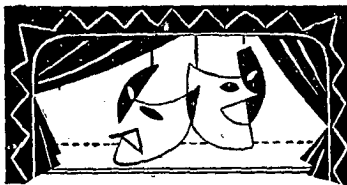


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# THE THEATRE

by GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

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## MEMORANDA ON FOUR PLAY CATEGORIES

**N***egro Plays.* One of the virtues of the Negro Theodore Ward's late *Our Lan'*, which dealt with the Reconstruction period in the South, was the manner in which the folk songs were made to seem a natural and integral part of it. In many a Negro play we have seen, the songs appear to have been incorporated arbitrarily and have had an unmistakable air of having been fallen back upon to fill in gaps in the dramaturgy and to distract the audience from the plays' temporary weaknesses. Ward, on the other hand, utilized them not as such deceptive raisins in a half-baked cake but honestly to hearten and forward his dramatic action and to color his theme interiorly. In the more usual Negro exhibit, the songs are employed much as songs were in the older, lesser musical comedies, to break up dialogue in danger of becoming tedious and to bridge with a presumptive acceptability the empty stretches between the love scenes and

the comedian's prattfalls. Whenever in such Negro plays there has been fear of plot drooping or internal color fading, song has been rushed into the breach, with the consequence that one has had some trouble deciding whether one has been invited to attend a drama or a minstrel show periodically interrupted by a dramatic plot.

Another of the play's virtues was its author's control of emotion. While it was present in plenty, it never was allowed to get out of hand and overweigh itself. In the average Negro drama, an excess of emotion is merchanted on the dubious theory that it is characteristic of the Negro, and what results is merely a lot of bad melodrama masquerading as the natural expression of Negro character. That the Negro is a more emotional person than his average white counterpart may be true. But the theatrical notion that he invariably conducts himself, in both his serious and lighter moments, after the manner of a figure in, the old-time gallery melodramas made up with black greasepaint is

surely open to question. Any such notion, I think, is a dramatic skin game.

**Sports Plays.** Not more than one out of a dozen plays dealing with sports or the underworld catches its vulgar speech with any degree of verity. The lingo is generally less an accurate duplication of the real thing than a theatricalized and artificially colored paraphrase. A little of it may be faithfully reported, but more is phony. Ring Lardner was, as everyone by this time knows, probably the only playwright who has caught literally the idiom of the eccentric characters he dealt with. George Ade invented a lingo that subsequently filtered into the popular speech. Lardner did not invent; he recorded. (Damon Runyon, with a sharp ear, as his stories demonstrate, did not see fit to employ his considerable gift in the one or two plays on which he collaborated.)

To the great majority of writers of sports jargon plays, the jargon seems simply to be a racket. Any such speech, however bogus, is resorted to by them to supply a character and background flavor which they can not otherwise manage. It is, they imagine, their easy way out, since it will impress as authentic the nine people in an audience out of every ten who know the particular argot only vaguely. This holds true, moreover, not only of sports plays but of most plays given to a vernacular supposedly indigenous to them. And it holds

equally true of a goodly share of popular fiction. The playwrights posture as neo-Lardners merely on the score of changing every *yes* to *yeah* and every *girl* to *broad*. They flatter themselves that they have hit off character with a beautiful sense of recognition by having recourse to such stuff as "pleased tuh meetya," "wuz she cold like a clam," or "shake me a hip, baby." And they further congratulate themselves on the precision of their recording ears with a sports, gangster and other patois that no baseball player, gangster, ring pug or race-track denizen would recognize or could possibly understand without an interpreter, who in all likelihood wouldn't understand it either.

**Mystery Plays.** Let the author of a mystery-detective play evolve a plot of some interest and he nevertheless is generally pretty certain to dull it out of interest with repetitions of the routine characters, lines, and stage business common to the species. Often to be anticipated, for example, is the detective who will seize up the telephone on a call from Headquarters and monosyllabically ejaculate a startled "What? Where?," thus theoretically agonizing the curiosity of the audience as to some new suspect. Equally often to be expected is the business involving the villain's drawing of a gun to shoot the heroine, the sound of a shot, the revelation that it was fired not by the villain but by the detective warily concealed without, and the villain's collapse with a bullet

in his arm. The comedy-relief household maid, the arbitrary dousing of the lights, the vase on the mantelpiece in which something or other has been hidden, and in sufficient instances the walking-stick containing a sword, dagger or revolver may similarly be looked forward to.

Often, also, one may anticipate the man-of-the-world character, attired in the *dernier-cris*, who will be the repository of what the author apparently regards as a modish and biting wit, which will take such contours as defining this or that as the last refuge of a scoundrel and that or this as the final essence of barbarism. The phonograph will be economically resorted to to supply anomalous music to a tense scene; thrown in will be some tokens of the author's culture in the form of allusions to ceramics, Shostakovich and the French novelists; and at least one scene will reveal the heroine in a silk pajama outfit so elaborate that it will take the audience all of ten minutes to get its mind back on the play again.

**Nostalgic Plays.** The recent revival of interest in the writings of Henry James was scarcely further promoted by the dramatization of his novel *Washington Square* under the paper-back title *The Heiress*. It isn't that the playwrights, Ruth and Augustus Goetz, were too disobedient to his theme, which is of so commonplace a nature that any transgression wouldn't matter much the one way or the other; nor is it that they did any

major violence to most of his characters, at least externally. It is simply that, through the imagined strictures of their medium, they so scissored and scattered his style and intent that what was literature became litter.

I appreciate that this is the conventional criticism of many such efforts to transplant a literary work to the stage. I also appreciate that with repetition it has become a little tiresome to customers of the critical art. But, though it may possibly be tricked now and then into some novelty of expression and passed off on the less foxy reader for something fairly original, it remains the old simple fact and as such is best to be expressed simply and without fancy trimming.

It is the custom of the theatre in periods of disquiet and discontent to hark back, not without a commercial gleam in its eye, to periods of greater tranquillity. The theory in the case is that the mood of tranquillity will be inculcated in an audience with such consummate effect that it will become blissfully oblivious of its earlier unrest.

The theory nine times out of ten doesn't work any better than one which might maintain that plays in a period of ease and contentment which were full of bloody alarms would make audiences feel like committing suicide on the spot.

Once in a while a play laid in the untroubled yesterdays may, it is true, divert an audience from its immediate worldly concerns. But the play that does so has to have something more

than handsome old-fashioned stage settings and costumes, wistful allusions to institutions long since gone their purple way or whimsical references to sirloin steaks at ten cents a pound, and the emotions of innocent adolescence incorporated into characters of adult exteriors. The average play of the species has little more than that and what nostalgia it evokes in its spectators is induced very much less by its elaborately contrived echo of distance than by some such minor stage property as a humorously recalled hand-painted cuspidor or a sentimentally recollected old brocade chair.

The weakness of *The Heiress* lay not only in at least one such direction but in the circumstance that its story, set in the middle 1800s, was not, as was that, say, of *Life with Father*, particularly flavorful of its period and would just as closely fit 1947 as 1847 or 1850. What it was to all stage intents and purposes was merely another variation of the old plot of the bitter father who breaks up his daughter's love affair with a young man on the ground that the latter is a fortune hunter, of the desertion of the suitor when he learns that the girl may be disinherited, of his eventual contrite return, and of her realization of his worthlessness and her rejection of him. In other words, if stripped of its mid-nineteenth century stage trappings, indistinguishable from a mid-twentieth century copy laid in a house on Fifth or Park Avenue. For the notion that such people as figure in the play

and period must invariably have spoken with a tongue approximating that of Henry James is akin to the notion that such as figure in similarly placed plays today generally speak with that of Harry James.

The moral philosophy of the James' fiction and of the play made from it, along with much of the conduct of the chief characters, finds its counterpart, moreover, in the drama of more recent times. And so it is that the exhibit intrinsically impressed one as being largely a stale contemporary play whose staleness was optimistically camouflaged in the setting and dress of a bygone era.

Aside from *Life with Father*, most of the attempts in later seasons to recapture the sentimental essence of the past, though here and there commercially successful, have missed much critical satisfaction. *I Remember Mama*, while it had its pleasant points, amounted in the aggregate to little more than a box-office shrewdly draped with antimacassars, hung with chromos of an old-time San Francisco, and perfumed with the smell of home-made cookies. *Years Ago*, though it similarly enjoyed its moments, manufactured its atmosphere largely with incorporated allusions to personages and events of its period, and with such obvious properties as unfamiliar telephones, two-pound gold watch chains, and the like.

*The Damask Cheek*, for all some graceful prose, had the air of a revival of one of Pinero's minor comedies strainfully adapted to the 1909 Ameri-

can scene with such lines as "She's been to the theatre — Sothern and Marlowe," "She went with Michael to the Bioscope and the Judge took her to hear Burton Holmes," and "I'd been to see 'The Easiest Way' only the week before." *The Old Maid*, laid in the middle 1880s, was, by the consent of everybody but the Pulitzer prize committee, unadulterated dramatic rubbish of "The child didn't know who her parents were; only that she was a foundling whom a family had

taken in" sort. And *The American Way*, laid in 1896 and the years following, was a fabricated tear-cadger larded with the names of Mark Twain, Admiral Dewey, William Jennings Bryan, McKinley, Mark Hanna, etc., with such songs as "I'm Afraid To Go Home In The Dark" and "Down Where The Wurzburger Flows," and with references to *St. Nicholas* magazine and Lillian Russell cigars. Nor were any of the other efforts to melt the trade critically any better.

## SUMMER INN

BY ETHEL BARNETT DE VITO

Whatever changes in a frightening world,  
Whatever the monstrous threats that may be hurled,  
The thunders fall far short of this quiet spot  
And whatever else may alter, this will not.

Each year the same old women come together  
From different winter worlds: fowl of a feather,  
Rock in the same old chairs the same old way,  
Knitting, recounting things their grandsons say.

Here they meet year on year till summer ends  
Certain of welcome, reassured of friends,  
Untroubled though eyes are dimmer, for they know  
All is the same: they saw it long ago.

The end of the world would cause them less of fear  
Than that this might not be here another year,  
But as long as it lasts, they hold it changeless, theirs,  
Bound by tradition made in rocking chairs.