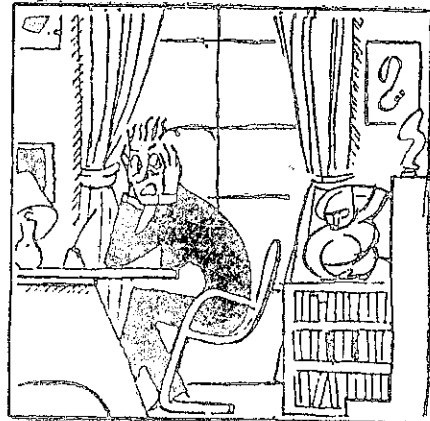


ART AND THE BOX OFFICE



A Christchurch Contributor Discusses "Royalty Poisoning" and Other Functional Ailments of the Little Theatre



LATELY there have been two articles in the "Record" tolling the knell of the repertory movement. At least, if not exactly announcing its death, they read like death-bed interviews with all the fatal symptoms carefully explained.

Jack Daw, under the heading of "Tragedy In One Act," ascribes the fatal symptoms to "royalty poisoning." There may be some truth in his diagnosis in the case of the smaller groups and Women's Institutes, whose programme consists mostly of play-readings—but it cannot possibly apply to the larger societies.

The Auckland Little Theatre Society, whose funeral service was read by "Wirihana" under the heading, "Repertory Blues," is reputed to have a membership of 2000. Wellington and Dunedin have two or three societies, each with a probable total membership for each town of 1500. If those societies cannot, with such membership, pay their way, inclusive of royalties, there is something radically wrong with their management.

Otherwise, how does the one and only large drama group in Christchurch, the Canterbury Repertory Theatre Society, with a membership of less than 600, manage not only to pay its way but make a profit? The box-office receipts from the last play, finished on Saturday night made a record.

HERE are some facts that other societies might do well to ponder. The average amount spent on advertising for the eight plays before the last has been £7 for each play. And yet the society can get enough of the general public into the audience to pay such expenses as cannot be met from members' subscriptions.

"Wirihana" suggests that a strong, practical guiding mind is needed to hold a repertory society together. The Christchurch society is run under a purely democratic form of government, with no one enthusiast leading the revels. "Wirihana" further states that in Auckland interest in amateur drama is stronger than ever before. In Christchurch, as anyone knows who has lived there, no one has an interest in anything—except, of course, when the trots are on. Active members—members willing and able to take parts—number probably less than a hundred. The really able young men on whom the Christchurch society can call for juvenile leads could be counted on the fingers of one hand, with a finger or two to spare.

In Auckland, if reports are true, there is a queue of talented juveniles clamouring for parts!

And yet Christchurch goes ahead, and Auckland goes into recess!

THE Christchurch Society owes nothing on back royalties, and yet has put on modern plays. Further, it employs a salaried producer, a salaried secretary, and a salaried stage-manager, and the wages-tax has been paid to date. The scenery is the society's own, remodelled and repainted for each play, and in the very unbiased criticisms in the local papers, the settings have more than once been given fulsome praise.

Comparing the societies in Auckland and Christchurch, it is fairly easy to see why Auckland keep mice in their box office, while the box office in Christchurch usually holds a smiling secretary. But in the previous articles quoted, no one seems to have put his finger on the spot, though it is as clear as a neon sign.

Whatever the highbrows may say to the contrary and whatever they may demand from the public, a repertory movement to-day has to compete with all other purveyors of amusement.

To 99 per cent. of members repertory is a hobby, just as going to the cinema is a hobby with so many thousands. The more intelligent and active minds demand something more than watching others, but few of them seem to be intelligent enough to see that they have to compete with the cinemas

and the bridge parties and the other social gatherings. And to compete they have to run their society just as any cinema is run, with a shrewd business executive watching the financial end all the time!

"**A**RT for art's sake" is a glorious (if somewhat moth-eaten) slogan, and should be confined to the art department. The firm's accountant can quickly translate a slogan into pounds, shillings and pence, and an able and enthusiastic member cast in the part of accountant has saved many a dramatic society.

If Auckland could not show a credit balance from the subscriptions of 2000 members, the society had two courses open: First, to curtail their activities, which they have done; and, secondly (it comes hard to the art for art's sake enthusiasts), to realise that they needed the support of the casual theatre-going public, and, having realised, to gain it.

Did Auckland do this?

Apparently not, because the society put into practice the best-known method of alienating the public. With misguided ideas of economy, the paid (Contd. on page 40).

ALL is not well with the Little Theatre in New Zealand—but apparently some societies survive and flourish. Jack Daw and "Wirihana" contributed the failure side of the argument in recent issues. So this week "R.W." tells a success story for a change.