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I WOULD like to pass comment on an article in The ABC Weekly (23/1/43), in which the recently concluded Verse Play Competition 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 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, Ascent of F6 (which, incidentally, 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 undoubtedly into posterity as a fertile theatrical achievement.

The Dame 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, for example, the verse-play, Poet in Exile, by T. S. Eliot, and his more recent The Family Reunion.

Seán O'Casey, well-known Irish playwright, has also enjoyed considerable success - The Star of the Sea, and further proof of the modern poet's activity in the expressionist theatre is The Juror, by Stephen Spender.

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

I feel strongly about the Australian theatre. Instead of encouraging Australian playwrights, producers are content to play the hits of American and English; 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 something the same as ours can offer to the world 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, "is the new medium for the poet. Through it the poet can use the most easily understood of all instruments, the human voice, with never greater advantage than in the theatre."

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. Radio has merely provided a market for a new medium for the artistic work. If it were possible for a truly Australian National Theatre to be initiated, with Australians playing plays written by Australians, that is the radio that I am speaking of - and I am not speaking of anything as long as it carries a New York critic's approval or a London run for so many weeks.

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 all 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 radio."

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