

THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

Romance Yesterday — And Today

THE best answer to those younger critics who deride any faintest testimonial to the romantic stage of the past is to be found in the circumstance that when the contemporary theatre seeks to adopt a romantic air it has to borrow it from that very bygone stage. Lacking such romance on its own, it is forced to dig up those musical shows and operettas which induced in the audiences of other days that purple mood which remains ever one of the theatre's most welcome narcotics. It thus is compelled to fall back upon revivals of *Die Fledermaus*, or *Rosalinda*, with its old Strauss waltzes to soothe anew the fancies of later-day audiences; *The Merry Widow*, with Danilò again to sing his Leharian way into the hearts of the vicarious Sonias up in the balcony; *The Vagabond King*, with its consoling tale of a poor poet made proud monarch of France for a day; *The Student Prince*, with its royalty melting before the charm of a little Heidelberg waitress and its melodic tributes to a time that even then had already

passed into the recesses of fond recollection; *The Chocolate Soldier*, with its Oscar Straus souvenirs of a jazzless era; and the mythology sung by Offenbach and the blossom-time love sung by Schubert.

While in the way of dramatic quality our theatre certainly indicates a great improvement over the one that our fathers knew and peculiarly relished, it just as certainly in its other branches of entertainment lacks the romantic flavor that our fathers knew and far less peculiarly revelled in. Save alone for the two Jerome Kern exhibits, *Show Boat* and *Music In The Air*, presented respectively in 1929 and 1932, the stage, though it has offered a number of very worthy musical shows, has not provided any which have permeated their auditors with that half-sad, half-smiling, boozy feeling which so often was their grant in a remoter day. An *Oklahoma!* may induce a transitory such feeling when one looks at Lemuel Ayres' Grant Wood-Thomas Benton scenic paraphrases of the sweeping South-

west countryside and when one hums along with its "People Will Say" tune, which at that brings up visions not of wondrous Ruritania princesses or the moonlit winding Nile but of hand-holding with a cutie in the Savoy-Plaza lounge. And now and then something equally exceptional may for a moment or two cause the mind pleasurably to wander afield from the prosaic immediateness and pick clover in the imagination's happy hunting grounds. But for the overwhelming part the mood inspired in one is as removed from the starlit and cloud-woven as that inspired by J. K. Lasser's *Your Income Tax*, even in its 1937 edition.

II

Where romance is attempted today, the results, to say the least, are slightly confusing. For few will deny that it isn't easy to sink oneself in the warm stream of reverie while contemplating, as in *Early To Bed*, young love blossoming in a bawdy house; or, as in *Something For The Boys*, a more adult love involving a lady who at one point in the proceedings gets herself up as a low-comedy cigar-store Indian; or, as in many another melody show, a grand passion expressed in lyrics dealing with Mrs. Vander-

bilt, Mr. Ickes, Toots Shor, and Jack and Charlie's.

The current frequent tendency to laugh off anything that may be regarded as romantic, customarily praised by amateur intelligences as being a sign of health, is rather a sign of emotional deficiency. Incapable of deep feeling and of sentiment without sentimentality, and devoid of that experience of the world which leaves ever in its wake, however sprayful, a trace of sadness and regret, the purveyors to our musical stage simply conceal in a sissy derision the qualities and attributes they lack. It takes a shameless emotional bravery to write a forthright romantic musical play. It requires only a shameless confession of emotional cowardice, or impotence, to write a romantic spoof, that is, save wit be its portion, which it presently isn't. Only a man contemptuously independent in Æolian emotion can have the nerve to write a song called "The Stars Of Egypt Are In Your Eyes, My Darling." It is the drugstore Romeo or the emotional weakling who in the general run of things writes the one called "I'll Love You, Baby, By The Gowanus Canal."

It is all very well sniffishly to curl a corner of the mouth over some of the romantic business of yesterday's

stage. Some of it, God knows, was pretty innocent and not a little out of keeping with discomfiting truth. Certainly the real Maxim's never in the least resembled the transcendent Everleigh Club of *The Merry Widow's* stage. Certainly anyone who had ever been in the Balkans and had gone bathless for a week had considerable trouble reconciling his recollections with the immaculate splendors of *The Balkan Princess*. And equally certainly the Japan of *The Geisha*, with its long, slim-legged English and American sing-song girls; or the Spain of *Maritana*, with its ladies of the court mostly looking like Maxine Elliott; or the Italy of *The Fencing Master*, with its plazette in Venice smelling of delicate sachets and its Milan as spick and span as Litchfield, Connecticut; or the Portugal of *The Queen's Lace Handkerchief*, with its inn in the Sierras indistinguishable from the Paris Ritz; or the Poland of *The Beggar Student*, with its peasants conducting a continuous Elsa Maxwell party; or the France of *Madeleine*, or *The Magic Kiss*, with its villagers and courtiers cavorting hand in hand in the gardens of the Château de Grimm; or the Africa of Von Suppe's *A Trip To Africa*, with its Bedouin camp's close resemblance to old Newport at the height of

the season — certainly the realist, contemplating such candied fact, was to be forgiven a wayward smile.

But no matter. Beneath and above it all, even for the recalcitrant realist, there was a genuine romantic cajolery. The moonlight may have been a bit too purple; the stars may have been as large as the argent mirrors over Denver's old Silver Dollar saloon bar; the desert may have seemed to have been laid out by Robert Moses; and none of the black hussars may have had knock-knees or bowlegs. Yet on those stages, take it even from one still often given to deplorable critical railery, there persisted something that has largely disappeared from our stages of today, and that something was the brilliant fiction of undying love, the unabashed song of hearts among the roses, the flowing plumes of princes in armor, and all the throb and derring-do of men and women above the clouds of our commonplace existence. And one gave in to it, one gave in to it irresistibly, and came away, maybe foolishly but all the same unmistakably, with a grand feeling that just around the corner lay a very beautiful world, and that in that very beautiful world one must one day surely share.

And how, save something from

those days is given revival, does one usually come away in this day? One comes away from a *Something For The Boys* with the memory of a plot about a house for aviation officers' wives mistaken for a bordello; from an *Early To Bed* with the memory of a plot about a bordello being mistaken for a girls' boarding school; and from a *Let's Face It* with the memory of a plot about a trio of silly, sexy old hags who take on three young soldiers as gigolos. One comes away, further, from such and other shows with ears still buzzing painfully from dialogic barroom wit in which a male who means to say that he got back on his feet last night becomes confused and says to the blonde that he got his feet on her back last night. And one comes away in general with the memory of lyrics consecrated to the rhyming of Goering with herring and heart-of-my-life with something like tart-of-a-wife, of heroes who drolly slap women on the behind, of heroines who crack jokes about toilet rooms, and of love duets ending in passionate clog dances.

The answer that the younger critics make — and loud — is that we live in a realistic age and that there is small place in our theatre today for the old romantic escape. The answer, I fear, is largely bosh.

Otherwise how account for the enormous success of an *Oklahoma!* which in its timid way makes at least a gesture toward capturing the old trovatore mood and the titles of whose three most popular songs sufficiently indicate their content: *Oh, What A Beautiful Morning*, *The Surrey With The Fringe On Top*, and the before-mentioned *People Will Say We're In Love*? And how account for the great success of *Rosalinda*, the persistent road prosperity of such shows as *Blossom Time*, *The Student Prince*, *Countess Maritza* and the like, a Metropolitan Opera House for the first time in years in the relative black, a Gallo troupe playing to packed houses, and the tremendous sheet-music sales of such songs as *As Time Goes By*, *You'll Never Know*, *In The Blue of the Evening*, and others of a similar nature?

III

The notion that the realistically minded audiences nowadays do not care for romance boils down to the simple fact that they do not care for it when it is presented to them in a shabby manner. Nor, for that matter, did they care for it even in the long past when it was presented to them in that manner. It is thus

and accordingly that the younger critics argue their false general conclusion from the failure of something like *Night Of Love*, which, taking a cue from Al Woods' old farce, *Ladies' Night In A Turkish Bath*, might better have called itself *Night Of Love In a Shubert Storehouse*; or of something like the revived *The New Moon*, which seemed to have been hastily costumed in a couple of hours' Bronx shopping tour and whose scenery looked as if it had been painted by the artist responsible for the Sells-Floto sideshow banners; or of periodic other such shoddy presentations — *The Vagabond King* for one — that couldn't possibly succeed in any theatre that didn't serve free beer and pretzels.

To return to an earlier motif, it isn't the simplest thing in the world to inspire the romantic feeling in audiences, where producers may hope to do so, with the kind of materials they presently often employ. Consider, for instance, the stage settings. In the yesterdays, the scenes relied upon to create that feeling were "The Marchesa's Villa near Venice," "The Court of Palms Outside Prince Guido Malespino's Manor House at Cipriani," "The Governor's Palace On the Island of Estrella," "Ruins of a Castle Near the River Temes,"

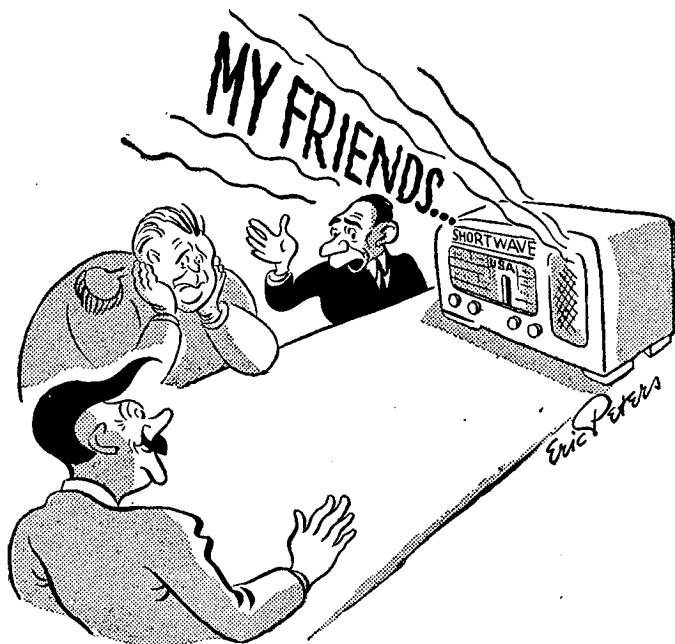
"The Gypsy Encampment on the Road to the Fair at Presburg," and "The Shore of the Mediterranean at Eventide." What, on the other hand, are the kind of scenes intended to make us dream similar warm dreams today? I select at random from among a half-dozen more recent exhibits: "The Corridor of a Texas Hotel," "The Smoke House On Laurey's Farm," "Skidmore's Kitchen Porch," "Lawn of the Keely Cure," "The Boiler Room of the Savoy-Perkins Hotel in Washington, D. C.," and "Erwin's Home, Jackson Heights."

Consider in turn, for another example, the mere names of the characters. All other things being equal, it is nevertheless a bit harder, I believe you will agree, to think in terms of moons and stars and tropical skies in the company of such present nomenclatures as Muriel McGillicuddy, Private Sweeney, Petunia Jackson, Hattie Maloney, Joey Evans and Elmer Whipple — I again select at random from the shows of the last three or four years — than in the company of such of yesterday's (we'll snobbishly leave out the Princess Flavias and Duke Del Dragos) as democratic Francesca Torquato, Myles Na Coppaleen, Phoebe Fairleigh, Captain De Merrimac of the man-o'-war *Cor-*

morant, Isabella Lotterighi, and Raoul St. Courmandet, for all their affinity to Laura Jean Libbey.

In conclusion, the younger critics' lofty contempt for the species of comedy relief in the stage valentines of another epoch. Without contravening them in the least, in point of fact applauding them, let them nevertheless be reminded that if that past comedy was sufficiently reflected in such fearful

comedian character names as Bouilabaise (*Paul Jones*), Count Maladetto Spaghetti (*Sinbad*), Baron Grog (*The Grand Duchess*) and Popoff (*The Merry Widow*), the considerably later-day comedy is just as sufficiently reflected in such as Mr. Rubbish (*Yokel Boy*), Woozy (*Panama Hattie*), Henry Clay Pigeon (*Let's Face It*) and Alexander Throttlebottom (*Of Thee I Sing*).



"Now don't take it too literally."

DOWN TO EARTH

BY ALAN DEVOE

Nature in the City

IN this corner of THE AMERICAN MERCURY there has been a great deal of saying — a saying and re-saying perhaps to the point of monotony — of how steadying and healing and frequently instructing a thing it is to enter into terms of intimate understanding with the world of wild nature which pre-

cedes and exceeds our own small and recent human world. We who are human are few and new. In the measured scheme of this inhabited star, we are only a latecomer compared to the bats that have been skittering and squeaking in these skies for possibly sixty million years. We are, so to put it, new-



Chipmunk

Frank Utpatel