

Off Stage and On

BY BROOKS ATKINSON



First night in a theater lobby

Keystone

WHEN the curtain starts to fall the morning newspaper reviewers leap into the aisle and hurry to the exit, hoping to get out of the theater before the departing audience clogs the passageways. It is eleven o'clock or eleven-fifteen and already most of tomorrow's newspaper is in type and in the make-up chases. Broadway is wriggling with humanity at that time of night; it is full of night-crawling daydreamers, and a sore impediment to a man who is in a hurry. But Forty-third Street is as open as a country lane, and a good place for brisk walking for a man who has a story on his mind.

At that hour the *Times* office is light and hospitable; my little coop on the outermost beach is a soothing haven. First, put the program on the desk so that the title of the play and the names of the actors can be accurately copied. Then lay out a box of matches, light a pipe, take a pad of yellow paper and a dozen sharply-pointed pencils from a drawer that has not been cleaned for a decade, and by that time a gentlemanly copy boy is at the door for the headline. It will measure one column or two according to the virtue of the drama tonight. Now, let's get down to serious work. What will the first line be? That is the crucial factor in the whole night's work. It is the entrance into the story; if the beginning is clumsy no steadying on this side or that can give the review an orderly appearance in the paper the next morning. Any reviewer worth his salt in the professional world would concentrate on the first line during the dash back to the office, instead of idly gossiping with Mantle of the *News* or Watts of the *Herald Tribune*, who are pretty genial fellows. But if the first line pops out of the fuliginous silence when it is needed, and by some miracle makes a perfect departure into the story, the rest of the review falls into place with the most

astonishing willingness. Praise God from whom first sentences flow!

Take, say, fifteen minutes for the first paragraph, which is the whole review in miniature. The obliging copy boy takes it out to the copy desk, where mistrustful copyreaders hastily examine it for accuracy, grammatical coherence, good taste, force, elegance, and indecency, consulting the night editor on any ribaldry that may be too impudent for a respectable newspaper. (Once Falstaff's "belly" was changed to Falstaff's "stomach," until I heard about it; and there was a time when every "prostitute" had to be a "wanton" which, so far as I understand love, is quite a different thing.) After the first paragraph has been disinfected the man at the copy-control desk takes a disinterested glance at the length and sends it up to the composing room on the automatic carrier. By that time the second paragraph is written, and unless the copy boy is practising his Yogi exercises he transmits it to copy-desk headquarters and the same procedure continues until the review is finished.

Meanwhile, the composing room, which is a chamber of magic, has been tapping away at the Broadway bulletins. Columns of crisis and scandal have been bearing down on that patient room for hours; stock market tables have been testing a compositor's dexterity; from Washington the President has been scaring the living daylights out of business, labor unions, and the middle class, and enough stuff to fill a set of books has been rolled up in type since late afternoon. But somewhere in that huge jungle of linotype machines the copy-cutter finds a place where a little item of Broadway news can be set up swiftly and more accurately than the handwriting deserves. By the time the last paragraph is going up on the automatic carrier, the first paragraphs of the proof have been brought down the

winding staircase by one of the proof boys. Unless things go hopelessly wrong, as they do upon occasion, that is the routine of reviewing a play for a morning newspaper.

To many people the review is infernally important—or at any rate, they think so. Although it will be on the street soon after two o'clock, some of them cannot bear to wait that long. There is a leak in our office; the head of the department is the victim of a conspiracy. Tecumseh, the drama reporter, who really ought to be home with his family at midnight, can be cajoled by neurotic friends of his into reading the proof of a review over the telephone. Before the last paragraph is written, Tecumseh can sometimes be overheard as he coldly reads the first paragraph over the telephone; it sounds monstrously flat and stupid on such occasions. Leslie Howard got the news of his "Hamlet" that way. According to Tecumseh, who stammered and blushed as he plowed through my animadversions, Mr. Howard took it like a gentleman, although he raised hell about it when he recovered his strength a day or two later and trounced the critics to delighted audiences after every good performance.

If there were no commercial significance to newspaper reviews, drama criticism would be an idyllic profession of theater-going and scribbling on yellow pads. But all forms of show business feed out of the soupy trough of publicity, depending upon the newspapers for their promotion. In

Next  Week

THE EDUCATION OF AN AMERICAN
By MARK SULLIVAN

Reviewed by William Allen White

TALES OF A WAYWARD INN

By FRANK CASE

Reviewed by Robert Nathan

New York, the newspapers take a remarkable interest in the theater; in addition to the daily news notes and the reviews, they treat the theater to imposing week-end sections in which drawings, photographs, columns of comment, news, and personal sketches keep the reader in intimate contact with the wizardry and duplicity of the theater world. As everyone associated with a drama department knows, the sections are closely and widely read in New York City and all through the country, for thousands of people are fascinated by the theater and regularly attend it. There is also an enormous public that reads about and discusses the theater without ever setting foot inside a playhouse. Particularly in recent years, the interest the theater has taken in the vast social problems of the day has given it a cultural influence greater than the size of the actual theatergoing public. Although most of the letters from readers come from New York and vicinity, many of the most interesting and best informed come from distant parts of the country, where theatrical fare is meager. The large week-end drama sections are thus maintained in response to general public interest; they also help to round out the service a daily newspaper provides. And the theater could scarcely get on without them; they not only inform the theatergoing public, but they also widen it. The result is that a lot of show business is conducted in the columns of the daily newspapers, which are the chief source of trade information.

To go back to the daily review which we dropped two paragraphs earlier, it is the first public response to the play that has just opened, and as such it is thought to have great commercial importance. The importance is a good deal less than giddy theater people enjoy believing; and it is not an arbitrary imposition of a critic's will on the public, but a news and editorial report of last night's theater event. But business at the box office is immediately influenced by the tenor of the next day's reviews. If they are all exuberant, possibly there will be a line at the box office by noon, for the public response to popular shows is immediate. The fate of the play is now in the hands of the public, which, in most cases, confirms the opinion of a unanimous press, although such epochal successes as "Abie's Irish Rose" and "Tobacco Road" grew in the face of unfavorable verdicts in nearly every newspaper in town. But even a unanimously favorable press cannot drive the public to a play which by some strange instinct it decides it does not want to see. It would not go to Philip Barry's "White Wings," although critics, columnists, and other writers raised the most urgent sort of din in its behalf.

If the notices of last night's play are "mixed," that is, if some are friendly and some are obdurate, the immediate box-

office fortunes of the play are likely to be uncertain; and this is the occasion when a producer's personal interest in his play and business resourcefulness are put to a test. Some years ago Crosby Gaige saved "Accent on Youth" by industriously promoting it after a tepid opening. "The Women," which has been a great box-office success, opened to mixed notices and looked like a failure for three weeks until the public discovered that poison and scandal were just what it wanted. When the notices are particularly bad, most producers close without further exploitation. The little pieces of dreadfulness that are constantly turning up to confound everyone who sees them seldom defy failure for more than a few days; some of them never give more than one disastrous performance. Although Tallulah Bankhead's "Antony and Cleopatra" cost \$125,000 before it came into New York it gave only four performances after uncommonly bad notices in the press. Rowland Stebbins, the producer, knew that the notices had told the truth about one of the worst bungled Shakespearean revivals New York had ever seen.

Although a good many talented and, in rare cases, high-minded people have devoted months to the production of a play, the reviews that dispose of it are written within a space of twelve hours. On the surface, that seems diabolically unfair, and it looks as though unprecedented power has been put in the hands of what is sometimes referred to as "a little body of willful men." Elmer Rice has said so more than once with the wild fury of which only he is capable; he blames the critics for the failure of his personal enterprises at the Belasco Theater a few years ago.

But the notion that the critics willfully make or break a play is subject to further consideration. In the first place, the critic is on the side of the public. Although he owes the theater an informed, tolerant, and selfless consideration, and must serve

as its spokesman with personal generosity, he is on the public's side. Unofficially, he represents the public; his basic point of view is that of a theatergoer. His ultimate decisions are made from the audience point of view. If, in most cases, a theatergoer knows whether or not he likes a play as soon as the final curtain descends, it is reasonable to suppose that a reviewer can decide with equal rapidity. Criticism of the time element in reviewing is a stalking-horse. We are talking now about ordinary plays. Some of the others, like those of Eugene O'Neill, Maxwell Anderson, Sean O'Casey, and most of the classics, require the most studious thought a reviewer is capable of giving them. Fortunately, he has a week-end opportunity to read the script and sift his impressions before he need offer his conclusions as final. But most plays would not bear another day's consideration, and ought to be reviewed immediately while the impressions are fresh.

In the second place, the basic element in a theater review is not the whim of a reviewer, but the play he is reporting and discussing. The frequent attacks upon drama criticism usually overlook the primary fact that plays are not all of one quality. Some are good and some are bad, and it is the business of the critic to say so clearly. Blaming the critics for writing unfavorable notices is a frivolous way of putting the cart before the horse. No one would be silly enough to maintain that the successful plays in the theater are the result of the critics' genius and clairvoyance. The credit for good plays belongs to the author, director, actors, and producers who have created them. It is equally silly to blame the critics for the failures; the author, directors, actors, and producer are responsible for them. In the ideal sense, good plays engender good notices; bad plays breed bad reviews. For the function of the critic is that of an experienced theatergoer who

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Desert Lake

BY FREDERICK MORTIMER CLAPP

ASPENS, aflame with a yellow unconsuming fire, lick up slopes where jade-green junipers cling, contorted, to red cliffs.

The bitter opaline lake, gripped in its scorched rock-crystal shores, drifts mistless, like a stretched and sheeny silk, to the clear horizon. The dun-colored lonely hills, a-crumple with gullies, sleep into their lifeless eternity.

Ah, you who have so desired a clear-cut vision, you with your ant-like problems of co-operation, and stung with love when the mating season pushes ajar the iron door of the future, look, as your brief bright day folds up beyond the ranges, at this flawless and sterile unity, this never-to-be-awakened faceted diamond of peace.