

# A notable occasion in amateur drama

When the curtain goes up at the New Plymouth Little Theatre's Aubrey St playhouse on Friday night it will be a red-letter day in more ways than one. For the first time in its 32 years of existence the society will be playing in its own theatre with facilities equal to those of any amateur drama group in New Zealand.

The Little Theatre bought its own hall seven years ago, after many frustrating years of pillar-post existence during which it was constantly on the move from one temporary home to another.

But it was only this summer that the society had the resources to undertake badly-needed extensions to its theatre—extensions which involved complete rebuilding of the stage and the addition of vital off-stage facilities.

## Notable double

Friday night's opening will be doubly notable because for the first time the society will be presenting a full-length New Zealand play—Bruce Mason's "The Pohutukawa Tree".

Cydie Strang, who is producing the play, told that the choice was deliberate. "We wanted to do a New Zealand play for this occasion," she said. "The Pohutukawa Tree" has been produced successfully on television and elsewhere, and it seemed ideally suited for our purpose.

Mrs Strang said it would have been virtually impossible to have staged the play in the Little Theatre before the enlargements were made.

"This play calls for 18 people to be on stage together during one of the scenes. It would have been very difficult indeed to have got that number on the little stage we had before."

## Scenery

"Then again, 'The Pohutukawa Tree' calls for three changes of scenery. Even if we could have got the scenery on to the old stage, I don't think we would have had enough room behind the stage for changing scenes."

The alterations to the theatre would have been tackled earlier—but for the expense.

The whole back wall of the theatre has been torn out to extend the building 25 feet for its entire width. This had provided not only an improved and deeper stage, but also valuable space for preparing and storing scenery. This in turn has freed the room previously used for property storage for conversion into dressing rooms.

All this has cost the Little Theatre Society something like £2000.

## Progress

This is quite a considerable sum for any amateur group, particularly so for the

Little Theatre, which has only just finished paying off the mortgage on its property. But no-one doubts that it is money well spent. Looking back, the society has come a long way indeed since those pioneering days in the early 1930's when it started life as a play-reading circle at the New Plymouth Y.W. YMCA.

Foundation members recall that the reading circle quickly grew to such an extent that it was able to branch out on its own, under the title of the New Plymouth Little Theatre Players. The word "players" was later dropped from the title.

The chief difficulty in the early days was always finding somewhere to work. The group's first temporary home was in a building formerly owned by the Union Steam Ship Company in St Aubyn St.

## Bare walls

One club stalwart (she prefers to remain anonymous) told me: "There were just four bare walls and nothing else. We set to work and built a little stage. We also made 60 chairs—some of which are still in use even today. The hall was rather close to the shunting yards, with the result that we often had an unwelcome obligato at our performances."

War intervened, and the members of the Little Theatre turned their energies to producing shows for the army and the air force camps at New Plymouth. About £500 was raised in this way.

Meanwhile, the group had had to move its headquarters to an old printing works in Devon St. But its stay here was short-lived. A waste-paper depot was established in the downstairs part of the building, and the New Plymouth Borough Council ruled that it would be too great a fire hazard to have public shows on the floor above.

Once again the Little Theatre was on the road.

## Austere

Its next home was in austere premises in Petty Lane, off Llardet St.

## Tom Tiddler's ground

### Tame same

There'll come a day, I shouldn't be surprised,  
When all of us are highly organised,  
And we, and all our daughters, sons and wives  
Shall live identically equal lives.  
We all shall scoff, or pray, or eat, or drink,  
Approve or disapprove, or feel, or think,  
Or speak, or hold our peace, or praise, or blame,  
Or anything—we all shall do the same.

We'll set a time to love, a time to hate,  
A time to grieve, a time to celebrate,  
A time to laugh out loud, a time to cry,  
And finally, of course, a time to die.  
And then, not one or two, but everyone  
Will join in doing what is to be done.

Text by Peter Trickett; photos by Ray Pigney

It stayed there for a few years, until the short lease on the rooms ran out.

Yet another move brought the wandering players to Rolland Hall, the Catholic parish hall. All this time the club had been trying to put as much money as possible aside for the purchase of a hall of its own.

When about £2000 was in the kitty, the opportunity came in the shape of the premises of a defunct furniture factory which were put up for sale. The Little Theatre stepped in—and at last found itself with a permanent headquarters.

In the shell of the building—it cost £7000—was only the first step. A stage had to be built, and seating and equipment of all kinds had to be acquired. It is no small feat that the society has been able to pay all this off in the comparatively small space of seven years.

## Handicap

One of the chief shortcomings of the old stage was its size. It was only 14ft deep, and this, together with the absence of scene-shifting equipment, meant that backdrops had to be hung against the rear wall.

To shift scenes in these circumstances was extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Having the backdrop against the wall also made it impossible for an actor to cross the stage unobserved, except during an interval.

## Large sets

Just offstage, the left high property room gives ample space for the preparation and storage of the large sets—even accommodating the huge "flats" needed for

Opera House productions. Removal of the old stage has also allowed more comfortable seating of the 200 seats in the auditorium.

Work on the alterations to the theatre has presented quite a few problems for Mrs Strang and her cast for "The Pohutukawa Tree".

"We started rehearsing in the auditorium while they were constructing the new stage," she said. "At one stage, we were rehearsing while rain was coming through the hole in the end of the building where the end wall had been torn out."

"Fortunately, the operatic society came to our rescue and lent us their hall to rehearse in after we really got desperate when we couldn't hear ourselves speaking above the hammering on the stage."

Mrs Strang said that lack of space had also set back the timetable for the preparation of scenery by at least a fortnight.

When we dropped in on one of the rehearsals this week, work on the theatre was still far from complete. Both stage and auditorium were littered with a conglomeration of odds and ends of



IN THE PROPERTY ROOM, Mesdames P. Upton (left) and E. Atkinson put finishing touches to the symbolic pohutukawa tree which will be one of the main pieces of scenery in the play.

timber, strips of iron, old newspapers, fuse boxes, step-ladders, electric cables, and miscellaneous chairs, tables and boxes. Onstage, volunteers were furiously pushing ahead with the preparation of scenery. Would it all be ready by May 17? I asked Mrs Strang. "I must have looked doubtful. 'Of course it will,' she retorted. "It's got to be!"



THE LITTLE THEATRE SOCIETY'S HEADQUARTERS in Aubrey St. Recently extended at a cost of £2000, the theatre's facilities now bear comparison with those of leading amateur groups anywhere in the country.



REHEARSING A SCENE from the play are (from left) Fred Brattle, Ted Collie and Waima Nathan. Author Bruce Mason has given advice on how some scenes from the play should be interpreted.

WAIMA NATHAN, a fourth-former, who lives at Rangitane Maori Girls' Hostel, is one of three Maoris who play leading roles in "The Pohutukawa Tree". Presented to mark the opening of extensions to the New Plymouth Little Theatre, the play is a penetrating study of race relations in New Zealand.



BALANCED ON A STEPLADDER, high above the stage, committee member, Mr E. F. Atkinson, adjusts one of the nine sets of ropes and pulleys which will be used for quick handling of backdrops and effects on the new stage.

## INSIDE SHOW BUSINESS

PETER O'TOOLE GOES THE  
Baby Kate  
We both went on to New York.  
"We got there just in time for the Becket premiere and

a mere teenager — 11 years ago at the Old Vic. I sent him a cable when he opened in New York last week. Just one word: Copycat.

"Incidentally, did you know my Sian and Richie were born within a few miles of each other in one of those unpronounceable Welsh places? Sian didn't speak English until she was 18. She still speaks to children and dogs