

THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

Why Playwrights Go Crazy

SEVERAL months ago a play called *The Walking Gentleman* was shown in New York. By a strange coincidence a play of exactly the same name by Fulton Oursler and Grace Perkins was advertised to open on the same night. By an even stranger coincidence the names of Fulton Oursler and Grace Perkins appeared as authors of the play that did open. But by an even still stranger coincidence the play that opened was no more like the play that didn't than mush is like mushrooms. The play that opened closed after just six performances. The play that did not might conceivably have achieved some success. Which is the cue for this dossier on why playwrights often go cuculus.

The play that didn't open was frankly designed as a thrill murder melodrama; the play that did turned out to be a kind of French sex-problem play, and about as bernsteinish as they come. The responsible party was, to a large extent, a French movie actor named Victor Francen, who had been engaged to play the leading rôle.

This Francen, who apparently esteems himself a lady-killer of irresistible beauty, fascination and charm, instantly took charge of things. An exciting scene in the original script wherein he was called upon to choke to death a serving maid whom he suspected of having eavesdropped a dangerous admission on his part and who was subsequently revealed to him as being deaf and dumb, he peremptorily declared out. "It would make me unsympathetic to the audience," was his firm explanation. A Jekyll-Hyde transformation scene found him adamant on two points: either the Hyde mask which he would wear must be hardly less comely than his own face when disclosed as Jekyll or the whole business would have to be eliminated, which it was. The scene in which he got his wife alone in her apartment preparatory to strangling her must not, he insisted, be played menacingly but with a Palais Royal farcical touch, which is the way he played it. And just before sneaking up threateningly behind his in-

tended victim, he must, for the effect it would have on the ladies out front, execute a droll *pas seul* and then hand her, with a low bow, a rose!

These are only a few of the reasons for the current insanity of the play's authors. And speaking of insanity, there naturally comes to mind Saroyan. If Saroyan is crazy, as some, most of them quilt-pluckers themselves, maintain, the causes are similarly not far to seek. I nominate just one out of many. When *Love's Old Sweet Song* was in the process of Philadelphia try-out, Walter Huston, the leading actor, professed to find the touching curtain to the second act, showing a small child deserted on the steps of the burning house and calling through its tears for its parents, quite unsatisfactory. It was his opinion grounded on long experience, he averred, that, as he was the star of the play, the audience would be sorely disappointed if he were not on the stage at the fall of the curtain, and hence on the stage he should and must be. So 'raus went the scene, over Saroyan's dead or at least despairingly schnappsful body, and Huston was there, like a troop of pleased Marines, to the child's rescue.

The preliminary stages of Saroyan's lunacy came into evidence at

the try-out, some time before, of *The Time of Your Life* in New Haven, Connecticut. Arriving from Fresno, he hurried to the theatre and there laid eyes upon something that caused him to exclaim My God! so loudly and so consecutively that the Yale students half a mile away on the campus concluded the Ouachita Baptist College basketball team had just pulled into the station and were rehearsing their college yell. What he laid eyes on was his low saloon on the San Francisco waterfront transformed under director Robert Lewis' inspiration into a setting that looked like a lovely oriental version of little Hannele's bedroom, with in a far corner a bar just big enough for the service of a single cocktail and with enough purple, green, amber, peachbloom and vermilion lights playing upon it to equip Grauman's Chinese movie palace for the world première of a two million dollar grade-M picture. What he further laid eyes on was, under the ingenious spell of the same director, a company of actors who had been coached to play his ragtag and bobtail characters as if they were participants in a Japanese *No* play written by Frederick Lonsdale in collaboration with Maurice Maeterlinck. And what he still further saw, before

they carried him out on a stretcher frothing at the mouth and wildly calling out the names of Ruby Foo, Sessue Hayakawa and Warden Lawes, was a play dealing with the riff-raff in an Embarcadero gin-and-beer dump that was directorially indistinguishable in its main features from the Russian ballet's *Petrouchka*.

II

For countless years before and since the late Louis Mann sent the author of a play called *The Consul* to Matteawan by suddenly incorporating into it on the opening night a secretly long-treasured sentimental ten-minute homily on the beauties of home — which, incidentally, wrecked the play — actors, directors and producers have conspired against the sanity of those negligibilities whose sole contribution to the drama is drama. Like my otherwise good friend Walter Wanger, who one day some years ago happened to glimpse the actor Walter Pidgeon walk into his Hollywood studio office in a becoming uniform and promptly got on six telephones and commanded as many scenario writers to get busy at once on a movie in which he could wear it, theatrical impresarios, directors and almost

everybody else associated with them view writers much as wives view husbands, necessary evils not always exactly to be murdered on the spot but maybe to be contemptuously tolerated and endured only on the chance that they may turn in a little money on Saturday night.

When Edward Sheldon and Charles MacArthur wrote *Lulu Belle*, it was their intention that the play, broadly speaking, be a Negro paraphrase of the *Carmen* theme. David Belasco, the producer, had other ideas however. And gradually as rehearsals progressed their play, to their loud outcries and agonies, resolved itself into a Negro *Camille*. Tearing his hair, MacArthur indignantly argued with his collaborator that they should immediately take their names off the abortion, to which Sheldon, as they led him out violently protesting that he was Williams and Walker and quite sane, issued the parting sigh that they should at least both be satisfied that Belasco hadn't turned it into a Negro *Ben Hur*.

More recently, two Irish playwrights were released from the sanitarium, whence productions of their plays had sent them, only after several months' observation and treatment. The two were Paul

Vincent Carroll and St. John Ervine. Carroll was not in America when his *The Old Foolishness* opened and soon thereafter closed, but when the notices and communiqués reached him he threw himself to the floor and, before they could stop him, had frantically nibbled seven square feet of carpet. What destroyed his reason was the news that the play's director, Rachel Crothers, dissatisfied with some of his Celtic dialogue, had written some of her Bloomington, Illinois, own to take its place and had thus brought the reviewers to flay the hide off him for his peculiar, sudden literary collapse. And not only that. Pursuing some whim of her own, this Miss Crothers had further, he learned, not only so staged the play that the emphasis fell heavily upon a character it was not intended to, thereby throwing the theme wholly out of focus, but had cut out the long final speech, the one really beautiful bit of writing in the script, and thus destroyed what little was left of the mess.

At some length recovering from the shock sufficiently to be allowed at large, Carroll was again recently returned to the sanitarium upon his receipt of news of the casting of his latest effort, *The Strings, My Lord, Are False*. The threatened

deletion of the phrase *My Lord* from his fine title derived from *Julius Caesar*, which met the clerical nature of the play perfectly, he managed to survive with the aid of a couple of cases of Scotch. But when he heard that in the rôle of his parish priest, whom he had pictured as a gentle cross between Cedric Hardwicke and Al Shean, the producer had cast that grim Phi Beta Kappa emotionalist Walter Hampden, celebrated earlier in the season for his conversion of Sir Anthony Absolute into a walking case of whooping cough complicated with hay fever, he got down eight more square feet of the carpet — to say nothing of an extra square foot on the casting of the coloratura comédienne Ruth Gordon as the tragic young heroine — before the ambulance arrived.

St. John Ervine, our other Irish guest-playwright, was perfectly normal until he discovered what they had done to his play, *Boyd's Shop*. As with Carroll, the change of the title to *Boyd's Daughter* by way of foolish hope more greatly to fascinate the box-office didn't too seriously exercise him. But when he learned that one of the actors in the play was coming before the curtain at the end of each of the acts and delivering a facetious monologue about the

play, the players and the audience, to the complete demolition of any interest his play might possibly have had, his appetite for what remained of Carroll's carpet may naturally be understood.

III

Upon observing what the Theatre Guild had done to his play *Dynamo*, including among other things the casting in a highly dramatic rôle of the fair cutie Claudette Colbert, who placed her beautiful legs on distracting display whenever the going got serious, Eugene O'Neill vowed he would never again permit a work of his to be produced unless he himself could be present to safeguard its interests. The vow was well taken, even though a subsequent play, which chivalrously should be nameless, went largely to pot in the second act when the rugged looking young actor who had been cast in a forthrightly masculine rôle tardily and dismayingly revealed himself to be a pansy, and with a falsetto that would have put the late darling, Florence Mills, to shame. But the vow was assuredly well taken in the instance of *Days Without End* when, a few days before the play was to open, O'Neill appeared at rehearsal and to his horror found

that the Guild for reasons of economy had substituted for the all-important crucifix in the old church, described by O'Neill as "a great cross with a life-size figure of Christ, and an exceptionally fine piece of wood carving," a miniature plaster of paris crucifix of the kind sold in Sixth Avenue novelty shops for ninety-eight cents.

What the immediate state of S. N. Behrman's health is, I have no means of knowing. I hope it's all right. But if he is still convalescing from the pains of *The Talley Method*, I can well comprehend and sympathize. When the play first went into rehearsal, the direction was entrusted to Elmer Rice, a fellow-member of Behrman's in the Playwrights' Company. After due process of trial and error, which ran into long weeks, Rice was voted out and Herman Shumlin brought in. Shumlin did what he could, but when the play opened in New York the actors, utterly confused by the two different styles of direction, found themselves playing according to both at one and the same time, thus projecting a performance that was as bizarre a mixture as if the understudies of a company playing *See Naples And Die* were called in at the last moment to substitute for a company playing *The Children's Hour*.

It is easy for us critics to criticize playwrights, but the remarkable thing, considering all the circumstances, is that they retain enough sanity to write even the kind of plays they lately have been writing or indeed sometimes ever wrote. In testimony thereto, consider Robert Turney's *Daughters of Atreus*, a formal paraphrase of classical Greek drama, cast with such a variety of German, Russian, Polish, Boston and what not other foreign accents that it sounded like a Weber and Fields show put on by the Moscow Art Theatre in Chinese. Think, too, of John Barrymore's miscellaneous low asides to his fellow actors and saucy remarks to the audience which drove at least one author to drink and another and more celebrated one, long dead, to grave gymnastics. Munch further the recollection of Richard Bennett's and Lowell Sherman's periodic denunciations of audiences who didn't seem sufficiently to be relishing their performances, and what happened to the poor authors' plays.

And while you are about it don't forget the star actress who got herself so full of strong waters on the opening night of a certain well-known dramatist's play that, in its most important scene, she walked haughtily into a bookcase under the impression that it was the door; of another who also under the influence got herself so tangled up in her voluminous boudoir negligee that she fell plumb on her rear, with the play following suit; of still another, cold sober, who more recently came on the stage wearing tiny bells on her slippers, which she tinkled merrily whenever another actress in the company whom she didn't like threatened to divert the audience's attention from her; and — still speaking of the ladies — of the fairly venerable one who not long ago, under the impression that she was being youthfully cute, kept jumping over the seated leading man's extended legs and thus turned the playwright's intended character of a woman of aristocratic bearing into a vaudeville kangaroo.





POETRY

IN THIS THICK EVIL

BY BABETTE DEUTSCH

THINK of a hand, think of a placeless curve
That is the bed where stars conceive, the field
On which old constellations fight, the nowhere
Where, as upon a hearth, the elements
Are born to burn in furious purity.
That hand will never let the systems fall.
And yet the same immeasurable member
Puts out no finger where an ant can crawl,
Exploring summer in its antish way.
Space makes a fist, say, that can close over
The galaxies, but if none hears a pulse
Beat in that wrist, how shall the world be safe?

Not although time receives what space refuses:
The ant, the ant-hill, all the swarms whose growth
Makes jungles and migrations, slums and wars.
Time sets the trap for what the larger grasp
Ignores and loses. Even the life that stirs
Among spilled ashes and eggshells is in time,
With every savage and majestic
Event that ordering eye can seize. It chooses
Lions, rats, eagles, in their habitat,
The desert or the gutter, scoundrels, saints
And men, species and dynasties, and frames them
In what its lens can capture, and so tames them.

Those few things yet remain, time's narrow eye
Cannot contain, or the loose hold of space
Perceive. Priests in their ignorance