

REVIEWS

THEATRE

The Old Vic and the new Sadlers Wells have closed after a triumphant season. Of their opera, I cannot speak from personal knowledge, but the fact that Sir Thomas Beecham has agreed to conduct for them next autumn is testimony enough. In their Shakespeare plays they reached a hitherto unprecedented standard, technically equal to anything in the West End. The service of producers of genius (notably Mr. Harcourt Williams) was in no way hampered by small financial resources, which, on the contrary, produced just that resistance of the material that is one of the essentials of creative art. As a result *Romeo and Juliet*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest*—to pick out favourites—remain memories of sheer beauty in their swift continuity, their accomplished acting and the clean lines and lovely colours of their settings. But the Vic and Wells mean more than Shakespeare productions; they have produced a Shakespeare audience. In majority local, composed of working men and women, many of them of the very poor, with a large sprinkling of children, their quickness of uptake, their tension in passages of high emotion, their immediate response to every joke, however archaic in expression (and the vocabulary of the people contains many vigorous words that have grown archaic only for the 'refained'), in short, the intimate union between stage and public is something to be found nowhere else. Let Komisarjevsky carry his fashionable bolshevism to Stratford. Here is the true Shakespeare, played to his own people.

To this the revival of *The Rivals* at the Embassy was a curious contrast. For Sheridan wrote for an audience that is no more. The theatre should have been filled with quizzing beaux and languishing elegance. Beautifully produced, with a porcelain delicacy, admirably acted (Lady Tree was a perfect *Mrs. Malaprop*), it remained simply a revival. It is besides, a writer's play, not the sheer theatre stuff of the masters. There are two essentials to the really great play. It must have been conceived not as a series of conversations, nor as words written or spoken, but immediately in the living material of the characters as they will be presented. And its course must have the tension of a drawn bow-string, aiming inevitably towards the climax from the moment the curtain rises. In both Shakespeare and Molière at their best the action starts moving from the first lines, and that is why (though legions of school-teachers have done their best to obscure the fact) there is rarely a dull moment in either.

B. B. C.