

Behind the Scenes

The Show Shop, in four acts, by James Forbes. Presented at the Hudson Theatre, New York.

ON the program "The Show Shop" is airily described as "something about the stage." Out of kindness to those who are likely to suffer distress at this artful concealment, it may at once be admitted that there is no deep or unscrupulous reason for it. A comedy interpreted in a manner generously broad, or a farce full of honest comedic material, "The Show Shop" is of a species familiar in the American theatre. And of its species it is a thriving example. The only real mystery about "The Show Shop" is the theatrical mystery it rudely unveils.

In the Dark Ages—the dreary period when we were children and parental conversation suddenly ceased on our entry into the room—the world was full of hierarchical characters who surrounded their performances with mystery. Struggling over pothooks and hangers, we regarded with fearsome reverence the godlike being—usually a grocery clerk—who could write reams without a guiding hand. Our nose on a level with the prescription desk, we saw the mysterious "black draught" compounded from a cabalistic order, and we gazed with wonder on the swift hands that wrapt up the bottle and the lightning fingers that sealed the package with wax. Cured as we were by the little glass instrument that worked equally well in our mouths or under our arms, we knew nothing of its mighty significance. We moved in a humble world overcome by the transcendence of our elders—deities who walked on tight-ropes, who rode horseback, who swam in water, who put the brakes on the train, who caught fish with a string, who were pleased to lather and scrape their rough faces, who "did up" their hair, who could tell the direction of the wind, who "knew the clock."

We who pretended to know the clock long before we understood its real meaning, were utterly aware that we belonged to a different order of creation from the expert masterly order that smoked tobacco, kept us silent when it read its unintelligible Journals of Opinion, and, without any evidence of mortal ailment, had "breakfast in bed." It was in those Dark Ages, the Ages of bullied apprenticeship and formidable authority, that we built up the respect for Constitutional adherents, Federal judges, physicians, jugglers, fortune-tellers, aristocrats, fashionable hostesses, doormen, night clerks, priests, eugenic experts, dog-trainers, professors, undertakers, members of the Masonic Order, Knights of Pythias, Oddfellows, members of the Century Club, cubists, futurists, admirers of Schönberg, disciples of Freud, early patrons of the taxicab, and all the other classes that, by virtue of superior faculty, have had an initiation denied to our pedestrian selves.

But it is typical of the impertinent, intrusive, irreverent modern mind that, as soon as it gets a little knowledge, it proceeds to divest everything in sight of all that made obsequiousness possible. And the worst of it is the craven eagerness with which members of a given craft or mystery encourage this rationalistic spirit. Instead of keeping up the tradition of special endowment and inborn grace, they expose to the public the methods by which they arrive at a desired illusion. They actually expose the machinery. They exhibit the hand that pulls the leg.

It is to satisfy this sophistication that "The Show Shop" was written. But the curious thing about Mr. James

ness, he practically says, this show business, and the people in it are no gods but human. To them it is work and you, the public, are being worked, but because it is human it is necessarily and thrillingly emotional. Like your own work, it has one aspect outside—the aspect of professional certitude, of artistic intention, of conventional decorum. But to the persons engaged in it it has another aspect altogether. It is their way of fulfilling ambition, of making a living, of satisfying their claims on life. Seen from in front, the play is a smooth unified surface, each part fitting next to each. Seen from behind, the surface is betrayed as nothing but the alignment of a number of diverse, rebellious, independent beams. There is a romance in the result to the spectator? Yes, but to the analyst another romance. How were beam ends aligned to produce the illusion of a surface? By what carpentry was this design conveyed? It is this inquiry, the inquiry of persons as much interested in the cause as in the effect, that impelled Mr. Forbes to dramatize the processes of "The Show Shop," regardless of the old reverential policy of keeping the mechanism of surfaces concealed.

What makes "The Show Shop" such excellent entertainment, however, is not its divulgence of theatrical method. It is the amusing and penetrating characterization of each of the persons connected with the show. The novelty "behind" is only the bait with which Mr. Forbes allures his audience. Once they swallow the bait, he holds them by exhibiting the genuine human nature of those whose business it is to play on human nature in front.

In satirizing Mrs. Dean, the resolute mother determined to put her daughter on Broadway, Mr. Forbes has developed a type of general, as against accidental, interest. Appreciated as she is by the initiated, she is also appreciable by the outsider. It is true that Miss Zelda Sears rather forces the note. The characterization is farcical. But, so plausible are her difficulties and so grim her resolution, the audience is kept constantly intrigued and delighted. The same amusement is procured by Mr. Douglas Fairbanks as Jerry Belden, a wealthy young American. He has staked "A Drop of Poison" for its Broadway production in the hope that, when it ignominiously fails, Mrs. Dean will despair of her daughter Bettina's future, and allow her to marry him. Since no one but himself and the manager knows the expected fate of the play, there is literally screaming humor in the dress rehearsal where Belden, as the star, acts like a wooden man. In his character as the lively commonplace youth Mr. Fairbanks gives one of those performances which are a triumph of American acting, while Mr. George Sidney is excellent as the rotund, money-minded manager. As Bettina, the promoted daughter, Miss Patricia Collinge is pretty, but decidedly too conventional. She spares us the twinkling run of the ingenue, but she is content to be vocally "cute."

The unexpected success of the imaginary play gives a chance for an amusing contrast between its anguished dress rehearsal and its exciting first performance; and also for an adroit last act. But ingenious though this is, it is the rich humor, the abounding sympathy, the pleasant satire and the perfect idiom of "The Show Shop" that make it so agreeable to hear and see. It is not because someone says, "Why worry, when you can be buried for \$25?" that "The Show Shop" seems humorous. It is because the characters that say these things are really imagined; because Mr. Forbes, in lightly taking away the front from the stage, has exposed the warm humanity

Books and Things

HOW does one set about writing the history of a literature? One way is to take any language you know and read its literature chronologically. Through absorbed eager hours, critically detached hours, hours of boredom, you accomplish your hellish purpose. But for your will to write you often wouldn't read, and yet you keep at it, your purpose growing. Excitedly you write of two authors between whom you have discovered hidden correspondencies. But for this discovery you would have had little to say of either. As you proceed you acquire momentum. Johnson's "Irene" does not stop you, nor "The Curse of Kehama." Before you have mastered your material you have learned to read, not without interest, anything out of which copy can be made. That is one way of preparing yourself to write the history of a literature. The other way is to have read the whole of it before the idea of writing its history entered your head. Neither way is ever followed. Literary historians have always read a good deal of their subject, and have never read it all, before resolving to write. Of Mr. Maurice Baring, whose "Outline of Russian Literature," published in the Home University Library by Messrs. Henry Holt & Company, I am about to read, it is safe to guess that his book will sound as if most of his reading had been done to amuse himself. Before beginning it, however, let me see what deposit a little reading of Russian authors has left in my head.

It was Russia leather, I believe, which taught me that such a country as Russia existed. To other leather it bore the same relation that guava jelly did to jellies of commoner sort. Then came stories of Siberia and of the steppes, and the story of the man who was pursued by a pack of wolves as he drove his sledge, and who saved himself by tossing his children, one after another, to the wolves. A large Russian match-box, picturing men and women in long clothes of splendor, arrived one day, and thenceforth sat on our library table and glowed. Out of such odds and ends Russia made itself inside my head—a Russia of far horizons you drove toward, endlessly, across yellow plains that were not quite flat; of bright lacquer-like peasants, bending to their tasks in forests and shadowed spots in villages; of winter days as cold as the ice-brook, when you reached the forest at nightfall, and heard howling all about you, and saw the hungry pack as you crossed open spaces of hard moonlight. The next morning you would be off again on your sledge, the forest left behind now, and drive all day toward the Volga, and all the next day and the next over creaking snow, days when there were no low winds, for a wonder, and the clouds, high up, seemed to go of themselves. Terrible to me, a little later, were the images made by such words as anarchist, nihilist, exile, the knout. I never quite believed the things they stood for existed in the older Russia. I seemed always to have known.

Since those early days the Russia inside my head has changed several times, but it is always the work of chance. The lean wolves are not less lean, but they have withdrawn from the center of the picture, and young children are no longer their staple food. Russians exist whose days are not all passed in sledges or exile, who have other occupations than bomb-throwing or sternest repression of revolt. For a while I saw them as men who dreamed their lives away, who hoped and felt and couldn't make

the earth all night by the open fire, making believe he was asleep, listening while the boys talked, listening to old superstitions refreshed by youngest believers. From time to time he heard the feet of the horses the boys were keeping in that vast meadow. Or he smelled the earth at daybreak, smelled the seasons, heard at the end of winter the sound of waters released on a night of sudden Russian spring—springs as sudden and beautiful as the decisions made by Russian women in love. Women to whom love says, "Who chooses me must give and hazard all he hath," and who do not hesitate. Men who feel deeply, whose indecision leads them to act like tepid souls, and who are not tepid, who always remember, in bitterness, impotently.

A little later Russia began to change fast. It contained more kinds of men and women than I had been able to see in my real world, more kinds than any novelist I knew had seen in his. They were seen more directly. The same unobstructed gaze was turned toward their appearance, their gestures, their sensations of heat and cold, their shyest motives, their illusions, their most experienced thought. You felt the confusion of crowds, of battles, as you feel things here and now. Love's birth and growth and decline were laid bare with a clearness that was not unreal. The greatest novelist in the world, you would have said, if only his seekers after truth had not found what they sought. He made all other novelists, even the other Russian, sound arranged. Next came strangest of all, the master of hallucination, in comparison with whose intensity your own life seems unrealized, un-lived. His fevered, tortured, life-twisted creatures, upon whom their creator spends his incomparable treasure of pity and love, obsess you as you were never obsessed by yourself. When you emerge again into your own world you are aware, for awhile, that its sounds come muffled, that you touch it with numb fingers.

After writing this I realize that a grown man, exposed in childhood and youth to our educational system, should have a less scrappy and less deformed notion of Russian literature. I also realize too late that I have given myself away. "No equally enlightening history of Russian literature exists in anything like the same space in English." "One of the most readable and first-hand volumes in a readable and first-hand series." Sentences like these form themselves now, when I have just read Mr. Baring's book. Only by an effort of reflection do I perceive that I have no right to such opinions. Somewhere on this continent, however, there must be readers whose acquaintance with Russian literature is about as extensive as mine. For their benefit I may say that Mr. Baring will give them a keen desire to better this acquaintance. He has many enthusiasms. He makes his subject interesting. His superlatives do not destroy your confidence in his guiding. He will take you where you want to go. He hasn't, I should guess, that special knack which we magnify by calling it "the critical faculty." But he convinces me that of the great Russians I know by name only, or have never heard of, there are many whose books I should like to begin reading to-day. He enables me to distinguish among his enthusiasms, to feel confident that I should like Krylov and Serge Aksakov, and that Lermontov would always be on my blind side. When another edition of Mr. Baring's book is published, why shouldn't he include a bibliography? This would be useful to readers who know no Russian, and who would like to be told of the better translations