

►► The Theatre ◄◄

Revolving Stages and Trick Scenery

IN THIS hot weather it would be a hardship to all of us to write or read anything about either *Gasoline Gypsies* or *Ebb Tide*, the two very typical products of the silly season that were presented last week. You don't want to see them, and I just want to try to forget that they ever happened. Anybody who has read this far is now warned that he or she is in for a theoretical appraisal of the relative importance of words, actors and scenery in the recent theatre. If he or she isn't interested, he or she may be excused to go swimming.

The season which has just drawn to an end contained a large enough proportion of successful productions whose most notable feature was unusual scenic effects to have the thing assume the proportions of a "trend" or something. *The Green Pastures* used a treadmill; *Grand Hotel* employed a revolving stage; *Five Star Final* had a revolving stage and played three scenes in different levels of the proscenium as well; and *Anatol's* eight scenes were slid in and out on Jo Mielziner's ingenious platforms. In *Roar China* there was real water on the stage and a battleship moved towards shore (in this case the audience) and lowered menacing guns into position to annihilate us all. *The Miracle at Verdun* employed not only a baby revolving stage, but three talking movie screens, so that Herr Chlumberg's slender play was completely submerged in mechanical effects. And now *The Band Wagon* appears, which has a double revolving stage—one that can turn in two directions concentrically and at various speeds.

It isn't only a product of American efficiency or ingenuity, either. Abroad the same sort of thing has been going on to an even greater extent for some time. In London they are packing them into an otherwise very dull show called *The White Horse Inn*, apparently solely on account of the magnitude of the production, and they have thought nothing of changing old theatres in various European capitals into semblances of night clubs so that *The Wonder Bar* could be performed. The German and Russian stages are famous for their staggering effects, but even conservative Paris has its *Théâtre Pigalle*, where all

manner of strange devices do astounding tricks with the scenery before your eyes. At the *Staatsoper* in Berlin I saw a ballet, *Die Planeten*, in which the

Recommended Current Shows

As Husbands Go: Very pleasant little show about Paris and Dubuque.

Crazy Quilt: Fannie Brice, Phil Baker and Ted Healy if it's gags you want.

Grand Hotel: Still going strong. Absorbing melodrama.

Once in a Lifetime: The year's funniest show. At the expense of the movies.

Precedent: Earnest and effective presentation of the case for Tom Mooney.

Private Lives: I still haven't seen the new cast, but the lines are there.

The Band Wagon: Smartest revue in years. Brilliantly staged.

The Barretts of Wimpole Street: The private and scandalous lives of a couple of poets and their families.

The Green Pastures: Last week of a beautiful show.

Third Little Show: For Beatrice Lillie addicts. Some good tunes, too.

Tomorrow and Tomorrow: Philip Barry's best serious play. Glenn Anders is in it now.

scenery moved in and out in time with the music.

Does this apparent submergence of the actor and the author under a mass of mechanical effects prove anything? It is my belief that several definite conclusions can be drawn from it. In the first place, quite a lot of it can certainly be laid to the influence of the films, and

I believe it is a manifestation of an ill-advised attempt on the part of theatrical producers to compete with the talkies on their home grounds. In the films you can show a fleet being sunk or an airship being blown up with a semblance of reality quite good enough for any dramatic purpose. What the talkies can't do yet is to produce a sound that can compare, in its power of affecting the human emotions as a sound, with the actual human voice. Also, because of the impossibility of varying the tempo of the performance with the varying reactions of different audiences, it will be impossible for the timing



V-D-E P A U W

of laughs or pauses to be perfectly done in the movies as they are on the stage.

However, most theatrical producers the world over being unanalytical, ill-educated and unoriginal men, a great many of them have been trying to save the spoken drama by means of the very thing which in the long run would be bound to consume it. In their defense it

must be admitted that it is far easier to make a stage revolve than their own brains. What they must eventually realize is that the movies have forever taken the bulk of the audiences that regard the theatre merely as a spectacle and not as an unrivalled means of revealing the depths of human souls.

It must not be supposed that I am for a moment laying the undeniable success of *Grand Hotel*, *The Green Pastures* or *Five Star Final* to any passing fancy on the part of the public for revolving stages or treadmills. Those plays were successes because they were written by men who had something to say and knew how to say it in terms of the theatre. The complementary part of my thesis is that no amount of trick scenery can make a play succeed if there isn't something like a play there in the first place.

To sum up, I think that there are a gratifyingly increasing number of playwrights who understand the legitimate uses to which a quick change of scene may be put, and that the present apparent taking over of the theatre by the mechanics is not as serious as it may seem. It won't last, and well written and acted plays in one set will always survive—not only because of the small expense of their production, but because they can give us a more satisfying glimpse of the way our fellow creatures think and act than any amount of scenes or strident noises ever can.

►► Plus Ça Change

By way of proving graphically my point above about waiting for laughs I would commend to your attention *Crazy Quilt*, the "new" edition *Sweet and Low*, in which the many years of practice Fannie Brice, Phil Baker and Ted Healy have had with all those old gags show to the best advantage. When Mr. Baker still says that the beautiful chorus girl's telephone number is Riverside eight four two eight, the man in the box still knows exactly the right fraction of a second at which to yell, "two nine." If you heard that now in a talkie it would only make you quite ill. In a revue it does not matter so long as Ted Healy does not have too much to say about it. Furthermore, according to the size of the audience the Monday night I finally saw *Crazy Quilt*, depression or no depression, there remains a lot of people who never heard of Keith Circuit—I know it's called RKO now, but good laughs all date back to pre-Orpheum days—or would rather pay four-forty for Fannie Brice, Phil Baker or Ted Healy than have them all at the Palace with Georgie Jessel thrown out at a dollar seventy-five.

OTIS CHATFIELD-TAYLOR.

▶▶ The New Movies ◀◀

▶▶ Four Carbon Copies

LOOKING about night after night at the acres of empty seats which even our ice-cool movie theatres display these days, I have come to the conclusion that Fate or some similar agency of justice has finally caught up with machine-made entertainment. Hollywood has always worshiped the idea that the film business was not very different from the tomato-canning industry or the paving-brick business. It had to. Eight hundred—think of it—eight hundred films a year mean a lot of work. I defy anybody to develop and stage eight hundred, or even four hundred or two hundred, fresh, well-written and well-planned entertainments in a year. Of the lot there are bound to be ten or twenty good ones and well over seven hundred sleazy imitations. Now adequate imitations are all very well in motor cars, or shoes or bricks, but the "entertainment business" is perhaps the only line of human endeavor which resists mechanization so resolutely at every stage. People go to the theatre (or film house) to see something new. They turn to their automatic refrigerators expecting to find ice cubes. It does not matter that today's ice cubes look precisely like last week's cubes, or last month's or last year's. Ice cubes are ice cubes and that's about as far as they go. The plot, theme or story of your evening's entertainment is another matter. You have paid somebody money to entertain you and give you a fresh slant on things. You ask for (and should oc-

asionally discover) spontaneity, gaiety and drama. It is true that certain elemental themes, such as romance, adventure and mystery, will keep cropping

Worth Seeing

Beggar's Opera: Unusual—a modernistic German edition of the old English ballad play.

Five-Year Plan: A silent travelogue with a talkie lecture in English showing what the Russians are doing.

Public Enemy: Hard-boiled gangster film.

Secret Six: Another gangster story with Wallace Beery.

Le Million: Delightful and amusing French farce—extremely pleasant and gay—no French needed.

Pennsylvanians and Chicagoans: Censors in your districts are reported to have cut **Public Enemy** and **Secret Six** to ribbons—in which case this department's endorsement is withdrawn.

Skippy: Percy Crosby's little boy and his friends—among the best.

Smiling Lieutenant: Light entertainment with Maurice Chevalier, a beautiful blonde and a beautiful brunette. Also lingerie and Strauss music.

up till doomsday, but they need not always sound alike. I don't know just what Hollywood is going to do about the situation, but I think that the general public knows what it is going to do. It is going to stay away from those pictures which it does not like, and go in extravagant numbers to those occasional ones which do strike its fancy. The movie is now a respectable dramatic medium, not just a time-killer.

Night Angel is the first carbon copy on today's list. It is the story of the poor girl of doubtful family who falls in love with the rich and socially prominent district attorney. It is not really bad; it's just extremely dull. Nancy Carroll and Frederic March are among our bet-

ter actors, but even they don't always take it seriously.

Chances is a war film with Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. It is pretty good in spots, but it, too, sounds like a carbon copy of all the other war movies. Plot—two brothers, very Hollywood-British, both love the same girl. One killed at the front.

Big Business Girl is the old idea that stenography is done with the legs (pretty legs) and that bosses are beasts, heh-heh. Loretta Young is the girl, but the best thing in the picture is Joan Blondell as a professional correspondent. She is swell.

I Take This Woman is the one about the pampered society girl who falls in love with the rough he-man cowboy (Gary Cooper). After running out on him Carole Lombard finds that Love is better than riches and fine clothes. There are some well-directed sequences, but who wants to rehearse this old plot again.

▶▶ "The Maltese Falcon"

Dashiell Hammett's story of the mysterious and sinister events inspired by a mythical statuette of a falcon fashioned of "pure gold and covered with priceless jewels" was so genuinely mystifying as to leave me still a little bewildered when it was finished. Bebe Daniels, Ricardo Cortez and director Roy Del Ruth have done a pretty smooth job—too smooth perhaps. In many ways *The Maltese Falcon* is unusual. Its romance is confined to a single casual night of love, and the film closes with Mr. Cortez seeing Miss Daniels safely tucked in jail for a nice long term. Perhaps "mystifying" isn't the right word. *The Maltese Falcon* is baffling—but it is also absorbing.

▶▶ Talkies in French

If your French is pretty good—and only if it is pretty good—there are two new films from Paris which offer light entertainment. *Le Mystere de la Chambre Jaune* is an old Gaston Leroux mystery story, so completely baffling as to leave you still a little bewildered when it is over. Nevertheless, it is well done and certainly holds the attention. *Le Culte de Beauté* is a screen operetta with a lot of fast repartee of the Al Woods bedroom variety, but not nearly as much impropriety as you might expect. One remark which caught my fancy was the answer the sanitarium manager gave the young lady who asks for a gift. He offers her a free course in his Nudist Cult.

CREIGHTON PEET.



Paramount

LOVE AMONG THE CZECHOSLOVAKIANS

Nancy Carroll and Frederic March in "Night Angel," a little story of Prague-on-the-Hollywood