

CHILDREN'S THEATRE IN ABERDEEN

by Catherine Hollingworth

In "Tabs", September, 1959, page 20, there is a lament on the absence of children's theatres in Britain. There is just one—in Aberdeen. Miss Hollingworth is Superintendent of Speech Therapy and Speech Training and it is to her more than anyone else, we suspect, that the children of Aberdeen owe their good fortune.

When the Town Council of Aberdeen confirmed the appointment of a teacher of Speech and Drama in 1941 no one could then have foreseen the developments that were to take place in connection with this appointment. At that time Speech and Drama were still something of a frill, perhaps less so in England than in Scotland where there is still a great emphasis on academic education.

Criticism is frequently levelled against citizens who do not support the "living" theatre, but if people have never been introduced to this medium of entertainment how can this blame be justified if from their childhood upwards they have become conditioned to the cinema and television? It is not likely that they will be interested in something about which they are ignorant. They are satisfied with the form of entertainment with which they are familiar.

In 1942 a group of Aberdeen school teachers interested in the theatre co-operated with the specialist teacher of Speech and Drama, and the first step was taken towards presenting suitable plays of good quality for children in the 8-12 age group. This Children's Theatre Group was in a peculiarly strong position. They were employed by the local Education Committee; they worked in the schools; they were enthusiastic and, with the ability they had in acting and the direction from a person trained and experienced in dramatic work for children's audiences, they established the basis of what has now become an important part of education in the city. These teachers performed plays, mimes, etc., at different seasons of the year in various school theatres; and for the children the burning question became, "What's on next Saturday?" The Corporation of the City of Aberdeen, recognising the importance of this work made available the dining hall of the Trades College. This was not always convenient, but it was a place that could be called the "Children's Theatre" and on Saturdays it became the Mecca of hundreds of children.

During the years since 1941 the Department of Speech and Drama has increased from one solitary teacher to thirteen, who are under the direction of the Superintendent of Speech and Drama. With this professionally-trained staff it has been possible to consider the work of the Children's Theatre from a much wider aspect. Instead of depending on the good will and voluntary work of class teachers, a Children's Theatre Organisation was established in 1949.

The Annual Non-Competitive Festival of Poetry, Drama, Puppetry and Mime had been growing and expanding until this venture occupied the space of a week with approximately 2,500