

# THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

## *Laurels and Raspberries*

HEREWITH, the Nathan-MERCURY awards for the theatrical year 1940-1941, the laurels first:

**THE BEST PLAY.** In the view of this department, the best new play of the season was William Saroyan's *The Beautiful People*. This is not to record it as an authentically first-rate play or, for that matter, even first-rate Saroyan. But, whatever it was, it was appreciably superior to any other new American play produced during the period in question.

More than any other play, it offered evidence of originality, imagination, poetic inspiration and fecund humor, and more than any other it met the demands of a dramatic criticism with standards higher than journalistic reviewing. A fantasy about a destitute but dreaming San Francisco family, it caught in its over- and undertones its author's peculiar gift for that combination of romantic realism and Lewis Carroll fancy earlier made known to us in his *My Heart's in the Highlands*, in the try-out ver-

sions of *Sweeney in the Trees* and *Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning*, and, to a degree, in both *The Time of Your Life* and *Love's Old Sweet Song*. It had fine flashes of beauty, and it had in it the melody of long forgotten and suddenly recalled music, and it brought to the theatre once again a new beating pulse. It had, also, its dramaturgical faults — a number of them — but not more than, on a higher plane, *Peer Gynt* or, on a higher still, *Romeo and Juliet*. A badly cut diamond remains nevertheless always more precious than a perfectly cut rhinestone.

**THE BEST MUSICAL SHOW.** *Cabin in the Sky*, by the Messrs. Root, Latouche and Duke, is my nomination. Although its book, a paraphrase of the Faust legend in terms of blacks, descended occasionally into a rather strainful innocence, it amounted on the whole to a superior contribution to American-Negro theatrical entertainment, its dancing choruses reaching an all-time darky musical show top and its songs in the hands of Ethel

Waters getting their full due. For second place, the ballot goes to *Pal Joey*, by the Messrs. Rodgers, Hart and O'Hara, an amusing chronicle of the rise and fall of a night-club lowlife. The general critical praise for its complete novelty on the score of the scurrility of its Joey character, however, somehow failed to impress anyone with a recollection of such various past exhibits as *The Beggar's Opera*, *Fra Diavolo*, *Erminie*, etc.

THE FUNNIEST FARCE. *Arsenic and Old Lace*, by Joseph Kesselring, and by a long shot. An hilarious excursion into miscellaneous murder.

THE PLEASANTEST COMEDY. *Claudia*, by Rose Franken. The gently observed picture of a young bride's effort to adapt herself to the eccentricities of married life and to the world.

THE BEST ACTOR. Paul Lukas, for his performance of the German who returns to his native land to carry on an underground fight against Nazism, in *Watch on the Rhine*. Close runners up: Canada Lee, for his performance of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, and Maurice Evans, for his Malvolio in the revival of *Twelfth Night*.

THE BEST ACTRESS. For a rare all-around performance, Gertrude Lawrence in *Lady in the Dark*. Runners up: Ina Claire, in *The*

*Talley Method*; Ethel Barrymore, in *The Corn Is Green*; Helen Hayes, in *Twelfth Night*.

THE BEST OF THE NEWER AND YOUNGER ACTORS. Arthur Hunnicutt, in the return engagement of *The Time of Your Life*, in the role originally occupied by Len Doyle.

THE BEST OF THE NEWER AND YOUNGER ACTRESSES. Dorothy McGuire, in *Claudia*. Runner up: Thelma Schnee, in *The Corn Is Green*.

THE MOST APPEALING PERFORMANCES BY NOVICES. Claire Niesen, in *Cue for Passion*; Betsy Blair, in *The Beautiful People*.

THE MOST PICTORIALLY SATISFYING ESTABLISHED ACTRESS. Katharine Cornell, in the revival of *The Doctor's Dilemma*.

THE BEST DIRECTOR. Rose Franken, in the case of *Claudia*. Runners up: Herman Shumlin, with *The Corn Is Green*; Orson Welles, with *Native Son*; Guthrie McClintic, with *The Doctor's Dilemma*; Hassard Short, with *Lady in the Dark*.

THE FUNNIEST SINGLE SCENE. The second act curtain to *My Sister Eileen*, with the officers of the Brazilian navy going into action against the two girls from Columbus, Ohio, and winding up with all wriggling in a crazy conga line, the urchins of the Greenwich Village

neighborhood facetiously hanging on to its tail.

THE BEST SCENE DESIGNING. Harry Horner's for *Lady in the Dark*. Runner up: Frederick Fox's remarkable capture of realism in the picture of the Coney Island boardwalk and beach in *Brooklyn Biarritz*.

THE BEST FARCE ACTOR. José Ferrer, in *Charley's Aunt*.

THE BEST MUSICAL SHOW COMEDIAN. Ed Wynn, in *Boys and Girls Together*.

THE BEST MUSICAL SHOW LYRICS. Lorenz Hart's, in *Pal Joey*.

THE BEST MUSICAL SHOW TUNE. *Taking a Chance on Love*, by Vernon Duke, in *Cabin in the Sky*.

THE BEST DANCE DIRECTOR. George Balanchine, in the case of *Cabin in the Sky*.

THE BEST SINGLE MUSICAL SHOW PRODUCTION NUMBER. The travesty on night-club floor shows in *Pal Joey*.

THE BEST NEW BURLESQUE COMEDIAN. Red Marshall, in *All in Fun*. (Rags Ragland, in *Panama Hattie*, showed himself originally several seasons ago in the revue, *Who's Who*.)

THE BEST NEWER DANCING GIRL. Nadine Gae, in *Panama Hattie*.

THE BEST STAGE LIGHTING.

Hassard Short's, for *Lady in the Dark*.

PLAYS DENOUNCED BY THE REVIEWERS THAT DESERVED A SOMEWHAT BETTER BREAK. *Five Alarm Waltz*, by Lucille S. Prumbs, a frequently very comical satire on Saroyan In The Flesh. Also *Out of the Frying Pan*, by Francis Swann, a roughshod but often highly amusing farce about youngsters looking for jobs in the theatre.

THE BEST PRESS-AGENCY. Russell Crouse's, Frank Sullivan's and Richard Maney's for *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

THE BEST REVIVAL. Katharine Cornell's and Guthrie McClintic's of *The Doctor's Dilemma*.

## II

Now for the raspberries:

THE WORST AMERICAN PLAY. *Popsy*, by Fred Herendeen. Very close contenders: *Your Loving Son*, by Abby Merchant, and *Brooklyn Biarritz*, by Beatrice Alliot and Howard Newman.

THE WORST FOREIGN PLAY. *Boudoir* excepted on the sole ground of Jacques Deval's continued residence in America, Max Catto's *They Walk Alone*, and how!

THE POOREST PERFORMANCE BY AN OLDER ACTOR. Taylor Holmes, in *First Stop To Heaven*. Runners

up: Ralph Morgan, in *Fledgling*; Al Shean, in *Popsy*.

THE POOREST BY A YOUNGER ACTOR. Robert Keith, in *Romantic Mr. Dickens*.

THE POOREST PERFORMANCE BY AN OLDER ACTRESS. Alison Skipworth, in *First Stop to Heaven*.

THE POOREST BY A YOUNGER ACTRESS. Elsa Lanchester, in *They Walk Alone*.

THE SILLIEST PLAY BY AN ESTABLISHED PLAYWRIGHT. *Liberty Jones*, by Philip Barry.

THE WORST STAGE DIRECTION. Rachel Crothers', in the case of *The Old Foolishness*. Runner up: Margaret Webster's, in the case of the Experimental Theatre's *The Trojan Women*.

PLAYWRIGHTS WHO SHOWED THE WORST FALLING OFF. Paul Vincent Carroll in *The Old Foolishness*; St. John Ervine in *Boyd's Daughter*; Ferenc Molnar in *Delicate Story*; Lynn Riggs in *The Cream in the Well*; Moss Hart in *Lady in the Dark*.

THE SEASON'S DULLEST EVENING IN GENERAL. *Mum's the Word*, Jimmy Savo's two straight hours of solo pantomime.

THE CRITICALLY MOST OVERESTIMATED PLAY. *The Corn Is Green*, by Emlyn Williams.

THE WORST REVUE. *'Tis of Thee*, Close runner up: *All in Fun*.

THE DIRTIEST PLAY. *Suzanna and The Elders*, by Lawrence Langner and Armina Marshall.

THE WORST ENSEMBLE ACTING. That of the company doing the Experimental Theatre's *The Trojan Women*, always forgetting the troupe that did *Popsy*.

THE PLAY IN THE SOUREST TASTE. *Cue for Passion*, by Edward Chodorov and H. S. Kraft.

THE WORST OFF-BROADWAY PRODUCTION. Erwin Piscator's *King Lear*.

THE MOST MISGUIDED PRODUCTION BY AN ESTABLISHED PRODUCER. Guthrie McClintic's *The Lady Who Came to Stay*.

THE WORST MUSICAL COMEDY BOOK. *Night of Love*, by Rowland Leigh.

THE POOREST DRAMATIZATION. Leonardo Bercovici's of Thomas Mann's *Tristan* under the title, *Gabrielle*.

THE MOST TRYING PERIOD OF THE SEASON. The production of four Hollywood plays — *Beverly Hills*, *Quiet Please*, *Glamour Preferred* and *Every Man for Himself* — in quick succession.

THE MOST SADLY WASTED GOOD ACTING PERFORMANCES. Sylvia Weld, in *Fledgling*; Diana Barrymore, in *Romantic Mr. Dickens*; Jessica Tandy, in *Jupiter Laughs*; Violet Heming, in *Beverly Hills*;

Jane Wyatt and Gordon Jones, in *Quiet Please*; and, certainly, Barry Fitzgerald, in *Tanyard Street*.

THE WORST STAGE SETTING. That for *First Stop to Heaven*, designed by Louis Kennel.

THE LEAST-BAD BAD PLAY. *Retreat to Pleasure*, by Irwin Shaw.

THE WORST PLAY TITLE. *Popsy*.

THE BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT. The Negro Playwrights' Theatre, with *Big White Fog*.

GOOD SCENES WASTED IN BAD PLAYS. The police station episode in *Delicate Story*; the scene be-

tween the prize-fighter and the girl in *Retreat to Pleasure*; the disappearing cabinet monkeyshine in *The Night Before Christmas*.

THE MOST PLATITUDINOUS PLAY BY A REPUTABLE PLAYWRIGHT. Elmer Rice's *Flight to the West*.

STRAIGHT-FACED DRAMA THAT EVOKED THE MOST AUDIENCE SNICKERS. Kenneth White's ghost play, *The Lady Who Came to Stay*.

THE WORST MYSTERY PLAY. Robert Wallsten's and Mignon Eberhart's *Eight O'Clock Tuesday*.  
Finis.



## LIGHTNING

BY CHARLES EDWARD EATON

A HEAVY thrust of wind falls on the land,  
A storm of glistening birds plunge through the sky;  
Sun's sinuous ray grips at my hand —  
And all are more articulate than I.  
The glinting rocks are mortised to the plain,  
Tall mountains are the landscape's arching rhyme;  
Listen: the bell-tone of the thunderous rain  
Is rumbling from the flaring mouth of time.  
The world is pressure, force, and shifting weight  
Where blood and bone are crowded and caught.  
So timid breath must leap toward love from hate,  
A bolt of lightning play within my thought  
To split the deep-hung clouds of gathering fear,  
And purge the tense night's hostile atmosphere.