
THE THEATRE

by GEORGE JEAN NATHAN



RANDOM AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

MY INTRODUCTION to play reviewing occurred on the night of January 29, 1906. The exhibit was a melodrama by Lincoln J. Carter called *Bedford's Hope*; the producers were Stair and Havlin; and the site was the old Fourteenth Street Theatre in New York. I was a cub on the staff of the James Gordon Bennett *Herald* and had been drafted by the drama department to serve as a fourth-string reviewer, since in those days there were sometimes three or four, indeed even five or six, openings on a single evening. On my return to the office, Thomas White, chief of the department, asked me, before I sat down to confect my review of the show, what my opinion on it was. I replied that it seemed to me to be an excellent melodrama of the blood-and-thunder species and that the audience had stood up and cheered it.

White received the news with a superior and pitying smile. "Young man," he said, "no melodrama can possibly be as good as you say, and consequently don't say it in your notice." I said it nevertheless to the extent of some eight hundred words which, when they appeared in print the next morning, were not only cut down to about a hundred but drastically edited.

While White was nominally the *Herald's* first-line drama critic, the factual first-stringer at the time was John Logan and I inquired of him if what happened to my copy was a common procedure on the paper. "Always remember," he whimsically replied, "that the *Herald* is a very fashionable paper and that nothing that takes place below Twenty-third street can ever be much good."

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When I shortly thereafter concluded that magazines would probably suit my purposes better than the *Herald*,

I found myself commissioned as a writer on the theatre for *The Bohemian* and *Outing*, both published by the same firm. Just what *Outing*, a periodical devoted to sports and the wide, open spaces, was going to do with pieces about the theatre, I could not figure out and so duly intimated to my friend, Lynn Wright, the editor. "If you can't figure it out, how do you expect me to?" replied the amiable Wright. The result was that, after some nose-scratching, I concocted a series of articles on the outdoor life of celebrated actors of the period. Since none of them that I could discover had any outdoor life other than that involved in going from their hotels to the theatre and back again, I simply gathered together all the "stills" I could lay hands on which showed them in *al fresco* scenes from the plays in which they had appeared — plays like *Pierre of the Plains*, *The Royal Mounted*, *Brown of Harvard*, *The Roundup*, and the like — and shamelessly offered the photographs as the real thing.

Since there were no complaints from readers, it looked as if sportsmen never went to the theatre.

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The loyalty of the English to their leading actors and actresses was brought home to me when, in the early Thirties, I served at Lord Beaverbrook's invitation as guest critic in

London for his *Daily Express*. My free criticism of some of these favorites was looked at askance by many, including quite a few of the London critics, and I could feel their resentment however deftly they concealed it. Though the paper generously gave me full rein and offered no comment on my criticisms, I asked my friend, Beverley Baxter, then editor of the paper, why it was that the players were held so sacred. "London," he confided to me, "isn't a city of millions. It is really a city of only about a thousand who form a kind of circle and are friends. And one doesn't criticize one's friends, including as they do the actors and actresses in question."

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In the years when I was writing criticism for *Vanity Fair*, among a half dozen other magazines, there was but one instance when Frank Crowninshield, the genial editor, asked me if I would mind altering a line in my copy. I had referred, in connection with a dirty play featuring a leading actress who was out of her element in such surroundings, to an outhouse with a star cut into its door. "Please, dear boy!" protested the punctilious Crownie. So I compliantly changed it to an outhouse with a crescent.

Crownie got many indignant letters from Mystic Shriners complaining that their order had been insulted.

My old side-kick, Mencken, has always protested in print that he could not abide the theatre in any shape or form, yet I have never known a man who enjoyed its comedians more than he has. He has laughed so uproariously at the likes of Moran and Mack, Bobby Clark, Lew Dockstader, and most of the rest of them that the tears have run down his cheeks and wet his collar limp. He once, indeed, cabled me from London, while on holiday, that Bobby Howes was the greatest thing in England and entertained him more than all the English literary humorists lumped together. He also, by the way, wrote the first books in this country testifying to an admiration of the two European playwrights, Ibsen and Shaw.

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Gertrude Hoffman, a vaudeville dancer, some thirty-odd years ago under Morris Gest's sponsorship put on an exaggeratedly bawdy version of *Scheherazade*, with herself as the principal hoofer, at the Winter Garden. In a review of it, I made sport of the exhibit's artistic pretensions and observed that I had not known until now that Fanny Hill was an Arabian. The police descended on the show soon after and Gest, a hysterical creature, attributed their action to what I had written. "The next time I see you," he telegraphed me, "I'm going to break your nose into a thou-

sand pieces." I replied, "If you succeed in doing so, you will demonstrate all the genius which you regrettably have failed to indicate, despite your conviction to the contrary, in the theatre. My nose is a little one and five hundred pieces at most would be the limit of its possible liquidation."

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Were it not for the ethics and obligations of dramatic criticism, I might be a rich man. Among the play scripts I have found and have recommended to one producer or another have been, among others, O'Neill's *Anna Christie*, which after being spurned by the late Edgar Selwyn was turned over by me to Arthur Hopkins who produced it; Paul Vincent Carroll's *Shadow and Substance*; Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life*; Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, with the recommendation that Laurette Taylor, who had not acted for many years, be cast in the rôle for which the producers had tentatively chosen Jane Cowl; Maurine Watkins' satirical farce, *Chicago*; and, to the late John D. Williams, the W. S. Maugham story, *Miss Thompson*, which I had published in *The Smart Set*, co-edited with Mencken, and which Maugham believed would never make a play but which seemed to me to be almost a play as it stood. All these proved successful and made a lot of money, yet I could not, de-

spite my belief in them, invest in them, since it is expected of a critic that he be financially immaculate in his relations with the theatre. (The Philadelphia tryout of *Rain*, as the dramatization of *Miss Thompson* was called, was a complete box-office failure and anyone who had faith in the play, as I still did after seeing it there on the opening night, could have had a quarter interest in it for \$2500. It eventually netted something like a million.)

I am presently of the opinion that, if properly cast and directed, O'Casey's *Purple Dust* and Maurice Donnay's free version of *Lysistrata*, among several other plays, would also make money.

On the other side, I suggested the production of Carroll's *The White Steed* which, though it ran for six months, merely broke a little better than even; along with Saroyan's *Love's Old Sweet Song* which, while it got some excellent notices, didn't make anybody rich.

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While lunching one day many years ago in London with Charles Cochran, he observed to Maurice Baring and myself that he much wanted us to meet a very beautiful and charming girl who was to be his guest in his private box a week hence at Eleonora Duse's first performance of *Così Sia* and would we join him. Just before

the curtain rose, a wheel-chair was rolled into the box and in it was the lovely, still youthful and radiant girl he had mentioned: the 70-year-old Ellen Terry.

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I served as a witness for Eugene O'Neill in the suit brought against him for alleged plagiarism of his drama, *Strange Interlude*. In the course of examination by the attorney for the plaintiff, one Cohalan, I testified that O'Neill, some years before he wrote the play, had outlined to me its theme, plot and general treatment. "Where did this take place?" Cohalan asked me. I replied that O'Neill was living at the time in the old Lafayette Hotel in University Place, that he had started the outline there, and had expanded on it during the walk to an oyster house on Sixth avenue in the neighborhood of Sixteenth street, where we had a dinner engagement with a mutual friend.

"There was a bar in that restaurant, wasn't there?" observed the interrogator. I answered that there was. "And you and O'Neill, with your friend, did some drinking there?" he continued. I allowed that he was correct in his surmise. "What did you drink?" he questioned. "Three Old-Fashioned cocktails apiece," I apprised him. "What else?" he asked. "Nothing else at the bar," I replied, "but at dinner we engaged two bot-

bles of Orvieto and rounded off with a couple of Remy Martin brandies each." "Did you then return once again to the bar?" he pursued. I said, yes, we had. "And what did you drink?" he went on. "Two Old Oscar Pepper highballs apiece," I volunteered.

A look of triumph crossed Cohalan's features. "And still," he shouted in my face, "after all those drinks, enough to make any man drunk, you say that your memory was so good that you remembered exactly the conversation you allege O'Neill had with you on a walk immediately previous!"

"If," I replied, "I can recall exactly the number and character of the drinks, which you assert were enough to intoxicate anyone, why should I not be able to recall exactly a conversation before I had so much as even one?"

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Speaking of plagiarism in general, Winchell Smith and Victor Mapes close to forty years ago wrote a comedy, *The Boomerang*, which was successfully produced by Belasco and which bore a suspicious resemblance to a story called *D.S.W.* which I had written and published in *The Smart Set* magazine two or three years earlier. When, in a review of the play, I commented on the fact, Smith wrote to me that on his word of honor

he had not read the story and hoped I would believe him. Since he had the reputation of being an honest man, I did.

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Still speaking of the same subject, I have nevertheless, I fear, occasionally been a considerable critical nuisance in one quarter or another. In a review of the great hit, *Lightnin'*, in which Frank Bacon, the co-author, scored the success of his life, I pointed out that the character he played, along with some of the lines, was a direct plagiarism of the character in Austin's *Tennessee's Pardner* which he had played many years before. The consequence was a forced settlement with the Austin estate. In a review of A. E. Thomas' *The Rainbow*, produced by Henry Miller and acted by him and Ruth Chatterton, I noted that the play, offered as original, was really on the whole a French comedy called *Mon Père*.

During the first World War, a play called *Such Is Life*, credited to Harold Owen, an Englishman who had collaborated on the popular melodrama, *Mr. Wu*, was presented in New York. It was, I observed, save for a few such minor alterations as the re-naming of the characters and localities, a direct copy of a German play by Lothar Schmidt called *Das Buch Einer Frau* (*The Book of a Woman*). Avery Hopwood's *Double Exposure*, I embar-

rassed the producers by pointing out, was largely the German von Scholz's *Changed Souls*; *The Blue Pearl*, credited on the playbill to Anne Crawford Flexner, was, I gadflyed, actually a translation of the Friedmann-Frank Viennese comedy, *The Blue Crocodile*; *The Riddle: Woman*, offered as the work of a celebrated Danish dramatist, one C. Jacobi, was, I disclosed, really the work of the well-known

Hungarian, Rudolf Jakobi; *Beggar on Horseback*, by George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly, owed a lot, I discovered, to Paul Apel's satirical play, *Hans Sonnenstösser's Trip to Hell*; Alan Jay Lerner's book for *Brigadoon*, was derived in full detail, I announced, from Friedrich Wilhelm Gerstäcker's *Germelshausen*; and so on, and so on.

No wonder there are no loving cups on my mantel.

CITY CATS

BY FRANCES FROST

Some city cats are dapper, sleek,
bright-eyed, in neat adventurous fettle.
Descending fire escapes, they move
disdainfully down steps of metal.
Pursuing sundry joys, they pause
to sample a neighbor's window kettle,
ignore a backyard skirmish, having
far more distinguished scores to settle.

Some city cats are rakish-eared,
fellows who hurtle hell-for-leather
toward open garbage cans, who don't
give an old whisker-twitch for weather.
They stalk slant roofs, back fences, gutters,
they make the whole dim city quiver
when, drunk on love and living, they
and the tipsy stars all sing together.