

DRAMA:

Veteran performers please
Seasoned playwrights disappoint

MR. WILLIAM SAROYAN'S *My Heart's in the Highlands* has created something of a stir among the newspaper critics, driving a few of them into hysterics of joy and others into a state of pleasant bewilderment. All seem to agree that they can't make sense out of it, and all apparently note significance of a sort in it. The general public, however, showed little interest in this commotion, keeping away from Mr. Saroyan's reputed jewel by the hundreds of thousands.

Once again, as heretofore on several occasions, the present reviewer must agree with the general public. *My Heart's in the Highlands* contains no mysteries of meaning. It makes sense from beginning to end, but unfortunately that sense reminds one of the mouthings of a very bright pupil in a progressive school. The story concerns a third-rate poet who suffers hardship and eventual eviction from his home, and whose lot takes on a certain glow in his own eyes by his first-hand knowledge that another third-rate artist, an actor, has gone through the same experiences.

This banal tale, told in language devoid of eloquence and constructed so loosely that it creaks all the way through, managed to keep the audience in their seats for two reasons: first, it ran only a little more than an hour, and, second, one could not help being impressed by Mr. Robert Lewis's extraordinary direction and Mr. Paul Bowles's expert musical accompaniment. Without this direction and music, *My Heart's in the Highlands* would have stood out at once and to all for what it is: a meander-

ing piece of effervescent adolescence. Boiled down to five minutes of playing time, with a hurdy-gurdy going every second, it might have made a tolerable tear-jerker on a vaudeville stage, but on the stage of the Theatre Guild it made an embarrassing sight.

PHILIP BARRY'S SECOND VENTURE this season, *The Philadelphia Story*, brought back to the New York theatre Katherine Hepburn, and to the people at large the realization that Mr. Barry probably can write only one kind of play, a slicky. Little more than a revision of his *Holiday*, his present tale deals with a brittle daughter of the Philadelphia rich, who divorces her first "understanding" husband, plans to marry a second, and ends by remarrying the first for reasons which only her Chanel No. 5 mind can make out. The dialogue has to be described as a sort of intellectual ping-pong — swift and boring. Not one character comes to life on the stage, and not one truly fresh conceit leaps across the footlights. People move about and things happen as if they were persons and situations in a comic strip printed on imported Japanese paper.

Miss Hepburn, who still has far to go before she can be considered an imaginative actress of size, plays the frigid, brittle little girl to the hilt — effortlessly and without offense. She has played the part before. In fact, it is the only part she has ever played with any ability. Audiences obviously appreciate her. If her torso were not so streamlined and her voice a bit more natural, they would probably appreciate her less.

A SLIGHTLY BETTER PLAY and an enormously better actress graced the Empire Theatre, where Ethel Waters performed in *Mamba's Daughters*, by Dorothy and DuBose

Heyward, a dramatization of the novel of the same title by Mr. Heyward. The story, as everybody knows by now, concerns Hagar, the large Negro woman of vast physical powers and free morals, who must leave town because of her "attack" upon a white man, and who in the end kills another white man in order to save her daughter from humiliation, her daughter, in the meanwhile, having achieved a radio career. Mr. McClintic has directed it skilfully; Jerome Kern has contributed a very moving song, "Lonesome Walls," from a lyric by Mr. Heyward; and Fredi Washington, Anne Brown, Georgette Harvey, and J. Rosamond Johnson give fine performances.

The script suffers from a looseness of construction and a commonplaceness of ideas, so that in the end the people and the situations don't add up. Undoubtedly what saved the play from flopping was Miss Waters' performance of Hagar, who commits murder and dies a suicide for her child's sake. It was one of the glories of the current season, and put Miss Waters in the front rank of actresses in the United States. One hopes that she will add magnificence to the American theatre for many years to come.

THE PLAYWRIGHTS' COMPANY's last presentation this season, *No Time for Comedy*, by S. N. Behrman, contributes very little to the artistic record of the organization, or to Mr. Behrman's stature in the theatre. He still has to learn that chit-chat regarding petty adulteries among the rich does not make a play, and that even stubborn love loses interest unless at least one of the parties involved merits attention as a personality. All his characters in the present play belong to the pismire class, and nothing Mr. Behrman has them do raises them above it. His dialogue, though suave, as the saying goes,

rapidly begins to sound like wood-pecking, so monotonous and unilluminating is it, while his occasional excursions into politics and economics — he apparently has come to the conclusion that fancy New York people, including playwrights, also read the newspapers — seem to stem from the auditorium of the Ethical Culture Society.

Mr. Behrman's fable can be described simply: a second-rate playwright, losing his grip, seeks for inspiration in the gabble and embraces of another man's wife, while the man proposes marriage to the playwright's wife. The latter refuses to surrender her man, and gives the other woman so severe a verbal trouncing that both she and the errant husband are ashamed, and he goes back to his lawful spouse — after she gives him the story of a play which excites him, the story being the playwright's own recent emotional experiences. The drugstorishness of this fable could be made to disappear with ponderable dramatic art, which Mr. Behrman unfortunately does not display. Even the highly able performances of Katharine Cornell, Laurence Olivier, and Margalo Gillmore cannot save it from being a piece of merchandise on sale at the novelty counter.

IRWIN SHAW SUBTITLED his third effort on Broadway, *The Gentle People*, "A Brooklyn fable." A more accurate subtitle would have been "a proletarian pulp story," for most of the elements of such a story can be found in it: the carefree, poor, fun-loving and good-natured father, who dislikes capitalists and racketeers; the hard-working, nagging mother; the glamorous daughter who simply must have her excitement, and who, of course, finds it in the wrong place — in the arms of a racketeer, who exacts tribute from her father, but whom she loves just the same;

and finally, the simple, hard-working young man, who has always loved the basically decent daughter and who waits for her when the racketeer is killed by her father and a fishing friend of his.

The Group Theatre, under the very able direction of Harold Clurman, did all in its power to rescue this stuff, and Sam Jaffe as the father and Sylvia Sidney as the daughter did their shares remarkably well, but they were unable to stifle the bad artistic odor that pervaded the entire script. Boris Aronson's settings deserve special commendation. If only the play had been worthy of them!

THE BEST MUSICAL SHOW in town, *Leave It to Me*, one hopes, will delight New Yorkers for many months to come. With the book by Bella and Samuel Spewack and the music and lyrics by Cole Porter, it constitutes an evening of excellent entertainment, compounded of sharp satire, pointed buffoonery, and tuneful, mature melodies. It relates the exploits of a pompous foreign correspondent, who takes it upon himself to make a somewhat vague American ambassador to Moscow *persona non grata*, but whatever he tells the latter to do places him in higher favor not only in the Russian capital but also with the State Department. In the end the ambassador does manage to get himself out of his job, returns home to Kansas, and there offers the foreign correspondent a job. Victor Moore as the ambassador would alone make the show worthy of long remembrance, for he plays the part in a sort of pre-natal haze that makes his mere appearance upon the stage a joy. He is ably assisted by William Gaxton as the foreign correspondent and Sophie Tucker as Mrs. Ambassador.

At least four of Mr. Porter's numbers deserve special mention: "Get Out of Town," "Most Gentlemen Don't

Like Love," "I Want to Go Home," and "My Heart Belongs to Daddy." Perhaps the best of them is "I Want to Go Home." As sung by Mr. Moore, it digs several miles into the soul of America, particularly the Middle West.

COMPARED TO THE SPEWACK-PORTER show, Nancy Hamilton's *One for the Money*, a musical revue, seems like a Junior League precocity. More lipstick than playwrighting talent went into its composition, so that when it should be pointed it is irritating, and when it should be light it tends to be girlishly hysterical. The sharpest, and also the unfairest, sketch in the show is "My Day," a take-off on Mrs. Roosevelt and her column. Miss Nancy Hamilton, the omnibus genius who wrote all the sketches and lyrics (with the music by Morgan Lewis) and also acts, plays the part of Mrs. Roosevelt with a venom that would be more effective if it had greater relationship to the truth.

OF *I Must Love Someone*, by Jack Kirkland and Leyla Georgie, little more need be said than that it is up to Mr. Kirkland's usual standard: cheap, hollow, and amateurish. It deals with stage life in the old "Police Gazette" manner. Nancy Carroll, James Rennie, Harry Bannister, and the rest of the cast have obviously caught the spirit of the thing, and one hopes their performances make Mr. Kirkland and his collaborator happy.

LENORE COFFEE AND WILLIAM JOYCE COWEN have presented Broadway this season with a story of the family of Jesus, starring Judith Anderson as His mother, that might better have graced the pages of the "Woman's Home Companion," for their *Family Portrait* has as much to do

with historical fact or legend as the fictional characters in the aforementioned journal have to do with reality. Jesus does not appear on the stage, but the personality attributed to Him resembles that of an obedient Sunday-school boy, sweet, soft, and soapy. Insofar as we know anything about Him, He was the opposite: realistic, hard to the point of stubbornness and even extreme intolerance, and possessed of a gentleness that only omnipotence can afford. This the authors miss, and what they do say they manage to say in humdrum prose reminiscent of Christmas editorials in the daily press.

Margaret Webster's direction is rather heavy-handed, and her own performance of Mary of Magdala leaves very much to be desired. Miss Anderson plays the part of a mother very well, but whether she plays the part of Jesus's mother well is open to doubt. To at least one observer her performance seemed as implausible as the entire play.

MR. PAUL VINCENT CARROLL obviously can fashion a good play, as *The White Steed* abundantly showed. He wastes no characters, and he seldom indulges in aimless verbosity, but his work somehow lacks magic. He wants the touch of, say, O'Casey, who manages to turn nearly everything to something warm and at the same time far-away and mysterious.

The White Steed is a realistic play of a busybody priest, who has not yet learned the meaning of Christian charity, which an elder canon tries to teach him — and in the end succeeds, thereby also bringing together two lovers whom the meddler's doings had kept apart. It flowed along smoothly, enormously aided by the superb performances of Barry Fitzgerald as the canon, George Coulouris as the priest, and Jessica Tandy as the girl whose life he almost

ruins. It says the right things about good and evil, charity and decency. But somehow it doesn't stir, it leaves no overtones. The reason for this cannot be found in the realistic nature of the play, for O'Casey instilled plenty of magic in an even more realistic play, *The Plough and the Stars*. The reason probably has to be sought in Mr. Carroll. Either he holds converse with fewer angels than his fellow countryman, or his angels speak a more practical language.

A BELATED WORD about another play by two of His Majesty's subjects, *Oscar Wilde*, by Leslie and Sewell Stokes. A monologue rather than a play, it presented to the American public an actor in the person of Robert Morley, who will probably never be forgotten by those who witnessed his performance of the unhappy Englishman. With gesture and with grimace, with the quiver of his lower lip and the raising of a finger, Mr. Morley threw across the footlights a character that for sheer artistry has probably never been surpassed here.

THE REVIVAL OF MR. ODETS' *Awake and Sing* reminded the theatre-going public that, for all its faults, it is the best full-length play he has written so far. The third act still seems wrong, and so does much of the second, but to a large extent the play is honest and eloquent.

Outward Bound, by Sutton Vane, as presented in revival by the Playhouse Company, continues to have a strange, powerful appeal. It, too, begins to wobble in Act Two, and pretty nearly collapses in Act Three, but the basic idea of the play is so original and so imaginatively treated that it covers up many of its deficiencies. Laurette Taylor's performance of Mrs. Midgit was magnificent.

CHARLES ANGOFF

ART:

Four Centuries of Nudes — Eccentric Contemporaries

THE EXHIBITIONS ON VIEW for the past several weeks have been more than usually illuminating of the organic relationship between painting and social and moral trends; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, particularly of the contemporary shows, the relationship between painting and society's various states of mind.

At Knoedler's, for example, we are permitted to study the development of the nude from Pollaiuolo (1429–1498) to present-day Picasso. At the Durand-Ruel where the Renoir portraits are exhibited, we observe the phenomenon of a great creative intelligence confronted for the first time (with the invention of the daguerreotype camera) by an ascendant non-intelligence. At Julien Levy's and at the newly-opened Associated Artists Gallery, in both the Thomas Benton and Dali shows, we come upon the artist recovering from the intrusion of the mechanical monster — its functional challenge, and the entire series of literal commodity evaluations of life which followed upon the newly industrialized society from which the "interpreter," highly spiritualized as he deemed himself, was a refugee. Here is the attempt to affirm once more "natural" imaginative values. We find both men shifting experimentation from form to content, resorting to an intensely subjectivized idiom in an effort to humanize their medium (itself become, since Renoir, a machine for escape), failing because of a kind of esthetic provincialism, the Spaniard employing an unintelligible Freudian patois, the Mid-Westerner applying his oils in Missouri dialect.