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## Wanted—A National Theatre

I WOULD like to pass comment on an article in *The ABC Weekly* (23/1/43), in which the recently concluded Verse Play Competition, won by Douglas Stewart with *The Golden Lover*, was discussed.

The A.B.C.'s Federal Controller of Productions (Mr. F. D. Clewlow) is reported as saying that after the Shakespearean and Restoration periods the theatre, as a medium for the poet, lost its popularity and died off.

That is incorrect. On the contrary, some of the greatest verse-plays ever written are currently flowing from pens of contemporary poets.

I would refer Mr. Clewlow to two well-known playwrights who have collaborated successfully—W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood. Their plays, *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, *The Ascent of F6* (which was produced in Melbourne by the late Gregan McMahon) and *On the Frontier* have the dramatic genre which not only raises them above the popular theatre, but sends them unquestionably into posterity as a fertile theatrical achievement.

*The Dance of Death*, by W. H. Auden, himself recognised as the Shakespeare of this generation, is probably the most original verse-play yet to have reached the stage.

There are many other verse-plays which could be named. There is the amazing work of T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, and his more recent *The Family Reunion*.

Sean O'Casey, well-known Irish playwright, has also enjoyed considerable success with *The Star Turns Red*, and further proof of the modern poet's activity in the expressionist theatre is *Trial of a Judge*, by Stephen Spender.

Then there are the virile works of Louis MacNeice, not to mention the long poem, rather than a verse-play, by Cecil Day Lewis, *Noah and the Waters*.

I feel strongly about the Australian theatre. Instead of encouraging Australian playwrights, producers are content to play the hits of America and England; anything as long as it carries a New York critic's approval or a London run for so many weeks. And so it is to the radio that the Australian playwright must turn for any recognition; and then from the National stations.

People say there will never be an Australian theatre. Why? If a country like Sweden with its population some-

thing the same as ours can offer to the world from its National Theatre a playwright like Ibsen; if, out of the profit-searching maelstrom of Broadway the artistic Theatre Guild and the Group Theatre can be born, and successfully too; well, anything can happen, and it should be quite possible to institute a truly Australian National Theatre.

"Broadcasting," Mr. Clewlow is reported as having said, "has brought a new opportunity. Through it the poet can use the most easily understood of all instruments, the human voice, with perhaps greater advantage than in the theatre."

This latter statement concerning the human voice is absolutely correct. Radio can twist the play, by way of a few explanatory words, from the ground to the interior of a bomber, from London to Leningrad—all in a matter of seconds.

But a play is written to be acted in the first place; not spoken. It is not a series of explanations of settings. In fact, the less of this the better the play.

And as for opportunity: in my opinion it has brought no new opportunities that weren't already in the theatre. It has merely provided a market for the Australian playwright's work. If it were possible for a truly Australian National Theatre to be initiated, with Australians playing plays written by Australians for Australians and about Australia, I am sure the radio would be wallowing in the wake of this new movement; not *vice versa*, as is the case to-day.

It is said among newspaper men that the spoken word of radio will never oust the printed word of the newspaper. The same applies with drama. The spoken play can never hope to achieve the dramatic effect of the live-show, and so, remembering this, with a knowledge of the extent to which radio can experiment and at the same time having in mind the future relationship which radio and the live-show will enjoy, let us trust in our poets that they will aim not to create an Australian National Theatre over the radio, but a National Theatre true to life from which radio can occasionally adapt the inevitable great Australian plays to come.

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