

THE THEATRE

By GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

If Holly Wood Came to Dunsinane

LITTLE provides more tedious reading than most of what may be called the If articles, which concern themselves with the state of affairs that would befall in one direction or another in the event that something which might conceivably happen actually did happen, and whose published number has been legion.

There may, however, be some constructive irony in contemplating what might occur to the stage if the code governing the making of the moving pictures and supported by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America were to have its counterpart in the theatre.

The possibility is not, after all, so absurdly extreme as its sounds. In certain instances, municipal or police censorship has already sought to impose upon the stage several of the very restrictions suffered by the screen. The New York closing of three such plays of sexual perversion, banned in their entirety by the movie code, as *The Captive*, *Pleasure Man* and *Trio*, has been a potential straw in the wind. So has been the moral suppression in other communities of various plays like *Strange Interlude* and *Tobacco Road*, along with the attempted sup-

pression of such as *Idiot's Delight*, *et al.* But the whole code picture clearly emphasizes the gulf between the screen and the stage and indicates what the position of the theatre might be like under some constituted dictatorship such as that of Will Hays, Joseph Breen, or Eric Johnston.

Specifies the code:

Motion pictures made in the United States are, with a few exceptions, produced in accordance with the provisions of a Production Code. A majority of the foreign pictures, exhibited in theatres here, likewise conform to these self-imposed industry rules and regulations. In Hollywood, there is a department of the Association, with an office also in New York, known as the Production Code Administration which was organized by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc., and which is authorized and maintained by the producing companies using it. The group which forms this Administration has been empowered . . . to make certain that the articles of the Production Code are uniformly and impartially interpreted and applied. All the major producing and distributing companies in the United States, and ninety-nine per cent of the others, work with and through the Production Code Administration. Very few of the producers of English-dialogue motion pictures now being publicly exhibited in theatres in the United States fail to make use of the facilities of the Code Administration.

Irrespective of the quality or lack of quality of the plays mentioned and simply as a study in the two freedoms, here, roughly, is what the general situation of the stage would be if a similar code were in strict application. (The Hollywood code regulations and specifications are set off in quotation marks.)

II

1. "No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin."

A few examples of the plays which, under the ruling, could not without alterations be produced in the theatre: *Camille*, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith*, *Magda*, *Mrs. Dane's Defence*, *Rose Bernd*, *Honor*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *Monna Vanna*, *Maternity*, etc.; in short, the plays of Dumas, Pinero, Sudermann, Jones, Hauptmann, Wilde, Maeterlinck, Brieux, et al., along with such as *Raffles*, *The Last of Mrs. Cheyney*, *Jim*, *the Penman*, *Arsène Lupin*, *Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford*, etc.

2. "Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented."

This would eliminate many such plays as Gorki's *Night Refuge*, Wedekind's *Earth Spirit* and *Pandora's Box*, Strindberg's *Countess Julie*, Houghton's *Hindle Wakes*, Guitry's *Sleeping*

Partners among a dozen of his other plays, together with at least one-third of the comedy and farce produce of France, and innumerable others.

3. "Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation."

On the *index expurgatorius* would be Galsworthy's *Justice*, Brieux's *The Red Robe*, Veiller's *Within the Law*, et al.

4. "Crimes against the law shall never be presented in such a way as to throw sympathy with the crime as against law and justice."

See the above paragraph. Add O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, the Armstrong-Mizner *The Deep Purple*, Wexley's *The Last Mile*, Galsworthy's *The Silver Box*, et al.

5. "The technique of murder must be presented in a way that will not inspire imitation."

Strict application of the ruling would prevent production of plays like Milne's *The Perfect Crime*, Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, such melodramas as *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*, Maugham's *The Sacred Flame*, Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, and a variety of plays like *The Woman Brown*, *Ten Minute Alibi*, *Uncle Harry*, *Hand in Glove*, *Dark Hammock*, etc.

6. "Brutal killings are not to be presented in detail."

Van Druten's *Leave Her to Heaven*, for just one example, would be denied production.

7. "Revenge in modern times shall not be justified."

Prohibited would be O'Neill's

Mourning Becomes Electra, Anderson's *Winterset*, Roland West's *The Unknown Purple*, *Beggars Are Coming to Town*, *Flamingo Road*, etc., etc.

8. "Theft, robbery, safe-cracking . . . should not be detailed in method."

Plays falling under the ban would be many like *Turn to the Right*, *Alias Jimmy Valentine*, et al.

9. "With special reference to the crime of kidnapping, or illegal abduction, such stories are acceptable only when the kidnapping or abduction is (a) not the main theme of the story; (b) the person kidnapped is not a child; (c) there are no details of the crime of kidnapping"; etc.

No such play as the successful Steele-Mitchell *Post Road* could be shown.

10. "Methods of smuggling should not be presented."

Which would interfere with plays like *Twelve Miles Out*, etc.

11. "Illegal drug traffic must never be presented."

Illegal drug traffic has flourished unhampered on the stage since the early days of *The Queen of the Opium Ring* and the later *Wooden Kimono*.

12. "The use of liquor in American life, when not required by the plot or for proper characterization, must not be shown."

Imagine the fate of dozens of English drawing-room comedies with their casual sherries and whisky and sodas and "Won't you join me in a spot?" Imagine also, minus its casual liquor, Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life* and

Love's Old Sweet Song, the beer picnic of *The American Way*, the banquet of *A Parisian Romance*, and countless comedies like *Born Yesterday* and musicals like *The Merry Widow*, *The Student Prince* and *Blossom Time*.

III

We come to Sex.

1. "The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld."

Censored would be at least five of Strindberg's best plays, Shaw's *Getting Married* and *Misalliance*, Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, scores of such plays as *O Mistress Mine* and *The Pirate*, and about two-thirds of the modern French drama. Also Brieux's *The Three Daughters of M. Dupont*, Coward's *Design for Living*, Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*, *Desire under the Elms* and *Welded*, Hauptmann's *Gabriel Schilling's Flight*, Hervieu's *The Nippers*, Maugham's *The Circle*, etc.

2. "Adultery and illicit sex . . . must not be explicitly treated or justified, or presented attractively."

Banned would be countless plays like O'Neill's *Anna Christie*, Donnay's *The Family Boarding House*, Lonsdale's *Spring Cleaning*, Behrman's *Biography*, Franken's *Outrageous Fortune*, et al.

3. "Excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces . . . are not to be shown."

Though *Sapho* was pounced upon in the theatre, it was subsequently freed

by the courts and its excessive and lustful kissing and embraces were given a clean slate. Further examples: *A Fool There Was*, Odets' *Clash by Night*, *Cobra*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (which had to suffer much soft-soaping before it could be shown on the screen), etc.

4. "Seduction or rape should never be more than suggested. . . . They must never be shown by explicit method."

Impossible of production would have been Tolstoi's *Resurrection*, *Lucrèce*, *Johnny Belinda*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Brother Cain*, *The Voice of the Turtle*, *Dark of the Moon*, *The Primrose Path*, et al.

5. "They [scenes of seduction and rape] are never the proper subject for comedy."

Impossible, too, would have been *Strictly Dishonorable*, among others.

6. "Sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden."

No plays like the following could be shown: Sophocles' *Ædipus*, Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, and Donnay's *Lysistrata*, along with *The Green Bay Tree*, *Oscar Wilde*, *The Children's Hour*, Lenormand's *Simoon*, *One-Man Show*, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *The Cenci*, *Outrageous Fortune*, Sartre's *Behind Closed Doors*, et al.

7. "White slavery shall not be treated."

Plays, among others, that have freely treated the subject: *The Lure*, *The Shanghai Gesture*, etc.

8. "Miscegenation [sex relationship

between the white and black races] is forbidden."

The stage would not be privileged O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, Sheldon's and MacArthur's *Lulu Belle*, Langston Hughes' *Mulatto*, Raphaelson's *White Man*, Smith's *Strange Fruit*, Green's *In Abraham's Bosom*, or Shakespeare's *Othello*.

9. "Sex hygiene and venereal diseases are not proper subjects for theatrical motion pictures."

Under the ban would come Brieux's *Damaged Goods*, Echegaray's *The Son of Don Juan*, Sundgaard's *Spirochete*, *Pick-up Girl*, *The Green Hat*, *I Must Love Someone*, etc.

10. "Scenes of actual child birth, in fact or in silhouette, are never to be presented."

Among plays that could not be produced would be Rice's *A New Life*, Eckstein's *Christmas Eve*, etc.

IV

We come to Vulgarity.

1. "The treatment of low, disgusting, unpleasant, though not necessarily evil, subjects should be guided always by the dictates of good taste and a proper regard for the sensibilities of the audience."

The ax would fall indiscriminately on *Tobacco Road*, *Maid in the Ozarks*, *Tortilla Flat*, *The Great Magoo*, *Battle of Angels*, *Salome*, *The Lower Depths*, certain scenes in Shakespeare in which Falstaff figures, among them the tavern scene in *Henry IV, Part II* involving Doll Tearsheet, etc., etc.

2. "Obscenity in word, gesture, reference, song, joke, or by suggestion, even when likely to be understood only by part of the audience, is forbidden."

It is easy to foretell what would happen to such scenes in Shakespeare as those like Hamlet's sexual animadversions to Ophelia, Katharine's dialogue with her attendant Alice, the bawdy business in *Pericles, etc.*, to many of the Restoration comedies, and to such modern plays as Guitry's *Wife, Husband and Lover*, Maurey's *The Benefactress*, Vincent Lawrence's *Washington Heights*, Brown's *A Sound of Hunting, et al.*

3. "Pointed profanity and every other profane or vulgar expression, however used, is forbidden."

Censored would be portions of all kinds of plays like *The Iceman Cometh*, *Born Yesterday*, *The Front Page*, *Five Star Final*, *Is Zat So?*, *Dead End*, *Jarnegan*, *The Hairy Ape*, *Lifeline*, *Sailor, Beware!*, *Chicken Every Sunday*, *What Price Glory?*, etc.

4. "No approval by the Production Code Administration shall be given to the use of words and phrases included in, but not limited to, the following: Alley cat and broad (applied to a woman); Bronx cheer, cocotte, God, Lord, Jesus, Christ (unless used reverently), cripes, fanny, fairy, fire (cries of), Gawd, goose (in a vulgar sense), hot (applied to a woman), in your hat, louse, lousy, Madam (relating to prostitution), nuts, pansy, razzberry, slut, son-of-a-bitch, tart, toilet gags, whore, damn, hell, Chink,

Dago, Greaser, Hunkie, Kike, Nigger, Wop."

"Alley cat" has been freely used in the theatre even as a play's title. "Broad" has figured in all kinds of plays like *Born Yesterday* and musical shows like *Pal Joey*. "Bronx cheer" is common. "Cocotte" is present in at least thirty or forty adapted French plays. "God" and "Lord" are heard almost weekly. "Jesus" is heard not only in Shakespeare but in all kinds of plays dealing with soldiers. So, too, in the latter is "Christ." "Cripes," "fanny" and "fairy" are perfectly familiar theatrical expressions. Cries of "fire" have not been confined to *The Still Alarm* and the Edward Ellis short play done by the Holbrook Blinn company at the Princess. "Gawd" is a standby of female comics. "Goose" has been ventilated before and since *Chicken Every Sunday*. "Hot," "in your hat," "louse" and "lousy" have been used in everything from *Is Zat So?* to the Winter Garden shows. "Madam" has figured in *Mahogany Hall*, *Morals*, *All That Glitters*, *Behind Red Lights, etc., etc.* "Nuts" has seldom been absent from the "tough mug" comedies; "pansy" has appeared in the Cantor and Jolson shows and others; and "razzberry" in dozens. "Slut" has been used in Maugham's *Our Betters*, in three or four Al Woods exhibits, and in the plays of many Broadway playwrights. "Son-of-a-bitch" figures in *The Front Page*, *Spread Eagle*, *Born Yesterday* and many others. "Tart" is to be found in *Ladies of the Evening*, *The*

Greeks Had a Word for It, et al. Toilet gags have been a favorite in various George Abbott productions and Olsen and Johnson shows. "Whore" is found freely in O'Neill, among others, and in the titles of such plays as Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and Dekker's *The Honest Whore*. "Damn" has figured in even the titles of such plays as *Damn Your Honor*, *Damn the Tears, et al.*, in innumerable plays like *Swan Song*, and "God damn" in the climax of Clyde Fitch's *The City*. "Hell" has been used in scores of plays and served in the final curtain line of *The Easiest Way*. "Chink" is found in Hoyt's *A Trip to Chinatown*, among a dozen or more others; "Dago" and "Wop" in *Lombardi, Ltd.*, *Moon over Mulberry Street, etc.*, *etc.*; and "Greaser" and "Hunkie" in many Mexican and Western and labor plays respectively. "Kike" is heard in Chodorov's *Common Ground*, and "Nigger" in the titles of *Nigger Rich* and Sheldon's *The Nigger* and in many plays about Negroes like *Strange Fruit*, *Jeb* and *On Whitman Avenue*.

V

We come to Costume.

1. "Complete nudity is never permitted. This includes nudity in fact or in silhouette, or any licentious notice thereof by other characters."

Shows like *Are You With It?*, *Good Night, Ladies, etc.*, would be jumped upon.

2. "Undressing scenes should be avoided, and never used save where

essential to the plot."

Many musical shows would feel the ax. Likewise plays such as *Good Morning, Corporal*, *Courtesan*, *If I Were You*, *Summer Wives*, Clyde Fitch's *Girls*, Clare Boothe's *The Women, et al.*

VI

We come to Religion.

1. "No film or episode may throw ridicule on any religious faith."

Censored would be various plays like *Rebellion*, *Polygamy*, *Susanna and the Elders*, *Papa Is All*, *Revolt*, *Salvation*, Bridie's *Tobias and the Angel*, Dunsany's *The Glittering Gate*, and liberal portions of Bernard Shaw.

2. "Ministers of religion in their character as ministers of religion should not be used as comic characters or as villains."

This would exclude plays like *The Servant in the House* (*vide* the bishop), *Shadow and Substance* (*vide* the football-playing curate), *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Rain*, *Bride of the Lamb*, *Elmer Gantry, etc., etc.*

VII

We come to Locations.

1. "The treatment of bedrooms must be governed by good taste and delicacy."

The ruling would interfere with such plays as Gantillon's *Maya*, *The Perfect Marriage*, *Catherine Was Great*, *Twin Beds*, *School for Brides*, Bourdet's *Times Have Changed*, *Her Card-board Lover*, *Baby Mine, et al.*

VIII

We come to National Feelings.

1. "The use of the Flag shall be consistently respectful."

Censored would be *Spread Eagle, A Man without a Country*, and others.

2. "The history, institutions, prominent people and citizenry of all nations shall be represented fairly."

Prohibited would be countless such plays and shows as *East Is West, So This Is London*, Caillavet and deFlers' *The Green Coat*, Shaw's *Great Catherine* and *Geneva*, a dozen of the better Irish plays, *Marinka, Polonaise, etc.*

IX

We come to Titles.

1. "Salacious, indecent, or obscene titles shall not be used."

Disallowed would be the titles of such plays as *The Demi-Virgin, Red-light Annie, Behind Red Lights, Sex, The Naked Genius, Virtue's Bed, A Modern Virgin, Slightly Married, Strip for Action, The Marriage Bed, She Lived Next to the Firehouse.*

X

We come to Repellent Subjects.

1. "The following subjects must be treated within the careful limits of good taste:

"a. Third degree methods."

Out with Charles Klein's *The Third Degree*, Bein's *Land of Fame, etc.*

"b. Brutality and possible gruesomeness."

Forbidden: Odets' *Till the Day I Die*, the Guignol shocker, *Vitriol*, Dixon's *The Clansman, The Duke in Darkness, Kind Lady, Professor Mamlock, et al.*

"c. Branding of people."

Prohibited: Menander's *The Rape of the Lock*, d'Annunzio's *The Daughter of Jorio, The Scarlet Letter, The Cheat, etc.*

"d. Apparent cruelty to children."

Suppressed would be *The Two Orphans, Oliver Twist, Little Ol' Boy, Hickory Stick, etc.*

"e. The sale of women, or a woman selling her virtue."

Condemned: Sherwood's *Waterloo Bridge*, Duke's *House of Assignment*, Bisson's *Madam X*, Walter's *The Easiest Way, etc.* Also *Night Hawk, Ladies of the Evening, Maya, The Yellow Ticket, Manhattan Nocturne, Pick-up Girl, Anna Lucasta, etc., ad infinitum.*

"f. Surgical operations."

Any play like *Sea Dogs*, with its sailor's hand chopped off, would not be allowed a showing.

XI

Amen.



THE FATHER OF BIRTH CONTROL

BY STEWART H. HOLBROOK

WHEN old Abner comes out of the jug," remarked his good friend, Theodore Parker, "he will come out like beer from a bottle, all foaming. He will make others foam, too." Boston's greatest divine was referring to Abner Kneeland, just then confined in a Boston jail for publishing a piece of literary dynamite quaintly entitled *The Fruits of Philosophy; or, the Private Companion of Young Married People*. The time was 1838. The Kneeland Affair was the beginning of the birth control movement in the United States.

At the time he entered the gloomy granite hulk on Charles Street in Boston, Kneeland was the most celebrated prisoner in the United States. He was also sixty-four years old, rather aged for a crusader. He was born in Gardner, Massachusetts, of stock that stemmed straight from Plymouth colony. He attended school in his native state, then in New Hampshire, and was presently licensed to preach in the Universalist Church. For the next thirty-odd years he held pulpits in New England, New York and Pennsylvania, meanwhile editing various religious papers, always championing liberal views, some of which were considered downright radical by

all except a few reformers. He came to know Robert Dale Owen and the fascinating Frances Wright, a handsome woman who did not endorse holy matrimony but admitted, from the lecture platform and to charmed newspaper reporters, that she was in favor of Free Love.

Kneeland, however, was no free love advocate. He considered formal marriage necessary to society; but in the matter of formal theology he was gradually becoming alienated from his Church. In 1829, upon the advice of the leading Universalist of the day, Hosea Ballou, he asked and was granted permission to suspend himself from fellowship in that church. Thenceforth he was a freethinker, and in 1831 he founded *The Boston Investigator*, the first Rationalist periodical in the country.

Two years before Kneeland published *The Fruits of Philosophy*, there had been one attempt in the United States to discuss birth control publicly. This was in a little pamphlet entitled *Moral Philosophy*, written and published by Robert Dale Owen of the New Harmony colony in Indiana. Owen's pamphlet was a mild and vague treatise in which he rested his case for the control of concep-