

UNMUSICAL NON-COMEDY

BY WILLIAM LYON PHELPS

THERE are seventy-five theatres in New York, more than in any other city in the world. In the height of the season, say in February or March, fifteen or twenty of these will be devoted to musical comedy. This modern form of entertainment is about twenty-five years old; the beginning of its vogue coincided with the decline of comic opera and with the rise of the cinema. In March, 1900, there were in New York three "musical shows"; in March, 1901, two; in January, 1902, four; in March, 1903, eleven. The World War, which stimulated so many evil tendencies, increased the popularity of musical comedy. It was generally believed that the soldiers and others engaged in war thought and work needed, as a reaction and refuge, some form of bedizened inanity; and yet, at a magnificent performance of the Ninth Symphony in New York in 1918, I was pleased to see a large number of soldiers in the audience.

The name "musical comedy" is singularly inappropriate; for though there is a vast amount of noise, there is little genuine music; and though there is plenty of buffoonery, there is usually no comedy. It is some years since I have had the misfortune to attend one of these entertainments, and I hope never to go again; but those that I did see were all alike. A squad of girls came forward, and advanced to the right, and after that to the left; this manœuvre was varied by sometimes advancing to the left, and then to the right. A male comedian indulged in horse-play and told jokes and stories that had paresis in the time of Rameses.

The house was invariably crowded; I never saw a musical comedy played to a small audience. Many people not only now pay the regular price of \$5.50 for a seat, but a large additional sum to secure it, and if it is a first night, fabulous prices are demanded. As it was intolerable for me either to watch or listen to the people on the stage, I turned my attention to the audience, as one does

whenever a freshly-caught mermaid is exhibited. Some of the more juvenile folks appeared to enjoy the performance unrestrainedly; but in general I could not see that there was much spontaneous laughter or sincere delight. If they had not known that it was "the thing" to go, and that they were therefore in the swim, I really believe many of them would have given indications of boredom.

There are of course in every large city a vast number of idiots who are not yet dangerous; at all events, comparatively harmless, so that there is no reason for their not being at large. It is necessary, however, that they should be amused, entertained, diverted; and musical comedy seems almost providentially adapted to fit their necessities.

I learn from the drama criticisms in the New York newspapers that during more recent years many of these musical comedies have almost exclusively an anatomical interest; so that there must be in every audience a considerable number of Peeping Toms. If, instead of being arrested, they can peep legally at \$5.50 a peep, they would be foolish to neglect so golden an opportunity.

No one has given a better description of musical comedy in England than Arnold Bennett. In his novel, *The Roll-Call*, a man of average ability attends one of these shows with a party of young people:

As for the music, George listened in vain for an original tune, even for a tune of which he could not foretell the end from the beginning . . . the same trio of delicious wantons fondled and kissed the same red-nosed comedian, who was still in the same state of inebriety, and the gay spark flitted roysteringly through the same evolutions, in pursuit of the same simple ideals. The jocularity pivoted unendingly on the same twin centres of alcohol and concupiscence. Gradually the latter grew to more and more importance, and the piece became a high and candid homage to the impulse by force of which alone one generation succeeds another. . . .

And if no beautiful and graceful young girl blenched on the stage, neither did the beautiful and graceful young girls in the audience blench. You could see them sitting happily with their fathers and mothers and cousins and uncles and aunts savouring the spectacle from dim stalls and boxes in the most perfect respectability. . . .

George was uneasy; he was distressed. The extraordinary juxtaposition of respectability and a ribald sexual display startled but did not distress him. . . . What distressed him, what utterly desolated him, was the grossness, the

poorness, the cheapness, the dulness, and the uninventive monotony of the interminable entertainment. He yawned, he could not help yawning; he yawned his soul away.

If we judge of the intellectual level of Athenian society in the fourth century before Christ by their enthusiasm for the plays of Sophocles and Euripides, what shall we say of London and New York in the twentieth century, when we know that of all theatrical pieces, musical shows are the most profitable and the most appealing? I heard Granville Barker say in a public lecture that the modern young girl in London and in New York unconsciously took the appearance and manners of the feminine stars of musical comedy as her model, and did her best to walk and talk in a similar fashion.

Such a remark may be a gross exaggeration; there are plenty of sensible young girls. But it is impossible that thousands of people should be exposed to the germs of inanity and vulgarity night after night, without suffering some deterioration.

The best way to cure a rage for musical shows is to supply something better; and fortunately New York theatres provide many excellent comedies and dramas, classic and contemporary. Furthermore, the success of the Theatre Guild and of Eva Le Gallienne's Repertory Theatre, both of which institutions appeal to human intelligence, indicates that there are more than seven thousand that have not bowed to the knee to Baal. Another vastly encouraging sign is the return of Comic Opera, which is as different from musical comedy as a nightingale differs from an upstart crow. How well I remember the delight with which we used to listen to *Erminie*, *Robin Hood*, *The Serenade*, and the dismay with which I saw them vanish with nothing to take their place. What depression, to look at an inane burlesque on that same stage—bare, ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang!

That admirable theatre director, Winthrop Ames, has proved not only that Gilbert and Sullivan have lost none of their melody and charm, but that there are thousands of people who agree with him. The immense success of *Iolanthe* and of *The Pirates of Penzance*, presented with absolute adequacy, has emboldened Mr. Ames to go ahead with the Gilbert and Sullivan cycle. The sparkling music and shining wit of these comic operas are as fresh

as on their natal day, and what a contrast to the repetitious, shop-worn vulgarities of musical comedy! And what a pleasure to sit in such an audience; one feels as if one were with intimate friends.

Nobody wants to be bored in the theatre; if a play is dull, that is the unpardonable sin. No matter how serious the theme of a drama, it must be interesting. But people differ very much in what they find tiresome. Coming out from a performance of Galsworthy's *Justice*, where John Barrymore took the leading part, a lady asked me if I did not find it depressing. On the contrary, I found it inspiring, exhilarating, enormously stimulating. Great drama, like great music, refreshes, restores, and increases one's vitality. But the last time, years ago, that I attended a musical comedy, I went away in a lethargy of depression. I felt as if a misfortune had happened to me, and I was right; it had.

REVOLT

BY R. L. MÉGROZ

There have been poets who for Love have died,
Whose hearts were gradually worn away
With bitterness more keen than words could say,
Yet unto Her who would their words deride
They ever strove to sing it—laughed and sighed
In verse that grew to beautiful bloom, to lay
Fresh chaplets on crowned brows of one whose "Nay"
Lashed coldly their Love-bleeding hearts that cried.

I am not one of these, though Love indeed
At thy feet worshipped has been bitterness.
I shall not die while tasks my strength await
In Love-filled Life pregnant with ungrown seed:
Refuse they queenship—even happiness
I shall regain, nor leave thee even hate.