

On stage for 60 years

On Cue
By JOE HILLS

EASTER in New Plymouth sees the 60th anniversary of the New Plymouth Little Theatre Society.

It can claim with pride that it is one of the oldest dramatic societies in New Zealand.

Back in 1933 a drama group was formed with the help of the YWCA and YMCA with the intention of providing more entertainment for young people in New Plymouth.

A group of enthusiasts was soon meeting regularly for play reading, and six months later the New Plymouth Little Theatre Players began plans for their first production.

Two one-act plays, *Mollie* and the *Mil-liner and Poached Eggs*, were produced by Mac Robertson in the YWCA Hall in Powderham Street.

The following year it was found necessary to move to the larger venue of St Mary's Hall and then later to premises in St Aubyn Street.

Productions ceased from 1940 to 1944 because of World War II, although play readings continued, troops were entertained and funds raised for patriotic purposes.

Because the St Aubyn St premises were needed for the war effort the club moved again this time to the lane behind Corrigan's book store.

By the mid 1940s the club had become an incorporated society and was known as the New Plymouth Little Theatre Society Inc., the title it still bears today.

In 1949 the society staged *Dear Ruth* in the Opera House. This risky venture proved such a success that annual productions continued to be presented there.

By 1953 the Society had accumulated a considerable building fund and decided to look for a permanent home.

Eventually the present premises were purchased in time for the Society's 21st Jubilee. These premises were originally P. Kristianson and son's furniture factory in Aubrey St.

The building required extensive alterations, but under the leadership of Evie Atkinson the members began the mammoth task of turning the factory into a theatre.

One year after purchase the Aubrey Street Theatre was officially opened with a temporary stage, patchwork curtains and rudimentary footlights. Little Theatre began operating from its home base.

The Society continues to be very proud



DEAR RUTH: The first Opera House production (1949) starred, from left, Mavis and Joe Sheat, Margaret Bradbury and Dorothy Tobeck.

of traditions begun back in the early days of its existence. Over the years, membership grew to a maximum of 300 adult members and 90 junior members.

Since those early days there has always been concern on the part of Little Theatre to cater for the younger members of the community. There have been drama classes and youth productions.

In 1992 the Society produced two one-act plays performed and crewed entirely by people aged 21 and under.

Technical expertise and a sense of adventure have enabled the Society to experiment with a variety of theatre forms — avant-garde, traditional, comedy.

Backstage crews are often the unsung heroes of productions. The Society is very aware of the contribution they make and tries to make opportunities for those people to extend their creativity.

Set designers and builders have proved their versatility by being able to provide interesting and innovative sets, not only at Little Theatre itself but also in the Opera House, the State Insurance Theatre, the War Memorial Hall, the Whiteley Memorial Church and the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

During the 1960s, productions temporarily ceased to be presented in the Opera House, but with the production of the

pantomime *Aladdin* they resumed, and the pantomime tradition began.

The public looks forward to these pantomime productions, which are presented every second year, sometimes in the Opera house and sometimes in the State Insurance Theatre.

A musical, *Lock Up Your Daughters*, was presented in 1973, followed by *West Side Story* in 1977. Two years later *Godspell* was produced. Now musicals are often performed in the alternate year to a pantomime.

Little Theatre has always tried to cater for its patrons in a variety of ways — one being the theatre restaurant.

Other extra attractions have included special suppers, wine and cheese evenings, cocktail evenings and now the availability of bar facilities for every production.

Over the years the Society has enjoyed producing locally written plays such as Roger Hall's *Aladdin*, Maurice Shadbolt's *Once on Chunuk Bair* and the current Jubilee production of Anthony McCarten's *Via Satellite*.

Little Theatre has maintained a presence in New Plymouth for the past 60 years as a vehicle for local artists to display their talent and make a valuable contribution to the culture of the city.