

THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

Sculpturing the Season's Bust

I HAVE been in this critical business for now exactly thirty-five theatrical seasons, and if ever there was a worse one than that just concluded, my memory is not only slipping but is flat on its ear. This low estimate is, however, hardly news; the vote has been unanimous. What were the reasons?

The first and most important of these reasons, with no apologies for the disagreeable didacticism, was the complete disappearance from the stage of the slightest evidence of dramatic imagination. Not one single new play produced in the New York professional theatre indicated a fancy of even minimum alcoholic content. Only in Saroyan's fifty-five-minute-long *Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning*, whatever its other lapses, could there be detected any genuine inspirational intoxication whatever and it remained for a group of amateur kids to do that play in a crudely converted brownstone-front up a dingy side street. As for the rest, there was here and there some undeniably sincere writing, some fairly clever

manipulation of three-dollar silk hats and rabbits, and the usual passionate strains toward novelty and ruptures toward merit, but of real or even approximate imagination there was considerably less than goes into the manufacture of an undershirt or a successful Southern novel.

Among the Americans, Steinbeck in *The Moon Is Down* showed periodic mild traces of the power that made his *Of Mice and Men* the superior job it was; Koch and Huston in *In Time to Come* suggested a talent for the literal chronicle play; young Greendale indicated an aptitude for character; and a few of the others implied a modest gift for dramaturgy. But in the plays of none of them was there a faint glimmer of that throwing open the window to the stars which lets into worthy drama its precious, breeze-swept life and beauty.

Where imagination was optimistically attempted, the results were, alas, even more painful. Hecht, swinging his movie imagination in-

to the Hereafter, collapsed into greasepaint allegory that suggested Little Eva on a return trip from Heaven bandying metaphysics with Mr. S. Legree. Odets' powerful ecstasy dug up Matthew Arnold's verse about ignorant armies clashing by night and triumphantly evolved from it a 1910 triangle play. Maxwell Anderson took flight from occupied France and soared into the skies with the old Sardou plot about the woman who exercises herself to free her lover from prison, further involving a couple of American schoolmarms who moseyed wraith-like around the gardens of Versailles and discoursed with a sentimental booziness on the sweetness of the past. And Marc Connelly pitched his rainbow at an analogue wherein a wily Mexican villager offered himself as an approximation of Hitler, only to be put out of countenance at eleven o'clock by a crafty American business man, proving — as must be more or less evident — nothing.

The English guest-playwrights were just as bursting with lush phrensies. Emlyn Williams, in *Yesterday's Magic*, worked himself up into a moonstruck prattfall on the subject of an old ham actor ruined by drink (Version 442) and given to pot-valiant apostrophies to the overwhelming glamour of the by-

gone theatre of Sarah Siddons, Henry Irving and the Cherry Sisters. Noel Coward's fiery reverie penetrated into the ghostly domain and came out, in *Blithe Spirit*, with one of his usual deftly serviceable box-office wares in which a deceased wife made up to look like whipped cream returns to badger her spouse, who has married a second time. Lesley Storm, in *Heart of A City*, allowed her effulgent imagination to wander backstage in a small London theatre during a bombing raid and to exalt us with the heroism of the chorus girls, the aforesaid heroism reaching its heart-stirring climax in their determination, come what might, to proceed with a show that, to the impartial audience, seemed to be even worse than *Of V We Sing*, that local amateur stinker. And Patrick Hamilton, in *Angel Street*, brought home his rich fancy's rewarding bacon with a melodrama that somewhat astounded the psychiatric profession with its thesis that a woman could be deprived of all powers of recollection and memory merely through being told by her husband that she had none.

II

A second reason for the disastrous span was to be found in many of

the producing geniuses' footless belief that no better plays were lying around and available for production than the cheeses which, once the public got a whiff of them and would have none of, they apologized were the best they could find. While it is quite true that there was a shortage of reputable scripts, it is far from true that there were not a sufficient number of relatively much likelier ones than the aforesaid entrepreneurs wasted their good money on. And, what is more, it is a foregone conclusion that they would have profited from a better reviewing press and in all probability would, unlike the overnight failures, either have made a little money or, at worst, lost considerably less.

In this regard, lest we be suspected of talking through our hat, let us modestly present a few concrete examples.

The Gilbert Miller still-born productions of the dreary *Anne of England*, the fruitless *Lily of the Valley* and the worthless *Heart of A City* are estimated to have shown a combined loss of more than \$80,000. For this amount, Mr. Miller might have produced Sean O'Casey's stimulating new one-set play, *Purple Dust*, a Saroyan bill made up of the Armenian Lope de Vega's new short plays, *Once Around the Block*,

which is grand fun; *Bang! Bang! You're Dead*, a nimble drollery in the vein of *The Time of Your Life*; and *As I Live and Breathe*, a thoroughly delightful titbit of fantastic humor; and — still safely this side of the budget and by way of satisfying his notorious prejudice for foreign plays — Molnar's fragmentary but appealing *Miracle of the Mountains*, which has been lying around idly for some years. All these plays are a hundredfold more estimable than the trio he lost his other shirt on; all, one feels sure, would have met with considerably more critical approval; and all would have been much better gambling chances. And what is yet more, as has been suggested, he might still have had several thousands of left-over producing dollars in his sock.

Further examples, gratis. The producer of the rubbishy *Good Neighbor*, which ran for just one performance, dropped \$26,000 that would more than have sufficed for a production of Tilman Breiseth's *As We Forgive Our Debtors*, which has been vainly peddled for the last nine or ten years and which, for all its defects, is 13,862 times better than *Good Neighbor*. The producers of the trash called *Ring Around Elizabeth*, *Golden Wings*, *Pie in the Sky*, *All in Favor* and *They Should*

Have Stood in Bed, all immediate failures and presented at a waste of more than \$85,000, might have helped the season and maybe even made a little jack on the side by putting on, instead, such readily available and certainly, whatever their faults, likelier new plays as William Bowers' *Back to Eden* and Pansy, Walter Kerr's *Art and Prudence*, and Saroyan's *Sweeney in the Trees* and *Jim Dandy*.

We come to the revivals. Instead of the revival of Barrie's absurdly soggy and outyeared *A Kiss for Cinderella*, which critically folded like a wet valentine, why not, if it had to be Barrie, *The Legend of Leonora*? Instead of the Theatre Guild's revival of O'Neill's all too recent *Ah, Wilderness!*, why not O'Neill's *The Straw*, which few present theatregoers either saw or well remember? And instead of the same Guild's revival of Sheridan's all too familiar *The Rivals*, why not Sheridan's *The Critic*?

Which, hardly circuitously, brings us to the Theatre Guild.

More and more, with the passing of each season and the last in particular, does it become plain that this once reputable and venerated organization has betrayed its original self and has sunk to the low level of a purely commercial enterprise, and a not always very saga-

cious or successful one at that. Infected with the Hollywood movie pox, its most recent consuming admiration has been for film stars and their possible circus draw at the box-office, with the resultant casting of a number of them in its stage presentations. The last season accordingly saw Harry Carey brought on to play a leading role in the revival of *Ah, Wilderness!* and giving a performance that helped in large measure to make the revival a failure; Mary Boland cast as Mrs. Malaprop in the revival of *The Rivals* and accomplishing much the same result; Paul Muni miscast in *Yesterday's Magic* and getting nowhere; Fredric March and Florence Eldredge featured in *Hope for a Harvest* and getting less than nowhere; and the sure-fire Katharine Hepburn doing big box-office business on the road in Philip Barry's weak *Without Love*. And one production was abandoned altogether simply because the Guild could not persuade Spencer Tracy to appear in it.

The rumor that the Guild next season will add bingo to its shows, exhibit double features, and offer personal appearances of Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney and Cesar Romero between the acts may perhaps be discounted. But, considering the contributions to the season

just finished, one wouldn't be too surprised.

III

When everything else fails in a season, there are usually the musical shows to fall back and rely upon. That has been one of the American theatre's time-honored traditions. But, here again, the season of 1941-42 thumbed its nose at the old order. One and only one such show of any merit came along, to wit, *Let's Face It*. A second, *Banjo Eyes*, by virtue of Eddie Cantor's presence in the cast, proved fairly diverting while he was on the stage. But that was all. The rest were lahoowzy.

Not only in this last season but in the season preceding, we had melancholy evidence that, by and large, something seems to have befallen this species of entertainment, for long regarded as one of our theatre's prime gifts to the cosmos. And with the loss of the former skill has gone hand in hand a staggering loss of investment money.

Herewith, in example, I have compiled a list of some of the principal musical failures produced in the two seasons in question, and the amount of money estimated to have been cruelly dissipated on them:

<i>Crazy with the Heat</i>	\$92,000
<i>All in Fun</i>	\$70,000
<i>Night of Love</i>	\$45,000
<i>She Had to Say Yes</i>	\$120,000
<i>Viva O'Brien</i>	\$82,000
<i>The Lady Came Across</i>	\$80,000
<i>Sunny River</i>	\$80,000
<i>My Dear Public</i>	\$78,000
(try-out edition)	

None of these was worth a hoot, and all, as noted, were prompt duds. The net total loss suffered was almost \$650,000. Think what an intelligent theatre could do with \$650,000!

Wiping off the lack of perspiration induced by trying to answer the question, let us move on and catalogue some additional reasons for the season's depression.

1. At least ten different plays occupied themselves with extended testimony to the fact that the Nazis are a bad lot, each plainly preening itself on having made the sensational discovery and being the first to announce it, to the \$3.30 a head grunts of the customers, all of whom seemed curiously to be already fairly privy to the news.

2. At least six plays occupied themselves periodically with rapturous testimony to the fact that the English are, on the other hand, a chin-up, sturdy, stiff-upper-lip race, able to smile in the hour of deepest despair and to sing *God Save the King* whenever a playwright doesn't know what else to

have them do, thus causing even the most pro-Ally American audience (including any sensitive visiting Englishmen who happened to be a part of it) embarrassedly to sink down in its seats.

3. The effort to be profound on the part of playwrights who, to put it politely, could fish successfully in their cerebrums with a toothpick, resulted in no less than half a dozen plays that sounded like expanded high-school paper editorials, and that dispensed such novel philosophies as the need for religion and faith in God in a war-ridden world, the desirability of an ultimate, comprehensive brotherhood of man, the necessity to fight for what one believes in one's heart, and the inevitable triumph of good over evil, sez you.

4. The postponement of *Life, Laughter and Tears* after a brief road tryout in which, despite absurdly bad direction, it revealed itself to be potentially the most interesting American production of the New York season.

5. The abandonment of the projected production of O'Casey's *Purple Dust* on the senseless ground that it was anti-English and hence

might offend, whereas it would in all probability have offended only a few choice numskulls, since the English critics, and Ivor Brown in particular, had already enthusiastically endorsed it. That it would have won the Critics' Circle's award for the best foreign play of the year goes almost without saying.

6. The absence from the list of active playwrights of Eugene O'Neill, S. N. Behrman, Robert Sherwood, Lillian Hellman and other such old-reliables.

7. The producers' faked quotations from the critics' reviews, which gave the public the impression that a number of third-rate plays which had been denounced were pretty hot stuff, and which subsequently disgusted away from the theatre such customers as had been made suckers of.

8. The prodigal playwrighting sons returning from Hollywood to recapture their lost self-respect, who proved that their self-respect wasn't all that they had lost.

9. The temporary decline and fall of the formerly witty and highly amusing George S. Kaufman.

10. Not enough of Bobby Clark, who appeared in merely two shows.



LIFE WITH THE EXPERTS

{This department, dedicated to the thoughts of sundry prophets, solicits contributions from readers. Please attach the actual clipping or other documentary source of the prophecies that went sour. — THE EDITORS.}

A FORECAST from embattled France in January 1940, as noted by the Jackson, Mississippi, *News*:

Eighteen months to go, and the war will be over — write it on your calendar. This confident prediction comes from Paul Bringuier, chief of the editorial staff of the *Paris Soir*.

MAJOR GEORGE FIELDING ELIOT, speaking at the Town Hall of the Air, November 10, 1941:

Japan is in no case to fight a war with a group of major opponents. Her army is sadly out of date, having not even one fully armored division, and being short of tanks, armored cars, anti-tank and anti-aircraft artillery, modern engineering equipment and modern communication devices. . . . As for Japanese air power, it is almost nonexistent. . . . The American, British and Dutch naval and air forces are fully capable of isolating Japan from the world and bringing to bear the pressure of full blockade — a pressure which Japan could not long endure, but which she lacks the strength to break by force.

RALPH INGERSOLL, peripatetic editor of the New York news-

paper *PM*, warns the world on April 30, 1941:

THE MEDITERRANEAN IS LOST

SUEZ AND GIBRALTAR DOOMED

We are so certain of these terrible facts that for us it is as if they had already happened. We believe the brave little British Army can fight only a rear guard action at the Suez Canal, and the garrison at the other end of the Mediterranean must yield Gibraltar. The Germans are moving hundreds of thousands of troops into position against them.

WAR CORRESPONDENT W. W. CHAPLIN, writing for the *INS* under a New York dateline, May 10, 1940:

Chancellor Hitler marched his first million men into an Allied trap when he ordered today's blitzkrieg invasion of Luxembourg and the Low Countries. . . . Before I left France to return to America on leave, Gen. Mason MacFarland, British Director of Military Intelligence in the field, told me: "We would be sorry to see Belgium invaded for her own sake, but it would open the quickest road to decisive Allied victory over the German army. . . ."