

THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

The Champion Turkeys of Twenty-five Years

SOME of the happiest memories one has of the theatre have been inspired by its worst plays. Not by its simply bad plays, but by its top-notch, incontrovertible, authentic stinkers. Whereas a simply bad play tires one to death, a downright, unrelieved, Grade-A hambust often provides a species of corned enjoyment whose rosemary permeates one down the long years, for when you come right down to it there is little so waywardly piquant as the spectacle of a playwright and a stageful of actors making utter and beautiful asses of themselves.

The current season has thus far withheld any such pure boon, although it came within hailing distance in something called *Victory Belles*. But *Victory Belles* just wasn't polecat enough; about every twenty-five minutes or so it became for a second or two almost endurable. The true turkey is more consistent.

Thinking back over a quarter of a century's playgoing, however, the connoisseur of the bishop's-nose drama has small cause for

complaint. In that period there has been a sufficiency of the 16-karat fowl to satisfy the most scrupulous snob, and I have had the signal honor and pleasure of sampling the lot. But out of the ample quota there were two or three that must be listed as heavyweight champions, plays so ludicrously inept and the actors in them such unspeakable porks that the evenings became matchlessly hilarious.

There was, for example, a rare number labeled *Love's Call*. The *chef d'oeuvre* of one Joe Byron Totten, it greeted the world in September 1925 and no one who saw it in its few days' run will ever forget it. Played in front of scenery described as Guadalharra, Mexico, but evidently retrieved from some earlier exhibit whose locale was Fairbanks, Alaska, its hero was programmed as a handsome American, impersonated by a very fat actor in white skintights and a ten-gallon white sombrero, named Clyde Wilson Harrison. This Clyde Wilson Harrison

(he was thus in full address throughout the evening by everyone who spoke of or to him) met up with a saucy package hight Piquita, impersonated by an actress with a thick Polish accent, while promenading the Guadalharra-Fairbanks boulevards and gave her the high sign. "Me love handsome American Clyde Wilson Harrison," allowed Piquita, coyly eating a rose. "Me love beautiful Piquita, *ma chérie*, too," allowed Clyde Wilson Harrison; "but me engaged to Sue Gertrude Madison, too."

Time passed, and again the juicy twain met, now in what was designated "The Devil's Pass." Here Clyde Wilson Harrison and his fiancée, Sue Gertrude Madison, were being held captive by the villainous Don Pedro De Scarillo, ten-inch mustachios and all, who proclaimed, "Me love Piquita, too; me shoot handsome American Clyde Wilson Harrison!" To save her handsome American hero, Piquita thereupon threw herself in front of Clyde Wilson Harrison and received the mortal bullet. Whereupon a quartet of extras named Juanita, Sancho, Francesco and Pasquale in the costumes of Comanche Indians piously crossed themselves; Sue Gertrude Madison deposited a bloom on the heaving stomach of the prostrate Piquita;

dawn (represented by such a scarlet conflagration as hadn't been seen on a stage since *The Still Alarm*) sprang up like a jack-in-the-box on the backdrop; and handsome American Clyde Wilson Harrison removed his ten-gallon sombrero, tenderly deposited it in turn upon Piquita's still heaving stomach, and — rising to embrace Sue Gertrude Madison — lifted his face to the flies and intoned climactically, "Love's call has been answered! Love conquers life and death! Clyde Wilson Harrison speaks to God!"

But, in Al Jolson's phrase, wait a minute; you ain't heard nothin' yet. In the general period in question came along another terrible turk, *The House Of Doom*, by one whose name mercifully escapes me. This *The House Of Doom* vies with *Love's Call* for all-time top honors, although something named *Flesh*, news of which anon, is a gobbler you should keep firmly in mind. The curtain went up on an eerily lighted chamber decorated with skulls, daggers, scalping knives, shotguns, poisoned arrows, bottles marked *Poison*, a small guillotine, and what looked like an electric chair. "This room has a peculiar atmosphere," observed an elderly gentleman as he entered. "I think, however, I shall repose here for a spell and rest." No sooner had he

reposed than from up behind the big electric chair oozed a ferocious, bewhiskered face with a green spotlight playing upon it. "Gurrrr," gurrrrd the face, which was the property of the man to whom, it seemed, the reposeful gentleman had once handed the dirty end of the stick.

That the owner of the face was bent on revenge began slowly to dawn upon the more sapient members of the audience. Every time the elderly gentleman, his wife, daughter or anyone else connected with his family reposed, upon from behind whatever they were reposing on sprang the bewhiskered, toothless, green, grinning phiz, and with louder and louder gurrrrs. A succession of murders naturally followed, all accompanied by the hoots of owls and the mysterious openings and closings of secret panels and trapdoors which the playwright and director had somehow seemingly forgotten in any way to relate to the foul work in hand. It was grand! But not so grand as the big climactic scene which, at least on the opening night, showed the hero's anaesthetized daughter being rolled by the villain on a table toward a fiery furnace and at the critical moment not only being saved by her fiancé but being saved so ferociously that she

fell off the table on her behind and let out the loudest shriek of the shriekful evening.

Flesh, which was practically hooted off the stage by ten o'clock, was a serious sex drama. Its heroine was an amplitudinous actress with breasts the size of conga drums who, clad in a series of gauzy gowns, languished passionately on chairs, sofas, beds and the floor in her determination to drive the male characters crazy with lust. I forget exactly what it was that made her so determined but I seem to remember it had something to do with getting even with the sex for having once done her wrong. Anyway, one by one she drove the boys to distraction, the distraction being interpreted by hoarse breathings, trembling grasps at the whiskey decanter, lush suckings of the heroine's ear, agonized gulps, vigorous scalp massagings and divers other reactions more generally associated with a morning-after stomach than a night-before heart.

There was apparently no resisting the siren. Let her so much as cross her legs and reveal an inch of ankle and one or another of the males fell on his face in a paroxysm of desire. Let her so much as elegantly extend her hand for labial homage and one or another instantly confused it with a lamb

chop and started voraciously to eat it up. And let her wriggle a mere miniature hinterwriggle and all hell broke loose. What finally broke up the show on the first night was the prehensile damsel's remark (not knowing that her dress had split in the rear), "I wonder what it is that keeps men following me? Can it be — can . . ." and, as she hesitated, the contribution from a member of the audience: "You said it, babe!"

II

While this trio of turkeys probably stands pre-eminent in our modern theatre, there are a few others that historically are not to be too airily waved aside. For example, *The Love City*, hatched by a Mr. Hans Bachwitz and unloaded on the gourmets some seventeen years ago. Laid in what is unarchitecturally generally described as a "house," this particular one situated on "The Hill of Delight in China," it edified its two dozen or so customers with the tale of little Tze-shi, acted by a tall blonde from Louisville, Kentucky. This little five-foot-eleven Tze-shi was sic'd by Chang Lo, the male madam of the house, on an English customer named Richard Cavendish whom Chang had foresightedly put under

the influence of drugs. But Chang (not very clever, these Chinese) had given Richard an overdose which put him to sleep, thus ruining business.

Since you have to have such business in such a play or lose it at the box office and since the play with Richard asleep stopped right then and there, Mr. Bachwitz had to do something. So in desperation he caused Richard to dream a dream, acted out on the stage, in which Richard saw little five-foot-eleven Tze-shi as his own wife and Chang as her lover, thus working in the necessary business. But wait for the climax! Richard, suddenly awaking from his Al Woods dream, pulled out a pistol and Chang, hanging around to eavesdrop the dream, followed suit for no reason anyone save maybe Mr. Bachwitz could figure out. "You have deceived me!" cried Richard and "You have violated the sacred code!" cried Chang, both also for no reason that made any sense. Bang, bang, and both Richard and Chang bit the dust, the while Tze-shi, who during the excitement had rushed upstairs and changed into another and more elaborate evening kimono, peered derisively over the balustrade and hummed something that sounded very much like "A Bicycle Built For Two."

Right down the same cultural alley was a dish of collateral cranberry sauce called *Spellbound*, by Walter Elwood, produced about a year later. Lasting for just three performances and played by some of the damnedest actors seen on the local stage since the fire department eliminated nets, it had to do with a mother who had read that if you drop a certain kind of pill in a man's breakfast coffee you can not only cure him of his taste for alcoholic liquor but, even if he has never had a drink of it, prevent any possible future taste for it. Having two young sons, both strict teetotalers, she nevertheless and accordingly put the pills in their morning beverage and sat back and waited. She didn't have to wait long. One of the sons presently let out a yell, grabbed at the air, and tumbled to the floor. When they picked him up, it was found that the pill had paralyzed him below the waist. No sooner was the lad deposited on a divan than the second son let out an even more terrific yell, grabbed at the air, and started mumbling like an idiot. When they in turn got around to investigating him, it was found that the pill had rendered him dumb.

Naturally, the mother was rather upset, the ribald laughter of the

audience not helping materially to quiet her nerves. Not knowing how otherwise to make amends, she announced to the two boys — the one tottering pitifully around the stage like Leon Errol in a bent-knee comedy scene and the other making inarticulate sounds like Nat Goodwin — that she was going to leave the country, go to some far-off cannibal island and, as a missionary, devote herself by way of consolation to saving the cannibals' souls. Years passed. And after almost two decades she returned, partly insane, and the boys at length learned that it was their own dear mother who was responsible for their wrecked lives.

But again wait! If you think that ended the turkey you don't know a real turk when you see one. No sooner was the confession out of mama's lips than the first son let out a yell of slightly different timbre, grabbed joyously at the air, proudly assumed a ramrod position, and proclaimed, "Look, look, I am well again; I am cured!" And no sooner had the first son spoken than the second let out a yell of similar nuance, joyously grabbed at the air, proclaimed, "Look, look, me too; I am cured!", and launched further into quondam muted speech, unfortunately. And with the boys' arms enfolding their

repentant mama the curtain fell on the happiest ending beheld on an American stage since, in an earlier turkey (the brainchild of one Helen Broun, called *Clouds*) a devoted mother suddenly restored her blind son's sight by shocking him with the lies that she had gone crazy, that his fiancée had secretly married his rival and that his pet dog had been run over by a street-car, thus bringing down the curtain on the rapturous spectacle of his triplicate embrace of mother, best girl and Bruno.

III

Coming to more recent seasons (and by no means overlooking such birds as *Roman Servant*, *Arms For Venus*, *Popsy* and *Boudoir*), the vote for the choicest turkey goes enthusiastically to *Reprise*, by W. D. Bristol, produced at 8:40 P.M. of May 1, 1935, and withdrawn at 10:55 on the same night.

Presented as a serious problem drama, the honey opened with a

young man about to throw himself out of the fifteenth story window of an apartment house, but who was restrained by a friend who screamed, "Halt! Desist! Life is worth living! I shall prove it to you by making you so happy in one short month's time that you shall be regretful that you ever cogitated such a sin!" The man thereupon crawled down from the window ledge and his happiness, sure enough, began instant in his falling in love with his rescuer's rich sister. So happy indeed was he that, needing funds to make his fiancée still happier, he swindled his benefactor, which made the latter's old grandmother so unhappy that she began making him doubt his own happiness and succeeded in goading him to climb up on the window ledge again and this time really jump off. As I recall the final curtain, Grandma was taking a hard look out of the window, shaking her head and muttering, somewhat egotistically: "God's will be done."



HE that wrestles with us strengthens our nerves and sharpens our skills.

—EDMUND BURKE

DOWN TO EARTH

BY ALAN DEVOE

The Mink

THE inhabitants of a metropolis, as has been often pointed out, tend to lose touch with fundamental simplicities and realities. They tend to become disoriented, restless, and susceptible to many a curious delusion and perversion; for there is no earth under their feet, and little visible sky above

them, and indeed hardly a reminder of the roll of the seasons; and for animals (which all of us still are, and will ever be), these deprivations are subtly unsteady. A metropolis is ever in the danger, to use Lewis Mumford's word, of becoming a megalopolis.

In the glittering and vertical



Mink

Frank Utpatel