

SOME THOUGHTS ON REPERTORY

Why several theater groups have fallen short of their intentions. Revivals that don't come off. . . . Joy Davidman sees the new Soviet opera film "Musical Story."

THE fact that the Theater Guild is instituting a revival series of formerly successful plays, the first of which is currently running—*Ah, Wilderness!*—reminds us that past experiments in the establishment of repertory in America have been largely unsuccessful. Many will remember Miss Eva Le Gallienne's ill-fated Civic Repertory Theater in New York, that ran about three seasons and collapsed for lack of public support despite relatively low admission prices. The Group Theater, when it was still functioning, fondly played with the idea of repertory—not only a revival bill of new plays pioneered by the Group, but even Shakespeare. *Waiting for Lefty* was revived for a time, as well as *Awake and Sing*; but neither brought big money, and the Bard of Avon was never attempted. And the fact that the Theater Guild, which has announced revivals of *Desire Under the Elms* and *Anna Christie*, among others, plans to run these plays for only four weeks at a time in New York, before sending them on the road, seems a confession of defeat.

There is no reason why people who love the theater would not support a repertory company that offered tickets at prices within the reach of the poor man's pocketbook. In the Soviet Union, for example, people regularly attend revivals of popular and classic drama, just as we in New York go to the Lewisohn Stadium or Carnegie Hall time after time, when we know a favorite composition will be played, and have the price. But it is interesting to speculate upon the failure, within the past several years, of any well intentioned experiment in the repertory field. Miss Le Gallienne sold tickets at remarkably low prices, and she produced some plays of everlasting interest—Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and *Three Sisters*, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and many others. Yet it might be said without too great injustice that the level of direction, of acting and production in general was terribly low. Her very earnestness imparted a lugubrious quality even to so light-hearted a bubble as Goldini's *Mistress of the Inn*, and her Chekhov performances, her production of Ibsen's *Master Builder* and *Hedda Gabler* were such as to coin a phrase among the sardonic: "Ah, the pain of it!"

One *sine qua non* of repertory then would seem to be an acting company of accomplished players, directed by a *regisseur* with something approaching a knowledge of stagecraft, timing, movement on the stage. Well, what about the Group? To Le Gallienne earnestness, it added an acting company that was pretty nearly nonpareil; directorship that was frequently brilliant in the extreme; innovation in approach

and something close to genius. Out of the Group there emerged such sterling performers as Morris Carnovsky and Lee Cobb, Ruth Nelson and Phoebe Brand, Art Smith, Roman Bohnen, Elia Kazan, Franchot Tone, and John Garfield. Out of the Group there also emerged Clifford Odets, Mordecai Gorelik, Lee Strassberg and Harold Clurman, Sidney Kingsley, and many other figures of stage and script, of lesser talent. And if The Group had not been torn by contradictory impulses—toward a theater of the people, and toward a successful Broadway company—if The Group had not been licked by the problems of paying a permanent acting company and finding backers and producing worthwhile plays that would automatically succeed on Broadway, we might have had the makings of an American people's theater.

For the Federal Theater of the WPA, even when its productions were mediocre, conclusively proved that there existed an enormous audience which would throng to plays if it had the price of admission and was not required to support on a luxurious scale a company of actors, directors, and technicians. Federal Theater, had it not been sabotaged by certain congressional Tories, could even have spread so wide over the land and developed so many outlets for its products, that it would inevitably have raised its own standards of stagecraft, not to mention the salaries of its actors, directors, and designers. In its thousands of performances before millions of people—hundreds of thousands of whom had never seen an actor on the stage—it was the nearest thing to a national repertory theater we have ever had in America. And it was already in a fair way to supplying competent, intelligent, illuminating theater for the masses. It revealed the great fecundity of human talent, formerly concealed in unsuspected places, as well as the great appetite of our people for theater.

It may still appear to be true that for every single person who would pay sixty-five cents to see a good classical play, there are hundreds who would rather see a bad new moving picture—but it need not always be true. The moving pictures, great and independent medium of expression as they are, have given a new impetus to interest in the theater; just as the stage has contributed many vitalizing factors to the screen. And if the movies seem to have put the stage play in the shade, the greatest single factor lies in the difference between the price of theater and movie tickets.

To the trade unions of our country, to the New Theater League which is affiliated with and close to many of the trade unions, we must look for the next revival of the stage in

America. If the trade unions want theater—and they do—and if the New Theater League and its affiliates throughout the land display energy, foresight, and initiative, they can have it. Together the unions and the NTL and the thousands upon thousands of little theater groups throughout the United States can place actors on the many darkened stages of our forty-eight states. The level of competency in acting, in direction, and in stagecraft will grow in direct ratio to the organizational energy put forth by the multitudes of men, women, and children associated with the unions, who want the theater and are willing to go to bat for it.

ALVAH BESSIE.

Recent Movies

A Soviet musical and a documentary. . . .
"This Woman Is Mine."

FILMS about aspiring opera singers have a family likeness the world over; whether in Moscow or the Metropolitan, the whole point is to let the tenor throw his head back and gurgle forth the golden notes. For plot, amorous misunderstandings are bound to turn up. The Soviet film *Musical Story*, at New York's Stanley theater, is no exception. Working with a slight, even a sentimental story, however, it manages to introduce enough humanity and humor to give it distinction. The singing is magnificent, the comedy engaging. *Musical Story* begins with a taxi driver who has a fine tenor voice, and an aged musician who once had. Drawn together by their mutual love of music, they bring opera to the taxi drivers' union, even going so far as to kidnap the only available drummer from the union's jazz band. Meanwhile Petya, the young tenor, pursues his love affair with Klava, hampered by his own shyness and by the horrid machinations of a rival, a delectable little snipe with a mustache like you-know-who.

Eventually Petya's union pays for his musical education. At this point misunderstandings with Klava enter, and the film, for the first time, becomes a little tedious. Petya moons about backstage; Klava moons about in the rain outside. At last, on the heels of Petya's triumphant debut, they rush into each other's arms again, and no one is surprised—except Alfred, the snipe.

The tenor Lemeshev, in the leading role, is not only a fine singer; more surprisingly, he is a presentable young man with a fair talent for acting and without sticky glamour on his

eyelashes. Kononov plays the old musician with warmth and tenderness, Fedorova manages to make Klava sprightly, and no one will ever forget the snipe with the mustache. The essential thing about all these people is their lack of affectation, their lack of the inch-thick makeup and the waxed hair-do which Hollywood confuses with human beauty. No Veronica Lake could be prettier than Fedorova, but Fedorova does not attempt to be a perfectly groomed doll; she is content to be an office worker in a blouse and skirt. Consequently Soviet actresses manage to seem people you might meet any day on the street.

In addition, *Musical Story* lives up to its name. If you like opera, here it is, full measure.

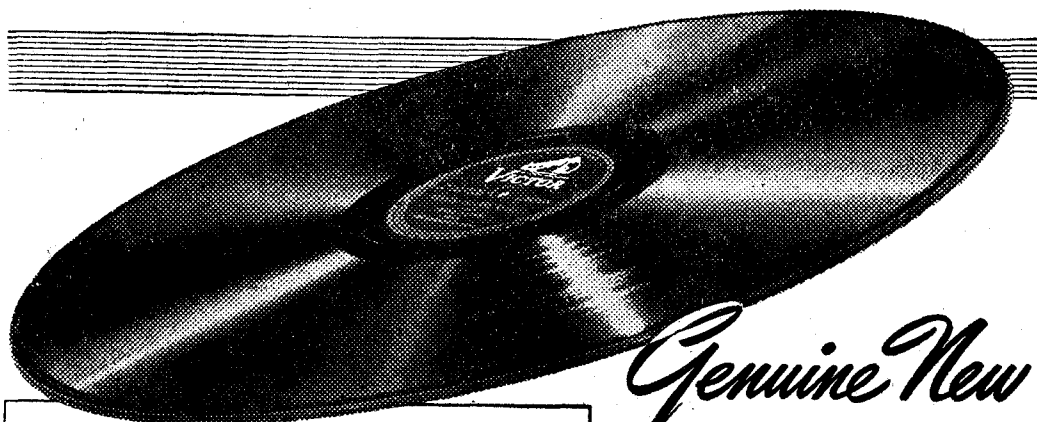
A SHARP CONTRAST to this lighter aspect of Soviet life is provided by the two short features also playing at the Stanley. An admirable documentary film dealing with the 1940 Agricultural Exposition in Moscow gives you a picture of the tremendous wealth of the Soviet, the wealth which has tempted Hitler; a film on the war shows you how the Soviet is defending it. The Agricultural Exposition is on the scale of the Soviet building at our own World's Fair. Its superb livestock, grain, fruit, and vegetables, its magnificent displays of farm machinery, its posters honoring outstanding Soviet agriculturists alternate in the film with actual shots of the farms from which all this had come; of the Russian people working in the fields. Five minutes later you see the Russian people fighting. The Nazi planes fall burning from the sky.

SUCH A FILM as *This Woman Is Mine* is difficult to review. It is better than its cheap and completely irrelevant title would indicate; reasonably well acted, fairly well photographed, written and directed with moderate intelligence, it provokes neither praise nor blame. It spreads abroad a pervasive mediocrity which chokes all enthusiasm and dampens all wit.

This is an adventure story of pioneer fur-trading days in Oregon. Many trusty old friends are reunited in its eventful history; the harsh sea captain, the Scotch fur traders, bagpipe, kilts, and all, the shy clerk of whom the wilderness makes a man, the beautiful girl smuggled on board dressed as a boy, the good Indian (i.e. the one who lets you cheat him) and the bad Indian (i.e. the one who objects with a tomahawk). All this has, in the past, often made a good story; perhaps too often. Your enjoyment of *This Woman Is Mine* might be more noticeable if you could rid yourself of the uneasy feeling that you've paid to see something which you've seen many times before.

One should, in a review, say something about the actors; but why bother? They're all right. Franchot Tone is pleasant, Carol Bruce is an agreeable young woman guaranteed not to wake you up, John Carroll (isn't it about time for the movies to think up some new first and last names?) achieves at least

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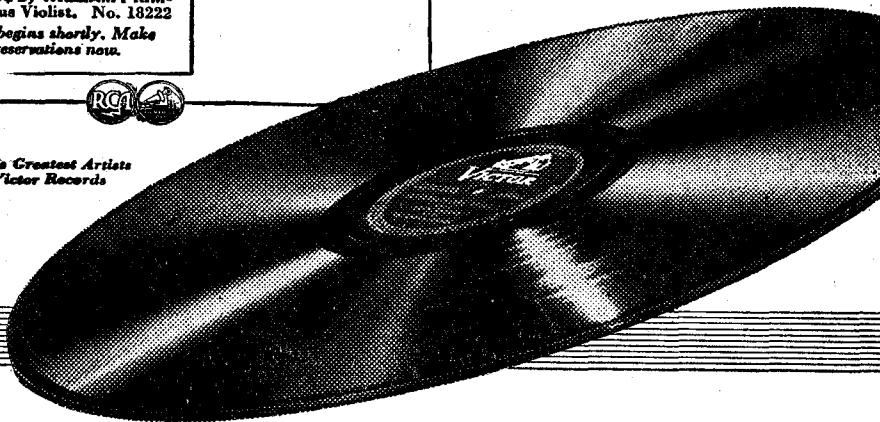


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