Compton Third

THERE are decidedly not more than three actors in Victoria Regina who would impress themselves on the film public. And I consider the film public rather discerning, rather apt to know the good show from the bad and the good actor from the bad.

First, there is Mr. Bruno Barnabe, cast as Albert, the Prince Consort. Mr. Barnabe is more than a mummer; he is a finely-gifted actor, sensible to the mood of an audience, able to capture it and play on it, to make it—and this is the most difficult feat of all—believe that he really is Albert, a man worried by antagonistic English, by the stupid statesmen who want war, by the queen who is so much a queen that she has begun to forget she is human. I would fault him for an inclination to stiffness, a tendency to march across the stage, with back straight, fists clenched, words flung over his shoulder. But they were the pricks to a notable, even a brilliant performance.

Secondly, Miss Ann Coddington, who doubled the part of the Duchess and Princess Alexandra. If grease paint is not too deceiving, she is young. She is also on her way, well on the way, to becoming a thoroughly competent actress.

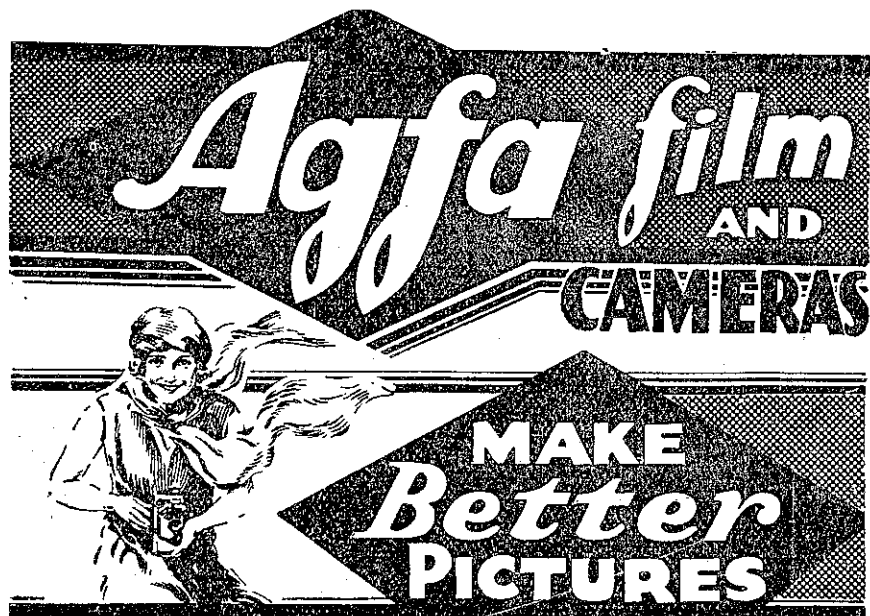
Lastly, Miss Compton herself. She was not, I think, suited by the part, for there is, through the ten scenes of the production, a sense almost of tragedy—at any rate, of great things. And Miss Compton was rather too superficial for me, brought up as I was by shockin' history books to believe that Victoria was a very determined little lady of icy poses, with a frequently dyspeptic outlook on life.

It is difficult to believe that an age notable in history for its primness and its prejudices could submit to dictation other than by an extraordinary woman, limited in vision and bigoted in belief. Miss Compton's Victoria was not that extraordinary type of woman.

On Mr. Stafford Hilliard's Beaconsfield and the rest, let us preserve discretion as the better part of criticism.

The only other figure in the production was hidden from the audience except by his works, he was Mr. Peter Dearing, as slick a stage manager as I have seen in years. I carp at allowing Mr. Gladstone to wear a wine-red dress on a visit to a deeply-bereaved Victoria; the real Queen, I think, would have permitted herself at least a sneer. Otherwise, Mr. Dearing's works were, as Jess Oakwood would say, "champion." Better than that, they were brilliant.

They say the play's the thing. May—
(Continued on page 42.)



Agfa film
AND
CAMERAS

**MAKE
Better
PICTURES**