

Seeing Things

MISS BANKHEAD TAKES OVER

A LITTLE gold book from Cartier's did the trick. It was an expensive going-away present, given generously and no doubt without ulterior motive. But it did the trick. It did it as surely as if Gertrude Lawrence had chosen it for that very purpose. When opened, it disclosed a clock, a calendar, and a thermometer on the one side, and an extremely pen- sive photograph of Miss Lawrence on the other.

Since he placed it, so opened, on the writing table in his cabin, Noel Coward could not escape, even while crossing the Pacific on a holiday, this reminder that he had promised to write a play for Miss Lawrence and himself. In "Present Indicative" he has confessed how he "gazed daily, often with irritation, at that anxious retroussé face." He has also explained how for the full stretch of the passage no ideas would come. He has admitted, too, how finally he closed the golden book with a snap, in order to avoid Miss Lawrence's reproachful gaze.

As I say, however, the present did the trick. It did it at the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. It did it the night before a friend of Mr. Coward's was supposed to arrive and Mr. Coward, having to get up at 7:00 to meet him, had gone to bed early. It did it the moment he switched out the lights. For then it was with the insistence of Abou Ben Adhem's angel (who also carried a "book of gold") that Miss Lawrence appeared to Mr. Coward "in a white Molyneux dress on a terrace in the South of France and refused to go again until 4:00 A.M." By that time, though he was not to do the actual writing until later, when he was to complete it in about four days while recuperating from a bout with influenza in Shanghai, "Private Lives,"* title and all, had constructed itself in his mind.

If during that journey Mr. Coward was haunted by Miss Lawrence's photograph, all of us who saw him and her in "Private Lives" nearly eighteen years ago are bound to be haunted even now by the pictures which will not leave our minds of the two of them romping gloriously and giddily as Amanda and Elyot. Mr. Coward's

play, as first performed, may have been in essence no more than a superior vaudeville sketch. But he and Miss Lawrence endowed it with the radiance of a comedy. In spite of its songs and dances, its demolition of a Victrola record, and the general frenzy of its hurly-burly, playgoers rejoiced in it in 1931 as the final word in sophistication. In those lean and tragic tin-cup years, it glittered like a goblet.

Its two principal characters—those divorcés who remeet in France on their second honeymoons and run away from their new, very commonplace mates only to love and quarrel, quarrel and love again—were worldlings, unashamed and disillusioned. They were no more worried about morals than they were about money. They shared the same attitudes, the same temperaments and tempers. Indeed, as Mr. Coward knew, his Amanda and Elyot were practically one part. Without anyone being the wiser, they could have exchanged dialogue and spoken each other's lines. Both of them were bright, glib, cynical, outrageous, and, as acted, charming.

They were hedonists who championed flippancy and superficiality. For moralists they had only contempt, for philosophers only pity. They took nothing seriously except nonsense, and it would have been nonsensical to take them seriously. Nonsense was what they believed everyone, however earnest, talked in the long run. "Come kiss me, darling, before your body rots, and worms pop in and out of your eye sockets" was Elyot's way of stating his conviction that the delight of the moment should be savored. His



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phrasing of that conviction did not repel Amanda. Her answer, symptomatic of the comedy's spirit, was "Elyot, worms don't pop." Life for them, including Love, was a "poor joke" which they met on its own terms by joking.

"Let's blow trumpets and squeakers and enjoy the party as much as we can, like very small, quite idiotic school-children" was Mr. Coward's credo and theirs. This is precisely what they proceeded to do. In spite of their moral audacities, they were grown-up children rather than children who had grown up. But, since the trumpets were bright, the squeakers loud, and the party an excellent one, no one objected. Everyone had a very good time, and—in 1931—thought himself very sophisticated for doing so.

Presenting as many custom-built opportunities to Miss Lawrence and Mr. Coward as the comedy did, it also presented its problems to them and Adrienne Allen and Laurence Olivier to whom fell the thankless secondary parts. Mr. Coward was well aware of the problems. Although he has no liking for reviewers, he is an admirable critic himself, and in "Present Indicative" dashed off the best review written of the original London production of "Private Lives." "The play's fabric was light and required light handling," wrote he. "Gertie was brilliant. Everything she had been in my mind, when I originally conceived the idea in Tokyo, came to life on the stage. The witty, quick-silver delivery of lines; the romantic quality, tender and alluring; the swift, brittle rages; even the white Molyneux dress. . . .

"Our duologue second act when, for some reason or other, we were not feeling quite on the crest of the wave, was terribly exhausting. We both knew that if we let it sag for a moment it would die on us. On the other hand, when it flowed, when the audience was gay and appreciative, when our spirits were tuned to the right key, it was so exhilarating that we felt deflated when it was over." As for the "wooden" Victor and the "tiresome" Sibyl that Mr. Olivier and Miss Allen acted, in London, and that Mr. Olivier and Jill Esmond played here, Mr. Coward confessed he "frequently felt conscience-stricken over them both, playing so gallantly on such palpably second-strings."

SEEN today in a different world and with a different cast, "Private Lives" is bound to be a different play. Mr. Coward's earlier comedies occupy at the moment an unfortunate position in time. They are like yesterday's styles, so recent that they appear odd and not remote enough to have become picturesque. Perhaps, if they last, they will some day be revived as

*PRIVATE LIVES, by Noel Coward. Directed by Martin Mannlis. Settings by Charles Elson. Presented by John C. Wilson. With a cast including Tallulah Bankhead, Donald Cook, Barbara Barley, William Langford, and Therese Quadri. At the Plymouth.

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period pieces and judged as such with detachment by people who were not a part of that period. Such detachment is now impossible. Although they remain amusing, these scripts have become disturbing. The irresponsible attitudes they so glibly express contributed not a little to the great troubles we faced in the war and, hence, to the greater troubles we face today. What makes us somewhat uncomfortable in their presence is not that we can blame Mr. Coward for this but that we must blame ourselves.

Certainly, the Coward skill is evident in the writing of "Private Lives." As a comedy, it is as theatre-wise as it is life-foolish. Familiarity has dimmed its wit a little. This was to be expected. What was not foreseeable is that its sophistication, which once seemed complete, comes through at many moments, when exposed under changed and unpredictable conditions, as downright naive.

As the revival of "Tonight at 8:30" made clear last spring, when Miss Lawrence appeared in these one-acts without Mr. Coward, and as "Present Laughter" made no less clear when Clifton Webb attempted in New York to take over the part Mr. Coward had written for himself and acted in London, Coward plays in which he was meant to appear are doomed to fly with only one wing without him. The same thing is true of the current "Private Lives," in which Donald Cook faces the impossible task of being a replacement for Mr. Coward.

Mr. Cook is a personable actor. He is neat, agreeable, self-assured, and, I am willing to concede, skilful. But, to me at least, he seems to be utterly devoid of personality as Elyot. That is a sorry thing for anyone, especially for an actor, to be denied. A motor yacht beautifully equipped and seaworthy in its lines but without a motor could not be said to suffer from a more vital loss. Furthermore, Mr. Cook has a voice so nasal in its placement that it sounds like a Britisher's imitation of American speech. The speed with which he is able to race through his lines cannot hide the flatness of the sound he produces.

What Mr. Cook subtracts from "Private Lives" by his voice, his lack of color, and his Elk-at-Oxford innocence, Tallulah Bankhead adds to it in her own tumultuous fashion. No one can accuse Miss Bankhead of being innocent, vocally limited, or without color. Demure is scarcely the word for her, but genius is, however violent or sometimes uncontrolled. More than being a volcano, Tallulah is a volcano in a hurricane.

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see her during her tour in "Private Lives." She does not bother to play the Amanda Mr. Coward wrote or that Miss Lawrence acted. She tosses both the script and Miss Lawrence's performance right out the window. In their place, she plays Tallulah. That is something; in fact, it is a great, great deal.

If Miss Bankhead, instead of Miss Lawrence, had dropped into Cartier's to purchase that little gold book (photograph and all) which haunted Mr. Coward on his trip to the Orient, no doubt he would have come back with quite a different comedy in his luggage. Part of the audacity, hence the fascination, of Miss Bankhead's Amanda is that she acts her not only as if Mr. Coward must have had Tallulah in mind, but as if he should have even if he didn't.

She sails in full steam—and takes over. The play ceases to be Mr. Coward's and becomes hers, even as in the process a comedy becomes a farce. A farce? A circus and a sideshow, too; a sometimes hilarious Barnum and Bailey evening with Tallulah under the Big Tent; with Tallulah as lion tamer and lioness, as snake and snake-charmer, as tumbler and aerialist, jumping through hoop after hoop, giving—and having—a good, if occasionally frightening, time.

JOHN MASON BROWN.

STAGE

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NEW EDITIONS

FASCINATING is not an adjective to be applied lightly to any book (although publishers' advertisements bear witness to the contrary), for its primary meaning is the ability to deprive a victim of the power of escape or resistance by one's look or presence, while in popular usage it is synonymous with charming and enchanting; but it is an adjective which I apply with firm confidence to the revised, expanded edition of Willy Ley's "The Lungfish, The Dodo, and The Unicorn" (Viking, \$3.75).

Mr. Ley, specialist in the history of zoology and paleontology, describes his book as "An Excursion into Romantic Zoology." It is a triple excursion. In his first sally—which might have been called "What Is There in It?"—the author surveys the legends and examines the scientific evidence concerning the unicorn, the kraken, the basilisk, sea serpents, giants of Biblical mention, and the Dragon of the Ishtar Gate; and in each instance science comes with more or less vigor to the support of what once were deemed old wives' tales and sailors' fancies. Anyone who does not believe in great sea serpents, for example, after Mr. Ley has dealt with them, is proof against persuasion. From creatures compounded of myth and reality, in unknown proportions, the zoologist turns to others that have vanished completely, or almost so, from the earth: wisent, urus, wild horse, great auk, giant sloth, sea cow, heath hen, passenger pigeon, and famed Dodo of the Mascarene Islands. Most of these became extinct because they were "too strictly adapted to a given set of conditions" and "had lost the ability of readaptation." By way of contrast, Mr. Ley's third section celebrates survivals that verge on the miraculous. Here we meet such ancients as the horseshoe crab, "probably the oldest living animal of our planet, not counting a few small marine or aquatic forms of life and a few dull clams"; *Latimeria*, "the greatest surprise among living fossils"; the platypus, "living fossil *par excellence*"; the estivating lungfish, the koala, okapi, and Congo peacock.

When one closes Mr. Ley's book, one can only exclaim, "What a zoo!" and reflect that it is a happy day for readers when precise scientific knowledge, a lively imagination, humor, and an easy, engaging style are combined in the person of a single author.

From animals who seem in some cases to compete with fiction, let us turn to a few specimens of pure fiction which have recently gone into new editions. Robert Penn Warren's "Night Rider" (Random House, \$3) is an engrossing story of tobacco warfare in Kentucky—alive in both character and incident, as inexorable as Greek tragedy in its development, and harboring universal truths in its specific instances—which, when first published in 1939, announced the appearance of a new American novelist of quality and stature. "The Robber Bridegroom" (Harcourt, Brace, \$2.75), by Eudora Welty, is a magical, almost indiscribable brew, among the ingredients of which one can detect a pinch of "Cupid and Psyche," some dashes of the grimmest Grimm, quite a bit of blood from the Natchez Trace, pungent spices of American folklore, and Miss Welty's own captivating, poetic, unifying prose. Harcourt, Brace's attractive reprints of Virginia Woolf's "Orlando," "Mrs. Dalloway," "To the Lighthouse" and "The Waves" (\$3 each) confirm me in the opinion that this brilliant but eccentric novelist will, for some generations to come, continue to be discovered by a number of fit readers, and that her company, like Landor's, will be small but select. Her forte was character in isolation; when she plotted she tended to become a puppeteer, and she was more at home with thought than with emotion.

"Tom Jones," illustrated by Harry Diamond, and "David Copperfield," illustrated by Everett Shinn (John C. Winston Co., \$3.50 each), are the first two of "The Ten Greatest Novels of the World" to be introduced and abridged, for the sake of easy reading, by Somerset Maugham. This surgical treatment of great books will doubtless be approved by some persons, and Mr. Maugham is obviously among them; not only as a paid editor, it would seem, but also as a reader of self-confessed impatience, who cares only about getting on with a story. His introductions are facile, informative, and designed for popular consumption. . . . The Heritage Press edition of Walton's "The Compleat Angler" (\$5), illustrated by Douglas W. Gorsline, and including an essay by James Russell Lowell, is a noble volume, set in type that will delight the weariest eyes.

—BEN RAY REDMAN.

The Saturday Review