

## QUESTORS PLAY TCHEKHOV

### Finished work in "The Seagull"

Main attraction in The Questors' production of "The Seagull" at their theatre in Mattock-lane, Ealing, this week are the settings, designed by Norman Branson, and the finished performance given by the cast.

The version presented is a translation from the Russian of Tchekhov by Constance Garnett. Though it can hardly be described as having a popular appeal, at least for English audiences, there is in it much to delight both the eye and the ear. It tells the story of a young man whose great ambition is to find new forms for his art and of a young village girl who wants to be a famous actress. They are surrounded by representatives of the old school—the young man's mother, herself a famous actress; the author Trigorin, bored, cynical and helpless against the fascination of lovely women; the old grandfather, whose recollections of his own early ambitions are a constant source of amusement to him, the kindly doctor, everybody's friend; the earnest schoolmaster and his melancholy wife, hopelessly in love with Konstantin the ambitious and unstable youth. It compels attention, despite an inevitable melancholy. Yet the sadness is so delicately woven into the fabric of the play that it moves rather than depresses, for the story of "The Seagull" is withal but the story of much of mankind, told with the vision of the poet.

Members of the cast are: John Gray, Barbara Hutchins, Francis W. Smith, Cyril Box, Mary Ballinger, Bill Landers, Elizabeth Oddie, Elizabeth Dixon, Philip Allen, Tom W. Franklin, Peter Bowen - Evans, John Hitches, Rosemary Grant. The play is produced by Alfred Emmet, and Peter Curtis is associate producer. Peter Ellis is stage manager, with the assistance of Dennis Robinson; Gerald Isenthal and Carl Johnson are responsible for lighting.

There will be a performance to-night at 7.30 p.m., and at the same time on Monday and Tuesday. D.R.

Middlesex County  
Times.

## THE QUESTORS

### "THE SEAGULL"

On Saturday last the Questors, Ealing, presented Tchekhov's play "The Seagull." Tchekhov, if allowed to speak for himself and not regarded as a peculiar or "highbrow" author, has an extraordinarily human appeal. His characters, far from being queer Russians, have a universal quality that is evident in almost every line. It is this quality that the Questors have clearly brought out. In conveying the deeper tragic power of "The Seagull" they have been less successful, for this requires a greater scope of emotional acting art than the company possess. But in Cyril Box they have a Treplev who stands out by his imaginative and restrained portrayal of that tortured, sensitive young man. One feels in Mr. Box's performance something of the smouldering passion which fate prevents Treplev from ever expressing except in the final despairing pistol-shot. Philip Allen's Trigorin, too, is a convincing study of a very human professional writer, unaware of the trail of sorrow which he brings.

The woman hardly match these two. Mary Ballinger's Nina has a delicate charm, but one misses the fire of ambition and passion that sweeps her into Trigorin's arms and underlines the overwhelming pathos of her final scene with Treplev. Elizabeth Dixon stresses Madame Arkadina's self-centredness, but she is seldom the temperamental actress, and Barbara Hutchins's Masha, melancholy enough, does not quite rise to a sense of tragic frustration. The other parts fit in neatly, thanks to Alfred Emmet's realisation that production and balance in Tchekhov are everything. Francis W. Smith is a gentle, humorous, clear-speaking old Sorin. Tom W. Franklin stamps the steward Shamraev with a nicely vulgar provinciality, and Elizabeth Oddie, Bill Landers, and John Gray all have their magical Tchekhovian felike moments. Altogether this production is a very creditable effort to bring out the beauty of great play, and one is grateful for the chance of seeing it.

**THE SEAGULL** by Anton Chekhov (Questors:  
8th Feb.). 15.2.47

Somewhere in his Dramatic Criticisms fifty years ago Bernard Shaw thanks God for the amateur in whom he sees the hope of the future of the theatre. Alfred Emmet's company are made of the stuff to give encouragement to the modern Jeremiah of the theatre. With one exception (Tom W. Franklyn's Shamraev, whose booming voice was out of all proportion to the quiet atmosphere of the production) the performances were of equal standard with the majority of professional repertory companies. Outstanding was Frank W. Smith, whose Sorin was superb. The producer broke down his proscenium and placed much of his action on a forestage; this succeeded so well that the audience were enthralled throughout, and more than once moved to tears. O.T.

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## SHOW SCRAPBOOK

### RENAISSANCE IN NEW YORK

of the 1946-47 season, Chekhov's *The Seagull*. By using an apron stage in the presentation of a realistic play, such a degree of lively intimacy is obtained that the proscenium arch is easily forgotten. Alfred Emmett, this remarkable theatre's capable producer, defeats fuss and restlessness by seating his characters on chairs and achieving, in his groupings, stage pictures reminiscent of Victorian daguerrotypes.

So much for London. I am handing the remainder of this column over to my New York colleague, Harry Granick, whose monthly show news has had to be omitted from this issue, but who has here bigger things to report.

ARTHUR SOUTTER.

BROADWAY'S only recent contributions to the new current of revival in the American theatre have been *All My Sons*, a new play by Arthur Miller, the musical version of Elmer Rice's *Street Scene* (with lyrics by Lang-

THE fuel crisis, its consequences to this magazine, and the difficult time-table imposed by the production of a single March-April issue make it impossible for me to review adequately the shows of the period. I hope my readers and my friends in the theatre world will extend to this column the forbearance with which they have faced all the difficulties of the last two months.

I should particularly have liked to discuss Laurence Olivier's production of Garson Kanin's *Born Yesterday* which still shines at the Garrick like a good deed in the naughty world of London's West End, with everything a comedy should have—faultless construction, crisp dialogue without an unnecessary word, wit, ideas, *characters* and guts; the Arts Theatre's courageous presentation of *Back To Methusaleh*; and the New Yiddish Theatre's presentation of *A Goldfaden Dream*, whose producer, Jacob Rothbaum, told me before the production of his methods and his aim—to help build a world-wide, vital Jewish theatre which, through the use of lighting, music, dancing, mime and gesture, would be universally understandable regardless of language.

The Amateur Questors Theatre, too, has outshone most of the West End with its fourth production



MAY 1947

## Theatre Diary

By Eric J. Batson

HAVING JUST READ MR. HARKER'S STIMULATING remarks in the last number of *The New Man* regarding the right artistic surroundings for cultural activities, I was most agreeably struck by Sydney Carroll's application in a recent issue of *The Sunday Times* of similar ideas to our future National Theatre—"a noble theatrical temple, a proper Cathedral of the Drama, in a perfect setting. How impressively it stands! Serenely beautiful! In spacious surroundings, with a superb approach"! Mr. Carroll makes no apology for the following quotation from Matthew Arnold; neither shall I. "The people will have the theatre; then make it a good one. The Theatre is irresistible. Organize the Theatre." Where, indeed, more than in the Theatre, should we expect to find enthroned Arnold's beloved twin graces, Sweetness and Light? Too often today we find their places usurped by Swing and Black-out. . .

I hope that many of you heard Peter Ustinov's witty answer in the Third Programme to his own question: "Is the Theatre Dying." "The answer," he said, "is 'No.' It is suffering from an ossification of the tear ducts, a cold in the heart, thin blood, excess bite, weak eyes, inflammation of the tongue, and quite simply, chronic constipation." The brilliant young director of the film, "School for Secrets," and author already of several notable plays, indicted the present commercial monopoly that rules in the London theatre—a monopoly, that prefers to run Wilde with the successes of yesteryear than to take a chance with the Shakespeares of tomorrow, with the remarkable result, for example, that Ustinov's own recent tragedy is performed in Oslo before being heard of in London. "The solution, to my mind, is something more than a national theatre. We need that in any case." And Ustinov, as Sybil Thorndike to similar effect on another occasion, goes on to say: "The solution is active government influence in theatrical affairs."

Mr. Ustinov has of course been working in the professional theatre for several years. There is, however, one unoccupied territory of commercialism, even in London, where not only is there no sign of a death but many signs of an active renaissance, and that is in the amateur theatre. That is why this column intends to bring to your notice not only what is good in the professional theatre (and there is much), but also the enterprising efforts of such energetic workers as the Tavistock Repertory Company—with one production a month—and the Questors Theatre, Ealing—with about nine or ten performances of a serious play every two months or so.

The recent performances by the Questors of one of Tchekov's most beautiful plays, "The Seagull," are indubitable proof to all who witnessed them of the splendid strides forward made by the amateur movement during these last few years. There was no overacting, little false emphasis. Indeed, Alfred Emmet's production, when I saw it at its seventh performance, fell not far short

of West End production standards, which are admittedly high. I say this, too, after having seen the memorable production of this play at the New Theatre, with John Gielgud and Edith Evans, some years back. What was lacking was more in the way of stage machinery than individual performance, and as it was the Questors made exemplary use of their small stage, to which had been added an "apron." Elizabeth Dixon gave a beautifully rounded and mature performance as Mme. Arkadina, Cyril Box and Mary Ballinger brought considerable talent and sympathy to the roles of the young lovers, and I very much liked Francis W. Smith as the elderly Sorin, who like so many other Tchekovian characters—and not a few of ourselves these days—is conscious of how little he has made of life's opportunities. Shakespeare, says Shaw, could portray human weakness, not its strength. Perhaps that helps to account for part of Shakespeare's greatness: it certainly does for part of Tchekov's.

In "Winterset," produced by Richard Taylor at the Tavistock Little Theatre, Maxwell Anderson takes a sordid American gangster theme and lifts it into the realm of poetry, leaving us with an impression not dissimilar to that left by Greek tragedy, without perhaps the same sense of "purge." There were several notable performances, including Frank Smith's deranged judge and Frank Berg's sinister gunman, and the production itself was most imaginative.

In the West End, "The Eagle has Two Heads" is the story of a tragic queen, who finds grief beautiful, confronted by a young assassin-poet "ravished by a cold idea." But beautiful grief is also ravishing, and between them they rear an "eagle with two heads," both of them bloody and bowed at the tempestuous final curtain. I was surprised that this warm kind of passionate nonsense with its trappings of romantic woe could ever again strike fire from my cold Shavian box—but it did. Maybe it was Ronald Duncan's poetic adaptation of Jean Cocteau's original (now showing in Paris); maybe it was Murray Macdonald's fine production; or (most likely) it was Ellen Herlie's splendid performance. Only at the very end was I brought down to earth by thoughts of the Shavian maxim that death is nearly always a mistake on the stage. M. Cocteau, having rewritten Sophocles in "The Infernal Machine," in this play seeks to revive the glories of the Hugoesque drama of the mid-19th century, and probably makes it as acceptable as it ever can be again to us who have been educated on the quiet realism of Ibsen, of Tchekov, and—slightly noisier and larger than life—of Shaw. Well, it's nice to have a change sometimes, and poetry is always welcome in the theatre—whether it be that of "Winterset" or of "The Eagle has Two Heads." In fact, I believe Mr. T. S. Eliot has called it the sole guarantee of dramatic immortality.