

St. John Ervine's Farewell

MR. SALPETER: After having lived for seven months in the city of New York how do you regard it, in relation to the rest of the country?

MR. ERVINE: New York is not a composed city. Its population is made up of disconnected groups which seldom mingle. Israel Zangwill wrote a play called "The Melting Pot" in which he described America as a crucible in which all the races of Europe are to be dissolved and, when purified, reassembled in a single and better race, the American people. I doubt if that is happening and I fear that it may never happen. America may one day break up into several nations.

I suspect that New York is more representative of America than people outside it will admit. It probably influences the manners and behavior of the United States to a great extent, just as London and Paris influence the manners and behavior of the English and French provinces. The restlessness of New York is reflected in other places fairly faithfully, and a notable characteristic of the American people is their extraordinary impatience. They are good starters, but bad stayers: they don't finish well. They want immediate decisions and results. Many American marriages end in the divorce court a year or two after they have been celebrated because the couples have not got the patience and staying power that would enable them to endure the difficulties and troubles that come after the romantic period ends.

An Englishman said to me the other day, "Have you noticed the number of young widows there are in America, widows of fifty and fewer years?" I replied, "Yes!" and he went on to say that their husbands had worked themselves to death. He was not flattering to the American woman. He accused her of enslaving her husband, but I told him that I thought he was mistaken about the widows. The real explanation, surely, is that many young women in America marry men considerably older than themselves. They are too cowardly to undertake the adventure of life with a man of their own age, unless he is wealthy. They demand security,

An Interview with HARRY SALPETER

The winter theatrical season in New York City was considerably enlivened this year by the feuds inspired by the writings of St. John Ervine, guest dramatic critic of the "World." On the eve of his return to England, Mr. Ervine granted an interview to Harry Salpeter wherein he expressed himself with slight, if any reservation, on many things American—including American life, American men and women, the theatre, intellectuals, culture, Lucy Stoners, the Marx Brothers, Ben Hecht and Heywood Brown

and seek for husbands whose careers are made. I often see young women whose husbands are at least twenty years older than they are. When they reach the age of fifty, their husbands, in the course of nature, have snuffed it.

Do you regard New York's emphasis on the prohibition question as infantile?

I have heard about Prohibition. Where is it practiced? I have been offered liquor in every house in which I have been in America, and I have seen liquor openly demanded and supplied in restaurants in New York. Have you ever been to Hoboken? Nobody over there has ever heard of prohibition.

I BEGIN to believe that I am the sole person in the United States who is obeying the law. I have not tasted intoxicating drink during the whole of my stay in this country, although I drank when I went to Canada. I feel that an alien ought not to break even a bad law. But the Americans seem to have no compunction about breaking it. At one time I lived in an apartment hotel in New York. A waiter told me that a thousand people dined there on New Year's Eve, and I shall not forget his horror and disgust when he told me that he had seen a drunken woman at each table in the dining-room.

What puzzles me is the fact that so many of New York's intellectuals make a point of drinking excessively. To protest against prohibition by making a drunkard of yourself is surely as fatuous as if one were to commit suicide as a protest against capital punishment. But there is, I am sure, less drunkenness in America than many Europeans believe. Over there, the general conviction is that all Americans are soakers, but there are multitudes of people who do not take drink because they disapprove of it or cannot afford to pay

the prices asked for liquor, and, of course, there are multitudes of moderate drinkers. The soakers must be few, and, thank God, they will soon be dead. Civilized people do not behave as if all that mattered in the world was drinking.

Is there more drinking in New York than in London?

I don't know. Soakers are the same everywhere. It is harder to obtain a glass of

water in London than it is to obtain a glass of gin in New York, but, broadly speaking, I should say that the consumption of liquor, if you omit beer, is no greater in London than it is in New York. The English people are steadily becoming sober. You see we haven't got any prohibition.

Most of the English writers I have interviewed seem to prefer American women to English women.

The American woman is extremely attractive, but not so attractive as all that. There are, of course, a tremendous number of good-looking women in the United States, and the majority of them are smart. They have style. But they are not preferable to English women, or even better looking. They are softer. They can't stand up to life so well. They throw up their hands too quickly. They are much more vivacious than English girls, and there is more expression in their faces. Our girls are trained in self-restraint. They try to conceal their feelings—or perhaps I ought to say that prior to the War they were trained in that fashion. The post-war girl is a very different person from the pre-war girl—better in some respects, not so fine in others.

The American girl is very, very attractive, and, given security so far as money is concerned, she puts up a good show as a mother, though not such a good show as a wife. But I oughtn't to generalize in this fashion. How absurd of me to talk as if I were personally acquainted with each one of the millions of women in America!

In what respect is the American theatre inferior to the English theatre, and in what respect is the English theatre inferior to the American?

I should say that the English theatre at present—mark that!—at present is inferior to the American theatre, in

nearly every respect. Our actors are superior to yours, but your actresses are superior to ours. We have too many young lady amateurs on our stage, but if Mr. Arthur Hopkins has his way you'll soon have more than enough on your stage. There are more good directors in New York than in London—Kaufman, Abbott, McClintic, Moeller and Winchell Smith seem to me to be almost unmatchable.

That paltry latrine piece, "The Front Page," would have been nothing without Kaufman's direction. Moeller can do things with a play that were not dreamt of by the author in his philosophy, and Guthrie McClintic can make a play out of a scenario. Abbott and Winchell Smith have uncanny feeling for the theatre. Character-actors in New York are magnificent, but good drawing-room comedy actors are rare.

There are a great many very accomplished musical comedy actresses in New York, more than there are in London. They can sing and dance and act and they are beautiful. A combination of these talents and looks is unusual. Yet I think I could name six or seven girls on the musical comedy stage in New York who possess them. You have some astonishingly good comedians, too. Will Rogers is a great comedian, as native as Niagara, a witty man and a wise man. Eddie Cantor is another comedian of genius and I like enormously Bert Laehr. The Marx Brothers are not funny. They're a highbrow fad. Another year will finish them! Harpo has some talent, although one tires of some of his tricks. Groucho makes seventeen dismal remarks before he makes one that is funny, and leaves you so limp and tired with his dull stuff that you have no strength to laugh at the funny bit.

There is a tremendously good comedienne in New York—Fanny Brice. Your theatre is a richer and more exuberant theatre than ours, and it has a more adventurous and enthusiastic audience. The English audience seems to have lost its interest in the drama. You, of course, have a more vigorous population to draw upon than has any European country. The men who should now be in authority in Europe are in their graves, and we shall

not have power again until a new generation has grown up.

Assuming that the American theatre is superior to the English theatre, do you consider that it reaches the standard of what a good theatre should be?

Far from it. The quality of the plays is not as good as it ought to be, and that is because the quality of the managers is poor. I am speaking generally, of course. If the majority of managers are men of poor taste, then

but you are not. You are still sucking nourishment from her, and because she is weak, you are weak. Too many of your authors are preoccupied by topical events. They dramatize newspaper reports, and their plays will be forgotten as quickly as last Tuesday's morning paper. And they work too much in collaboration. Great plays are written by individuals, not by committees.

If American managers are drawing upon Europe for their fare, why is it that the European theatre is inferior to the American?

The European manager is more timid than the American manager because his audience is too exhausted to be interested in experiments. But the chief stimulant of the American manager is the Theatre Guild. He has always before him the spectacle of this brave and successful enterprise, and when he is offered a piece which is beyond his comprehension or which seems to him to be unusual, he can comfort his mind with the thought that the Theatre Guild successfully produces such pieces. The European manager has no such stimulant to good productions. The Theatre Guild has many claims on the gratitude of the American people: its chief claim is that it has set an example of courage to the other managers and induced them to aspire beyond the range of their own minds.

What plays have you seen that you liked?

Quite a number, but I can tell you better what kinds I have disliked. I am sick of plays about gunmen, gangsters, noble crooks, bootleggers, hijackers, young women who drink cocktails and are raped, young women who wish to lead their own lives and cannot stop yammering about it. I am sick of mechanistic-morality plays in which morbid authors tell us how dull are the lives of bank clerks when, in fact, it is the morbid authors whose lives are dull. What bores these fellows are, with their tiresome unpoetic, photographic minds, and their mawkishly sentimental cynicism.

But I am especially sick of the play which is full of foul speech. There is a sort of sewer-rat author who exploits the low taste of the herd in the pretense that he is serving the higher interests of literature and freedom of thought.



ST. JOHN ERVINE

A drawing by Harold S. Barbour

the majority of the plays they produce will be third-rate. The disquieting thing about your theatre, and largely this is the fault of your managers, is that you still depend upon Europe for your plays of quality. There is an abundance of home-made rubbish, but a lamentable lack of home-made plays of quality. Take the record of the Theatre Guild, and of Miss Le Gallienne's Civic Repertory Theatre. The Theatre Guild has produced about sixty plays in ten years, of which only twelve or thirteen were by nine American authors. Miss Le Gallienne in three years has produced thirteen plays of which three were by Americans.

That would alarm me if I were an American. You ought, in this time of Europe's distress, to be repaying some of the debt of culture you owe to her,

The fellow's a liar. He is simply trying to make money out of the prurient curiosity of the adolescent and the mentally arrested. Trench language is essential to such a play as "What Price Glory?" Without it, the atmosphere of the War could not properly be created. But some of the lavatory-authors who came after the authors of that play stuffed their dialogue with dirty speech merely to make a sensation and tickle the herd. These fellows thought that the trench language in "What Price Glory?" was put in to ginger it up, but the trench language *belonged* to that play. The play would not have had life without it. In the imitations of "What Price Glory?" the foul speech was irrelevantly added, was not essential, did not belong. The authors of "What Price Glory?" were full of moral fury and high passion, but the authors of "Jarnegan" and "The Front Page" and the Mae West stuff are common hucksters who would write sickening Sunday school stuff as readily as they write rough-house plays if they were paid enough for it.

Is it your impression that Americans, especially New Yorkers, write and speak more loosely than they live or is there some consistency between their conduct and their speech?

I don't know. There are all sorts of Americans just as there are all sorts of Europeans. I read in the newspapers of hold-ups, shootings, gang wars and every sort of night-club horror, but I have never seen anything more sensational in New York than two taxicabs colliding.

Well, will you say that the level of speech and conduct on the American stage is lower than the level of speech and conduct on the English stage?

Yes.

Would you deduce from that that there is more vulgarity in American social life than in English social life?

No. Among the several causes of the collapse of the New York theatre is the fact that the standard of speech and behavior in the plays is lower than the standard of speech and behavior in life. Decently bred people do not care to subject themselves or their families to the humiliation of hearing for two or three hours language that they would not tolerate for five seconds in their own homes. Provincial people are more easily offended by it than metropolitans.

Now, this is not a question of morals,

it is a question of taste. I do not choose to associate with drunken and foul-mouthed dockers. We should be bored to death if we had to spend much of our time with uneducated and ill-behaved people. Yet we are expected to enjoy in the theatre what would make us yawn our heads off in life. Jejeune people, foul-mouthed people, mannerless people, drunken people—all of these are as tedious on the stage as they are off it.

Don't misunderstand me. I am not pleading for a sterilized drama or one in which only very refined persons are to be found. I am pleading for some observation of the proportions of life, and I am protesting against the current idea that a drunkard, *qua* drunkard, or a foul-mouthed fellow, *qua* foul-mouthed fellow, is interesting. Something more than that is necessary if your attention is to be engaged.

Then you think that the American manager is not a good judge of public taste?

Very few modern managers of any nationality are. How can they be? Their lives are narrow and uninformed. Many managers are almost illiterate. Some of them are wholly illiterate. In London lately, one of them was examined in bankruptcy. He acknowledged that he could neither read nor write. In the movie world, I am told, a man who can make his mark is considered to be highly educated. The average manager lives in the remote village of Broadway where he is surrounded by flatterers and sycophants and trade rivals. His reading is restricted to the box-office returns. He knows of nothing or anybody outside his village. He is the original hick, the first hayseed, and he will be the final butter-and-egg man, the last of the mutts. How can he hope to be a judge of public taste when he does not mingle in the normal public life?

DO YOU BELIEVE in the genuineness of the American desire for culture which so many flattering visitors tell us we possess?

There is a good deal of pecking at ideas here. People read about books rather than read books. Women spend a deal of time in picking the brains of informed people so that they may have luncheon and dinner-table conversation, but I seldom find that they have seriously read the books about which they are so bright. Several years ago, the secretary of an American Woman's

Club wrote to me in London. She told me that her society had decided to study drama during the coming winter. Could I tell her of the name of a good book on the subject? During the previous winter, they had studied music. In the winter before that, they had applied their minds to philosophy. I gave her what information I could and added that in my effete country people gave their lives to the study of one of the subjects which her club disposed of in a single winter.

IDARESAY, though, that this pecking at ideas is universal. It is only more apparent in America where curiosity is greater and franker than anywhere else. Europeans live more intuitively than Americans do. They accept certain facts without question. They *know* that they are there and feel under no obligation to talk about them since everybody else knows that they are there, too. But in America people are still questing, and they will argue about the obvious as if it were the unknown. Europeans do not excite themselves over the fact that two and two make four: Americans do. Perhaps that is wisdom. Perhaps Europe would be a happier place if we could thrill ourselves with the obvious.

Do you think that women have done good or ill to the cultural life of America?

Some good, because it is better to take even a superficial interest in the fine features of life than to take none, but a great deal of bad because they have created an impression that culture is an effeminate thing, that love of literature and poetry is an exclusively womanish affair. But poetry throughout the ages has been chiefly a masculine product, and you must have observed that in times of national crisis and national emotion, people instinctively attempt to express their feelings in poetry. More verse was written in the trenches during the War than had been written in twice as many years before the War. When a boy falls in love, he writes verse. When he fights for his country, he writes verse. Whenever he is stirred to the depths of his finest emotions, he writes verse. But he does not write verse when he becomes a member of the Stock Exchange, nor does he write verse when he successfully corners wheat or merges one company in another. Money making never drew a song out of anybody, but love-making and war-making and any en-

agement that makes a demand on a man's nobility instantly turn him to thoughts of verse. Poetry is the conversation of heroes. It is the most manly stuff that a man can write. Here in America it has been womanized, and men, who should be reveling in it, are ashamed to be seen reading it lest they should be called "sissies" and "lounge lizards." Do you wonder that the soul seems to be vanishing from America when you find that foul pieces of drama, such as "The Front Page," are considered to be robust and masculine, and any piece of poetry is stigmatized as a piece of effeminacy.

Have you not at some time made scornful references to "advanced" women?

Yes, frightful bores. Look at the specimens you have in New York. My God, I'd run two miles to avoid them. Have you ever encountered a Lucy Stoner? Aren't they the limit? They'll solemnly tell you that they must keep their maiden names after they are married because to abandon them would be to abandon their individuality! Can you beat it? All the personality the poor soul has got consists apparently of her maiden name.

Which she got from her father.

Exactly. She is willing to take the name of her father whom she did not choose, but refuses to take the name of her husband whom she did. She'll bear children to a man, but she won't bear his name. I don't care what name a man and a woman who are married take, provided that they share one. That is socially convenient. This Lucy Stone stuff is professed, of course, by the less intelligent feminists who think that a mere tag or label is important. The great feminists were not stupid. All the leaders of the suffragists, the brainy women, called themselves by their married names—Mrs. Pankhurst, for example—and did not fritter away their intelligence and energies on this Miss stuff.

AMONG what groups of Americans have you found the highest level of intelligence? What kind of Americans do you like best?

Professional men. I like doctors, lawyers, soldiers, sailors, men of affairs. I dislike literary men in the lump—very dull people, although, of course, I have immense affection for individual authors. The general assumption that a writer merely because he is a writer is more interesting than any other sort

of person seems to me to be one of the world's silliest illusions. And when you descend to the semi-intellectuals, the half-intelligent, the pseudo-aesthetes, Oh, my God, Oh, my God! The speakeasies, I am told, are crammed with these persons. That's good! Let's hope they will all drink themselves quickly to death or pass into an alcoholic coma from which they will never recover.

Do you feel that these semi-intellectuals, as you call them, suffer from too much money and leisure?

The majority of them seem to me to be overpaid for what they do. I would gladly give them more leisure.

Now, what is your opinion of New York? Do you feel that it has too good a time compared with the rest of the country?

Perhaps. A friend of mine, an accountant, who travels all over the United States, examining the affairs of businesses, tells me that the tale of American prosperity is greatly exaggerated. New York and Chicago and other big cities are prosperous, but there is real hardship outside these cities, especially in small towns in the Middle West. I, of course, know nothing about that. New York certainly suggests immense wealth, and I detect in people whom I meet an air of confidence that I should have thought was only to be found in people who are pretty sure of themselves. There is one fact about New York which almost instantly strikes every alien who comes to it.

What is that?

The fact that you never see a prostitute in the streets. I have lived in New York on two separate occasions, once for three months, and this time for seven months, but I have never seen a woman in its streets who seemed to me to be a prostitute, nor have I ever been accosted. Other Englishmen will tell you the same story. An American friend to whom I said this, told me that he had lived in New York all his life but had never been accosted. Now, that's odd! Prostitution is part of the routine of great cities. It would not be possible to walk along Piccadilly or Regent Street, even in the morning or afternoon, and certainly not at night, without being ogled by at least a dozen prostitutes. That is true, too, of Paris and of all large European cities. But it is not true of New York, although, so Americans have informed me, it is true of Chicago and Philadelphia.

Have you drawn any conclusion from that?

No, I haven't. How can I? I merely say that it is a fact, but I can't account for it. My American friend, to whom I have just referred, says that Tammany Hall drove the prostitutes off the streets. He says that speakeasies are full of them.

Is the absence of prostitutes from the New York streets due, do you think, to the single-standard?

No. That standard has not abolished the prostitute from European streets. Perhaps the competition of the amateur with the professional, of which we hear so much, has had this result, but I don't know. Mind, I'm not saying that there are no prostitutes in New York. But it is not apparent as it is elsewhere.

Have you found greater or less toleration of heterodox opinion here than you expected?

Curiosity about heterodox opinions, provided there is no danger of them becoming practical, is rife. I doubt if many persons will listen tolerantly to a discussion of Bolshevism—that's too ominous and actual—but I fancy that a discussion of trial marriages would attract a crowd because it is unlikely that there will be a system of trial marriages put into practice, openly, tomorrow. People here are more willing to discuss abstractions than Europeans are.

ISUPPOSE the greatest change I have noticed in America since I was here nine years ago, is in the men. During my first visit, I said to a friend, as we walked through the streets of New York, "Where are all the young men?" He pointed to a group of bald, orbicular men, and said, "There are some of them!" They were paunchy fellows, with flabby stomachs that bulged over belts. Their faces had fattened or sagged and they were bald, or becoming bald. Heywood Broun is the last of the flabby-bellied, orbicular Americans—the sort that are led by the nose by their women and told what to say and do. I thought that they were the ugliest-looking men I had ever seen.

But today all that has been considerably changed and a race of handsome men is springing up in America: trim men, with lean, lithe athletic figures and fine carriage.

I see signs in the street that a handsomer set of men, trimmer and fitter, is coming into American life than was here nine years ago. I greatly like the

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▶▶ The Trend of Events ◀◀

▶▶ Gauging Prohibition Feeling

EMOTION aroused by prohibition seems to ebb and flow like the tides. Within a month it was at the ebb; since then it has been coming to the flood. It has been like an intermittent fever. The temperature, which early in March was about normal, appears recently to have been rising.

Our daily press in its editorial pages registers fairly well this rise and fall of prohibition feeling. It is a rough sort of tidal gauge—or, if you prefer, an approximately accurate clinical thermometer. Of course there are certain newspapers that always become agitated when prohibition is mentioned; but most so-called organs of public opinion have periods of calmness. Such a period when both wets and drys were inclined toward reasonableness rather than emotionalism was at the time when they were discussing Mr. Hoover's announcement of his intention to investigate the disregard for law, including disregard for the Eighteenth Amendment and the act for its enforcement. Now that attitude of reasonableness toward prohibition has been changed into one of belligerency. Again the press is at the old fight again as if it had never been fought before. Once more there is fever. Once more the tide is high.

Two incidents seem to be chiefly responsible for this attack of temper. Neither has very close bearing upon the merits or demerits of any particular form of liquor legislation; but each had its dramatic and even tragic aspects, and each could be used as an appeal to the feelings. One was the killing of the wife of an alleged liquor-seller by a deputy sheriff in Illinois. The other was the sinking of the rum-running schooner, *I'm Alone*, two hundred miles off the Louisiana coast by a Coast Guard cutter.

The tragedy at Aurora, Illinois, has evoked the less comment but the more feeling. The fact that the victim was a woman and that the deputy sheriff was wounded in turn by her twelve-year old son has afforded an opportunity to picture prohibition enforcement as a form of fanaticism that spares neither women nor children. Coming, too, just after the enactment of the stringent Jones Law, which increases the maximum penalty for bootlegging, and the

prompt declaration of New York lawyers to come to the defense of trivial offenders in peril of disproportionate punishment, it has served to put fire into protests from newspapers opposed to prohibition. New ardor thus characterizes the asseverations that protecting accused persons against an unreasonable law is not an invitation to crime, that attempts to compel one community to submit to the moral sense of another community should be resisted, and that



Kirby in the New York World

"Which side are we on today, Juan?"

lawlessness does not excuse lawlessness. Michigan's decision to change her law so that the sale of a pint of liquor, even if it is a fourth offense, need not send the seller to prison for life somewhat soothes otherwise savage breasts. On the other hand defenders of prohibition say that cities that are centers of crime cannot be allowed to set the standards for the whole Nation and that the Jones Law has put fear into the hearts of those who conduct speakeasies. The only conclusion that these high feelings lead to is that prohibition in these United States is still the mostly acutely controversial of questions.

It may be just as well so, for emotion over prohibition has perhaps saved us from emotion over what otherwise might have become a somewhat inflammatory international incident. The fact that it was the prohibition law the *I'm Alone* was violating has saved a number of newspapers from the temptation to become excited about our rights on the sea. The general opinion is that we dealt legally with a notorious rum-runner; but wet newspapers find it hard not

to draw the lesson that prohibition is ultimately at fault. It is not going to be another case of the *Virginian*, or another Trent affair; but wet newspapers think our Coast Guard was too zealous and might have been more considerate of foreigners who were doing only what many Americans condone ashore. So there is a disposition to see the other side—a disposition that is rare in most international disputes. Indeed from any editorial on this subject one may guess with some confidence whether the newspaper in which it appears is for or against prohibition. Was, for example, the *I'm Alone* like a slaver after 1808, when the slave-trade was outlawed by the Constitution? Even more lawless, says the "Springfield Republican," because slave-selling was legal within the United States up to the Civil War, while liquor-selling is not. Not so lawless, says the Boston "Transcript," because slavery was outlawed throughout the civilized world outside the United States while liquor is not. So the argument turns to prohibition and international ill-feeling is starved out for want of attention. With emotions diverted to this domestic question, it seems to be easy for the American press to view the sea law involved in this case with detachment.

▶▶ Stimson's Full-Time Job

INDEED WITH REGARD to all our international relations as well as this international incident the press of this country just now is disposed to be tolerant and broad-minded. It wonders, with gravity or amusement as temperament or mood may govern the editorial thoughts, how the new Secretary of State, Mr. Stimson, is going to deal with his new problems. As he takes office he finds experts in the State Department less confident about our rights in the case of the *I'm Alone* than the Coast Guard and the Secretary of the Treasury seem to be. He inherits the good will engendered by the Peace Pact negotiated by his predecessor, but he also inherits some questions quite capable of becoming irritating. He finds a revolution in full blast across our Southern border. He finds several situations in other parts of Latin America that may at any time test both his decision and his tact. He is likely to encounter soon