
THE THEATRE

by GEORGE JEAN NATHAN



SOME PLAYS AND SOME PLAYWRIGHTS

Servicemen Plays. — Our returned servicemen seem determined, and very understandably, to write plays about themselves and their fellows. The plays are usually found to be of two sorts: (1) those in which the protagonist upon his return home in the flesh seeks to orient and re-establish himself and discovers to his disgust that conditions, despite the war, have not only not improved but deteriorated and that the forces of evil are still operating in the land; and (2) those in which he returns as a uniformed ghost and finds much the same thing or, if the playwright thinks he can ultimately persuade a producer to hire a little off-stage music, learns wistfully that life is for the living and that, though his old friends remember him with affection, he must be content to remain a spook.

Good vs. Evil Plays. — The Good versus Evil play, which has again been with us, on the other hand usually as-

sumes one of three forms. In the first, the Morality variations, the forces of Good and Evil are symbolized respectively as a blonde in a white dress named Virtue and as a brunet male in a black ensemble named either Vice or Wickedness. In the second, those of a poetic flavor, Good and Evil are cast in the respective persons of a medium-size, bandy-legged, milk-fed actor in a fair, curly wig whose persistently pure love for the heroine would, if she were normal and not merely the routine cardboard figure, bore her to death before the second act was half over, and a tall, tubercular basso profundo with painted red ears and a couple of cowlicks who, if the management is not too economical, at several points in the evening is elaborately projected up onto the stage through a trapdoor illuminated by a crimson gelatine slide. In the third, or later day version, Good is represented by a character with some such ordinary modern name as Jones, or perhaps vaguely The Stranger, and who with needful box-office caution is implied to be the Lord Almighty Himself,

and Evil by another, similarly christened, who with no such necessary caution is heaved at the audience as Satan. I refer, of course, to the white drama. In the plays performed by Negroes there is no call for any such prudence in the picturing of the Deity, since audiences are disposed to accept as childishly innocent, artless and inoffensive anything that Negroes may do under such circumstances.

Lillian Hellman. — It seems to me that Miss Hellman's primary weakness as a dramatist is her tendency too often to confound italic capitals with strength of emotional expression. She drives emotion into her characters with a melodramatic sledge-hammer instead of allowing it naturally and forcibly to be driven out of themselves. She is in a way, particularly in her latest play, *Another Part Of The Forest*, an Edgar Bergen with a cast of Charlie McCarthys, all painted in violent hues and all equipped with shrieking sirens. She has her virtues in intelligence, honesty, a simple and direct prose, and a keen sense of isolated dramatic episode. It is her greatest fault that she now and again rushes precipitantly at drama instead of craftily stalking it. It thus sometimes just stands there scared, and in its scare becomes hysterical. And its net effect on any intelligent auditor is like a hollowed-out, illumined, glaring Hallowe'en pumpkin, hypothetically frightening but only childishly agitating.

It may be possible, in Mr. Atkin-

son's ironically exact description, to offer "a witches' brew of blackmail, insanity, cruelty, theft, torture, insult, drunkenness, with a trace of incest thrown in for good measure" and one in which, as he says, "there is hardly a moment when someone is not bellowing at someone else in a very bad temper indeed" and when "patricide and matricide and fratricide are apparently only a few years further back in history, in case Miss Hellman ever takes up the next earlier generation of Hubbard footpads." But such witches' brews miss their efficacy when the ingredients are not stirred with poetic imagination and majestic dramaturgy. Miss Hellman unfortunately uses a stick of dynamite as her swizzle.

George Kelly. — When the discussion turns to writers of polite comedy, someone is usually pretty certain to defend his particular favorite with the observation that he understands women better than any of his rivals. In the late 1890s and early 1900s, it was Clyde Fitch who often benefited by the argument. A little later on, it was Avery Hopwood, and then it was Vincent Lawrence, and then it was S. N. Behrman. It strikes me, however, that only one of these four has understood women so well as, for example, the late Arthur Richman did in the years immediately past, or as George Kelly still does.

Fitch was plausible on the subject, but his female characters were mostly less women than actresses merely playing them. It was for well-known

actresses that he commercially tailored his plays and in the tailoring his characters naturally absorbed many of the superficial characteristics of the actresses themselves. Fitch generally saw his women as so many female box-office treasurers and ticket sellers. The heroines of his *Thoroughbred*, *The Cowboy and the Lady*, *Her Own Way*, and *Her Great Match* were thus not distinct characters but one and all Maxine Elliott. And, even apart from comedy, she remained the heroine of *Nathan Hale*. So, further, was it in the cases of the comedies he tailored for Clara Bloodgood (*The Way of the World*, in part, and *The Girl with the Green Eyes*, *The Coronet of the Duchess*, and *The Truth*), for Ethel Barrymore (*Captain Jinks* and *Her Sister*), for Amelia Bingham, Mary Mannering, and others, certainly including in his last years the young actress Ruth Maycliffe whom he and Charles Cherry unsuccessfully tried to build up and for whom he carpentered *Girls* and *The Bachelor*.

Hopwood, whom I knew well in our early post-college days in New York, once said to me, "The difference between us is that you have respect for the theatre; I haven't; I look on it only as a means toward gratifying my love of money." He was an astute and skilful comedy writer of the second rank but, when it came to women characters, he was either unacquainted with the sex or as cagily dishonest as Fitch. In these later times, Behrman, a comedy writer greatly superior to both, indicates

also a superior equipment for dealing with female characters, but his, too, though he is, it seems, completely honest, waywardly appear to be dieted in perceptible part on greasepaint.

Richman showed a penetration of female character infinitely deeper than either Fitch or Hopwood, and relatively deeper than Behrman. To any skeptic, I recommend a comparative study of such of his comedies as *Heavy Traffic*, *The Awful Truth*, *The Far Cry*, *A Proud Woman*, and *The Season Changes*. But apt as Richman was, he did not, save in certain details, capture the essence of his females quite so fully as Kelly has. The latter's psychological insight rounds out where Richman often simply sketched — sketched impressively but nonetheless merely sketched.

In *Craig's Wife*, *Behold the Bridegroom*, and *The Deep Mrs. Sykes*, Kelly has plumbed more profoundly than either Richman or Behrman. In even such of his weaker efforts as *Daisy Mame*, *Maggie the Magnificent*, and *Reflected Glory* traces of his cunning are not absent.

Kelly's only real competitor in the fifty-year span considered — the previous years disclosed little or nothing — has been the lately deceased Vincent Lawrence aforesaid. This Lawrence, above every other American writer of comedy except Kelly, indicated a perception of the female sex that none of his predecessors and but one of his contemporaries approaches, and I am not too sure that

that perception at times was not superior to Kelly's. In comedies like *Sour Grapes*, *Two Married Men*, *A Distant Drum*, and *Among the Married* he at least equalled in their own especial department even his French coetaneians. Now that he is no longer part of the comedy scene, Kelly accordingly takes over the lead. In his latest, *The Fatal Weakness*, though it is considerably below his best level, there is again evidence of his skill. An intelligent and droll fellow, his comedies measurably outdistance most of the contemporary English.

Moss Hart. — In his most recent flirtation with the box-office, *Christopher Blake*, Mr. Hart's emotional grand larceny stops at nothing. Resorting to the device of showing alternately the judge's chambers and court-room in which divorce proceedings are in motion and scenes picturing the incidental imaginings of the divorcing couple's young son, he runs the hokum gamut from the father's and mother's grief-laden conferences with the child to the latter's tearful prayer in church for a reprieve from his unhappiness, and from episodes in a poor house from which the parents are to be evicted by the cruel superintendent to the time-honored agonized cry of the child, "I didn't ask to be born!" And all staged with those long pauses between speeches and that physical slow motion on the part of the leading actors which are supposed to heighten the sense of their inner torture. In only one detail

does he depart from such exhibits' routine, and that is in not finally reuniting the separated couple in their child's interest. Yet even here one has the feeling that the business has been offered less because the husband and wife would honestly conduct themselves as they do — the wife's antecedent comportment with her son suggests that she would listen to her husband's plea to return to him — than because of an eye to theatrical novelty and surprise. In the family crisis which Mr. Hart pictures, as in many such human crises, people often have a way of acting conventionally and not like O. Henry.

The play in its judge's chamber and court-room scenes is substantially still another version of the kind of gallery drama popular in the theatre of past decades, and in its scenes of the child's fancy owes some debt to a variety of plays ranging from Eleanor Gates' *The Poor Little Rich Girl* to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Vegetable* and from others like Hauptmann's *Hannele* to the famous old extravaganza, *The Magic Doll*. Though, furthermore, we are assured that the psychological aspects of the child's flights of imagination have been passed upon and endorsed by Mr. Hart's corps of psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, I am not persuaded that a child whose theatregoing had necessarily been limited to the contemporary playhouse would visualize himself as an actor in the long ago, elegant, cape-swinging tradition of Richard Mansfield or Leo Ditrichstein, or that, at

his innocent age, he would be more greatly impressed by Hamlet than by any other stage character, or, in another direction, that he would be likely to imagine himself committing suicide immediately after receiving the nation's highest honor from the President of the United States in person. Such things, unless I am severely mistaken, smack much more of Broadway playwriting than true psychoanalysis.

It is thus that a play and produc-

tion involving five revolving stages and a huge cast at an expense of one hundred and eighty thousand dollars fail so far as I am concerned to accomplish any slightest comparable effect to such infinitely simpler and more reputable plays on much the same basic theme as Brioux's *Suzette* and *The Deserter*, Atlas' *Wednesday's Child*, or, certainly, Strindberg's *The Link*. All that Mr. Hart's exhibit sums up to is emotional boogie-woogie on a gilt piano.

PHRASE ORIGINS — 12

ONE FOR THE BOOK: *When a friend approaches with an outré or incredible anecdote, he often prefaces it with the remark: "Here's one for the book." Many lexicographers and philologists have been puzzled by the phrase, and some have attempted to explain it on the basis of a metaphorical assumption that one is collecting or noting down esoteric material, i.e., gathering material for a book. There is now reason to believe, however, that the phrase derives from the argot of the racetrack gambler, that it is an elliptical form of "one for the end book." Before pari-mutuel betting machines were used at racetracks, it was customary for the bookmakers to line up in some designated area. A sort of order of seniority was observed, with each newcomer taking his place at the end of the line and working up. When a bookmaker was consulted by a bettor who wanted higher odds than the bookie could give without "dutching" his book, he sometimes passed him on to a colleague who was giving better odds on that particular horse. If a bettor asked unusually high odds, the bookie might comment, "Here's one for the end book," implying that no one but a green newcomer, hard up for bets, would accept those odds. By extension, the expression became common as a means to denote skepticism, and it is still so used in the betting fraternity. When it passed out of gambling circles, it became a useful but rather vague metaphor to outsiders, who dropped the meaningless "end," while "book" came to resume its conventional meaning. "One for the book" is one of the many phrases in our language which have pulled themselves up by the bootstraps to achieve universal usage as well as respectability.*

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