

THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

Russian Drama Without Tears

The Russian Drama. — It entertained the late venerated Prof. Hugo Münsterberg to hurl various words at the students in his psychology clinic and to bid them forthwith respond with their personal connotations. Thus, *top* would seem almost invariably to have suggested *hat*; *whiskey* to have suggested *soda*; *blue*, *Danube*; and so on. It entertains the present somewhat less venerated Prof. Nathan to hurl various modern national drama at his readers and to bid them do likewise. He need not, however, as in Münsterberg's case, wait even momentarily for the connotations, since they will be even more routine than the Harvard boys' replies. Thus, French drama will in nine instances out of ten undoubtedly suggest *infidelity* and in the tenth maybe *bed-room*; English will connote *drawing-room* and in the tenth perhaps *butler*; German will betoken *stodgy* and from the facetious back row in the tenth either *beer* or *fat actresses*; and the Russian, in all ten cases, surely and per tradition *gloomy*.

That there is a measure of accuracy in all these connotations is obvious. But the measure is materially smaller than is commonly thought. For one modern French play treating of infidelity there are at least three that do not. For one English play set in a drawing-room there are at least four or five otherwise set. For one stodgy German play there are at least five far from stodgy. And though the modern Russian drama often leans to the gloomy there is plenty of evidence that the Russians can chuckle with the best of them.

The popular picture of Russian drama, fairly justified by the examples of it generally shown on the stages of the Western world, remains still that which I impressionized all of twenty-eight years ago in *Another Book On The Theatre*:

Cast

Miska Vasalnavitch Klooglosevtloff
(a retired professor)
Anna Vladimirovna Klooglosevtloff
(his ailing wife)
Andrievna, Elizavetna, Marina, Marfa,
Varvana, Binga, Masha, Ginka,
Paulina (his daughters)

Volgutz, Savel, Kuligin, Boris, Constantin, Alexis, Ivan (his sons)
 Michailovsky Alexandrovitch Distcheff (his wife's brother, a failure)
 Astroff Leonidivitch Zowski (his first cousin, a failure)
 Marina Konstantinova Petrishsheff (his second cousin, a failure)
 Bimboff (his third cousin, a neurotic)
 Butkevitch Spiffvitch Kokoklinghin (his wife's step-uncle, a paralytic)
 Kudrash Ilia Psychovitch (his grandfather)
 Dmitri Binghoff Korotskoff (his half-brother, a half-wit)
 Nastasya Paulovitchna Vitch (his imbecile great-aunt)
 Leonidas Dostevski Klishavitch (his uncle's brother-in-law, a dipsomaniac)
 Feodore Paulovitch Sonoff (his doctor)
 Klinghoff Abrezkovitch Statchoff (his wife's doctor, a paranoiac)
 Pishkin, Dltchidor, Borapatikin (other doctors)
 Gamboff, Pisk, Kudrash, Gregorovitch (epileptics)
 Sergius Vodkaroff (chief of police)
 Diapera (an old nurse)

The entire action is laid in the country home of the Klooglosevitloffs, near Moscow, during a thunderstorm.

In the popular imagination the plot of the Russian drama follows, with minor variation, one of three courses. In the first, all the characters are filled with a deep longing for something they haven't got, and never get it. In the second, someone murders someone else for a Principle and, apprehended by the police after an hour and twenty-five minutes' colloquy with his conscience, escapes the law by sui-

cide. In the third, everybody except an old man with white whiskers goes crazy from drink, dissipation and philosophy.

That the Russian drama — the current war plays, as in the case of those of other nations, eccentrically and naturally aside — is frequently far from the accepted tombstone pattern and of some considerable humor is customarily overlooked. Katayev's farce-comedy, *Squaring The Circle*, hasn't a paralytic in it from beginning to end and is approximately as pessimistic as Sacha Guitry. Evreinoff's *The Chief Thing* is, thematically, Pirandello dancing with the Irish Lennox Robinson. His *The Theatre Of The Soul* is satirical humor all compact. And his *The Merry Death* is as entertaining a harlequinade as his *The Beautiful Despot* is droll irony. Ostrovsky's *The Forest* and *Little Snowdrop* glint with pleasant humors. Nemirovitch-Dantchenko's prize-winning *The Value of Life* is frisky comedy; gay farces like *Strange Child* popularized Moscow's Satire Theatre; and Saltuikoff-Shchedrin's *The Death of Pazuhin* added to Moskvin's high standing as a comedian.

If you think all Russian plays contain speeches like "Yes, I am well. It would be better if I were ill — but something is wrong. Such a fancy keeps flitting through my

head and I cannot escape from it. I begin to think and I cannot collect my thoughts; I try to pray and I cannot. I murmur words with my lips but my mind is on something else. What is the matter with me? Some misfortune is going to happen! At night, I cannot sleep; I no longer dream those old dreams about the trees of paradise and the mountains," etc., — if you think that, disabuse yourself of the notion by taking a look at Zamiatin's *The Flea* or Faiko's *Teacher Bubus*. If it is loud sex farce you seek, you won't find a louder one than Shkvarkin's *Another Man's Child*, which was so great a success in Soviet Russia that it brought its author more than a million roubles in royalties in its first year. Pushkin's *The Stone Guest* is given to smooth Don Juan humors; and Turgenieff's *A Month In The Country* is certainly far from being the grim business the Theatre Guild made it out to be by casting the tragic Nazimova in the leading woman's rôle but rather a high comedy, as the Moscow Art Theatre properly realized (Moskvin scored one of his biggest comedy successes in it) and as the local Gilbert Miller, taking a hint from the St. James's Theatre in London, appreciates in his hope to revive it with the comédienne Ina Claire.

The delusion of the insistent gloom of the Slav drama in toto, spreading to the majority of our local producers, ambitious stock company actresses and one-tongued translators and adaptors, has helped further to mislead audiences. It is such as these who, unlike Guthrie McClintic, have banished much of the periodic satiric comedy from Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, unlike the Lunts from his *The Sea Gull*, and unlike Jed Harris from his *Uncle Vanya*. It is such as these who have ignorantly tricked audiences into imagining that a people who could give birth to world-famous witty ballets, comical Balieff vaudeville, operas like Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Girl from Pskov*, orchestral scherzos like Borodin's, and jolly *belles lettres* like Andreyev's *Satan's Diary*, Dostoievski's *Another Man's Wife* and Gogol's *How The Two Ivans Quarreled* — that such a people could produce only dramatists who invariably saw their world as an admixture of desolation, despair and lingering death.

What is further generally overlooked is the two-sidedness of many Russian playwrights. Thus, if one of the leading moderns like Alexander Afinogenev, haplessly killed a year and a half ago in an air raid on Moscow, could write the tragic *Distant Point*, he could also write

the humorous *Mashenka*, a sociological comedy about children which is announced for local production under the title, *New Horizon*. Thus, in the past, if one like the celebrated Griboyedov wrote in the vein of tragedy, he could also write in *Gore ot Uma* what is considered to be one of the great classic Russian comedies. And probably even the Quiz Kids can tell you that the Chekhov whom their elders somehow view as an apostle of gloom was a pretty hand at lively farce and satire, as *A Marriage Proposal*, *On the Harm of Tobacco* and *Entr'act Under The Divan* attest.

For every deep-dyed woe-is-me playwright, the Russian theatre in point of fact has offered one who has often approached the world with a genial smile: the witty Ostrovsky before mentioned, Sologub (his *Vanka the Butler* is a comedy lark), Luiboff Stolitsa (*The Mirror Of The Virgin* will give you some sardonic grins), Evreinoff (*The Foundation of Happiness* is a three-act spoof of gravediggers), Kuzmin, Merezhkovsky and, surely, again Griboyedov with his *The Misfortune Of Being Clever*. And now once more, if there remain any slightest doubt in the matter, we have in prospect as I write another revival of Gogol's classic comedy,

The Inspector-General, which should further contribute to the death of the legend that the Russian dramatist invariably cries into his beard.

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The Folk Musical. — When it comes to the average folk play, it is better to have it with music, which is the case with Lynn Riggs' *Green Grow The Lilacs* converted by the Messrs. Rodgers and Hammerstein into *Oklahoma!* Whereas in its dramatic form the exhibit was on the supine side, in the musical it gains the measure of vitality it earlier lacked. Rodgers' score, one of his best, does wonders for the script, and if the Riggs' fable still lags when mouths speak it instead of singing it and if Agnes de Mille's choreography is here and there too extended and somewhat overly art-conscious, the evening as a whole is nevertheless an agreeably acceptable one.

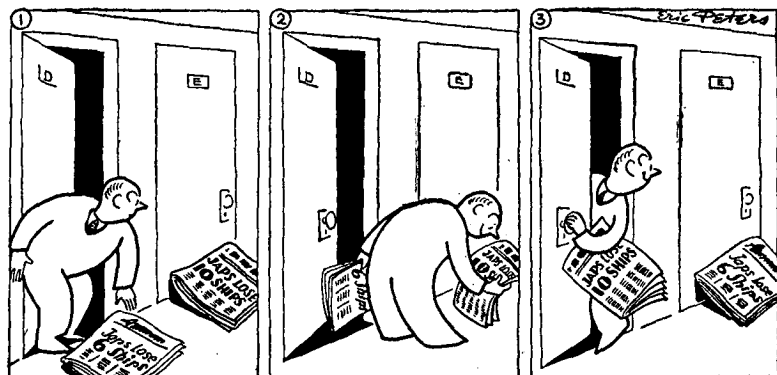
The so-called folk play as we have commonly experienced it on the more modern local stage has needed a Rodgers badly. From *Bunt Pulls The Strings*, which was nothing but the old greaspaint Little Miss Fixit plot in Scotch dialect, to such recent dispensations as *Papa Is All* with its gun figuring climactically in a Mennonite community that notoriously forbids the presence of all firearms, and from Lula Vollmer's *Trigger* and

The Hill Between with their dated themes concealed in Southern mountaineer accents to the later *The First Crocus* with its Scandinavian-Americans comporting themselves like Charles Kleins in a Lottie Blair Parker makeup, eight out of ten of the plays have been for the most part sophisticated affairs. Only the plays emanating from Ireland, and now and then Spain, have had any authenticity and, at that, several of the Irish seem occasionally to have confused Pat O'Mulligan, the illiterate swineherd, with W. B. Yeats, as several of the Spanish appear to have mixed up the genealogical charts of their peasants with those of Sardou.

It is thus, to repeat, that whereas many such folk plays fail as drama

they offer likely material for the song and dance stage. There, the dubious plots and characters they contain do not much matter, since gay tunes, lovely costumes, pretty legs and fancy scenery make one oblivious of their deficiencies and reconstitute their materials into something that, at least superficially, seems to have more body to it than the usual Broadway musical comedy book.

Nevertheless, the day they make a musical show out of *Tobacco Road*, dress up the Georgia cracker girls in silks and satins and have Jeeter Lester eat crêpes Suzette instead of turnips, expect no such friendly notice as this to *Oklahoma!*, even if Rodgers himself should write the music for it.



DOWN TO EARTH

By ALAN DEVOE

Great Blue Heron

THE wild creatures of the earth have reacted in a variety of fashions to the coming of that unique two-legged animal, gifted with a convoluted cortex and a devious will, who made his startling appearance on their earth a few millenniums ago. Some of the wild things, too gentle to survive his

malignance or too instinct-fixed in old patterns of behavior to be capable of ready charge, have simply perished under his assault, as man has spread and increased and carried his contrivances to more and more parts of the earth, or else they have fled helplessly before him; so that now the passenger



Great Blue Heron

Frank Utpatel