TRUST NEWS

No. 6 December, 1960

● A scene from
"A Taste of Honey"
Union Theatre
Repertory Production

ARTISTS and CRITICS

● *by Neil Hutchison,*

Executive Director, Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust

I know it is presumptuous to talk about artistic criticism, for this has been a subject for learned men throughout all the ages from Aristophanes to T. S. Eliot.

My excuse is that we are all bound to practise criticism every time we see a play, read a book or look at a picture. For criticism is a judgment of the beauties and faults in any production of the fine arts. Whether our judgment is good or bad, we cannot help making one. As T. S. Eliot has said, criticism is as inevitable as breathing.

Many people regard the dramatic critic as an unscrupulous and ill-informed ogre who is bent upon the destruction, by one merciless blow, of something which has involved a world of effort. I do not accept this sweeping condemnation for one moment, although I think I can understand how this feeling has come into being. No critic, however learned, intelligent and sensitive, can grasp and estimate in the course of writing one short article, something which has taken other intelligent and sensitive people a great many weeks to prepare. I think most sincere critics realise that in such circumstances it is impossible to do a thoroughly satisfactory job. To be under the obligation to file a criticism within a couple of hours of the end of a show is something they must surely deplore. On his part, the actor knows that the judgment being passed on his work is not really fully considered and he is inclined to resent it, quite naturally.

This is the sort of thing that is neither the fault of the critic nor the actor. It is the fault of a commercial system. But it is bad for all concerned, because it sets the actor and critic at loggerheads. It tends to make the actor dislike and despise criticism which ought to be valuable to him. On the other hand, it drives the critic to give up criticism and to take to something easier. He may, for instance, simply write notices and make speeches which tell the public that they will like the play or dislike it — but that is not criticism. It is not a comment on the actor's work, but on the public's taste.

But there may be a far worse development from the critics' impossible position. He may get to the stage where, harassed and frustrated beyond endurance, he only wishes to Heaven that people would stop creating this awful spate of plays — and this may become clear in his criticism. As Aldous Huxley says of an art critic in one of his novels, "He had an immense knowledge of art and a sincere dislike of all that was beautiful, and tore artists to pieces in his weekly article with all the holy gusto of a Calvanist iconoclast smashing images of the Virgin." This is the most deadly and destructive of all types of criticism. It is the one that leaves the artist with the paranoid feeling that he is fighting a hostile world, which not only hates what he does, but hates his desire to do it.

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Designed and produced by The Publicity Department, The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, 85 Goulburn Street, Sydney.
Printed by Peerless Press, 507 - 509 Kent Street, Sydney.
Blocks by A. A. Lawson Pty. Ltd.
Cover Photograph by Bryan Edward.

Back Again . . . Sam Sawnoff, Bill Barnacle and Bunyip Bluegum, with the other characters from Norman Lindsay's "The Magic Pudding" return to Sydney in Peter Scriven's marionette adaptation of the famous children's classic for a season at the Conservatorium commencing on December 21. Their return to Sydney follows a spectacularly successful Commonwealth tour.

Take, for example, Ruskin's comment on Whistler's "Nocturne", which was the subject of the famous libel action, "I have heard much of Cockney impudence, but never thought to hear a coxcomb ask a hundred guineas for throwing a pot of paint in the public's face." The implication here is not simply that Whistler's effort was unsuccessful or artistically inadequate, but that he was artistically a cheat and an impostor. Here, the critic has implied that nothing—i.e., a blank—would have been better than something. But it is the inescapable belief of all artists, however humble and unskilled, that something is better than nothing. For that reason, the creative mind must, and always has, and always will, hate the iconoclast mind and vice versa.

Perhaps the most striking illustration of the operation of the iconoclast mind is to be found in Florence at the end of the 15th Century, when the period of fine and intelligent patronage of the arts by Lorenzo de Medici was immediately followed by the domination of the gloomy Savonarola, who, like the Puritans, made bonfires of pictures and books. With the present levels of taxation and religious faith respectively, our critics cannot be Lorenzo and they are unlikely to be Savonarola. But, in a minor way, they are bound to land on the same side of the fence as one of them. Either, in general, they are in favour of the actor and hope he can do it, and are pleased when they find that he can; or else, in general, they are against him and hope he cannot do it, and pleased when they find he cannot.

To me, that summarises the spirit of good and bad criticism. The critic must not be like the judge sitting at the bench, administering penal laws to put down crime. He must observe, like the Vicar at the local flower show. He must compare, evaluate, find fault and find virtue. He may award very few prizes. He may be depressed by the current low standards and achievements. But he must always keep in mind the absolute certainty that something is better than nothing, that creative effort is better than no effort, that the desire to create is a virtue in itself, and that the desire to destroy is the most unpardonable of all crimes. ●

"TIME AND THE SHOCKER"

Another view of crime and violence in the theatre by **HAYES GORDON**

We've had a little joke with our production of "The Drunkard". We have perpetrated a hoax, and many fell for it.

To begin—recently, there has been a hue and cry about plays of crime, sex, and violence . . . "Why must we be continually subjected to such plays when there are beautiful plays with lovely poetry and prose, colour, music, dancing, pretty-picture staging, romance, comedy and 'happily-ever-after'?"

So, goaded by public opinion, we presented "The Drunkard"; and we have these very elements in the production. The audience laughs, sighs, and even participates. But "The Drunkard" is one of the most violent plays we could find of the 1840 vintage. It contains not one crime, but dozens. Count them:

Rape, corruption, conspiracy, forgery, usury, robbery, mob-violence, brutality, labour-exploitation, brawling, resisting arrest, desertion, sexual perversion, neglect, common soliciting, uttering, cruelty, concealment, champerty,* common and indecent assault, vagrancy, blackmail, attempted murder, failure to support a child, induced insanity, attempted suicide, libel, slander, fraudulent misrepresentation, contributing to the delinquency of a minor, embezzlement—as well as drunkenness.

"The Drunkard" was originally presented as a shocker in an attempt to persuade drinkers to sign the pledge. History tells us that it succeeded; and it was probably to drink what "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was to slavery. "The Drunkard", in fact, was probably the "Orpheus Descending" of its day, so far as shock-theatre goes. And yet to-day we laugh at it. Why?

In our production, the play was not burlesqued. There are deliberately funny moments of comic relief written into it, but like Shakespeare's clown scenes, they are extremely hard to make humorous to our contemporary audiences. There are also scenes which, presumably, were intended to raise a laugh then, but which, in fact, are now rather touching. But the heaviest dramatic scenes, such as the death scene where father leaves home, once "tear-jerkers", are now rip-roaringly funny. Why has there been such a reversal of values?

There are, of course, continuous changes of taste and fashion. At the same time, there are certain basic things which never seem to change; people are born, grow, die, experience joy, sorrow, aggression, suffering, love and hate. These are the perennial (and universal) facts. They occur regardless of the trappings, forms, customs or mores surrounding each experience. But while these superficialities may become dated, the facts themselves never do.

Consequently, when a play—or a song lyric—relies on transitory superficialities for effect, one may fairly accurately presume that in time these may become quaint, obscure, charming or corny. When on the other hand, plays reflect life in more fundamental forms, these may never date. So what about these violent plays?

Hayes Gordon is director of the Ensemble Theatre, which presents plays "in the round" in its picturesque harbourside theatre on Sydney's North Shore.

There is no doubt that, as a shocker, "The Drunkard" (as well as "Uncle Tom's Cabin") has dated. What will be the fate of "Orpheus Descending" one hundred years hence? Presumably, it, too, will date; but, I believe, not so much as "The Drunkard" has done. Tennessee Williams' mirror reflects a more universal nature in a more universal way. Williams depends less on the special manners of a period than on the underlying drives and deeds they inspire. These are timeless.

Nevertheless, it may be imagined that our great-grandchildren will indeed smirk at our naivete in making such mountainous problems out of infidelity, mob violence and blatant social exchanges. Assuming, of course, that smirking itself has not become an unfashionable expression. ●

* Champerty. The offence of assisting a party in a suit in which one is not naturally interested with a view to receiving part of the disputed property.

OUTLOOK . . . ? UNCERTAIN . . . !

A stage hand for one of Melbourne's large commercial managements looked at the audience a few nights ago and summed up the general position for 1960. "They went away for the Christmas holidays," he said, "and forgot to come back."

This comment is partially true in the case of the Union Theatre Repertory Company, which since August, 1959, has received limited financial and administrative assistance from the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, and which will soon (with the Trust's assistance) be transferring to the new Russell Street Theatre.

by John Sumner, Manager for Victoria

Productions during the present Eighth season have listed impressive titles; "Roots" by Arnold Wesker, "She Stoops to Conquer", Gore Vidal's "Visit to a Small Planet", Shelagh Delaney's "A Taste of Honey" and "Man and Superman". Nevertheless, the large mass of the floating audience seems to have receded.

Nor has this tendency to show little interest in the live theatre been confined alone to the Union Theatre Repertory Company. But whether the reason is television, weather, apathy, or because there is too much to do and see, it is becoming more and more probable that a high standard of contemporary and classical drama may be seen less frequently here.

As this poor response to live drama—depicting, for the most part, the contemporary trends outside this country—seems to be Commonwealth-wide, it is to be hoped that it is simply one of those seasonal slumps that can soon be shaken off; and not proof that Australians are really uninterested in contemporary thought and tastes from overseas. ●

An Attitude of Aunts . . . Sheila Bradley, as Charley's real Aunt, and Gordon Chater, as her impersonator, in a scene from Alexander Archdale's production of the classic farce at the Elizabethan, Newtown.

the illusionists . . . .

(i) the stage designer

by wendy dickson

Spectators who go backstage after a performance in the theatre often express their surprise and sometimes their disappointment that what they see at close-hand on the stage bears little resemblance to the scene presented earlier to the audience.

Under the hard glare of the working lights they see the canvas-covered flats with their painted architectural detail, the broadly painted backcloth, the plywood cut-out trees, the unpolished furniture. A little time before all of this, framed by the proscenium opening and subtly lit, had presented an illusion of perhaps an Edwardian drawing-room, a Parisian street or even a Brooklyn tenement. The reason for the deception is not necessarily one of economy; indeed, the stage facsimile can cost more than the actual article. It is rather a calculated effect to project a reality to the whole audience, the nearest member of which is often as close as twenty feet.

This means, of course, that the set must be convincing when seen at this distance, but it must also be obvious enough to carry to the remotest seat in the theatre.

In actual construction, strength and durability are extremely important, as productions often involve unmerciful and prolonged use of costumes, scenery and props. At the same time, scenery and furniture must be light enough for easy handling. A living room can be constructed by four men in ten minutes. These two factors, governed by a budget, control the choice of materials.

The basic materials in theatrical workshops have not changed greatly in the last century, though recent new plastics have presented time-saving and artistically interesting possibilities.

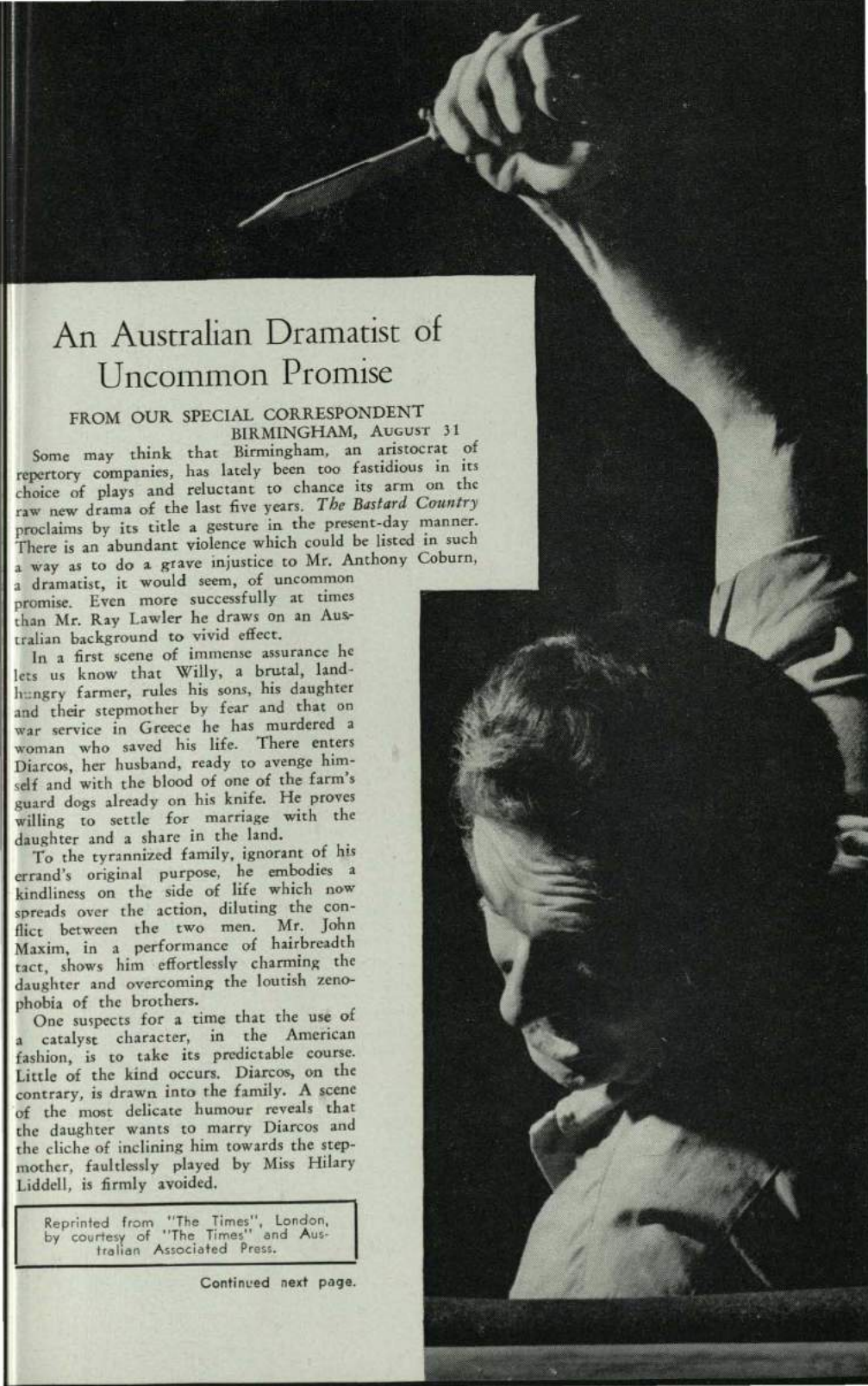
Painted flats, canvas-covered wooden frames, have formed the basis of stage scenery since medieval times and there seems little liklihood of any other method being employed.

The construction problems of the property department are more varied. Here, there is more scope for experiment, as every production presents something new and untried though every property department carries a dependable stock of felt, wire, plaster and cane. Convincing armour is made of sized felt, marble statues of papier-maché, tapestries of painted hessian and elaborate wrought iron of cane.

Curiously enough, costumes still retain their glamour on close inspection, but in some instances an illusion of richness is produced simply and effectively, and the embroidered silk panel admired from a seat in the stalls, one is dismayed to discover, is only painted cotton.

Productions sometimes demand that costumes should be old and worn — the textile painter paints them with dirt, sprays them drab with dye, tears them to destroy their newness and freshness.

The interpretation of a design from the painted picture or cardboard model given by the designer to the material realisation is an enormous responsibility as so easily the illusion and style of a production can be shattered by unconvincing scenery. ●



An Australian Dramatist of Uncommon Promise

FROM OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
BIRMINGHAM, AUGUST 31

Some may think that Birmingham, an aristocrat of repertory companies, has lately been too fastidious in its choice of plays and reluctant to chance its arm on the raw new drama of the last five years. *The Bastard Country* proclaims by its title a gesture in the present-day manner. There is an abundant violence which could be listed in such a way as to do a grave injustice to Mr. Anthony Coburn, a dramatist, it would seem, of uncommon promise. Even more successfully at times than Mr. Ray Lawler he draws on an Australian background to vivid effect.

In a first scene of immense assurance he lets us know that Willy, a brutal, land-hungry farmer, rules his sons, his daughter and their stepmother by fear and that on war service in Greece he has murdered a woman who saved his life. There enters Diarcos, her husband, ready to avenge himself and with the blood of one of the farm's guard dogs already on his knife. He proves willing to settle for marriage with the daughter and a share in the land.

To the tyrannized family, ignorant of his errand's original purpose, he embodies a kindliness on the side of life which now spreads over the action, diluting the conflict between the two men. Mr. John Maxim, in a performance of hairbreadth tact, shows him effortlessly charming the daughter and overcoming the loutish zenophobia of the brothers.

One suspects for a time that the use of a catalyst character, in the American fashion, is to take its predictable course. Little of the kind occurs. Diarcos, on the contrary, is drawn into the family. A scene of the most delicate humour reveals that the daughter wants to marry Diarcos and the cliche of inclining him towards the stepmother, faultlessly played by Miss Hilary Liddell, is firmly avoided.

Reprinted from "The Times", London, by courtesy of "The Times" and Australian Associated Press.

Continued next page.

N.I.D.A. Graduates Already at Work

MANY of the first group of graduates from the National Institute of Dramatic Art are already at work in the theatre—acting, understudying or learning backstage crafts and techniques.

Immediately the first two-year course finished in November, ten graduates received firm offers of employment with the Trust Players, the Union Theatre Repertory Company and with the Young Elizabethan Players.

Since then, another six graduates have found work; two of them at the Perth Festival, two backstage at the Elizabethan Theatre, and one with the Garnet H. Carroll production, "Music Man".

Executive Director of the Trust, Mr. Neil Hutchison, says the proportion of students finding employment is exceptionally high for any school of drama, and reflects the fine standard achieved in the Institute's first two years.

The Institute is jointly sponsored by the Trust, the University of N.S.W., and the Australian Broadcasting Commission, and opened in February, 1959, with the aim of providing full-time and comprehensive training for the professional theatre. ●

Continued from previous page.

The twist is that rule by love, in the manner of Diarcos, brings vulnerability with it. Willy, with the patience of the insane, unable to love, casually surrenders his daughter. "That's got rid of her," he remarks after the wedding. The obduracy of evil brings back the earlier conflict in a more complex form.

Diarcos, evolved beyond the futilities of revenge, is now in the network of relationships his enemy controls by fear. He prepares to spend his wedding night in a hut endangered by bush fires. It says much for the dramatic fabric that his line, "We don't stay here no more", has dignity.

Now Willy becomes the vengeful intruder in a scene technically spoiled by the unlikeliness of the bridegroom's leaving his wife alone, after a love scene, incidentally, of unusual frankness and grace. Increasingly, it appears that the one thing Mr. Coburn has not mastered is the character of Willy himself. Mr. Brian Blessed's sullen and gritty interpretation still leaves an uncertainty. ●

THE AUSTRALIAN
ELIZABETHAN THEATRE
TRUST
wishes all its
Members and Patrons
A
HAPPY CHRISTMAS
and a
NEW YEAR
full of fruitful and enjoyable
theatre-going

We hope that all theatre-goers will find this issue of Trust News interesting and informative. If you know other people who would like to see it, we would be grateful if you could pass it on to them; we would be even more pleased if you mentioned that all members of the Australian Elizabethan Trust receive a copy of Trust News — as well as preferential booking, price concessions, and advance information about coming productions. The cost of membership is £5, which is deductible for income tax purposes, and application should be made to The Secretary, Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, 85 Goulburn Street, Sydney.

The cover picture shows Janne Coghlan (seated foreground), Joan Harris and Frederick Parslow in a scene from the Union Repertory's production of "A Taste of Honey", a first play by Shelagh Delaney, a young English factory worker.