

Sights and Sounds

SCARCELY A PLAY IS NOW ALIVE . . .

By Robert Littell

THAT brief period in theatrical history which began with Mr. Benchley's departure from these pages for Europe and ended shortly before the annual celebration of the Cherry Tree Incident was encouraging chiefly for the undertaker. Of the two-score or more bids for our favor very few survive even at this early writing.

A rapid visit to the costly cemetery and a hasty glance at the little tombstones would reveal hardly anything worth a tear. Over there in the corner lie two revivals of plays by early but still extant English masters, Galsworthy's "The Silver Box" and Sir Henry Arthur Jones's "Mrs. Dane's Defence". Good theater in spots, but creaky. On the top of the hill under a huge marble mausoleum reposes Mr. Gilbert Miller's military version of what might have been an interesting play, "The Patriot". Down in the hollow are the humbler crosses of "So Am I", a re-hash of Boccaccio, "A Distant Drum", with two rather neat acts of Mr. Vincent Lawrence's smooth dialogue, "La Gringa", the story of a Mexican girl transplanted into Puritan New Bedford, "57 Bowery", "These Modern Women", "Mirrors", "The Clutching Claw", and "Spring 3100"—about which there is nothing to say.

"Salvation" also has disappeared. Mr. Sidney Howard and Mr. Charles MacArthur started with the interesting idea that this female Evangelist business lies a lot deeper than Elmer Gantry, but they didn't build solidly enough and even the remarkable acting of Miss Pauline Lord failed to hold things together. And "The Merchant of Venice", Mr. Winthrop Ames's superficial pastel, with Mr. Arliss as a dried-up aristocratic Shylock, has gone forth to pluck the flowers that grow by the roadside. And then there was the regular monthly musical

comedy, "Sunny Days"—No. 133 off the old Ford Conveyor, but in spite of its strict faithfulness to formula, already gasping for air.

Excepting Eugene O'Neill's "Strange Interlude", that leaves only "The Silent House", a gorgeously absurd hodge-podge of every trick in the mystery locker, and "Rain or Shine". When I have said that "Rain or Shine" is an extremely cheerful and well-managed background for the sublime antics of Joe Cook, do I need to say more? Whether Joe Cook is shooting out candles from a tight-rope or telling one of his pointless long stories, he seems just about the best entertainment in existence. And that Goldberg contraption, that wonderfully complicated machine for smashing guitars, is, or should be, historic. Beside Mr. Cook, Mr. Howard and Mr. Chasen are themselves no mean comedians, and Mr. Chasen has enriched the world with a meaningless and benevolent gesture which I cannot get out of my system or keep from trying to imitate at odd hours and for no particular reason. But, like any other profoundly simple work of genius, it can't be imitated. Go and see it.

Beside the obvious pleasures of criticism, like sitting in the sixth row of "Rain or Shine", there are duties. Getting your stuff written, for one thing, or arriving on time, or staying till the end, or trying not to applaud when you are enjoying yourself (critics would as soon think of clapping their hands as you would of wearing a white tie with a dinner-jacket). Or the painfully geographic duty of going to see plays on the far-flung rim of Broadway.

A visit to the New Playwrights' Theatre should be just as much a part of your education as Chemistry A. Down there at 45 Commerce Street, barely six hours' ride from the rest of civilization, earnest young men

are making all sorts of experiments with light green acids and dark brown colloids, and pale yellow gases. Go and see for yourself. It will make everything else seem tremendously worth while.

This Young Men's Playwrighting Association shook up two test-tube cocktails in midwinter. One of these was "The International", by John Howard Lawson, twenty-nine scenes of significant boredom enacted by sixty-three people on a stage the size of a pullman washroom. The other, "Hoboken Blues" by Mike Gold, was a dreary insult to the animal spirits and high humor of the Negro race. That's all I propose to say about them. You'll simply have to take my word for it that they were terrible. If you don't believe me, go shut yourself up in a small garage with your favorite automobile. And still they say that carbon monoxide has no odor.

In addition to a rear platform fenced off for a stage, the Y. M. P. A.'s theater consists of a longish aisle with about two seats on each side. If you look back from your seat in row C, the sight that meets your drooping eyelids is a good deal like the inside of a suburban trolley filled with members of the Critics' Benevolent and Protective Society returning from the annual clam-bake. To judge from the expression of aching misery on the drawn gray faces, there must have been something wrong with those clams. And many of the passengers have a strange mania for getting out before the end of the line.

Mr. Otto Kahn, so we hear, is the Maecenas who has made it possible for the Y. M. P. A. to keep their test-tubes filled and write long letters, after the miserable panning of each show has burst into print, asserting their right to live because they are doing things which the commercial Broadway managers wouldn't dare to do. Well, boys, that isn't enough. Got to be more constructive, more positive. Just because you know and we know and everybody knows that Broadway isn't going to dramatize ether cones is no reason why you should take a shot at it.

Personally and privately, if I were John J. Maecenas I would double Mr. Kahn's bad

bet and pay these young men handsomely never to write or produce a play again as long as they live.

Which brings us out of a two-inch tunnel up into the fresh air and the excitement and the sharp bitter veracity of "Rope". Mr. T. S. Stribling wrote a novel called "Teeftallow", and he and Mr. David Wallace have made it into a play which we predict will turn out to be one of the finest of the year. Probably the Jules Verne sociologists of the New Playwrights' Theatre would brand it as melodramatic journalism.

"Rope" is a play about mob minds and mob murder. It is laid in a small town somewhere in Tennessee, a small town full of hill-billies, female bigots, mean pool-room loafers and all the other ingredients for a perfectly corking little local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. The authors don't mention the Klan by name, but you know at once that you are assisting at the birth and inner workings of just such an informal, ruthless and cowardly organization as the Klan usually is in places of about six hundred inhabitants.

The plot is rather thickly peppered with stock meller props—the mortgage on the farm, the ruined gal turned out of the house, the shotgun wedding, and the holy hell-hollering she-Bible-swallower. But it doesn't matter. The tone and the ring of the play are true, and often tremendously exciting. There is a lynching scene in the second act in memory of which many of my hairs are still standing on end. The lynching is sketched, it begins, but doesn't actually take place until after the curtain, though you feel it a hundred times more vividly than if they actually strung the poor fellow up right before your eyes. Wonderful things are done in this scene with the shadow of a great wobbly noose thrown on a shabby wall.

There are some other fine bits of direction in it too, and some very remarkable acting, notably by Mr. Ben Smith as young Abner Teeftallow. The directors assembled a cast all of whom speak a natural Southern dialect much more impressive than the usual synthetic Broadway blackface drawl. And the faces collected for the mob were quite wonderful—haggard, weasel, wide-eyed, witless faces. Most stage mobs look like just

what they are—a baker's unleavened dozen of thirty-dollar-a-week supers.

I'm afraid, according to recent reports from the front, that the Public isn't as fond of "Rope" as it ought to be. A terrible pity—"Rope" should be kept running somewhere in these states for the next ten years. It's exciting enough, and quite well enough done. But apparently it is a little too realistically near the heart-chilling truth for a "good time". Mystery shows, which make audiences yell and hang' around each other's necks, don't offend, because there's *nothing inside of them, and we all know it*. But "Rope" is packed full of rasping, blood-curdling, sour and splendid truth. If Mr. Edgar B. Davis, the oil and oxygen king, had more than one track in his mind, he'd spend some money on "Rope" instead of making a million dollars climb up "The Ladder" and jump off into space.

Nobody else but Mr. Davis can hurl the millions except the movies. I am told that King Vidor spent nearly that much filming "The Crowd". Who is going to get that million back, if ever, I don't know and I don't care, but Vidor should at least be promoted to Emperor. "The Crowd" is quite a sock on the nose of the American public, or the American employee, or the American white-collar slave, or the American desk-worm, or whatever is the name of the poor underpaid little animal. I suspect that the little animal will parry the thrust by refusing to step up to the box-office and be disillusioned. A law should be passed forcing him to do so. For "The Crowd" is a bitter, gray, disintegrating and memorable film, and nobody should be allowed to escape a dose of its fine medicine.

The story of "The Crowd" was written by John V. A. Weaver, who ought to be well-known by now as the author of those highly original and native verses "In American". "The Crowd" is American stuff, rather than just movie stuff, nearly all the way through. Some of the direction is magnificent, some of it is terrible, and some of it simply doesn't come off. I don't believe in squashing little girls with Mack trucks on stage, screen, or street. They might have left that out. The

women won't like it. It will help them dislike and avoid the rest of it, a lot of which is first rate and brand new . . . I know just how they are going to feel. Sitting behind me at the Astor Theater were a typical Mr. and Mrs. Shortly after the little girl had died, Mrs. muttered, "Cheerful film you've taken me to". Mr. grumbled in reply, somewhat belligerently, "It's good". But Mrs. came right back at him: "It's awful". I'm afraid the line-up is going to be like that all over the country. And men don't go much to the movies alone.

"The Crowd" is the story of almost any mediocre, self-kidding American office worker, ploughing his way along shoulder to shoulder with thousands of other mediocre office workers. Wherever he goes the crowd of his inferior equals follows him. In the office, he sits at one of two hundred duplicate desks. At Coney Island, at the beach, in the home, on the street, at work, in love, in play, they surround him and he can never get free of them. There are some melodramatic or unsuccessful turns in this particular story, some hokum and some trite expressionistic devices, but there are also bits of fine realistic comedy, mellow irony and hard sardonic despair. It's something quite different in films. And it introduces to us a very fine young actor named James Murray.

Some of the single shots of photography are marvellous. That beautiful parody of a honeymoon snapshot at Niagara Falls for instance—a girl sitting beside the Falls. Or the mad perspectives of menacing skyscrapers. They remind you a little of "Metropolis", but I think they are more effective.

Speaking of sky-scrapers, I would rather look up at the silhouette, or off the top of the new Telephone Building, than go to almost any play or movie you could name. It's a more exciting piece of architecture than the Woolworth, and a much better view, because the Telephone Building stands right next the river and apart from the jagged mountain-range along Broadway which it commands. There is a fine flat roof at the top, and you can walk all the way around and figuratively, or actually if that's your style, spit upon Brooklyn, Westchester, Hoboken and

the Berengaria coming up the Hudson like a tin toy in a bathtub.

You must go right up to the top and out of doors. The view from any and all of the building's windows has been spoiled by some fire ordinance or anti-wind-velocity insurance which dictates that the windows shall be reinforced with a sort of wide-webbed mosquito netting. Add this one to American

Ironies: The Presidents and Vice-Presidents on the 31st floor are doomed forever to survey the Empire which lies at their feet through a lot of chicken wire. A constant daily reminder of Life's Imperfections or How Small We Are After All or The World is a Prison or *Memento Mori* or some other cold douche for the fiery imagination of Big Executives.

"BALLADS, SONGS AND SNATCHES"

By Abbe Niles

THERE comes to hand a two-volume biography of a great Californian adventurer ("Frémont", by Allan Nevins. Harper's; \$10); a rich subject, treated by a notable historian, and one who knows the power of old prints, cartoons and songs to restore the colors to faded scenes. To celebrate such an event, this department does what it can by producing, from its own archives, portions of a song dating from Frémont's presidential campaign, seventy-two years ago:

THERE IS THE WHITE HOUSE YONDER*

Old ten-cent Jimmy is no go!

(Few days, few days)

And Breckenbridge is far too slow

(We're going home)

They both endorse weak Pearce's reign,

(Few days, etc.)

Which on our country leaves a stain

(We're, etc.)

(Chorus)

For there's the white house yonder

Fremont and Dayton's bound there

We can't be kept back longer

Every day we're growing stronger.

* Original spellings have not been meddled with. Frémont and Dayton (Republican) ran in 1856 against Ex-President Fillmore and Donelson (Whig) and the successful Buchanan ("Buck", "Ten-Cent Jimmy") and Breckenbridge (Democratic). Franklin Pierce was in office. Frémont, a native of Tennessee, had fifteen years before eloped with the daughter of the powerful Senator Benton of Missouri, and made the old man like it; Benton, however, opposed his son-in-law's candidacy. Frémont's emblem was the "b'ar", under which he had conducted his own little war in California.

Old Bachelors are low in rate,
They'd never populate a state.
The white house party's must not drag
And what could BUCKS be but a STAG?
Old Benton says he's out for Buck,
But his finger on his nose is stuck:
Fremont's the man he surely knows,
Or if he don't, his daughter does.

Tho' Fremont, he was born down THAR,
He's strong as his Rocky M'. BAR (bear)
He made our California state,
It's made us rich—we'll make him great.

Here is something which may harmlessly,
if not profitably, be compared with the first
1928 campaign song on sale, "Our Al", which
runs in part:

A stands for America, MY COUNTRY 'TIS
OF THEE,
And L is meant for Liberty, COLUMBIA
THE GEM OF THE OCEAN!

The Frémont song is quite anonymous, and I solicit information about its tune, which was certainly not original, and which, in an arrangement by John H. Hewitt dating from 1854, is alive and kicking today as the air of one of the best-known of Greek-letter fraternity songs—every collegian knows a series of such verses as

The bright-eyed maiden winked her eye:
(Psi U., Psi U.,)

"To hell with Alpha Delta Phi!"

(Psi Upsilon.)

Who composed this fine tune? "Carmina Collegensia" (ed. 1876) has a Dartmouth class of '58 song and an Amherst song by a member of the class of '61, each to the tune of