

Speak to Me of Love

ROBERT FORSYTHE

WHEN you speak of the French in America, you must distinguish between the French themselves and the native Iowans who are enraptured by the merest twitter of a Parisian accent. At the moment there is agitation among those Americans who feel that no novel is good unless it be a French novel in a paper back. The causes of this are Lucienne Boyer and Yvonne Printemps, who are with us for the season, or, more exactly, during that portion of the season in which the box office feels the need of their tenure.

Both of them have been here previously—Mlle. Boyer in an ill-fated venture with les frères Shubert called *A Night in Paris*, which was on the Century Roof some years ago, and Mlle. Printemps with her former husband, Sascha Guitry, in a short season which preceded the lamented happenings of October, 1929, and which is still remembered with awe by the light-footed hoofers who congregate in front of the Palace on Forty-seventh Street as the opening which cost \$27 a seat. Comparable excitement was caused by the appearance of Raquel Meller even further back and the French must find the Americans amusing.

Mlle. Boyer is now singing her sad little songs of unrequited love in the *Continental Varieties* at the Little Theatre and is appearing as well at the Rainbow Roof on top of Radio City. Mlle. Printemps is in Noel Coward's *Conversation Piece* at the Forty-fourth Street Theatre. What distinguishes a show in which a French actress appears from a show in which Miss Helen Hayes appears is the audience. The Theatre Guild patrons who saw Miss Hayes last year in *Mary of Scotland* had the air of a busload of teachers intent on seeing every museum and church in town. The audience which saw Mlle. Printemps opening last week was composed of ladies and gentlemen so unbelievably gowned and bedecked that anybody turning around in the theatre would never again be able to get his attention on the stage. It was a group which came late and rustled down the aisles and climbed over seat holders and acted in the delightfully ill-mannered habit of the rich. My only pleasure was in kicking a gentleman as he went by and accepting his apology for his clumsiness.

What struck me on my two contacts with the newcomers was the susceptibility of the excellent American male to the Parisian influence. Mlle. Boyer is no raging beauty and there is nothing so scandalous in her past as to warrant any hopes of conquest by the gentlemen in these parts, but she seems to have restored the age of the stage door johnnie. There are foolish looking fellows hovering about the runway to the dressing rooms with posies in their buttonholes, her dressing room

is filled with flowers, she is bombarded with invitations and her mail is cluttered with mash notes. As against this we may report that she is in love with her pianist, who is well enough versed in the barbarian language to translate the notes to her.

If this is a matter of importance, the scenes within the theatre are no less striking. She finishes the first half of the program and comes on again later to close the show. What we have are the gay blades in shiny shirt fronts coming in just for the Boyer numbers and departing directly afterward. The show started at 9:15 with Chaliapin's daughter singing something so amateurish that you would run your own child out of the parlor for attempting it and the shiny gentlemen were still coming in as late as 10:45, creating some sort of record and a great deal of disturbance. During the intermission the lobby was filled with the French of people who had taken the course in High School and there was more rolling of eyes and placing of finger tips to lips than has been seen in this country since the visit of General Joffre.

What interested me most of all, however, was a gentleman who came in about 11 o'clock and stood in the aisle at the rear and gave forth genteel approval at the sight of Boyer. He was a trifle expanded at the waist but he had the frank honest look of a stock broker and it was plain that he had been hiding in the alley for an hour rather than appear before the lady came on. As he listened to the tender plaints of Mlle. Boyer, he jingled the coins in his pocket with such satisfaction as to quite drown out the words of the songs. In a sense he vindicated every cartoonist who ever lived, for you might have embroidered a dollar mark on his chest with full artistic justice and even with his consent. He was quite willing to spend \$4.40 for the sake of standing in the aisle and showing that his sense of selectivity was such that only the exquisite had a right to his attention. Without expressing the feeling publicly, it was plain that the gentleman considered himself a figure out of Zola's *Nana*. I am reporting this at length to show that fashion is not dead and manners are not dead and that wealth will carry on the banner of culture.

The opening of *Conversation Piece* was even more extraordinary. The matter had been bruited about for weeks in advance and it was obvious that the drama was at last to get its opportunity in New York. The audience was composed in great part of ladies and gentlemen from the garment district, the editors and writers of fashion magazines and other interested parties concerned with the stealing of models brought over by Mlle. Printemps. As a sporting gesture and with the purpose of meeting Mlle. Printemps half

way, the audience in turn allowed itself to be garbed in creations from Paris last year and the contest between stage and auditorium was such that Mr. Coward's masterpiece might as well have been played by a company of robots, which indeed it practically was. The cast mumbled in several languages and it was not clear what was going on, but the scenery was beautiful and the ladies of the cast wore short gloves of such brilliant hue that the members of the trade confined themselves to their pews only with an effort. You could sense a general desire to rush forth and confer with their designers.

In all, New York is something to be proud of these days. Just how it strikes the visitors is a matter of doubt. The English accept homage of this sort as a tribute due a superior race. The French, I am prepared to believe, take it much more cynically. Mlle. Boyer comes of a poor family, her father having been a machinist before he was killed in the war, and she is at no pains to disguise the fact of her lowly origin. She arrived in New York with 23 trunks and dozens of pieces of hand luggage and her expenditure for gowns runs into the thousands but there is every indication that she views her admirers among the socially favored with something less than reverence. Perhaps I am holding the lady too highly but I am basing it on the French capacity for reason; anyone who couldn't see through the people who are acting so Rue de la Paix every evening at the Little Theatre would not only fail to be French but would fail to be alive.

What will happen when Elizabeth Bergner arrives later in the year is almost too horrible to contemplate. It will not be so much the absence of the Nazis or the presence of Samuel Untermyer as it will be the attendance of American travelers who have seen Bergner in Berlin or in London and are most utterly convinced that only a true Bergnerite has any reason for being in the theatre. There is something about rich Americans who travel which can only be regarded as unfortunate. They combine a distaste for loud Babbitts who embarrass them in hotel dining rooms with a preciosity of their own which makes everything a mystic rite. If they have met Jean Cocteau or Alice B. Toklas, the result is even more calamitous. They are the sort

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of people who are enchanted by any German motion picture which appears at the Fifty-fifth Street playhouse, they feel that every French experimental movie is a masterpiece: that Andre Gide was the greatest man in French letters until he was ruined by Communism and that George Jean Nathan is a wit.

But what I really started out to tell you was about the gentleman who wore the velvet

jacket to *Conversation Piece*. He looked elegant and I was at some pains to keep from stroking him. He kept my attention away from the performance about social conditions. I can see how a thing of that sort might be used by the Communists to undermine the present order, but I fail to see the significance of such reasoning. What in heaven's name would a man in a bread-line want with a velvet jacket?

Music

Bruckner and Beethoven

THE SECOND Philharmonic Concert with Otto Klemperer, conductor, presented two of the most imposing symphonic creations of all times, the Ninth (unfinished) of Bruckner and the Fifth of Beethoven.

In the presentation of these symphonies Klemperer did well not to adhere to chronological order. It would be difficult to imagine an audience remaining to listen to the Bruckner after the Fifth Symphony of Beethoven. Rarely did the Beethoven, so far antedating the Bruckner in its creation, seem so fresh, so compact in structure, so logical—so complete in the attainment of Beethoven's objectives: to portray the "struggle of the spirit against mankind's physical limitations . . . awakening man from his idealistic mirage. The spirit is all-powerful. . . . Even to this day, Beethoven is near to us; he is still capable of calling forth revolutionary enthusiasm by the ecstasy of his sounds, to awaken consciousness, revolutionize it with rebellious ideas, as well as uplift the activity of organisms and inject into them an orgy of happiness!"*

And by contrast with this true masterpiece of Beethoven, the Bruckner seems, both at the time and even more in retrospect, to be diffuse, pompous, futile in its mouthings of the ideas of Wagner, who was Bruckner's god. Familiar themes from the entire range of Wagner's music dramas pass in review—"lifted" in strangely assorted fragments from their original context—and how ghost-like and hollow are their reverberations! How tragic seem the vain strivings—the reminiscent throes of "Liebestod"—the eternal quest of the Holy Grail! Bruckner, foredoomed to frustration, reveals himself as a reactionary of colossal proportions, forever gazing longingly towards the past—the ideal—the unreal.

Klemperer conducted the Bruckner with evident devotion—a notable example of love's labor lost. The *Scherzo* (the most original section) lacked the diabolical character which makes it really exciting. The Beethoven came with such cumulative force, that the conductor and players, having rid

themselves of Bruckner's excessive ballast, seemed to rejoice and revel in music which is surely as eloquent and pertinent in the 20th century as it must have seemed when it was first heard.

ASHLEY PERTIS.

New School Symposium

AT the New School for Social Research a symposium course called "Creative Music Today" is being conducted by Henry Cowell, one of the most adventurous of contemporary American composers. Last week Mr. Cowell presented Dr. Ernst Toch, prominent German composer, and Adolf Weiss, an American theoretician and composer who is one of the foremost exponents of the Schoenberg theories.

Dr. Toch, in the course of his brief remarks, confined himself primarily to the general theories of musical composition as distinguished from any particular "modernistic" doctrine. He simply repeated the very well-known and obvious fact that inspiration without technique is not conducive to the writing of good music and that technique without inspiration is equally futile. Dr. Toch looks upon music as being neither classical nor modern, but either good or bad. The external features of the art change while the basic ideas and qualities remain the same. In the playing of his compositions, a sonata for the piano in three movements and five capricciottes, Toch revealed the narrowness and remoteness of his viewpoint. This music is extremely well written, but it fails to express anything of import to those who look upon art as a medium through which the creator sets forth ideas rooted in the lives of the masses and universal in content. At best this music can only be classified as politely adequate, socially indifferent and ideologically chaotic; a true product of the ivory tower.

Mr. Weiss, who was speaking for Schoenberg as well as himself, explained that Schoenberg's theory is but an extension of the diatonic system and that almost every composition is based on a single motive which is developed to the point of its greatest possibilities. Like the technical theories of Dr. Toch, we have no quarrel with those of Mr. Weiss. It is with the results that we must differ in both cases. Mr. Weiss' piano sonata, played

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* History of Music in connection with the history of the class struggle, by S. Tchemodanov.