

FARCE AND VIOLENCE

"The More the Merrier," Broadway's latest comedy, would have been better with less rough-house nonsense. . . . A new Soviet film, "General Suvorov," reconstructs the story of a people's hero.

THE business of writing farce comedy is one of the most difficult in the theater. For the farce demands—if it is to be successful—not only a sound dramatic structure, but that super-addition of comic content that makes "being funny" one of the most arduous of occupations. What seems, on the stage, spontaneous crackling humor—of situation, of character, of manners, of satire, of dialogue—is most often the result of intensive and deliberate contrivance, of ingeniously calculated timing and the clever juxtaposition of character and situation. Where comedy depends mostly on character—in its broadest definition—farce relies largely on situations that are not only ingenious and ludicrous, but ostensibly logical.

Frank Gabrielson and Irvin Pincus started off with an idea in their farce comedy *The More the Merrier*. The comedy idea was the humor to be extracted from a pompous and ambitious Colorado millionaire, who has political aspirations. (The portrait bears more than one resemblance to W. . . . m R. . . . h H. . . . t; a humorous character, you will admit.) At the rise of the curtain he is going slightly mad because his press agent, who is managing his campaign, is undergoing an emergency operation. There are many pointed cracks about the relationship of wealthy parasites to the body politic, and you get set for the authors to say something of more than comic moment.

From this point on the comedy degenerates into a farce that never comes off. If it *had* come off, the word *degenerates* would have been ill-advised. But it doesn't. The authors' humorous and satirical inspiration flags, and they have recourse to all the old tricks we have seen in rough-house farce since the first imaginary curtain rang up in the theater at Epidaurus. A substitute press agent arrives; he is expecting his writer-ex-wife (with whom he is still in love), and her female collaborator. The female collaborator turns out to be a male with amorous designs on the lady (which she reciprocates). All three are broke. Problem: how to get to Denver to help manage the tycoon's campaign?

Well, there are moments of genuinely insane comedy, most of them supplied by variegated minor madmen and women: a tourist who swipes souvenirs, a respectable-looking old gent who likes to draw mustaches on faces; a querulous old maid who hopes to catch a man in her room; assorted mysterious thugs; a corpse on roller skates. Like the corpse, the farce falls on its face, and only picks itself up at odd intervals.

Distinct credit must go to the man who

plays the corpse: Jack Riano, an acrobat of no mean accomplishments. He executes a magnificent and terrifying backward dead-fall from a high balcony, that will live in the annals of the New York stage. Will Geer, in a minor part in the third act, is Will Geer without benefit of a character to get his teeth into. Keenan Wynn is a genuine comedian without benefit of his father's boring mannerisms. Teddy Hart is a clownish gangster who exploits his diminutive stature to no good purpose. Millard Mitchell has a funny face and a dry humor that is contagious. Miss Grace McDonald is a charming young girl from musical comedy, who walks like the dancer that she is. Doro Merande contributes her stylized old maid; she is very funny. Frank Albertson works hard, and these accomplished people momentarily succeed in getting the farce off its last legs. But only for a moment at a time.

WHERE *Arsenic and Old Lace*, under the hand of a devilishly clever writer, achieved real farce out of the impossible situations posed by two sweet-old-lady murderesses, *Cuckoos on the Hearth*, the concoction offered by Parker Fennelly, does its best to capitalize on *Arsenic and Old Lace*, and makes a ludicrous mess of it. Most amusing aspect of the play—which is farce comedy *cum* horror—is the bland admission in the program that it is liberally swiped from *Arsenic*, *Our Town*, *The Tavern*, *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, not to mention

The Seven Keys to Baldpate. There is a folksy commentator a la Frank Craven; a man made up to look and act like Alexander Woollcott; a lonely farmhouse on a howling winter night; an escaped homicidal maniac; unexpected guests. All of this is tied into a hero who is working on a secret poison gas; a bird-brained cousin whose life ambition is to do the hula; a house where the Hawaiian wife of an American sea captain died under mysterious circumstances.

Some of this is funny; but not too much. After two acts the commentator announces that what has gone before only happened in the mind of Alexander Wool—I mean, the writer, who is writing a murder mystery. The third act then is supposed to show you how truth can be stranger than fiction. By this time, however, you don't much care, for you have figured out the identity of the homicidal maniac by the simple, classic method of deciding that the most innocent-appearing character is undoubtedly the culprit. He is.

Here again is an excellent cast of players set to the impossible task of resuscitating a play that is dying on its feet. They should be applauded: especially Janet Fox for her hula-ing old maid; Percy Kilbride for his convincing maniac; Howard Freeman, whose imitation of Alex Woollcott has such verisimilitude as to sicken the beholder; George Matthews for his highly credible dumb gangster. But Mr. Pemberton, who produced this thing, should have shown greater discernment; or hired the original Mr. Joseph Kesselring. (He wrote *Arsenic and Old Lace*.)

ALVAH BESSIE.

Military Epic

Mosfilm presents the life of a great Russian general.

NEARLY 150 years ago a Russian general, Alexander Vasilevich Suvorov, wrote a book of maxims whose brilliant common sense is incorporated in the military strategy and command of his country today. Suvorov titled his book *The Science of Victory*, which was no boast. For his maxims were derived from experience and he never knew defeat. Acting on them, he directed a counter-offensive against that "invincible" of the eighteenth century, Napoleon Bonaparte, and drove the Conqueror of Europe out of Italy. He was the first Russian general to cross the Alps into Switzerland. Out of his career Mosfilm has made an immensely heroic and human screen epic, the timeliness of which need not be pointed out to anyone who



N. P. CHERKASOV as General Suvorov

HIT THE TOP at
the new
HOTEL
ALLABEN
LAKEWOOD
NEW JERSEY
501 Monmouth Ave.
TOPS IN FOOD—TOPS IN FACILITIES—TOPS IN
ACTIVITIES—TOPS IN ENTERTAINMENT
But NO TOPS in Rates—We're Very Moderate
Director: Jack Schwartz, formerly of Unity Hotel



The Woodlands

FOR THE SPIRITED:
Tennis — handball — swim-
ming — ping-pong — bad-
minton — archery — moun-
tain trails — croquet — cutl-
ery masterpieces — fishing
— boating.

FOR THE LAZYBONES:
Well-stocked library — Art
classes — crafts — dark room
— musical recordings — open
fireplaces — spectacular coun-
try.

Rates \$22.50-\$25 per week.
SIGGIE GOLDNER, PHOENICIA, NEW YORK

LOCUST GROVE FARM
SYLVAN LAKE, HOPEWELL JUNCTION, N. Y.
Enjoy real country at an artist's farm, dedicated to good
food, good fun, good fellowship. . . . All indoor and out-
door sports. Informal entertainment—barn dances—just
55 miles from N. Y. Limited accommodations.
Low Winter Rates
*George A. Podorson, 250 Park Ave., N. Y. C. PL 3-8928
or Locust Grove Farm, Hopewell Junction. Phone 42 F 31

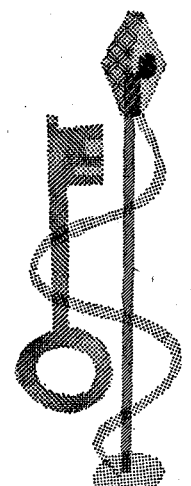
Enjoy the beautiful Indian Summer at

Camp Followers of the Trail

All sports facilities including tennis, handball, baseball,
ping pong, etc. Delicious food. Pleasant atmosphere.
Buchanan, N. Y. Tel. Peekskill 2879

TUNE IN EVERY THURSDAY AT 11 P.M.

JOSEPH STAROBIN
(Subbing for BRUCE MINTON)
broadcasts the
"KEY TO THE NEWS"



SET YOUR DIAL TO STATION WHOM
1480 KILOCYCLES
Get your friends to organize
"LISTENING PARTIES"

reads today's headlines. Nowhere in the film is the parallel stated or obtrusively implied, but it is so inherent in the very material of the script, the historical fact, that no one can miss it. *General Suvorov* is a movie to excite and hearten the millions who feel themselves allies in the present-day "magnificent resistance" to another, more monstrous Conqueror.

Suvorov was an *enfant terrible* among generals of his time. He rebelled against the customary military uniforms—frilly, braided, sashed, coat-tailed affairs that made battlefields resemble a fancy-dress ball and impeded freedom of motion. He despised as much the foppish coiffures, the powder-puff effects and pigtailed, the wigs that nested vermin. The sanctity of Military Regulations bored and irritated him. Above all things he hated the arrogance of the Imperial command toward rank and file soldiers, the attitude that these men were not men at all but creatures wielding guns, with just enough sense to hear and obey orders. Suvorov's heresies—and they were revolutionary—might have earned him exile if he had not had a shrewd empress, Catherine the Great, who relished the practical virtue of his ideas, particularly as they were expressed in the tremendous victories he won for her armies. She permitted him to effect some administrative reforms in the army and to abolish the worst of the fripperies.

The movie opens with a scene in Poland two years before Catherine's death. Suvorov's army has just captured an encampment from the enemy and, even while celebrating the victory, is planning to march on to nearby Warsaw. The great general, his coat off and his short locks blown by the breeze, addresses the troops collectively, then speaks individually to certain officers and soldiers, dressing one down for inefficiency, promoting another for heroism. In this scene the remarkable artistry of N. P. Cherkasov's acting is at once evident. What he does, actually, is to give a lesson in military tactics—but he projects such an impression of personality, of the human element in his thinking, that the whole scene is robbed of any flavor of a lecture and infused with the excitement of suspense. The arrival of an emissary with a message from another general gives Suvorov an opportunity for a finely sarcastic speech about Military Regulations which order a general to go *around* a forest instead of *through* it, thereby losing time and exposing his troops. Mobility, speed, suddenness: these are three major principles of the Suvorov strategy—the major principles of mechanized warfare today. And the fourth principle, the most important for Suvorov: "I do not *drive* my men into battle . . ." he tells the emissary. They follow him, and follow because they understand what he, and therefore they, are doing. This point, which is elaborated later in the scene that shows Suvorov dictating his famous maxims, is illustrated in the relationship between him and his soldiers. They follow him, yes—they look up to him as a leader. But the

enthusiastic love for him is buoyed by a collective pride and confidence; it is always "our" victories, or "we" who will conquer.

At Catherine's death the "Mad Emperor" Paul becomes czar and Suvorov's rivals get their innings. Back come the lace ruffles, the wigs and vermin, the pompous posturing and goosestepping. Paul's flatterers feed his vanity and thereby feed on it, getting their reward in military promotions and noble titles. They tell their emperor the terrible truth about the famous General Suvorov—that he writes derisive verse concerning Paul's military intelligence, and (incredible!) promotes men from the ranks. Commanded to end his insubordination, Suvorov retires to the country with his loyal veterans and remains there until one day the emperor summons him to the palace to make a request. Napoleon is swaggering through Europe, advancing toward Russia. Will General Suvorov lend the glory of his military reputation to the struggle against France by taking command of the army? Yes, says the general, if he can command in his own way, treat his soldiers as persons and not as the "mechanism" (the emperor's own word) that the army has become. This the emperor refuses to allow and Suvorov rejects the command—a piece of insolence for which Paul virtually exiles him. He is finally brought back, at the insistence of Russia's English and Austrian allies, to lead the troops against Napoleon in Italy.

AND he leads them to victory—through fearful exploits up the Alps at night; against spies and defeatists in his own War Council; despite blunders by the Austrian command which leave him stranded on the Alps, surrounded by the French, his army of veteran "old men" worn out and starving. Even when he has managed to get his men down a terrific precipice to the dreaded Death Bridge, he nearly loses the battle, for the French blow up the bridge. It is then, for the first time, that Suvorov finds a use for the fancy czarist uniforms—he commands the officers to take off their sashes and lash together the logs of a demolished hut to make another bridge. The soldiers cross in triumph.

There's the story, but it's only half the film. The other half is in the actual scenes of combat, between individuals as well as armies, in the personal characterizations, and most of all N. P. Cherkasov's portrayal of General Suvorov. This Cherkasov is surely one of the finest actors on the screen today. In fact the only other with which I can think to compare him is a Soviet actor by a nearly similar name, the famous Nikolai Cherkassov of *Baltic Deputy*, *Peter I*, and *Alexander Nevsky*. The role which Cherkasov has in *General Suvorov* is a test even for exceptional actors. Military heroes are old stuff in drama and literature; a slip in the direction of bluntness, sentimentality, stern-profile heroics, or lovable cussedness could have turned the movie into a stereotype. Of course, Cherkasov had the great advantage