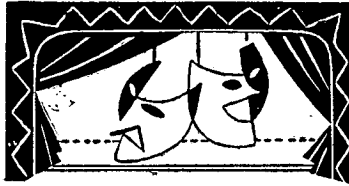

THE THEATRE

by *GEORGE JEAN NATHAN*



STRICTLY TRIVIA

WHENEVER, outside the theatre, I can not get to sleep at nights, I no longer count sheep, having found that that particular exercise in arithmetic does nothing to woo slumber, probably because of the bothersome agility of the animals and the touching look of sadness on their faces. What I presently count is something much more monotonous and immeasurably more auspicious as a soporific: the characters I have regularly encountered in the Broadway comedies. I lie down, close my eyes, and in no time I am fast in the arms of Morpheus.

There they parade in all their frozen doldrums: the smart divorcée with a train of husbands in her wake whose cynical banter is supposed to constitute such wit as hasn't been heard from a stage since the death of Congreve; the lady novelist who is admired by the other characters for her great womanly wisdom on the score of having written such epigrammatic profundities as "Marriage

is the death of love"; her suave publisher who professes to be done with the female sex but who is obviously doomed to marry his fair client in the last act; and the ingénue who, like her young swain with the rumpled hair and loosely knotted tie, gags at the sophistication and flippancy of the other members of the houseparty and wants only to settle down and have babies. To say nothing of the comedy household maid descendant of May Vokes; the society medico ever in immaculate habiliments and squirting manly charm who perches himself elegantly on chair arms and sofa ends and paternally counsels the ladies; the fluttery female nitwit interested in politics; the small boy devoted to the comic strips who makes his exits at top speed whooping like an Indian; and so on.

On only one occasion hasn't it worked. That was on the night I had had ten cups of after-dinner coffee. On that night, I began counting the stereotyped situations in the same comedies and I had not got beyond the one in which the men shake cock-

tails and consider their strategy against the women before I was happily sound asleep.

The critics have made so many jokes about stage butlers that playwrights now seem to be afraid to include one of them in their exhibits. Instead, they resort, safely they think, to maids. I don't like it. A household that properly should have a butler, however waywardly comical the character may be, is unconvincing when his place is taken by a female servant who generally looks as if she had been out in the kitchen cooking lamb stew and had whipped on a cap and apron to announce Sir Esme Paget-Finklebatten.

Many of our current playwrights feel that they have contrived something extra-commendable if they contain the action of their plays within a single day. Most often the time economy is transparently arbitrary and fraudulent. Drama in life on only the rarest occasions confines its course to 24 hours. Much more often it ploughs slowly over days, months and years before reaching its resolution.

If I were an actor, I should train myself to play the rôles of Chinamen. I have yet to see an actor who failed in such a rôle; it seems to be one of the easiest and surest, whether serious or comical, in the entire catalogue. True, I might not get many jobs, since plays and shows with Chinese rôles, unlike those in the past, are few and

far between. But when I did get one, I would know that I'd be certain to make a hit. If, on the other hand, I were an actress, I should look hard for rôles in which I would be a Salvation Army girl, and for the same reason. You think the remarks are silly? Look up the records for the last 75 years.

I have been accused of prejudice in my comprehensive distaste for and avoidance of the motion picture art which, its admirers sternly point out to me, has elements of beauty, intelligence, charm, sex appeal, etc., which I am missing. All that I can say in reply, if they are right, is that Lillian Russell was similarly endorsed for her beauty, intelligence, charm, sex appeal, etc., but that she was nevertheless not my type.

What often seems to impressionables to be symbolism in the plays of some contemporary playwrights is nothing but confusion of thought presented as deliberate intelligence.

I am frequently asked if I do not get bored going to the theatre night upon night after so many years. I notice that the questioner, who has trouble avoiding a trace of pity in his voice, is usually some man who has enthusiastically been going to a business office day after day for the same long length of time.

The line of dialogue in the Messrs. Lindsay's and Crouse's political play,

State of the Union, which was most admired by the critics and on which the authors were most highly complimented by them was, you may recall, "Let's stop thinking about the next election when we should be thinking about the next generation." On January 12, 1927, many years before, in a prayer offered by Glenn Frank, then president of the University of Wisconsin, at the fifty-eighth session of the state legislature, Dr. Frank said, "Save us from thinking about the next election when we should be thinking about the next generation."

I am surely not arguing for a return of the old-time cloak and sword and kindred dramatic balderdash, but there was something impressively romantic about its titles which has passed from the titles of plays today and which latter bring a suggestion of drabness into a medium whose very foundation is romance. Think, for example, of *In the Palace of the King*, *The Song of the Sword*, *The Pride of Jennico*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Sprightly Romance of Marsac*, *Sweet Nell of Old Drury*, *When Knighthood was in Flower*, *Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines*, *Miranda of the Balcony*, *Under Southern Skies*, *Alice of Old Vincennes*, *The Helmet of Navarre*, *D'Arcy of the Guards*, *A Gentleman of France*, *The Sword of the King*, *My Lady Peggy Goes to Town*, *Hearts Courageous*, *The Proud Prince*, *John Ermine of the Yellowstone*, *The Pretty Sister of José*, *Sweet Kitty Bellairs*, *Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall*,

and *The Light That Lies in Woman's Eyes*. Think also of *If I Were King*, *The Dagger and the Cross*, *The Fortunes of the King*, *The Prince Consort*, *A Parisian Romance*, *A Light from St. Agnes*, *A Blot on the 'Scuicheon*, *The Girl of the Golden West*, *The Fascinating Mr. Vanderveldt*, and *The Daughter of the Tumbrils*. And of *The Embassy Ball*, *The Prince of India*, *King Rene's Daughter*, *The Rose of the Rancho*, *The Belle of London Town*, *The Rose of the Alhambra*, *The Royal Box*, *When Knights Were Bold*, *The House of a Thousand Candles*, *The Flower of Yamato*, *The Royal Mounted*, and *The Prisoner of Zenda*.

Think of all such purple dandies, and now think of what we have got on theatre marquees in later years: *Is Zat So?*, *Love 'Em and Leave 'Em*, *Lady, Behave!*, *Suds in Your Eye*, *Pick-up Girl*, *Oh, Brother!*, *Woman Bites Dog*, *Crazy with the Heat*, *Snookie*, *They Should Have Stood in Bed*, *Behind Red Lights*, *Bet Your Life*, *The Fireman's Flame*, *How to get Tough about It*, *Waltz in Goosestep*, and *Battleship Gertie*. To say nothing of *Them's the Reporters*, *Stick-in-the-Mud*, *The Sap Runs High*, *Hot-Cha!*, *Move on, Sister*, *Are You Decent?*, *Stripped*, *Everything's Jake*, *She Lived Next to The Firehouse*, *She Means Business*, *A Modern Virgin*, *A Regular Guy* and *I Gotta Get Out*.

No wonder.

The remarks of even the most illustrious workers in the theatre sometimes seem to be minus sense. Yeats.

for example, observes in *The Cutting of an Agate*, "Of all artistic forms that have a large share of the world's attention, the worst is the play about modern educated people. It has one mortal ailment: it cannot become impassioned without making somebody gushing and sentimental. Educated people have no artistic and charming language except light persiflage, and no powerful language at all, and when they are deeply moved they look silently into the fireplace . . ."

Is it possible that Yeats could not have been acquainted with a great variety of plays like Shaw's *Candida* among others, Granville Barker's *The Voysey Inheritance*, Schnitzler's *Professor Bernhardt* among others, O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*, Maugham's *Our Betters* and *The Circle*, some of the Pirandello plays, etc., etc.?

The never-dying argument as to the relative beauty of the women of the theatre in the yesterdays and today overlooks, I think, one important point. Even assuming that both those of the past and the present have enjoyed the same measure of looks, there can be small doubt that those of other days seemed the more beautiful, and for a simple reason. They were, in brief, unlike most of those nowadays, presented beautifully by the men who produced the plays and shows in which they appeared. The good-looking girl in these times is simply thrown at an audience; in the past, she was insinuated into its

appreciation. She was dressed with elaborate shrewdness; she was set into a lovely frame; she was lighted with canny care; she was press-agented with an eye to what is currently known in Hollywood as glamour; she was cautiously persuaded by her management to be seen only in the properly brilliant restaurants and with the properly important escorts; and she was photographed only by the Saronys and Hills and Alfred Cheney Johnstons who knew how to drape her figure and pose her in such wise that what attractiveness she possessed would be heightened by their cameras. She was, in a word, even when beautiful on her own, lent an added beauty and an added allure.

The beautiful girl today gets no such treatment, or at best very little. She is photographed by some side-street bulb-squeezer who operates a theatrical mill and turns out photographs of all and sundry like so many doughnuts; she is an habituée of Sardi's and the steak houses, and generally in the company of Broadway nondescripts; she dresses in public not in the lovely evening things of her sisters of yesterday but as if she were on her way to market or a neighborhood movie; her press-agent publicizes her behind large hamburgers or with pictures showing her perched on a steamship rail with her skirt up to her navel and idiotically waving a hand in the air; and her management either casts her in unappetizing rôles or pushes her out onto a stage dressed

for the most part in an unattractive manner and lighted by someone whose real métier is the illumination of Broadway haberdashery windows.

It is a belief stubbornly held by the critics that actors cannot achieve eminence in their profession save the plays in which they appear are authentic specimens of the dramatic art. Many actors and actresses have confounded the lofty principle. Duse achieved most of her great reputation in the rhetorical junk of D'Annunzio. Bernhardt achieved hers largely through such stuff as Sardou's and such things as *Camille* and *Frou-Frou*. All kinds of actors and actresses have built their reputations on rubbish: George Arliss with plays like *The Darling of the Gods*, *The Rose*, *The Eyes of the Heart*, etc.; Kyrle Bellew with *In His Power*, *Loyal Love*, *Raffles*, *The Thief*, and the like; Mrs. Fiske with a wealth of claptrap;

Charles Hawtrey with everything from *The Private Secretary* and *The Lucky Miss Dean* to *A Message from Mars* and *The Cuckoo*; Rose Coghlan with *Forget-Me-Not*, *A Scrap of Paper*, *The Silver King*, *Diplomacy*, etc.; Madge Kendal with such trash as *Broken Hearts*, *A Hero of Romance*, *The Wicked World*, etc.; and Sir Charles Wyndham with *David Garrick*, *Pink Dominoes*, *Dearer than Life*, and *Betsy*.

And let the critics not forget E. S. Willard who spent his life largely in things like *A Pair of Spectacles*, *A Fool's Paradise*, and *The Professor's Love Story*; the great Modjeska whose reputation was assisted quite as much by *Heartsease*, *The Old Love and the New* and *Adrienne Lecoureur* as by her Ophelia and Juliet; and various such others. And what, today, of Helen Hayes? Let them think of most of the stuff in which that girl has appeared!

PHRASE ORIGINS—27

GREEKS BEARING GIFTS: *American aid to Greece and Turkey has caused some writers to recall this expression by twisting it about. One headline writer switched it to "Turks fear Americans bearing gifts." The original expression, derogatory to the Greeks, is one of the oldest slurs in literature on a national group. It is found in Vergil's Aeneid, Book II, line 49: "Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes," "I fear the Greeks even when they bear gifts." The admonition was uttered by Laocoon, a Trojan priest who advised his countrymen not to take the horse left by the Greeks, the famous Trojan horse, into the walls of Troy.*

MORRIS ROSENBLUM