

Art of the Night

By GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

JUDGING from the published plays that are being delivered in amplitudinous bundles at my door, it appears that when a writer not previously associated with the theatre suddenly gets it into his (or, more often, her) head to compose a drama he pretty generally goes in for the biographical kind of thing. This is too bad, and for two reasons. The first is that biographical drama imposes upon the playwriting novice one of the most difficult of theatrical tasks. The second is that, even in the hands of the experienced playwright, it more often than not turns out to be embarrassingly dull, if not downright absurd. Yet the novices fail to be dismayed. And for two obvious reasons, in turn. In the first place, they seem to believe that they can conceal their own weaknesses in the art of dramaturgy by substituting real characters for fictional characters, which their incapacities prevent them from making theatrically and dramatically real, and by substituting for alive original speeches, similarly beyond their talents, the more animated passages from the writings and utterances of the eminentos whom they have honored with their attention. In the second place, they seem to imagine that the box-office will be more easily hospitable to the story of some personage familiar to it before the curtain goes up than to some strange and wholly imaginary one.

In both these instances, our friends are sadly mistaken. Firstly, it is much more difficult to make a real character seem real on the stage than a fictional character. In the plays of hacks we periodically encounter fictional characters that have a certain breath of life, whereas in the biographical dramas of otherwise skilful and practised playwrights the central characters, to say nothing of the minor ones, often smell stubbornly of artificiality. Thus, no one with the slightest experience of the theatre will deny that even such a fictional character as the Italian janitor in the dreadful dish of claptrap called "Moon Over Mulberry Street" enjoys an authenticity, or at least feel of authenticity, infinitely superior to two-thirds of the Robert E. Lees, Paganinis, Cromwells, Andrew Jacksons, Emily Dickinsons, and other such figures whom much more adroit dramatists have tried to bring to a stage existence. Secondly, quotations from the writings or utterances of the great almost invariably have a peculiarly false ring when spoken at second-hand, particularly when they are already familiar to an audience. Why it should be so, I do not know, but the fact remains that when an actor, however able and however popular, speaks or reads as his own the words of some historical personage there is about the situation something slightly comical. The audience, for once unwilling to follow Carlyle's voluntary remission of judgment, resents the pretence and—if my professional observation of the theatre over a period of nigh unto thirty years counts for anything—frequently rewards

the mummer with a derisive chuckle, sometimes, true enough, merely internal but a derisive chuckle nonetheless.

As for audiences' greater antecedent hospitality to characters out of life than to characters out of the thin air, the box-office statistics for the last twenty years say nay. In this present season alone, up to the time of writing, they have said nay, and in unmistakable tones, to the three biographical dramas, on Napoleon, Poe, and Richard Wagner, which have seen theatrical production. For one "Victoria Regina" that prospers, you will usually find a half dozen biographical plays, whether written by hacks or by the better grade of playmakers, that do not—and it should not be overlooked by the aspiring novices that when a biographical drama now and again does enjoy success it is very largely, if indeed not entirely, because the author has been fortunate enough to get for his central role an actor or an actress already an established box-office pet. In some years, the only exception in this respect that I can summon to memory is the "Lincoln" of John Drinkwater.

But novices are an egregious lot. It is unquestionably their logic that a biographical play will find a ready market because of its appeal to the notorious vanity of star actors, which theoretically makes irresistible to them the idea of posturing as someone who has been hallowed by the world's fame. That the logic is not, to quote the late Finley Peter Dunne, entoirly illogical is to be allowed. But the novices, to vouchsafe them a sliver of practical commercial criticism, forget one important point. They may find an actor who itches to glorify himself in the role of their particular magnifico, but they will most often have a very devil of a time finding a producer who is willing to waste his money giving the actor that gaudy pleasure.

Recollections of the Moscow Stage

MY LIFE IN THE RUSSIAN THEATRE.

By Vladimir Nemirovitch-Dantchenko.
Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1936.
\$3.50.

Reviewed by NORRIS HOUGHTON

RUSSIA is fortunate today in having two "grand old men" of the theatre. Constantin Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovitch-Dantchenko, co-founders and still the co-directors of the Moscow Art Theatre, are honored and revered wherever artists of the stage assemble in the Soviet Union. To the outside world Stanislavski's name has become synonymous with the greatness that belongs to Russia's most illustrious theatre, but Nemirovitch has been less well known. "My Life in the Russian Theatre" should dissolve any mystery

that may have surrounded him and reveal his exact contribution to the Moscow Art Theatre.

Not since "My Life in Art," the autobiography of Stanislavski with which this volume must inevitably be compared, has there been such an intimate picture of the life of the artistic Moscow of thirty or forty years ago. As such it has a certain historical and sociological value, for the people and the society of which he writes have vanished or are vanishing; in a few years there will be none left to reminisce about those latter days of imperial Russia and in the new days few clues and no counterparts to them can be found. This book, to be sure, has no such purpose. Indeed, one does not feel that white-bearded Nemirovitch looks back with nostalgia. Rather is it a collection of reminiscences about the great Russian litterateurs and artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries among whom Nemirovitch, himself a literary man of considerable distinction, moved and with whom he worked. He has chosen to dwell longest on Chekhov, Gorky, and Tolstoy, and his recollections of their personalities are the most delightful part of the book.

It is in little vignettes of character and manner which one finds on every other page that Nemirovitch brings us closest to these literary giants. He gazes into Tolstoy's "famous eagle eyes, almost rapacious in their searching gaze." He remembers how Chekhov's smile was "unique. It appeared all at once, quickly, and as quickly vanished. It was broad, frank, full-faced and always brief. It was as if the man had quite suddenly decided that the matter wasn't worth smiling about further." Anecdotes about these men are numberless.

The chapters on the foundation, early life, and later travels of the Moscow Art Theatre are less interesting, perhaps because the student of drama is already familiar with much of the same story from Stanislavski's account of it. And there is little added to Stanislavski's enunciation of the theories of acting which have made the Art Theatre famous. These chapters do make undeniably clear, however, how Nemirovitch's talent for literary criticism and appreciation moulded the repertory of the Theatre. It was he, for instance, who almost alone understood Chekhov's plays, who pleaded with him and finally persuaded Chekhov to give the Art Theatre his plays and to write more for it. And without Chekhov what would the Art Theatre have been?

It is unfortunate that "My Life in the Russian Theatre" has not had a better translation or more careful editing. The language often hinders the flow of meaning and its structure is often so disjointed as to make one feel that it is but a collection of notes which a slightly doddering old man has pulled out when rummaging through his desk. One hesitates to believe that Nemirovitch-Dantchenko, still clear-thinking and active, has constructed so formless a volume. One would rather blame his editors!

Norris Houghton is the author of "Moscow Rehearsal," a study of the Soviet theatre.

The PHOENIX NEST

CONTEMPORARY POETRY: BY WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

JUST to be different, I am going to top the column this week with a book of light verse. The season has brought forth, of course, the collected poems of both "F. P. A." and Dorothy Parker, but these have already been noticed elsewhere in this magazine. The first-named writer is an expert versifier, and the latter, as I have said at another time, writes real poetry in the midst of her greatest flippancies. Now there is before me the work of a third writer of verse, "Gaily the Troubadour" (Dutton. \$2), by Arthur Guiterman. I have followed Mr. Guiterman's work for many years. He is the author of several humorous masterpieces, such as "The Quest of the Ribbon." He started in the era of the late Oliver Herford, and was quite as witty as Herford in the old *Life*. A serious poem of his that I am fond of is his ballad of "Quivira." It ought to be included in any collection of modern ballads. Guiterman, of course, has been widely popular and one of the versifiers of the day who has been able to make a living by it. More recently his poem "Death and General Putnam" has gone all over the United States. One pearl of this bard's that I particularly prize is his own comment on the "great Gaels of Ireland," a revision of Chester-

ton's verse in "The Ballad of the White Horse." I quote from memory:

*For the great Gaels of Ireland are those
that God made mad;
For all their words need footnotes, and
half their rhymes are bad.*

It is not necessary that a statement be wholly true to be funny. Such an exaggeration as the above shoots at certain obvious eccentricities in Irish poetry. Also there is Guiterman's superb "Battle of the Doormen," a New York fantasy that appeared first, I think, in F. P. A.'s column. But I am speaking of work not comprised in the present book.

If "Gaily the Troubadour" is not Guiterman's best book, it is a good, salty one; and there is at least one literary discovery in it, headed "Local Note."

*In Sparkhill buried lies that man of mark
Who brought the Obelisk to Central Park,
Redoubtable Commander H. H. Gorringle
Whose name supplies the long-sought
rhyme for "orange."*

Even a life embittered as mine has been by Arthur Guiterman's refusal to allow me to rhyme "accolade" with "Scheherazade," can appreciate the importance of this discovery!

Also, as one who is an ex-Qwerty-U-I-Opper, I approve of his verses to his typewriter. Furthermore I exult in the close of his "Ode to the Amoeba":

*For you and I and William Beebe
Are undeniably amoebae!*

I also like the beginning of his "Genealogical Trees":

*Undoubtedly you'll never see
A poem like a family tree.*

"The Shakespearian Bear" should have been put into a ballade before, but Guiterman has done it perfectly. There's shrewd human wisdom in this book, and lots of entertainment. I like this way of writing the old lament for dead ladies of which poets have always been so fond:

*Rosamond is in her grave,
Hero sleeps beneath the wave,*

*Long deceased is Guinevere,
Yseult lies upon her bier;*

*Cleopatra, Lady Jane,
Deirdre, Beatrice, Elaine,—*

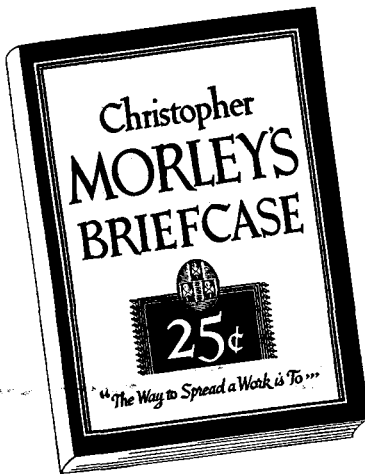
*All are gone, those damsels fair,
But you're here, so I don't care!*

I'll put our own Arthur Guiterman up against any of the contemporary British white hopes in *Punch*. And if you gave a member of your family a book of his for a holiday present you will have lightened your family cares.

Margaret Widdemer is not rated in the first flight of American poets, and yet she can turn a verse extremely neatly and

**"The way to spread a
work is to . . .**

**. . . sell it at a low
price." —DR. JOHNSON**



PARTIAL LIST OF CONTENTS

Dowager of the Sea
Letter to a Gentleman
Thirty out of Forty-eight
A Bibliophile in a Big House
New Verses for
Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-De-Ay
Coldest and Hottest
Walt Whitman's Bathtub
Adventures in the Middle
West
The Unknown Reader

The Saw Mill; and Sun
Cured
But Voltaire Never Said It
The Oldest University in
America is Open Again
Translations from the South
American

*Also, many other shorter
pieces and "further amper-
sands and etceteras" both in
prose and verse.*

✎ The compiler of this Briefcase has often dreamed of reaching more readers than are attainable through the slow and costly medium of a book.

✎ He has chosen pieces from his recent writing that seemed appropriate for this form of publication. Many first appeared in *The Saturday Review*.

✎ Nothing included has ever appeared in book form.

✎ This venture is offered for those occasions of travel, recreation and brief opportunity when a book is less convenient. If the Briefcase finds favor with readers (either casual or studious) further numbers may follow at intervals.

**Two Editions
of 10,000 Sold Out
3rd Printing Now on Press**

25c At Book Stores, Newsstands,
or from

J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY, Philadelphia

The Business Manager of *Morley's Briefcase* is eagerly accessible at Lippincott's New York Office, 250 Park Avenue: PLaza 3-0403, where he may be had both at retail or in bulk. His name is Frank C. Henry.