

# Staged in Moscow

By Alexander Woolcott

*Mr. Woolcott went to Russia, not to investigate sociological conditions or the Five-Year Plan, but to see plays. Resolutely ensconced in the third row on the aisle, he witnessed a burly, scheming Hamlet drive a tipsy Ophelia to her watery grave. And, almost against his will, he found out a good deal about the U. S. S. R. Here you may watch the eye of a critical beholder functioning smoothly*



GW

Four weeks in Soviet Russia may turn anyone into an economist

ON a brisk afternoon I skidded my way along the snowy streets of Moscow with a box party I had myself somewhat wildly assembled. I do not recall ever having seen a more violently variegated cluster of playgoers. First there was a distinguished Franco-Prussian Jew who had been born in Corpus Christi, Texas, and who was a cousin of that most monstrously victimized scapegoat of our time, Captain Dreyfus.

Then there was a swarthy, keen and elegant young Oxford graduate whose father was an eminent Celestial and whose mother was a dusky native of Trinidad, himself therefore a living reminder that, in flagrant defiance of Rudyard Kipling, East and West do get together once in a while. Also, there was his wife, an exquisitely fair, fragile and attractive Russian girl who persisted in practicing her Chinese and English on him when he would rather have talked Russian to her.

The play that afternoon was a self-inflicted agony about miscegenation by our own Eugene O'Neill, a tragedy known in this country as *All God's Children Got Wings* but played in Russian, its Negro rôles being performed by able young Muscovites with the aid of considerable burnt cork. In the intervals for scene changes, there would also be American songs to create the proper atmosphere. With a perceptible start I recognized one old favorite of my childhood, even when disguised as "Onnie Rooney." But if you have never chanced to hear Russian troubadours lifting their voices in Negro spirituals, the more pensive ballads of Irving Berlin, and Bonbon Buddy, the Chocolate Drop, let me console you with the assurance that you have not suffered an intolerable esthetic privation.

It was characteristic of the Russian stage that in vitality, resourcefulness and creative imagination this Kamerny Theater realization of O'Neill's play made its original New York production look like thirty kopecks. It was perhaps characteristic of me that, with the food shortage and the grotesquely mis-

represented Five-Year Plan lying just outside the door and fairly aching for comment, I should have been huddled cozily indoors, inspecting life at second-hand.

At that, I am not sure I did not learn more about the Mobile Experiment from attending a dozen theaters in Moscow and Leningrad than I would have learned by journeying to the Dnieprostroy Dam in the manner of the more sociological globe-trotters and staring fixedly at its grandiose proportions. Even one who, in decent if exceptional humility, has no notion that four weeks in Soviet Russia will turn him into an authoritative economist, may discover, when he gets home, that he has brought back some thoughts on the subject, even as you may find some sand in your shoes after you have come home from the seashore.

## Freedom of Satire

Well, during the intermission we all dropped in on the director, the brilliant and engaging Alexander Tairoff, whose working quarters—office, studio, what you will—have a greater dignity, graciousness and beauty than I ever found in the settings of our own impresarios. He gave us tea and raisin cake and wrung from me the promise to send him the score and libretto of this Pulitzer Prize work called *Of Thee I Sing*, of which the tickling rumors had apparently reached Moscow some time before.

He already knew it was a saucy derision of the circus of American politics.

If he were to produce it in Moscow, he said, he would of course be able to sharpen the satire considerably. He could not have been expected to know that the satire was already sharper than a serpent's tooth. It could never have occurred to him that, being notoriously crushed under the feet of their capitalist masters, the authors of that impudent harlequinade had really said precisely what they wanted to.

You see, there had been nothing in Tairoff's experience under the Czar—or under the Soviets—to make him think it would be possible anywhere for a political satirist to have a free hand. He could not imagine it any more than the urchin authors of *Of Thee I Sing* could imagine functioning at all in a country where any playwright who took such liberties with the Kremlin as were taken by them with the poor old White House would be shot at sunrise.

The Russian stage, with such superb organizations as the Kamerny, the Vakhtangoff and the Moscow Art theaters, is, I suppose, the finest and most flexible instrument of its kind in the world, just waiting, like the bow of Ulysses, for a great dramatist to come along and bend it to his uses. But there is, I think, no such dramatist even in sight and, as things have been and still are, there could not be.

Without going here into the anxious question whether, as the Russians say, our own boasted freedom means nothing more than the poor privilege of starving to death on a park bench, it is impossible to characterize the theater

Illustrated by  
Gloria Williams



GW

Hamlet was presented as a burly rascal scheming to supplant his uncle

in Moscow without mentioning as its most salient characteristic the fact that it is not free. In a country where everything belongs to the state, including the radio, the stage and the printing press, every publication partakes of the nature of a house organ, and you would no more look to the theater for the unpacking of hearts oppressed than you would expect to find revolutionary sentiments in the court circular issued from St. James', or to find pacifist propaganda in the Army and Navy Journal.

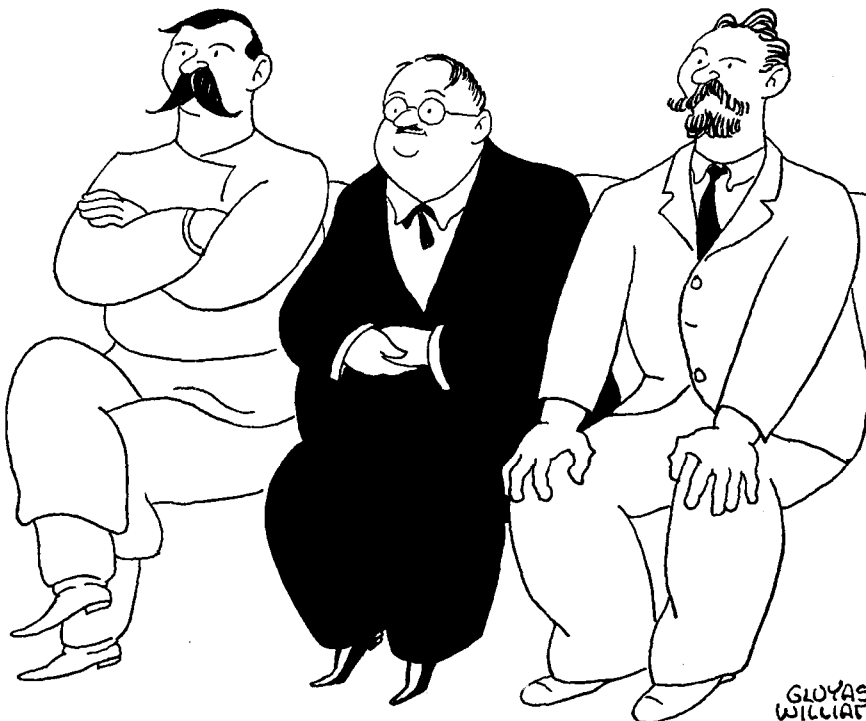
## Self-Starting Propaganda

I do not mean to suggest that Stalin personally runs through the manuscript of every tragedy submitted. That is not necessary. So essentially craven is the average person, in Russia as well as America, that most human institutions are self-censoring. All small people, whether they be privates in an army or underlings on a newspaper, strive to guess what the big chief is going to want and act accordingly. More than most human institutions, the theater in all lands and times has tended to be servile, fawning at the foot of the tyrant, whether the tyrant was a dictator like Mussolini or a mob like the Broadway public.

Thus, during 1917 and 1918 in the land of the free, Newton Baker, as Secretary of War, did not have to come to Broadway and see that, in the interests of the martial spirit, all the Germans in the play should be treacherous spies and unspeakable bullies. The theater took care of that unbidden. By the same token, the priests, nuns and landlords in the new Russian plays are usually represented as horrid vulpine wretches, without specific orders to that effect having been issued from on high.

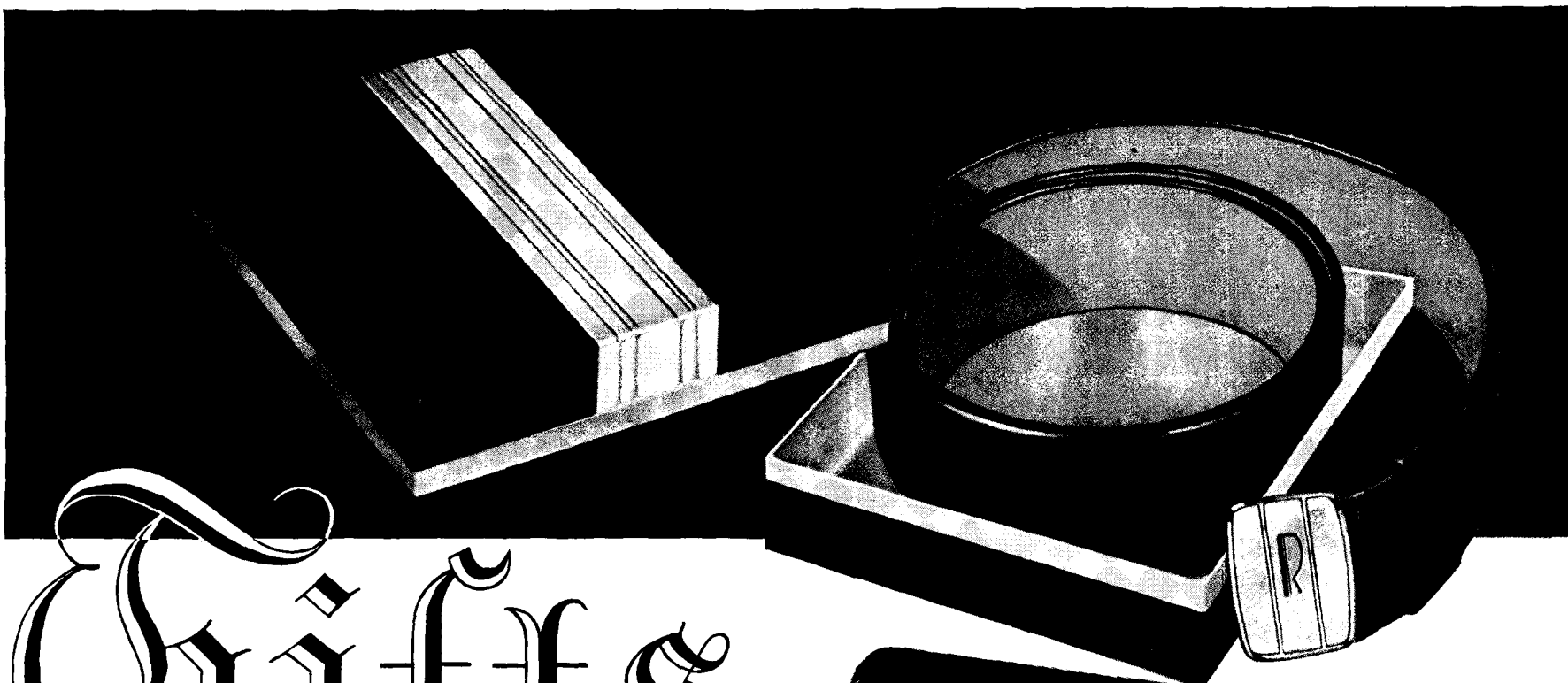
You see, the kind of special pleading we stigmatize as propaganda is, for the most part, self-starting. But the state of mind and political control that foment it cannot, at the same time, nourish that freedom of spirit without

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GLORIA WILLIAMS

I was wedged into a keen, turbulent horde from a boot factory

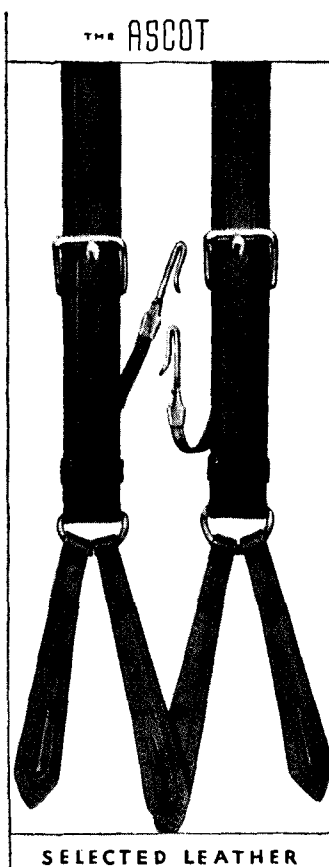


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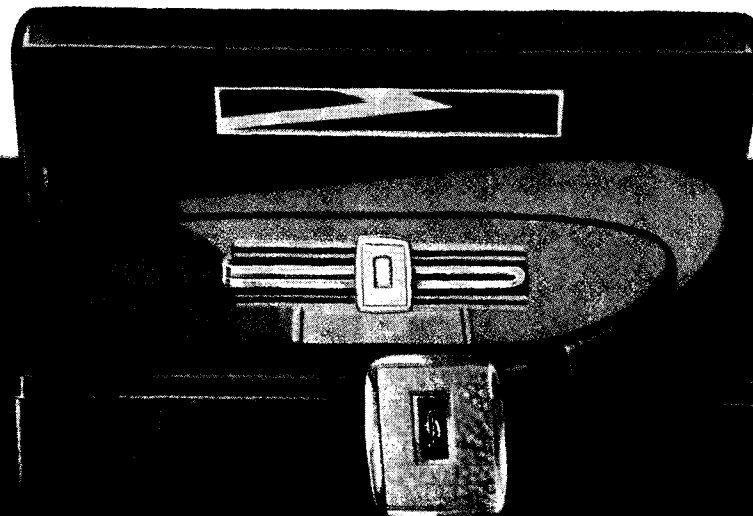
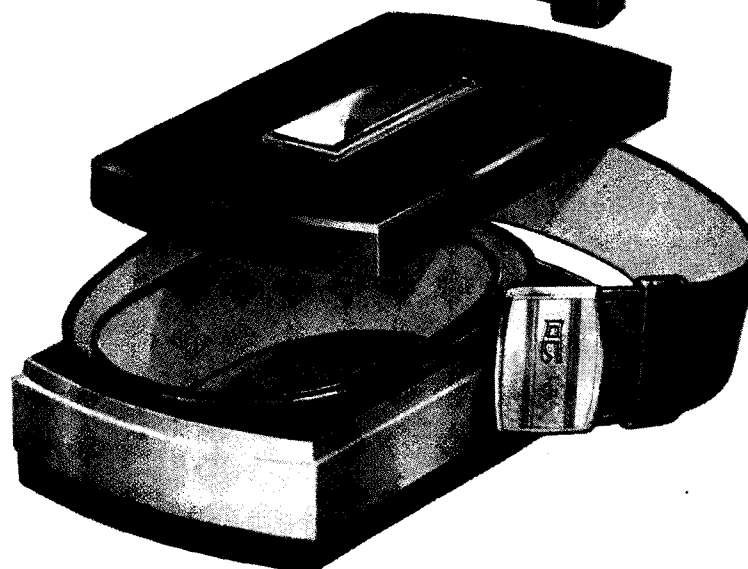
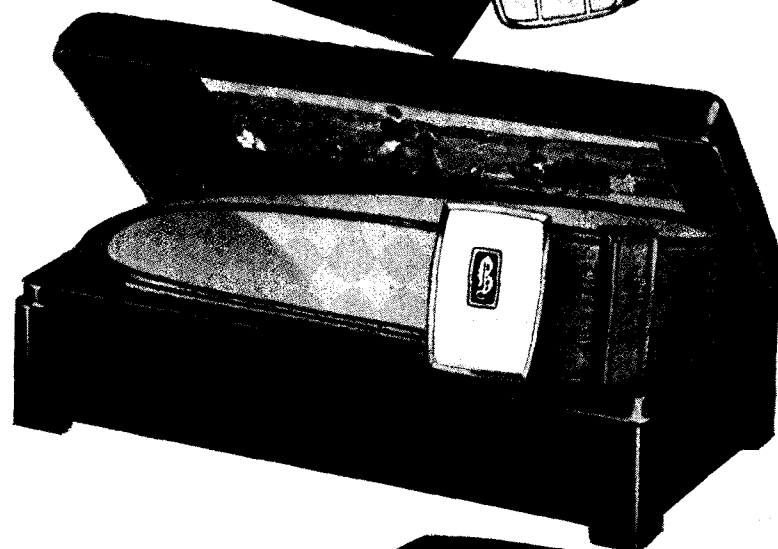
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Illustrated by Earl Oliver Hurst

# A Winning Ticket

By Edward L. McKenna

*Here you have the stern father, the wayward daughter, the cold and cruel world. But you also have Miss Ella Bingham and the Irish Sweepstakes. It's not at all what you might expect*



"She's not good, is she?" said Ella. "Well, then, I'll tell you something"

ELLA BINGHAM was thirty in 1906. In those days, she was considered too thin to be a beauty, and she didn't have money enough to attract a suitor. Her father was a lawyer, and lawyers don't do too well, in little Illinois towns, unless they're bankers and politicians too.

People liked Ella well enough, though she had few really close friends. When her companions married, she seemed to draw away from them. She was a little prim, a little prudish, and more than a little proud. She thought of herself as one of the best people in her town; so she was. Her manner was stiff and precise, and without grace, except to inferiors and to the poor: she was bound nobody should condescend to her because of her maiden state, or her loneliness, or her big white house grown gaunt and shabby for lack of painting. Her father was no Joseph Choate, and he was further handicapped by honesty and a certain pompousness a little like her own. A decent man he was, and a careful one, and when he died in 1916 he left his daughter twenty thousand dollars of insurance.

Of course, twenty thousand dollars is scarcely too much. Ella was no heiress, surely, but she could live comfortably enough, and somewhat as she chose.

Her life was quiet, one day was like the other. Sundays she went to church, Wednesdays she went to prayer-meeting. Few called upon her, and she visited almost no one. She wasn't a great reader, and she was a little ashamed to read light romance. She'd pick up a volume of Jane Austen, or Dickens, or Anthony Trollope, and soon she'd be yawning and ready for bed. Travel books she liked. She imagined it would be rather nice to travel. It would be a little change: she'd never been ten miles from home, except perhaps on a motoring trip or two. Adventure? No, she wasn't looking for adventure. Adventure had passed her by. Still, it might be pleasant to see new faces and places and the world that was far away.

Miss Ella Bingham got her chance to travel.

ONE day—she was fifty-seven then—a young man came to her door, a fine, jolly, good-looking young man. He called her Madam, in a rolling North-country voice, and he was polite and easy, and unabashed, and when at her bidding he seated himself he noticed his frayed trousers and his run-down shoes. So she gave him two dollars and a half because her heart was touched with pity for him who was poor but not begging, and she took the little ticket he gave her, scarcely understanding what it was, with a secret smile or a look of commiseration that she was lady enough to conceal. She was not an educated woman, nor a subtle one, but she'd had dealings with the unfortunate, and she knew that pity is the last impertinence.

Then, months later, this happened: Ella Bingham, much confused and flustered, but elated too, found out that she'd won four thousand pounds in some horse-race that was run in Ireland.

Nineteen thousand dollars, she'd won. That much she could understand. They'd send it to her, if she liked, or

she could take her ticket and collect it from a bank in Chicago.

She'd go to Chicago, Ella said. To tell the truth, she was thinking that she'd rather buy her clothes and things in Chicago, too. She'd never sent out of town for anything before. Whether that was right or not she wasn't sure, but lots of people said it was. As to her plans, at any rate, so she told the editor of the local paper, she was going to spend the summer in Europe. After that, she didn't know just what she'd do.

SHE told the same story to all her friends. All of them were ready to advise her. She wasn't looking for advice. She knew exactly what she wanted to do. She was going to have a good trip to Europe, a good trip, but a sensible, prudent, thrifty one. Then she'd come back home and tell the breathless neighbors about the wiles and wickedness of the foreigner, and all his pomps and pride. She'd have the house done over. She'd fix the roof and the rattling shingles. She'd have the old broken fountain carted off the side lawn. She'd make the barn look a little more like a garage, and put a car in it, and learn to drive. She'd get a new radio, and an electric phonograph and all the records of Victor Herbert and Reginald De Koven and Franz Abt and a great many more. She'd buy a new piano, a grand piano, instead of that old thing with the jangling notes and the yellow keys. She'd get one of these mechanical ice-boxes, she'd get a new stove. She'd get . . . she'd get . . .

What a great thing a little money was! When you hadn't it, you didn't miss it so much, to be sure, but how comfortable it made you just to know that it was there. Fifty-seven was a nice age, too, to find out about it. You weren't a flighty, sentimental girl any more, then. Of course, once in a great while, when the wistaria was in bloom, or the honeysuckle, or the syringa, or at the close of a brisk October day when you'd look out at the stubble in the corn-fields and think how nice it would be to be coming home and getting dinner for somebody, anybody, it took your own appetite away to think of it. . . . Well! well, what nonsense that was! There you were, so many years ago, a great, lanky gawk of a girl in a blue sash and a white dress, opening the windows in the living-room, and sitting down to a piano all by yourself, and singing love songs. You, you little idiot, waiting for Galahad to hear you, for Gareth, for St. Elmo, for Captain Macklin. You'd finish your song; your fingers would be idle on the keys; you'd hear the night-sounds in the garden, the crickets, the rustling of the apple trees, and from the road, a horse's clomping hoofs and a girl's laugh, high, and mirthless, and eager.

A horse? Why, goodness gracious sakes alive, what a horse had brought to Ella Bingham! She wasn't just that old maid who lived in the big white house all by herself, any more. She was the old maid who'd won all that money in the Irish Sweepstakes. And didn't she know it! To all of them she may have seemed sedate as ever, but in her heart

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