

# The Theatre Arts

By John Gassner

DECEMBER is the season for gifts, and the theatre treated itself to a few. The Yule-tide spirit was most in evidence in a series of packages consisting of Maurice Evans' G.I. version of *Hamlet*, in Elmer Rice's *Dream Girl*, the new musical *Billion Dollar Baby*, and the Gertrude Lawrence revival of Shaw's *Pygmalion*.

Maurice Evans, who once gave us the only unabbreviated *Hamlet* within memory, has gone completely in the opposite direction with the most abbreviated version, minus even the Gravediggers' scene. Brought back from a successful tour in the Pacific area, where Major Evans trimmed the great tragedy for speed and simplicity of staging, the production proved to be a driving and at the same time fascinating melodrama. It was something more, of course, thanks to Shakespeare's poetry, and this able actor-producer is not one to overlook opportunities for recitation. Each *Hamlet* monologue, whether short or long, became an aria, and I doubt whether anyone in the non-Latin nations has had a proper introduction to the classic theatre of Greece, Rome or France who has not witnessed his performance. That great poet of the French theatre, Jean Racine, has remained a mystery to those of us who are not completely bilingual. It has been difficult for us to con-

ceive that a play like *Phèdre* can be effective when it consists of long formal speeches. The new Evans production combines melodramatic action with French classic formalism.

To facilitate the speed of the action, the director, George Schaefer, no doubt under orders from his Major, has staged everything on a unit-set designed by Frederick Stover. The settings are various but have an easily sensed unity; they are colorful and impressive and yet functional. Excellent incidental music by Roger Adams heightens the atmosphere and tides us over the brief breaks in visual continuity. The production comes over without a hitch, and the interest never flags. To bring the action closer to us, as well as to disencumber the actors of their armor, the production costumed them in nineteenth century European habiliments. Hardly anything in the G.I. version would be incongruous at some continental court in the pre-Victorian period—hardly anything, that is, if we except the Ghost, who belongs to the Elizabethan tradition. The results are somewhat anomalous. Yet there is a certain degree of logic in this measure. One way of interpreting *Hamlet* is to view him as a prototype of the heroes of early nineteenth century romanticism. By-

ronism is not far removed from Hamletism; both Byron and Hamlet are synonymous with disillusion, morbid grief and a sense of damnation or fatality.

Supporting Evans are Thomas Gomez as Claudius, Thomas Chalmers as Polonius, Walter Coy as Horatio, Frances Reid as Ophelia, and Lili Darvas as the Queen. They deliver, for the most part, carefully thought out performances, and a good deal may be written about the various interpretations, which diverge from the traditional in many instances. (One divergence, Ophelia's using a book on flowers rather than flowers in the mad-scene, is quite interesting; and Miss Reid is a very good Ophelia.) But they form a dim galaxy beside Evans, and this is to no one's advantage. In all his endeavors to unify the effect of the production, Mr. Evans forgot to harmonize the supporting actors with himself; the former play in a style of realistic restraint while he coruscates romantically. Another anomaly will be found in the costuming, which suggests a Byronic treatment while Mr. Evans' Hamlet is generally devoid of the pale cast of thought. There were moments when this reviewer thought of Graustark and Ruritania, instead of Elsinore. That, in fact, is the chief limitation of the actor's performance, as well as of the interpretation he foists upon the play by production and editing which dispensed with Shakespeare's chiaroscuro. The very omission of the Gravedigger's scene indicates a rather surface view of the tragedy, in which the macabre element was

as integral as the heroic. There is conspicuously less dimension and depth in this *Hamlet*, and in previous presentations by Evans, than in the great text.

Nevertheless, the production remains the peak of the season, and its eminence is unlikely to be challenged by anything that will reach the boards in 1946. There is the play, God be praised, and there is Evans, who projects the action and reads the lines better than he ever did. He is the best Hamlet of our generation, except for John Gielgud, whose psychoanalytic approach to the role had, however, its own limitations when we saw him in New York.

A smaller measure of greatness pertains to *Pygmalion*, although G.B.S. might dispute the point. It is a mistake to deny emotion to the author of *Candida*, *Androcles and the Lion* and *St. Joan*. But Shaw wrote *Pygmalion* out of his head, not his heart. Nevertheless, intellectual passion is a nearly adequate equivalent, and there is plenty of it in the first offering of the recently founded Theatre Incorporated. This auspicious beginning must be credited largely to Gertrude Lawrence, whose Eliza Doolittle is a thoroughly expert performance. When Eliza is a cockney flower-girl, Miss Lawrence commits such assault and battery on the King's English that only hanging would suit the crime. When Eliza has been sufficiently exposed to young Professor Higgins' elocution lessons, Miss Lawrence is murderously funny; externally she is all lady and her pronunciation would do credit to a

duchess, but she "slays" us with her refined use of unmentionable language without blinking an eye as she sails through a Victorian salon in a fetching costume. Then Miss Lawrence executes a tailspin in the third act and plays a mature Eliza better even than Lynn Fontanne (if memory doesn't deceive); plays her with the right proportions of feeling and intelligence, pathos and rebelliousness. It is not the most sparkling of performances, and she overdoes the cockney, but it almost comes up to Shaw's writing. The supporting cast rarely falls much below adequacy. Melville Cooper's Doolittle disappoints only because the role is so much better than it appears in the present revival. Although Raymond Massey seems too strenuous or brash in the role of Professor Higgins, he looks sufficiently bright and limber to convey the essence of this Shavian character, who is all spirit and intelligence. Massey does better in Act Three and does justice to Shaw's conception of a modern, completely confident male who does not need the salve of feminine subservience for his ego. If he is not entirely "human," this is because he interprets a Shavian creation in too Shavian a manner—that is, as a new kind of roughneck who rides roughshod over ordinary humaneness.

The result is a generally satisfying realization of a brilliant comedy, which is one of the classics of dramatic modernism, even if it is a notch or two below Shaw's best. By comparison with it, even our most resolutely modern intellectual comedies seem rather sentimental and

namby-pamby. In what current comedy can we find so brilliant a series of comic ideas as Doolittle's comments on middle-class life or the notion that pronunciation and clothing make the difference between a flower girl and a duchess, including the addition that "the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves but how she's treated?" Where will one find a better commentary on manners than Higgins' defense: "The great secret, Eliza, is not having bad manners or good manners or any other particular sort of manners, but having the same manners for all human souls; in short, behaving as if you were in Heaven, where there are no third-class carriages, and one soul is as good as another."

Where will we find a more applicable thought than his rejoinder to Eliza, who has complained that his lessons have unfitted her for her station: "Would the world ever have been made if its maker had been afraid of making trouble? Making life means making trouble. There's only one way of escaping trouble; and that's killing things. Cowards, you notice, are always shrieking to have troublesome people killed." And what other dramatist would have dared to conclude this play without having Pygmalion marry his Galatea. Higgins' reply to her complaint that he doesn't care for her is merely, "I care for life, for humanity; and you are a part of it that has come my way and been built into my house. What more can you or anybody ask?" Cold porridge, perhaps, for a movie audience and for ordinary living, but

how exhilarating after the lukewarm pabulum of most entertainment!

The contrast between *Pygmalion* and Elmer Rice's *Dream Girl*, coming within a week of each other, can only lessen enthusiasm for the latter. *Dream Girl* is sentiment masquerading as modernism, which is substantiated only by a few unconventional *obiter dicta* and by some very good sparring between a romantic girl and a sharp-tongued newspaper man, who unite in holy matrimony in the end. It is the kind of comedy in which no one is really hurt, and in which balm is poured over the wounds administered to sentiment. Nor does the play's *Lady in the Dark* technique serve as more than a theatrically attractive device which leads to humdrum drama at some points, if it also inspires some excellent scenes. The burden of Rice's comedy is that dreaming is a cheat and a snare. Since a considerable portion of American girlhood is still wedded to Hollywood dreamfulness, the point is well directed. But it is not finely ground; it can barely penetrate the epidermis.

Nevertheless, it is unfair to apply the oversized Shavian yardstick to *Dream Girl*. By more moderate, ordinary standards, Mr. Rice's latest play is generally successful and engaging. It is ingenious comedy, though some of the ingenuity, as in the courtroom scene, harks back to his *Adding Machine* of 1923 vintage. Since, moreover, the play must not be judged independently of its production, it is to be noted that the author has fabricated an ideal vehicle for Betty Field, and

that he has staged it even more expertly than he has written it. The multi-scened production is a model of contrast, smoothness and orchestration of effects. The cast is extremely well chosen, and is wisely directed. Wendell Corey, in the role of a rambunctious journalist, proves himself one of our most valuable supporting players. And Betty Field is supreme as she dreams her way with equal facility through a wide assortment of roles as mother, mistress, prostitute, murderess and Shakespeare's Portia. Miss Field, who by a happy conjunction of circumstances is also the heroine of that fine film *The Southerner*, has proved herself the most accomplished young actress to reach the American stage in over a decade. The theatre, which has been singularly laggard in bringing out stellar acting material, is fortunate in having her. She combines an utterly winning personality with forceful and flexible delivery; she has decisive movements and gestures, but without mechanical angularity, and both her eyes and mouth serve her as expressive instruments. She is never cloying in sentimental passages, never maudlin in tragic ones. Her transitions of personality are effortless and convincing. Her athletic femininity—one might describe it as femininity without coyness, or as sensitivity with force—is uncommonly refreshing.

If *Dream Girl* is subject to the soft impeachment that it is mild, the new musical *Billion Dollar Baby* is subject to the criticism that it is brash. If there is too much milk in the consistency of the former, there is too much acid in the latter.

More specifically, it may be said that *Billion Dollar Baby* is not wholly satisfying because it falls between humor and wit. Since it hasn't heart or warmth enough to be humor, it should have wit. It is cold enough to be wit, but it lacks wit's brilliance and edge.

Yet there is much to be grateful for in this musical travesty on the alcoholic, materialistic 'twenties tracing the primrose path of a gold-digger who just misses becoming Uncle Sam's Miss America and becomes instead the darling of less reputable characters. The book hammers away at the theme with many a dent in the *corpus delicti* of the vanished age. The hammering becomes monotonous because the feminine Pal Joey runs true to form with too much regularity and without having a particularly interesting character structure. But the dents are theatrically interesting thanks to very able staging, by George Abbott, clever if unmelodic music by Morton Gould, and above all remarkably adept choreography by Jerome Robbins, who performed the same yeoman service for last season's *On the Town*. The musical skims the cream of its plot by means of three ballets, a Charleston travesty, a gangster's funeral, and the heroine's perhaps too literal fantasy of the life she would lead with a gangster if she followed the dictates of her heart. Augmented by such apt travesties as those on speakeasy culture, Texas Guinan night-club entertainment, and Babbitism (the Babbitts of the

stock-market even bet on the moon!), *Billion Dollar Baby* is an astringent for jaded appetites. Mitzi Green wins first honors as the hearty Texas Guinan of the play. Joan McCracken, playing the gold-digger, is not too far behind; her personal charm goes far toward mitigating the vixenish role.

On the rest of the December productions this report can economize: In *The Mermaids Singing*, John Van Druten dramatizes the middle-aged problem of infatuation with youth and reluctant renunciation, the hero in this case being a successful playwright. The writing has sparkle. The story is old and not particularly illuminating. The play comes as an anticlimax after the author's *Voice of the Turtle* and his *I Remember Mama* dramatization. *Strange Fruit* proved unwieldy and bumbling despite thematic importance and some striking scenes, probably because of the difficulties of dramatizing the novel and the inexperience of the novelist-dramatist. It is doubtful whether the play will disseminate its theme as widely as the book, though the intention remains just as honorable. *The French Touch* proved to be an acute disappointment considering the promising theme of a French actor-playwright's battle with a Nazi commandant. The authors were only partially responsible for the failure. Much of the blame devolves upon unfortunate casting. *The French Touch*, however, was virtually the only fly in December's ointment.

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• "Nervousness is the penalty you pay for being a race horse instead of a cow."

—Richard C. Borden

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# HIGHLIGHTS

## The International Scene

Big Three relations stalemated after the failure of the London Conference of Foreign Ministers early in October, 1945. Hopes for world peace and security sank after the ill-fated peace conference, the first among the Big Powers. But early in December came the announcement that the Big Three would try again. United States' Secretary of State James F. Byrnes and British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin journeyed to Moscow, where, on December 15, they began a 12-day conference with Soviet Foreign Commissar Vyacheslav Molotov. During these 12 days the world waited hopefully for news of definite progress but only trivia was released. Secretary of State Byrnes had learned to say "I agree" and "No" in Russian. A wayward owl was adopted by the American delegation. Byrnes and Bevin visited Premier Joseph Stalin. Then on December 24 came the Christmas present, a 4,500 word communiqué.

### MOSCOW ACCORD

The major achievements contained in the agreement were: (1) a proposed method for international control of atomic energy; (2) a formula for drafting peace treaties with the defeated European countries (the problem that had split the London Meeting) and (3) new measures for dealing with the control of Japan, the future of Korea and the unification of China. Specifically, Byrnes seems to have said "I agree" more than "No." Russia's special position in eastern Europe was recognized and her participation in the control of the Far East was assured. At Russian insistence the problems of the Middle East, (which Great Britain particularly wanted to solve), were postponed for future discussion. Result—the re-establishment of Big Three unity.

On the atomic bomb, Russia virtually endorsed the policy that had been outlined by the United States, Great Britain and Canada on November 15. A U.N.O. Commission was "to consider problems arising from the discovery of atomic energy," promote the exchange of scientific knowledge, propose security controls, propose a method for the liquidation of atomic-weapon stockpiles and safeguard the United Nations from violations or evasions of agreements. For the time being the "ABC" powers will retain the secret. The United States and Great Britain conceded to Russia, however, the subordination of the atomic commission to the Security Council rather than to the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization.

The deadlock over the European peace treaties was broken by three agreements. The foreign ministers decided that "only members of the Council [of Foreign Ministers] who are . . . signatory of the surrender