



At home Nanette studies the score of her latest show, *Arms and the Girl!* Though she pretends to have a bad memory she mastered her long role quickly

Danger: BROADWAY BEAUTY

Nanette Fabray got herself black and blue climbing to musical-comedy stardom

THERE are moments in her hectic life when Nanette Fabray, the vivacious young musical-comedy star, is firmly of the opinion that playing in a Broadway show is one of the most dangerous professions in the world. Miss Fabray has danced, talked, sung and looked luscious in nine musical extravaganzas since 1939, including such smashes as *Let's Face It!*, *By Jupiter*, *Bloomer Girl*, *High Button Shoes*, *Love Life* and currently *Arms and the Girl!*, the latest Theatre Guild melodic masterpiece.

In *Arms and the Girl!*, a musical set in 1776 during the American Revolution, she portrays an aggressive Yankee patriot, named Jo Kirkland, who is obsessed by a Joan of Arc complex. For the amusement of her audience, at each and every performance Miss Fabray gets involved in blowing up bridges and amateur espionage, attempts to commandeer a detachment of Connecticut militia, engages in bundling parties with two (2) colonial gentlemen, hides in a barn which collapses when an honest-to-goodness cannon ball is dropped on it, and climbs out of the debris to fight a duel with a deserting Hessian soldier.

"I'll probably get my skull fractured before the show ends its run," Miss Fabray predicts cheerfully.

"The duel is the real thing, too," she says, her almond-shaped eyes twinkling. "Georges Guetary, who plays the Hessian, and I fight with real swords. Finally he slams me across the . . . across the . . . you know. After five weeks of rehearsals, I'm black and blue. Hurts me to sit down."

But this is not the first time Nanette has suffered for her art. She ran an equally hazardous anatomical peril in *Love Life*, one of the really delightful musical soires of the 1948-'49 season. *Love Life* was a fantasy about the tribulations of a married couple in the United States from 1791 to 1948; and to dramatize the psychological confusion of

modern woman, who often feels split in two, the author decided to have the leading lady sawed in half in the opening scene. The script called for Miss Fabray to get into a box; then a magician, cast for the part, was to drag out a crosscut saw and actually slice the box in half.

"It was an awfully small box," Miss Fabray recalls with a shiver.

If she scrouched down in it just right, the saw would miss her by one-sixteenth of an inch. Several times the saw came so close it tore her dress. And on one occasion, the magician actually shaved off several ounces of her flesh as neatly as a delicatessen meat slicer snips a Virginia baked ham.

In *Bloomer Girl*, she wore a 72-pound iron-boned hoop skirt and it took three stagehands and a block and tackle to maneuver it down around her. Once in it, she couldn't get out without help. The plot called for her to unhook the hoop skirt and show herself in bloomers. Unhooking this contraption was almost an engineering problem, and one night the fastener got stuck and she yanked and yanked, and finally ripped a ligament in her right hand. She played most of the run of *Bloomer Girl* with her hand in a splint. Now, four years later, the ligament still hasn't healed completely.

In *By Jupiter*, she made her first entrance carrying a 50-pound stag across her shoulders as she marched down a flight of 20 steps. One night, just for laughs, as she was preparing to make her entrance, Ray Bolger, the star of the show, unexpectedly pinched her. Nanette shot forward, tumbled pell-mell down the steps and fell flat on her face on the stage. The stag flew out of her grasp and landed on a bass drum in the orchestra. The effect was so hilarious Bolger wanted to keep the bit of business in the show permanently. Miss Fabray discouraged him.

When she was in *Let's Face It!*, Benny Baker, the corpulent comedian, accidentally fell on her during

one performance and shattered five ribs on her left side. In *Meet the People*, a swinging iron door crashed into her and cracked three ribs on her right side.

The body which has been taking this prodigious beating is slim and graceful, five feet, six inches tall, with a weight that's normally a slight 105 pounds. Nanette Fabray is always trying to fatten herself up. Three months before she goes into rehearsal for a new show, she embarks on a fattening diet—stuffs herself with potatoes, puddings and pastries. She hit 127 pounds at the start of *Arms and the Girl!* rehearsals. By the time it opened its tryout in Philadelphia last December 29th, she was down to 110. Natural restlessness and nervous energy are what does it. Although a number of critics have called her one of the most beautiful creatures in the American musical-comedy theater, Miss Fabray, curiously enough, feels that she is a rather plain-looking girl. No amount of critical flattery or adulation can convince her that she is, in fact, beautiful. Her inferiority complex is genuine and deep-seated, and it seems to stem from the earliest years of her life.

Nanette was a child performer. Her mother, a vivacious person filled with practical energy, was a perfectionist about Nanette's training and appearance; her nose, for instance—a tip-tilted nose—seemed wrong. Nanette has had three operations on her nose: the first, a plastic operation to change it into a lean Grecian nose; the second, to place a metal support inside to strengthen the Grecian nose; and the last was to undo the effects of the first two operations and return her nose to its original shape.

She also underwent a serious tonsil operation at the age of twelve, which, while it widened her vocal range to three octaves, caused a serious break in her middle register; it took five years of hard work with a voice coach to correct the weakness.

Collier's for February 11, 1950

At sixteen she had an appendicitis operation, after which her long golden hair unaccountably changed to its present brown shade.

No, Nanette Fabray doesn't consider herself a fragile beauty. Nor does she strut around Broadway or put on displays of heavy temperament. She's modest, kind, thoughtful, sweet. Veterans around the big street consider her tops.

La Fabray is among the highest-paid and most solidly established of the new musical-comedy heroines who are today challenging the long-time domination of the field by Mary Martin, Ethel Merman and Beatrice Lillie. In 1947, Nanette won two Donaldson Awards for her exploits in High Button Shoes. For her heart-warming portrayal of the eternal American female in Love Life, she received the 1948 Antoinette Perry Award for the best musical-comedy performance of the season. Both of these awards—the highest Broadway can give—are analogous to Hollywood's Academy "Oscars" in that the selections are made by persons in the theater—including actors, directors, producers, scene designers, dancers and singers.

Leland Hayward, the canny director of South Pacific, remarked not long ago:

"Nanette Fabray is going to be the greatest musical-comedy star since Marilyn Miller."

Fiscally, she's been doing all right, too. From the \$500 a week she received for her role in Bloomer Girl, she climbed to \$1,250 a week in High Button Shoes and \$1,500 a week in Love Life. For Arms and the Girl!, in which she finally attains star billing, she receives \$3,000 every seven days on a guarantee and percentage basis.

What makes her worth such a huge chunk of currency was recently explained by Sammy Cahn,

AT WORK

one of the best lyric writers in the business, who penned the rhymes in High Button Shoes. He said, "Nanette takes a line in a song, gives it a little twinkle at the right word, and packs a ton of meaning into it just with the expression on her face. It isn't only that she punches a lyric across to an audience as few singers can, but she sparkles, just sparkles all over, like a great big diamond. If you've got a song that's bad, Nanette makes it good. But if you've got a good song, why that girl will make it a show-stopper.

"We had a little thing in High Button Shoes—the Ladies Birdwalking number—just a couple of lines, strictly a throwaway bit to get the chorus and Nan on the stage. Nan took this incidental bit and she worked up a raucous whistle, like a truck driver, and she put in some business where she wipes her lips after each whistle. Well, she took some pretty tame lyrics and she brought the house down with it.

"It was one of the three big show-stoppers of High Button Shoes. The others were the Papa, Won't You Dance with Me number, and then I Still Get Jealous, where after she sang it she did a soft-shoe dance. People will be talking about what Nan did with that number for years. It's that look in her eyes, that smile, it's—well—it's her, and you can't put it in words."

But like all the great musical-comedy empresses, Nanette Fabray can do more than merely sing well. She's a quadruple-threat gal—singer, comedienne, dancer and actress. The qualities that make for distinction in the musical theater are diverse, and the training that brings out these qualities is complicated. Nanette started her training shortly after she was born in San Diego, California, on October 21, 1921. Her name originally was Fabares (pronounced Fah-bah-ray). She changed it to Fabray in 1939, because it was the only way, apparently, to get everybody to agree on the same pronunciation.

The Fabares had come from New Orleans originally. Her father, Raoul, was a railroad engineer until he retired. Her mother, Lela McGovern, was and is a beautiful Southern (Continued on page 61)



As Jo Kirkland, Nanette plays a pocket-sized amazon who wants to take on the entire British army alone, but succeeds only in creating confusion and chaos among Colonial troops. It's her first starring role

PHOTOGRAPHS FOR COLLIER'S BY ZINN ARTHUR

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Continuing a vivid novel
of the American Frontier

City beyond Devil's Gate

By LILLIAN JANET

This is the story of the pioneers who founded the fabulous gold and silver town of Virginia City, on the eve of the Civil War. JASON FEATHERS capitalized on the community's sudden wealth by opening a bank. He looked forward to acquiring all the mines in the area, and to a prominent role in the projected Pacific Republic. When young DANIEL MACGRATH returned to Virginia City and asked for a job, Jason hired him, although Daniel had been a minister when he and Jason had known each other in Sacramento. Why Daniel had stopped preaching abolition and left the cloth was a mystery.

News of Daniel's return to Nevada was carried to beautiful EMILY FIELDING by TOOBY, a miner who had operated her mine for her since her father, NOAH FIELDING, and her brother JOHNNY were killed in an ambush by warring Paiutes. Emily had heard Daniel preach three years before, and had been in love with the memory of the fiery young man ever since.

Two weeks after the massacre, Emily was asked to tea by REBECCA FEATHERS, Jason's spoiled and gossipy young wife. Rebecca told Emily about Daniel's tragic marriage the year before to the young sister of Jason's first wife. The bride had died three days after the wedding.

Daniel, Jason, and TOM FEATHERS, his son by his first wife, came in at the end of the tea, and tempers rose as Jason tried, unsuccessfully, to buy Emily's mine. Later, Tom forced his father to let him take a job in a mine by threatening to go to work for Emily. And that night Rebecca, bored with life in the crude town, made advances to the impressionable Tom.

When Daniel protested a wanton killing engineered by Jason during a mine foreclosure, Jason rationalized, saying that JESSE HULL, his hired gunman, had acted rashly. Alarmed, Daniel went to Emily to warn her of Jason's plan to force her to sell out. He had to tell her of the murder. They fell silent, and Daniel wondered if this was to be the first and the last time he would ever be close to Emily.

III

EMILY was still silent when they reached her house, and Daniel hesitated in front of the door, wondering how to take his leave. It was quite dark now, and the soft night air seemed to bring a stealing, inexorable sadness. Loneliness and longing—he was not sure for what—welled up in him. They had grown very close, sitting out on the mountain. The vastness of the panorama spread around them had left him moody, almost spellbound.

"It's getting late—" he said at last.

She seemed not to have heard him. She put her hand upon the latch and with weariness and effort pushed the door open. And then, strangely, she left it open. She took a step inside and looked back over her shoulder at him.

"You haven't any place to go," she said. "Come

on in and eat with Charley and me." She had spoken flatly, without enthusiasm, and yet he sensed that she did actually want him to stay. He said nothing but followed her into the house.

It was even darker inside, and she lighted a lamp and placed it on the round wooden table. Charley, the Paiute handy man, was nowhere in evidence. Some late errand had apparently taken him out of the house.

"I'll start supper," she said.

She went over to the stove, took down an apron, took potatoes from a barrel and started peeling them.

Daniel felt ill at ease, uncomfortable at her silence. "Can I help?" he began uncertainly.

"The fire in the stove's gone out. If you want to light it, you can." Her voice was not angry or resentful. It was merely quiet, and rather tired.

Daniel went quickly to the stove and created a flurry of activity with kindling and wood. Then he straightened and looked toward her. But now she had stopped her work.

"Why did you give up preaching?" she asked. Her eyes were on his face, probing, searching.

"Why are you working for Jason Feathers?" He hesitated, trying to frame an answer. She tilted her head slightly to one side, studying his face.

"Why did you come to Virginia City?"

"I don't know," he said at last.

A self-consciousness seemed to come over her. She turned back to her work, began moving with uneven, almost jerky haste.

"I heard you preach once," she said. "I was just wondering."

That was not entirely true, of course, what he had said about not knowing what had brought him there. Like most evasive answers it had contained an ingredient of truth. He could remember and point to this event or that and say, here it started, or this was a turning point, or that was the final deciding factor.

And yet all of these were but fragmentary. Perhaps, he reasoned, he was as yet unable to see the picture whole because of the immediacy of certain memories. Those memories! How could he ever share the bitterness, the humiliation of them with someone like Emily. Yet why was he goaded by this almost masochistic compulsion to return again and again to those memories, himself?

Of one thing he was certain. It had started in a crowded San Francisco street that September afternoon almost a year ago.

"There hasn't been a funeral like this since Bella Cora buried her lover."

Daniel had never forgotten those words. He had turned angrily to the man standing next to him. "That seems to me a highly inappropriate remark, sir."

"Quite a show," the man went on, taking little no-

It seemed to him that they had grown very close, sitting out on the mountain. The vastness of the panorama had left him moody, almost spellbound

tice of Daniel's heated remark. He was a short, stocky man in a tall silk hat, and his black frock coat hung open to reveal a green satin waistcoat which bore evidence of several past meals. He had a bland round face, but both shrewdness and speculation showed in his quick, observant eyes.

They were draping the doors with black in San Francisco; the bearded, heavy-handed, humorless, desperately earnest David Broderick lay dead. Senator Broderick was dead, struck down in a duel by a bullet from the gun of his archrival Judge Terry, the hotheaded Southerner.

"They have killed me." His words were whispered back and forth, reiterated, searched for meaning and import. "They have killed me because I was opposed to slavery." The words, Broderick's

Collier's for February 11, 1950