

THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

The Delusions of Musical Comedy

THE theatre is a Maypole 'round which dances, season after season, a motley but resolute crew of delusions. The dance this year is no less breezy than heretofore and the frolickers no less eccentric. Of the latter, five in particular stand out.

The first of these cavorting delusions, a persistent leftover from last season and still patted affectionately on the back by a majority of the critics, is that the trouble with many of the newer playwrights is that they have not learned the business of sound play construction and that, as a consequence, their plays, even when possessed of intermittent merits, miss fire. This, in most instances, is sheer critical twaddle. The real trouble with the playwrights in question is not that they have not mastered the dramaturgical technique but that, even were they to be veritable hounds at it, their mental, spiritual, emotional and imaginative quotient is woefully deficient.

It is, of course, perfectly true that a knowledge of technique is occasionally valuable, but that it is

a prime essential is far from true. Genius, or merely unusual talent, may be ignorant of it or may loftily wave it aside and nonetheless produce plays of high esteem. Gorki's admittedly best play is almost amateurish technically, at least in the sense that the critics understand the word. Most of Shaw's plays would have been marked G-minus by dramaturgical professors of the George Pierce Baker school. As a matter of record, Maurine Watkins' admirable satirical farce, *Chicago*, which subsequently proved a great success in the theatre, was so marked by Baker when the author, a member of his class, submitted it to him for his criticism. Wedekind's best play is a technical botch and so, to the pundits of his day, was Georg Kaiser's. And Strindberg's *The Dream Play* originally had the critics yelling for mama.

Saroyan is the latest goat of the technical assayers. If only he obeyed the dramatic rules, they say, his plays would be what they should be. As Bobby Clark exclaimed recently in *All Men Are*

Alike, oh, bal — derdash! If Saroyan wrote his plays according to the stricter dramaturgical formula, they would be unspeakably bad. One of their greatest virtues is their very neglect of that formula. Those who believe the opposite are those who insist that poetry is not poetry unless it rhymes. Some of the very worst plays in the theatre of the last few years have been technically perfect. And some of the very best have been as technically imperfect as Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

A second prancing delusion is that farce must inevitably and invariably be paced very much quicker than comedy. This has resulted in some of the most painful directorial antics experienced by audiences and critics. A number of the most effective and successful farces have been wisely directed not as if they were Eva Tanguay and Betty Hutton getting drunk on quicksilver cocktails but as if they were little different from straight, nimble comedy. *You Can't Take It With You* is one example; *Boy Meets Girl* is largely another; *Sailor, Beware* is still another; and *A Slight Case Of Murder* is surely another still.

A third gallumphing delusion, this season again brought into focus

by Frederick Hazlitt Brennan, indignant over criticism of his play, *The Wookey*, is that, in Mr. Brennan's words, "a writer must be an expert on any subject he uses as backbone for a play." Continues Mr. Brennan, "It is a cliché that will never, apparently, die." Mr. Brennan, though taken to sarcastic task by certain critics, is right. Mr. Brennan, however and nevertheless, is at the same time himself no proof of his contention, since his play is a very bad play in great part because he evidently knows little of the subject he has used as backbone for it.

Otherwise, the dogged cliché of which he speaks is frequently just what he says it is. Many playwrights have written reputable plays in spite of it. The case of Shakespeare is altogether too obvious to mention. So let us rather turn to the names of such assorted moderns as Andreyev (*Savva*), Hauptmann (*Elga*), Schnitzler (*Reigen*), Moody (*The Great Divide*), Shaw (*Mrs. Warren's Profession*), Strindberg (*Simoom*), Ibsen (*Ghosts*), Wedekind (*Pandora's Box*), O'Neill (*All God's Chillun Got Wings*) and the like.

The fourth pirouetting delusion, still coddled by certain of our producers, is that audiences of a democratic nation are ever snob-

bishly fascinated by the stage spectacle of royalty. Give them a play about kings and queens, preferably English, or even one of the drawing-room species filled with lesser titles, and the poor, pushing louts will gape with such wide-mouthed awe that even the Park Avenue dowagers' false teeth will fall out. That this was once, alas, true, there is no gainsaying. But that it is true any longer, save the play itself be something pretty superior, is believed only by the producers in question, and then only until they take a look at their first-night customers somewhere around ten o'clock.

The fact of the matter seems to be that not only are today's American audiences not fascinated by such toady-bait but infinitely bored and no little downright irritated. This was once again proved in the case of Gilbert Miller's production of the Canfield-Borden-Ginsbury *Anne of England*, which, though itself a wretched play, sought nonetheless to fetch the local bourgeoisie with enough purple delicatessen to floor even all the headwaiters at the St. Regis and the Monte Carlo night club. And what, incidentally, was also evidently proved is that, for all their sympathy with the present cause of Britain, local audiences are be-

coming fed up on stage rhapsodies to the deathless glory of dear old England, in which this particular exhibit was hardly frugal. When they discharged the third of such molasses squirts on the opening night, W. Somerset Maugham, a highly intelligent and cosmopolitan Englishman, couldn't help letting out a humorously ironic grunt on behalf of his suffering American friends in the house.

Plays about titled England, whether palace or merely polite parlor, have with minor exception become just a little ridiculous to the local bums. The spectacle of elaborate court ceremonial, of humility in the presence of a jewelled head ornament, of kowtow to swell monikers, or of only Sir Basil Flummery languidly sipping a club whiskey and soda with Sir Ivor Wishwash strikes them as superfluity and bad manners, and slightly unnecessary and even offensive in a day and time of democratic death struggle, and more particularly in a day and time of lease-lend, auxiliary naval arms, and frankfurter picnics at Hyde Park.

Mr. Miller is well known for his admiration of the English and for his regard for everything English, but he can do England no greater disservice than producing before

American audiences plays like the one under discussion, which obliquely make even the Anglophiles in those audiences feel like jumping to their feet and, in annoyance, singing *The Star Spangled Banner* at the tops of their lungs. And if Mr. Miller doesn't believe it, just let him take a canvass of the honest reactions of even his snobbish first-night audience.

II

With the fifth capering delusion, we come to the main and profound business of this month's meeting, to wit, the popular idea that a great deal of the success of a musical show these days depends upon the good looks of the girls. No one wishes it were true more than your present Socrates, as is widely and sufficiently known, but he fears it is an even greater delusion than any of the others hereinbefore noted.

Of all the successful musical shows put on hereabout in the last five years, two and only two of the lot disclosed any girls who had anything at all in the way of looks above the modest average, one being *Louisiana Purchase* and the other, Ed Wynn's *Boys And Girls Together*, and the latter, at that, falling back on some especially

hired models to provide relief from the chorus piefaces and pianolegs. The girls in one of the latest successes, *Best Foot Forward*, though youngsters, are with one single solitary exception of a pulchritude level hardly higher than that encountered among Childs waitresses or this year's society debutantes. *Hellzapoppin*, the biggest success in American musical show history, offers not so much as a single girl who wouldn't scare a policeman. *Panama Hattie*, a gold mine, has maybe a couple in the chorus who could get by if the shade on the lamp were thick enough; *Cabin In The Sky* had two colored babies that weren't half-bad; *Pal Joey* hasn't so much as one girl to wobble the connoisseur; and so with the rest both last season and this.

The fact seems to be that the simon-pure girl-show is, at least temporarily, a thing of the past and that its place in the public affection has been taken either by the comedian show or the song and dance show, irrespective of the personal pull of the girls in them. The girls in themselves are no longer enough, as Earl Carroll not long ago found out when he returned to town with enough hot-lookers to have satisfied two or three old Ziegfeld *Follies*, but with,

unfortunately, nothing else. A single Victor Moore or Ed Wynn or Eddie Cantor today draws more trade than any returned-to-earth eye-walloping George Lederer chorus possibly could, and Ethel Waters singing *Taking A Chance On Love*, the while a quorum of spindle-shanked pickaninnies kick themselves into a frenzy, galvanizes a house to an even greater degree than the Bonnie Maginns, Edna Chases, Olive Thomases and Kay Laurels used to.

A second, subsidiary critical delusion in regard to musical shows is that there is something exceptionally stimulating and overwhelmingly attractive about youth. You should have read all save two of the New York newspaper reviewers' testimonials to *Best Foot Forward*, with its cast made up almost entirely of girls and boys who haven't yet achieved the age of twenty!

While I am perfectly willing to agree that youth is in some cases refreshing, and in some others even animating, it can nevertheless be taken only in small doses. A lot of youth in one big gob is pretty trying as, at the other extreme, a lot of age in single assembly is. A whole stageful of it conducting itself for two uninterrupted hours after the forbiddingly effervescent pattern is rather more than one

can calmly take. One's feeling under the circumstances is inclined to be much of a piece with that induced by being compelled to bounce up and down for a couple of hours on a gymnasium electric horse the while an attendant ceaselessly keeps singing *Hail, Hail, The Gang's All Here* into one's ear.

Too much youth, in short, is a bore, since youth lacks variety and has little to fall back upon but animal spirits, which are an even greater bore. In all the musical shows of the last half dozen years, there has been only one kid in her teens whose youth was a critical asset rather than a liability: Grace McDonald in *Babes In Arms*. And only one boy in his teens: Gil Stratton, Jr., in this *Best Foot Forward*. And it is the same with the dramatic stage. The only kid girl who, in the same period of time, has combined her seventeen years with comfortable charm was Betsy Blair in *The Beautiful People*. And the only boy, Eddie Bracken in *So Proudly We Hail*, etc. As for me, in the case of all the others, I much prefer my stage youth to be played in musicals by girls of twenty-four or five like Marcy Wescott and in drama by girls of twenty-six or seven like Betty Field. And so, too, with the boys.

A third supplementary delusion

in this learned matter, and one that has persisted longer than the oldest sitter around the grocery store stove can remember, is that the girls in the front line of a chorus are always and invariably better looking than those in the second line. It may have been true once upon a time, but if it is true any longer someone cheated me on the quality of my opera glasses. It has come to be the practice of producers and their directors to fill the first line with the better dancers and singers and it is often the

regrettable case that the better dancers and singers are not blessed with the looks of the girls somewhat less skillful. These latter are accordingly relegated to the second or third row and it is thus that in these rear rows of the chorus the alert eye detects the real or at least approximate dandies, if any. The only even remotely attractive girl in the entire youthful chorus of *Best Foot Forward* is a slim, dark little thing hidden away in the second line behind the front line of agile kid pumpkin-faces.



OUR TRADE BARRIERS WITH CANADA

BY OSWALD GARRISON VILLARD

CANADA and the United States are now partners in every way except for the lack of free trade. War has made the alliance tight in other respects. We are pledged to protect Canada from attack, no matter what the source. We are presently garrisoning one of her harbors and the two countries are partners in a joint Defense Board, which is to be permanent. The American President and the Canadian Prime Minister have agreed to a program calling for complete coordination in the vast North American effort to supply England with what she needs to carry on. This community of purpose in the present struggle will certainly be perpetuated if the Allies win and if Hitler should batter down England, an air-tight defensive alliance would be immediately demanded. Above these present considerations is the undisputed fact that the two countries largely use the same tongue and, for the most part, have the same cultural background and national aims.

Then why not free trade?

At first sight, it would appear that the long peace between the United States and Canada discredits the statement made by the present Governor-General of the Philippines, Francis B. Sayre, when he was Assistant Secretary of State: "If goods cannot cross international boundaries, troops will." Troops have not crossed our respective boundaries in 126 years, although trade between us has been more or less fettered during all that long period. In fact the tariff policies of the two countries have repeatedly given rise to bitter misunderstandings and to serious friction, and have created no little hostility on both sides of the border. It is altogether likely that if both countries had not been disarmed, until our recent heavy arming, there would have been grave conflicts between us.

Curiously enough, the Canadians rejected a reciprocity treaty with the United States in 1911 when it was offered to them. Opponents of the treaty raised the issue of annexation by citing the