

# THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

## *Hep-Cat Drama Criticism*

**Jitterbugs On The Aisle.** — The time-honored Broadway objection to local drama criticism is that it is tragically deficient in the theoretically contagious warmth and excitement which sends customers galloping post-haste to the box-office. It is thus that in the last quarter century not more than three or four of the many practitioners of the craft — all of the three or four given to the irradiation of heat of so many Pittsburgh blast furnaces — have been esteemed by Broadway as authentic, A-1, white-headed boys. These three or four were members, respectively, of the Oh-What-A-Genius! school, the Horticulture-and-Hat-Removing school, the Dancing-In-The-Streets-and-Hat-Tossing-In-Air school, and the Glauber's-Salt-or-Self-Purgative school, all closely affiliated.

The first of the tropical quartet was Acton Davies, of the Oh-What-A-Genius! school. When Acton really got going the heat was such that you had to wrap a cold towel around your head to read

him. His especial four-alarm was the late Belasco, and this is a sample of the blaze induced in and exuded by him:

When we take stock of true genius, the kind associated with the names of such immortals as Michelangelo, Mozart and Dostoevski, where can we find a truer, more beautiful and complete development of it than in the superb art of David Belasco's magnificent production of *The Darling of the Gods*? The answer, plainly, is nowhere! It makes your pulse bounce with renewed life and your brain buzz with such visions of grandeur as are rarely the gift to us mortals. It makes you shout for supreme joy, and — seeing it — it is all you can do to keep from rushing up to the nearest stranger on the street and hugging him while you cry out in happiness over such stunning mastery.

Following Davies, came Clayton Hamilton, a member of the Horticulture-and-Hat-Removing school. It was sometimes impossible, reading Clayton, to know whether you were looking at a seed catalogue, a Stetson advertisement, or a theatre review. When he in turn got up full steam, you had to turn on the phonograph for an accompaniment. Let J. M. Barrie come forth with a

play in which little babies were mentioned so much as even once, and Clayton was in there pitching with something like "Art has sprung alive into the world with the music of a million Easter-lilies leaping from the grave and laughing with a silver singing." And as for the hat motif, herewith a typical morsel:

In this particular part [*Boys Will Be Boys*, by Irvin S. Cobb] Harry Beresford reaches greatness; and whenever greatness is achieved, all lovers of the arts should rise to their feet and stand reverently, hats off, with uncovered heads.

Hamilton's successor in the Broadway affection was Alexander Woollcott, a member of the Dancing-In-The-Streets-and-Hat-Tossing-In-Air school. As a street dancer, Alex rivalled Carmen Amaya in her youth, and as a hat-tosser he was the theatre's William Jennings Bryan plus. Let Mrs. Fiske, or Ethel Barrymore, or any one of two or three dozen older actresses appear and, whatever her vehicle, Alex's review would contain enough hoofing in the streets and throwing of his hat into the air to make the Fourteenth of July in old-time Paris look like Black Friday. The dancing in the streets and hat-tossing were also occasionally supplemented by hands-and-knee-crawling, as in the instance of an actor named Jacob Ben-Ami, of

whom Alex rhapsodized, "See him by all means, even if you have to crawl on your very hands and knees to get to the theatre where he is playing!" But when it came to the mimic Elsie Janis, Alex got really hot:

When she danced her moonlight dance . . . when she sang her moonlight song . . . when, above all, when she stood there in the uniform of a French chasseur and sang *Madelon* . . . well, these were great moments not to be forgotten . . . All of which is solemnly reported by one who finds it difficult to keep from growing incoherent in the process!

There was no stopping the boy once he started to unbosom himself. "Perhaps," he would write, "it does not choke you up a little when, from some high-walled school-yard, you hear suddenly the shrill clamor of children at recess. If it does not, the play *Five O'Clock* would have no particular call upon your sympathies." Or,

A little of the real flame is in Edward Robinson. You have only to see his performance as Satin [*Night Refuge*] to realize it and to realize, too, how all-compensating is the real fire. Here is a young actor seemingly without an atom of what is feebly called "personal distinction." His speech [and Satan was supposed to be a man of education] is what dear Mrs. Sanders used to call "barbareous." He takes the keynote speech of the play, wherein Satin cries out: "What is truth? Human beings — that's the truth," and devastates it by saying, "Youman beans." Yet he is still worth his weight in gold!

If the late lamented Woolcott may be said to have a successor, it is probably my old friend Burton Rascoe, a member of the Glauber's-Salt-or-Self-Purgative school, with further matriculation in the Great-Stuff school. In the single season that he has substituted on the New York *World-Telegram* for John Mason Brown, in the armed services, Burton has managed to find more great plays and great actors than even Davies, Hamilton and Woolcott in all their combined long and eager careers. In *Flare Path*, *Cry Havoc*, *Harriet*, *The Morning Star*, *The Great Big Doorstep*, *The Moon Vine*, *Sons and Soldiers*, and other such exhibits that have aroused a remarkable lack of enthusiasm elsewhere, Burton has discovered all kinds of rich and notable art. And his tributes to actors ranging from John Philliber, who had a bit in *Mr. Sycamore*, to George Coulouris, whom everybody else thought was pretty bad in *Richard III*, have been so voluptuous that you had to look twice to make certain he wasn't writing about somebody like Lotta Faust.

But the Glauber salt got really working in the case of the movie actress, Geraldine Fitzgerald. Hearken unto Rascoe:

Let me tell you that on Saturday afternoon I dropped in at the Morosco and

stood in the back to catch a part of *Sons and Soldiers* again. I wanted to see if my first impression of Geraldine Fitzgerald, as she appears in this play, was correct — that she is one of the greatest actresses of our time. I caught her in that party scene in which she is the middle-aged mother getting a little tipsy at the celebration of her son's twenty-fifth birthday. My physical sensations were these: tinglings ran up and down my spine; my heart seemed suddenly to fill up and almost to stop; tears trickled down my cheeks. I was in the presence of perfection, of magic, of beauty. Etc.

It is this general brand of jive criticism that gave birth to movie criticism, with its "epics," "colossals," "supers," "peerless artists," "triumphs," "masterpieces," "director geniuses," and the like. Nevertheless, I somehow still perversely believe, Broadway notwithstanding, that so-called "cold" criticism like Hazlitt's "Miss O'Neill's Lady Teazle appears to us to be a complete failure . . . the only thing that had an air of fashion about her was the feather in her hat," or Shaw's "I think something better could be done with Rejane's talent than this business [*Madame Sans-Gêne*] of playing the washerwoman like a real duchess and the duchess like a stage washerwoman," or, better still, his "Sardou's *Delia Harding* is the worst play I have ever seen; the whole business was so stale, so obviously factitious, so

barrenly inept, that at last the gallery broke out into open derision" — nevertheless, as I say, I somehow still perversely believe that such criticism in the long run helps the theatre a thousandfold more than the kind that sounds less as if it were written by reviewers than blown by Harry James.

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*Impression of German Stage Director Art.* — A fat woman with a daisy in her hair. \* \* \*

*The Contrariness Of The Theatre.* — Whereas war books during the last year have made many publishers rich, war plays in the same period have contrariwise made many producers poor. Out of a total of fourteen plays dealing directly with the war, only one has made any money; the rest for the most part have lost a load of it. Of nine others that have dealt with the war somewhat less directly only two have turned a profit. The biggest money-makers, aside from the exceptions noted (*The Eve of St. Mark* in the first category, and *The Skin Of Our Teeth* and *Tomorrow The World* in the second), have been an orthodox comedy about a marriage of convenience (*Without Love*), a light sex comedy (*The Pirate*), a star revival of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, a naughty farce (*The Doughgirls*), a

farce-comedy about a trio of crazy females on Long Island (*Dark Eyes*), a biographical play about Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Harriet*), and a farce-comedy about children (*Kiss And Tell*).

The biggest money-making hold-overs from the previous season or seasons have been a murder melodrama (*Angel Street*), a roughhouse lampoon on murder (*Arsenic And Old Lace*), a comedy about a man's dead wives who return to haunt him (*Blithe Spirit*), a comedy about youngsters (*Junior Miss*), a comedy about family life in the 1880's (*Life With Father*), and a psychological murder play (*Uncle Harry*).

Death in battle seems most often to spell failure at the box-office. What the public apparently prefers, when death figures in the matter at all, is death treated either as farce or comedy, or as part of civilian melodrama. It is a further theatrical idiosyncrasy that in the three war play exceptions noted there is no immediate death. The enormously successful war books, on the other hand, make Woodlawn Cemetery look like a sprained ankle.

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*Today The World.* — Without lending myself to objectionable levity, it occurs to me that someone might write an amusing travesty of the

play called *Tomorrow The World*. In that play, you will recall, a twelve-year-old boy indoctrinated with the Nazi way of life is introduced into an educated American family and makes a shambles of the household. Convert the Nazi youngster into an American youngster indoctrinated with zoot-suit jazz, comic strips, Hollywood movies, juke-boxes, all-day suckers, the Dodgers, and other such tenets of the democratic way of life, introduce him into an old-fashioned, educated German family, let him practise his tastes and habits on the family with its five or six offspring, and picture the resulting shambles. It might be whimsical.

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*Pains*. — The old schoolroom saying that genius is the capacity for taking infinite pains calls for revaluation. It is mere talent, rather, which demands that capacity. I have just looked up again the stories of some hundred acknowledged geniuses from Aristophanes to Shakespeare and Bernard Shaw, along with the sculptors, painters and composers, and much of the greatest of their work seems to have been the result of no particular over-assiduity or headaches.

*Rubber Plaque Awards*. — Now that all the prizes for the best plays, best actors, etc., are in and the Critics' Circle, Pulitzer Committee, Drama League, Theatre Club and the other awarding bodies have retired for the summer to their several favorite spas, it is fitting that stock be taken of the late season's worsts in its various phases and due recognition accorded them. Herewith, accordingly, the recipients of this department's rubber plaques, each plus 500 dollars in German occupation marks:

1. The year's worst play: *The First Million*.
2. The worst musical show: *You'll See Stars*.
3. The worst actor performance: Norman Lloyd, in *Ask My Friend Sandy*.
4. The worst actress performance: Thelma Schnee, in *Cry Havoc*.
5. The worst musical show performer: Carrie Finnell, in *Star and Garter*.
6. The worst stage director: John Kennedy (*The First Million*).
7. The worst scene designer: Cleon Throckmorton (*Across The Board on Tomorrow Morning*).
8. The worst dramatic scene: The twenty-minute opening of *Apology*, in which a woman lecturer expatiated on the origin of man.
9. The worst dramatic revival: *Bird In Hand*.
10. The worst musical show revival: *The Time, The Place, and The Girl*.



# DOWN TO EARTH

BY ALAN DEVOE

## *Brookside*

ALL men everywhere have deep in them the feeling — as by a “primary intuition,” in Coleridge’s phrase — that they are somehow in discord with their universe: that by a wrong act their kind has somehow set itself in exile, and has lost a

homeland, and has come to be at odds with the rest of creation’s flowing and organic harmony. And nearly all men everywhere are agreed as to the nature of what caused this disheartening askewness. It was pride. It was the over-



*Brookside*

*Frank Utpatel*