

# **new theatre**



# • Art and Propaganda

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The New Theatre is a workers' Theatre. In its early years its basic philosophy was proudly blazoned across the proscenium, under the slogan "Art is a Weapon." It flourished by warning the Australian people of the dangers of Fascism. During the years of the war against Fascism, the New Theatre merged with the mighty stream of National Unity. The defeat of the Axis marked an important stage in the anti-Fascist struggle, but it did not end it. Fascism is a desperate endeavour to prop up a crumbling social system. The system continues to crumble, and present attempts to prop it up are no less desperate than were those of the past. The Class struggle, temporarily transformed into a war against Germany, Italy and Japan, has resumed its national and international characteristics. Since the end of the war, the Australian people have waged some important struggles for defence of union organisation, and in pursuit of higher standards of living. With real wages being constantly cut by rising prices, and with more and more anti-democratic legislation littering the statute books, all the symptoms point to even more violent struggles in the immediate future.

In this situation the New Theatre has a grave responsibility. The New Theatre was born as part of a world-wide movement, in which artists, profoundly affected by the shock of the depression, began to pay sympathetic attention to the problems of the working class; 1935 saw the publication of an "anthology of Proletarian literature," and an outcrop of plays like Odets' "Waiting for Lefty," and Ben Bengal's "Plant in the Sun." This movement in Drama, of course, was not just a simple product of the depression. Its roots go right back into the history of the Theatre. Just as 40 years before, the emergence of Shaw into the English theatre was not just simply a result of the end of England's world monopoly of industrial production. Shaw was greatly influenced by the social realism of Ibsen; but it is true to say that the emergence of Shaw and other Shavian progressives can be traced to contemporary social developments. At the end of the 19th Century England suddenly became conscious that a new class had appeared in society—namely, the Intelligentsia. Suddenly awakening to the realisation that English industry no longer led the world, and that unearned incomes were becoming less accessible, writers and scientists began to criticise the English social structure. This intelligentsia had many facets, and Shaw is only one, although an important one. But in all its facets the concepts of this group never reached beyond the confines of capitalism. Shaw, it is true, proclaimed himself a socialist, but his drama has no socialist content. His "Plays Unpleasant" all treat of facets of English social life, in a way calculated to goad the ruling class into rectifying obvious absurdities.

ties. None of them is calculated to rouse mass demands for a complete change in the structure of society.

This is the basic difference between the Social realists of the late 19th century, and the "Proletarian" dramatists of the Thirties. In the former case the critics were directing their talents to the elimination of absurd inefficiency from Capitalist society; in the latter case the artists based themselves on the creation of a higher social order with a new and better society. It is to this philosophy of art that the New Theatre subscribes.

Art is essentially a mode of self-expression—an attempt by man to crystallise his experience; that is, his emotional and intellectual reaction to his environment. The value of the artist to society is that because of the intensity of his experience he makes man more conscious of reality. In expressing his own experience, he recreates and crystallises life, so that all its facets are clearly visible. This is as true of abstract art form, such as music, as it is of concrete form, like drama. The man who hears a Beethoven sonata can receive added insight into his own emotional potential. As Joseph Freeman expresses it, "The specific external motives which prompted Beethoven to compose the *Apassionata* may no longer exist, yet the same mood of passion and longing may be aroused in us by other things, and it is that mood which we recognise in the composition." The "*Apassionata*" was the product of a specific environment. Yet, although we are still capable of emotional response to that music, modern composers write entirely differently from Beethoven. Why? Because while their emotional and intellectual equipment is similar to that of musicians of the 18th century, their environment is basically different. Hence their experience has changed; hence their art has changed.

Drama is a much more concrete art medium, with perhaps the widest possible popular base. It uses man's simplest medium of communication, language, and does not even demand literacy of the audience. It does not invoke emotions in the abstract, but always in relation to some specific situation. It does not aim merely to create moods, but it endeavours to create characters—whole, full-blooded people, who, in order to live, must be given an environment. The dramatist endeavours to extract from his experience a crystallisation of life, which he presents to his audience. With the new upsurge heralded by the formation in America of such groups as the "Group Theatre," "New Theatre," in England, of the "Unity Theatre," and in Australia of the "New Theatre," it was inevitable that much bad as well as good drama would result. Many intellectuals, burning with anger from their experiences in the depression, hastened to express that anger in drama or novel. Choosing themes suitable to their new-found sympathy with the working class, they frequently tried to write about events completely outside the gambit of their own experience. The results were bad plays (or novels) which received unwarranted attention from the "critics," and which were used to prove the point that "propaganda and art were incompatible." But such plays were not proletarian literature. They were products of one section of society (intellectuals, wealthy liberals,

etc.) writing drama about the working class. They prove nothing, except to confirm that no artist can create from books—experience must be the touchstone of his creation. Thus, "Waiting for Lefty," written expressly for propaganda purposes, measures up to the demands of real drama, because its author at that time was identified with the working class. The taxi drivers, on strike, were within the scope of his experience. Similarly, Gow and D'Usseau's "Deep Are the Roots" is a work of art which the New Theatre was proud to present. Although the viewpoint of the writers was not entirely that of the working class, the play rings with sincerity. Again, the same touchstone would classify T. S. Elliot's "Wasteland" as a work of art (ruling class art) despite its propaganda of pessimism and despair.

Each one of these works is both art and propaganda, because in so far as it awakens man to an increased awareness of himself as part of reality all art is propaganda. But while art is creative, pamphleteering is descriptive. But this does not mean that art is free from class alignments. In periods of relative class stability such as the Elizabethan age in England, it is possible for an artist to be less directly tied with classes. It is possible for him to achieve a greater universality of experience. But even Shakespeare did not write from a vacuum. His preoccupation with the destiny of great and weak individuals, his abiding interest in kingship, his profound analysis of merchants and moneylenders—all these reflect the main experiences of the young virile capitalist class. But no artist can achieve even Shakespeare's relative vantage point today. There are no oases of peace from which the artist can observe life. An analysis of those artists who claim to be above class will always expose them as lackeys of the ruling class—spreading a gospel of defeatism, or distributing the dope of escapism. A play is a goad to action. In choosing a play, then, the New Theatre is concerned with two considerations: Is it art, and is it socially valuable art? And we judge that by the action it invokes.

We do not believe that the decay of capitalism is the end of civilisation, to be accepted with defeatism or to be combated with terrorism. Therefore our stage is not used to propagate such ideas.

We do not believe that the world is so vile that humanity's only hope is to escape from it into the realm of make believe.

Therefore our stage is not used for the injection of sedatives.

We do believe that a new social order is being built within the ruins of the old. The builders are the workers and the useful people of this society, and in them lies the hope of mankind and its culture.

We do, therefore, endeavour to use our stage for the presentation of plays which inspire hope for the future, and the courage to go forward and seize it,

## • The First 15 Years

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Born as part of the Workers' Art Club in 1933, the New Theatre has now established itself as one of the leading little theatres in Sydney. Its first major production was Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion," presented at the King's Hall on the 12th July, 1934. So successful was it, that it was decided to play the next production, "On the Rocks," "for two nights running," as their publicity leaflet expressed it. Today the New Theatre shows three nights a week, every week of the year, and their audiences average between 5,000 and 7,000.

The progress represented by these figures could not be graphed as a steady incline, but is the result of two main factors: constant and close attention to the raising of the artistic level, and the identification of the theatre with the mass movement of the people.

It was with the production of "Waiting for Lefty" that the theatre sprang into overnight prominence. "Polite" theatrical circles were amazed and fascinated by the "passionate and sensitive" presentation of Clifford Odets' revolutionary one-acter. "The Home," a large and glossy magazine published by the "Sydney Morning Herald," devoted two pages to photographs of the production. Sydney Tomholt, writing in the same issue, said: "Nowhere in Australia is the impulse of the drama more vital than in the work of the New Theatre League. . . . No play has been staged in Sydney with such authentic atmosphere or with more ardour. Produced by the recognised and growing theatre of the working man, its dialogue is alive and afire with passion, its emotional impact terrific. Here is provocative drama at its strongest."

It was with this play that the theatre won its first Eisteddfod in 1936. This award caused a great stir in the art circles, certain people complaining bitterly about the play's "obscenity." But the adjudica-

tors, Miss Betty Shaw and Mr. F. J. Montague, held there was nothing objectionable in the script. The theatre went on to win Eisteddfods in 1938, 1939, and 1940, as well as winning the Fay Compton Cup in 1939.

But while the members of the New Theatre do not under-estimate the importance of these artistic achievements, the main basis of their increased prestige lies in the theatre's consistent and courageous championing of the people's causes.

On 22nd July, 1936, the New Theatre League presented Clifford Odets' "Till the Day I Die" at the Savoy Theatre. Apparently news of the performance reached the German Consul General, Dr. Asmis, because at 5 o'clock on the afternoon of the 22nd, League Secretary Victor Arnold was informed by the Chief Secretary's Department that the play could not go on.

The Theatre decided to test this censorship in the court of public opinion and went ahead with the performance. Police did try to stop the play, but in the face of a unanimous demand from the audience they discreetly allowed it to continue, satisfying themselves with summoning Victor Arnold and fining him £3. The sequel was a tremendous mass movement, involving hundreds of private performances of the play at the League club-rooms in 36 Pitt Street, and elsewhere. Questionnaires were issued to audiences asking their opinion as to whether the ban was justified, and out of the thousands issued to doctors, lawyers, university professors, workers, artists, politicians and trade union officials, no more than four answered "Yes." It was revealed that Chief Secretary Chaffey had not even read the play, and he refused an invitation to attend a private performance. The Press joined the mass protest, and the name of the New Theatre featured in the

editorials of practically every leading paper in Australia. Despite this the ban was extended to Melbourne in November, where the Melbourne New Theatre ran a similar campaign. In Perth, the Workers' Art Guild had presented the play in February, 1936, and the performance had been the occasion for a demonstration by the Fascist "Blue Shirts."

Despite the width and depth of the mass protest, however, reaction was not to be shaken. The Nazis and Fascists were at that time "stamping out Communism in Spain," and their friends in high places were determined to protect them from "offensive" exposures like Odets' play. Consequently the ban was not lifted until 1941, when the Labour Chief Secretary, Baddeley, gave permission for public performances. In 1940, 12 months after the outbreak of the war against the Nazis, the U.A.P. Chief Secretary, Tonking, still refused permission for the play. But in those five years, over 150 private performances of the play were given, and tens of thousands of people learnt of the menace of Fascism. The ban had introduced the New Theatre League to a tremendous audience.

This was not the only mass campaign in which the Theatre figured in these years. In 1938 wharf labourers at Port Kembla refused to load the S.S. Dalfram with pig iron for Japan. The Federal U.A.P. Government took all necessary steps to bludgeon them into acquiescence. The notorious Workers' Transport (Dog Collar) Act was invoked, and 2KY was banned from the air because its news commentator, J. K. Morley, had criticised the B.H.P.

The Theatre sprang into the resulting movement. A special play, "War on the Waterfront," was written, and permission sought to present it in the Domain. When permission was refused the Theatre went ahead, and five members were fined £5 each. The play was taken to Port Kembla and Wollongong and played on the streets. Similar agitation propaganda sketches were featured in the struggle against Langism. These plays, written to be played without props, from the backs of lorries or from the sidewalks attracted

much attention and always contained a strong political punch. They were prominent features of both the Hurstville and Waverley by-elections, where victories by Messrs. Evatt and C. E. Martin precipitated Lang's downfall.

The Theatre, too, played a vigorous part in the fight for peace. In spite of shaky finances, the Conservatorium was hired again and again for the presentation of anti-war and anti-Fascist plays such as "Trumpets of Wrath," "Blood on the Moon," and perhaps our greatest triumph, "Bury the Dead."

Then when the rosy vistas of peace, painted by the appeasers, were blotted out by the rubble of war, the Theatre entered the struggle to make the war an anti-Fascist war. Their political revue, "I'd Rather Be Left," mercilessly exposed the Fascist leanings and the profiteering of the leaders of the "Phoney War."

With the defeat of the Menzies' Government, the signing of the British-Soviet



Jerome Levy in "TILL THE DAY I DIE," by Clifford Odets.

20 years' friendship pact, and the treacherous Japanese attack, the tasks of the Theatre changed. The war had now become a really democratic struggle, and the New Theatre plunged vigorously into the fight. Co-operating with the newly-formed Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, they took plays such as "According to Plan" and "Tomorrow the World" and produced them in military camps often under the most primitive conditions. They assisted in War Loan rallies and sent scripts and advice to soldiers in advanced areas to help maintain morale, the essential for victory.

Such activities, over such a long period, had their results. By 1943 the Club premises at 36 Pitt Street were too small, and an exchange was made with the International Seamen's Club, who had premises in Castlereagh Street. Some money was raised, but in the main the task of changing the big empty rooms into a theatre was performed by the voluntary toil of the members. Nor was this work allowed to interfere with the important work with C.E.M.A. It was with justifiable pride and brave hopes for the future that the Theatre announced the opening of its new premises in July, 1943, with an all-Australian revue, "The Marx of Time," written by a member of the theatre. But they were not to enjoy their triumph long. Coming up on the day of a performance, the Theatre Secretary found Council employees busily wrecking all the work they had done—tearing up the stage, pulling down the lights and

curtains, ripping off the switchboard. One night's performance was missed, but members worked all day and night to repair the damage and were able to show next night. To conform with the regulations, the stage was transformed so that it was no longer a fixture, and other amendments were made. Then the Theatre entered a war of attrition to retain possession of the premises—a war in which they were victorious.

During the war years the New Theatre produced, and later revived, a Moliere season, which proved a tremendous success with the culture-hungry Sydneysiders. For the first time in its history the Theatre knew prosperity. A fund was opened for the buying, renting or building of a new Theatre, and in a very short time friends subscribed £300—but neither building nor land could be obtained—so the money remains in trust pending that happy time. Since the war, the Theatre, in common with theatres everywhere, has had difficulty in finding plays—but as a glance at our list of productions reveals, the difficulty has not been insuperable. The sharpening struggles of the people have once more embraced the Theatre—£50 has been collected for the Queensland strikers, the old agitation propaganda plays are reappearing at Prices meetings, trade union and political rallies. The Theatre maintains its traditions—a theatre of the people; it has grown and flourished by participating in the struggles of the people. It can never dishonour that tradition and survive.