

SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

Two New Plays and a Post-Mortem

THE spectacle of our civilization destroying itself has its satirical aspects, but somehow, when served up in *Hooray for What!* (Winter Garden, N. Y.) with all the incredible lavishness of a Shubert musical staged by Vincente Minelli, music by Harold Arlen, lyrics by E. Y. Harburg, fun by Ed Wynn, and dances by Paul Haakon (and why were there only two of these?), this reviewer could hardly muster a snicker except when Wynn was making cracks that had nothing whatever to do with the main theme of the show. Mr. Wynn has a poison-gas formula everybody is after; the League of Nations is making a laughing stock of itself; there are some swell cracks at the munitions racket and the inanity of high diplomacy. But the burlesqued fashion-show of the latest in death-carrying projectiles is not funny; it is queasy. And when Paul Haakon danced the realities of the coming war, the hilarity was stilled with terrifying suddenness. People wriggled uncomfortably and laughed with hysterical relief when Ed Wynn reappeared. If they think the subject for *Hooray for What* is funny, why don't the Shuberts try a nice little musical comedy about cancer?

In addition the singing is uniformly bad (Jack Whiting was out of the show, so give him the benefit of the doubt), and the humor veers all the way around the compass. There are plenty of cracks such as "Italy's in Ethiopia, Japan's in China, Russia's in Spain—nobody stays at home, that's what's the matter," and "Free speech isn't dead in Russia, just the speakers." "God's Country" is a good tune, but the gist of the lyric is that America is different, and safe—"Every man is his own dictator." And after all, a refrain like "We got no Trotsky, we got no Stalin, but we got Burns and Gracie Allen," isn't really such a scream.

One of the more vicious aspects of our commercial theater today is the inability of Negro actors to get work excepting in roles and plays that libel their race. Not the least disgusting of these vehicles is *Brown Sugar* (as its name implies), presented by George Abbott at the Biltmore, N. Y. Dramatically it deserves very little attention, being a thoroughly bad melodrama according to which life in Harlem is made up solely of the numbers racket, drinking, whoring, and murder. Unfortunately there was a very real danger that the play might run, for the same reason that *Tobacco Road* is now in its fifth year, not because of the social truths it also portrays, but because it shocks and titillates an audience.

The paradox of the first night reviews of *Brown Sugar* was that only John Anderson

of the *Journal and American* saw fit to brand it as "a condescending and vulgar exploitation" of the Negro race. Even this is putting it mildly. The play appeals in revolting terms to all those prejudices and chauvinistic instincts nurtured by a capitalist society which seeks to dominate a racial minority in the interests of a ruling class. Mr. Abbott and Mrs. Bernie Angus, who wrote the play, may protest the innocence of their intentions. But the fact remains that the position of the Negro people today forbids the casual presentation on the stage or screen or in literature of a Negro in derogatory circumstances, since he will never be considered by white audiences as an *individual*, but will always represent to them his race as a whole, thereby bolstering their sense of racial superiority and reinforcing their prejudices, however latent.

Barchester Towers at the Martin Beck, N. Y., must have Anthony Trollope whirling in his grave. The "free adaptation" of a classic may be pardoned if it adheres in some measure to the spirit and period of the original, and if the result is a good play. Thomas Job's dramatization fulfills none of these requisites. He has discarded the central theme of the novel, the intrigues and bickering for place and position of a nineteenth-century English episcopal town, presumably as lacking in dramatic possibilities, and devoted himself largely to the flirtations of Madeline Neroni Stanhope. But the spleen and bitterness of Trollope's cripple, poisoned by invalidism and a life of idleness and excess, is diluted by Mr. Job into the gay playfulness of a woman bored with ecclesiastical provincialism, who takes to her couch on pretense of an injured ankle solely as a matter of strategy when visitors are present, and in the bosom of her family runs around like a gazelle. The other characters are similarly emaciated: Mr. Arabin becomes a priggish bore, Mrs. Proudie a mere busybody, Mr. Slope an ineffectual climber. Necessarily, therefore, the comedy of character which is Trollope's forte, and which did very well by Helen Jerome in her adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, is discarded, in favor of a series of trumped-up farcical episodes of the "comedy of errors" variety which are as dull as they are inchoate.

Ina Claire does what she can with so creaking a vehicle. The rest of the cast, with the

exception of pleasant characterizations by Frederick Graham and J. M. Kerrigan, are very bad indeed. Much of the blame must rest on Guthrie McClintic, who as producer has miscast most of the roles and as director evidently made up his mind early in the day to abandon any pretense at maintaining the proper atmosphere. Consequently we are treated to a series of inexcusable lapses, such as extremely casual manners between the two sexes, young ladies squatting on the grass, a very modern-looking railway time-table, a quotation from "Maud Muller," a bishop cavorting on a garden bench singing an accompaniment to a dance, and Bertie Stanhope receiving young lady visitors in his night-shirt and dressing-gown, all in the year of grace 1857. If a reviewer may be pardoned a timid pun, Mr. McClintic has made a very poor Job of Trollope indeed.

ELEANOR FLEXNER.

Why the C. P. Grows in France

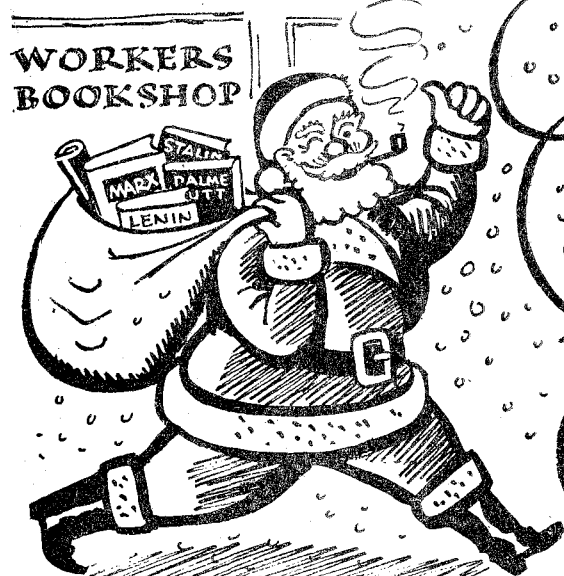
ONE important reason why the Communist Party of France increased its representation in the Chamber of Deputies to seventy-two in the last general election is now on view at the Squire Theatre in New York. There *People of France*, the election-campaign propaganda film which has not been shown publicly in this country before, is bearing brilliant testimony to the political maturity of the French Communist Party. That political maturity is evidenced objectively by the human and artistic power of this film and subjectively by the fact that its director, Jean Renoir, and many of its cast, are among the shining lights of the French cinema industry.

The film opens with a classroom scene in which a teacher expounds to his students the natural and industrial riches of la belle France. How effective a beginning this is for a propaganda film you can readily see when you recall that as a kid in grade school, when you got your new batch of books at each term's start, the one you sat down to and looked through first was your geography. There was pictured the seething, multifarious, half-familiar yet half-unknown life of contemporary man: the busy traffic of New York harbor; the cavernous steel mills of Pittsburgh; the boundless wheat fields of the Dakotas; salmon fisheries on the Columbia River—all exciting and pulsing with life.

Catapulted by this sort of basic interest, then, the propaganda message takes off. The classroom lecture is brief, and we follow the kids homewards, where they begin talking about more personal concerns, yet relating them to what they have just seen and heard about the work, wealth, and presumptive hap-



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pininess of France. The question of who owns the wealth is abruptly introduced, and the camera eye focuses on the "200 families" and a characteristic board-of-directors meeting, at which it is decided to destroy commodities in order to raise prices and profits. Then the French fascists and their foreign friends appear in their full lineaments of death and destruction, followed by the Communist Party.

Here the scheme of the film changes abruptly and three short scenarios follow. Marcel Cachin is shown at his *Humanité* office, reading his mail. The three scenarios flow from letters he is reading. The first relates a job action in a metal works, whereby a middle-aged worker is saved from discharge and a wage increase is won for all. The writer of the letter, who was involved in the action, writes to thank the party for its leadership. The next is the thwarting of a foreclosure on the countryside, wherein the Communists organize to buy the foreclosed chattels at public auction for a pittance and return them to the dispossessed. The third shows how an unemployed and demoralized intellectual finds himself by his contact with the movement. The film winds up with a series of short talks by leaders of the French party, and the final sequences picture, symbolically, the ever-swelling river of marchers behind the party's banner, with the worker, the peasant, and the intellectual shoulder to shoulder.

It is impossible to detail here the wealth and subtlety of the film's artistry. It deserves to be seen by everyone for its simple and powerful message; and for those who have a special interest in the propaganda film, it will yield new lessons every time it is seen.

ROBERT WHITE.

A Ballet for the Carriage Trade

UP at the celebrated Lafayette Theatre in Harlem, and under the direction and supervision of Eugene von Grona, the much publicized American Negro Ballet came to life and played its initial performance to an enthusiastic S.R.O. audience. They had Reginald Forsythe's swell jazz, the public blessing of James Weldon Johnson, famous Negro poet, and began the concert with the *Star-Spangled Banner*. But all this, unfortunately, had little to do with the engineering of a young, earnest, undoubtedly talented group of dancers into a program of cheap tinsel and white chauvinism. There can be no question of it; the program was calculated to please the carriage trade. It certainly wasn't a concert designed to advance the lot of the Negro peoples.

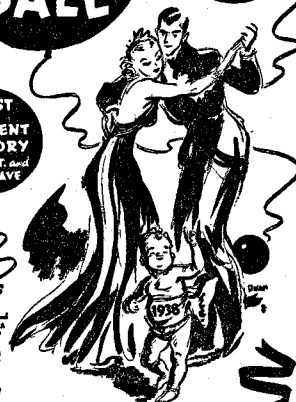
First there was the *Children of Darkness*, a dance in the decadent style and flossy manner of von Grona, with the primitivism of the Negro for its theme, the sort of primitivism attributed to the Negro by such of his

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