

Seeing Things

IN A CLASS BY ITSELF



—John Bennewitz.

Vivienne Segal and Harold Lang—"diamond-hard and diamond-bright."

THE catastrophe is manifestly wrong, for an Opera must end happily," says the Player who at the end of "The Beggar's Opera" is horrified to learn that Macheath, the polygamist, highwayman, scoundrel, and jailbreaker, is to be hanged.

"Your objection is very just," replies the Beggar, thereupon arranging, however absurdly, a reprieve and having the prisoner brought back in triumph to the several women who think they are married to him. "All this we must do," adds the Player, "to comply with the Taste of the Town."

The taste of the town, whether in the London of John Gay's time or the New York of John O'Hara's, has almost always been in the realm of musicals for spangled nonsense, for plots with happy endings and no relation to life, and for sweet romances about young men and maidens who, however nitwitted, are passed off because of their virtue as heroes and heroines. This is why Mr. O'Hara must be welcomed with Mr. Gay as an innovator.

Did Mr. Gay ignore prettiness and choose a Hogarthian world of squalor

for his scene? Did he stand the operatic convention of his day on its flat head by dealing lustily and uproariously with bandits, jailbirds, pickpockets, sluts, and rogues? He did, and with a result which, more than making Gay rich and Rich (his producer) gay according to the contemporary gag, has been cherished as a classic all these many years.

The musical play* which Mr. O'Hara fashioned eleven years ago from his *New Yorker* sketches, and for which Richard Rodgers wrote some of his most beguiling music and the late Lorenz Hart some of his most engaging lyrics, has already been accepted as a modern classic. Certainly his "Pal Joey" is the nearest Broadway has come to producing its own "Beggar's Opera." No less certainly, one of the surest sources of its en-

*PAL JOEY, a revival of the musical play. Music by Richard Rodgers. Lyrics by Lorenz Hart. Book by John O'Hara. Dances and musical numbers staged by Robert Alton. Settings by Oliver Smith. Costumes by Miles White. Book directed by David Alexander. Entire production supervised by Mr. Alton. Presented by Jule Styne and Leonard Key in association with Anthony B. Farrell. With a cast including Vivienne Segal, Harold Lang, Lionel Stander, Helen Gallagher, Pat Northrop, Elaine Stritch, Helen Wood, Jack Waldron, etc. At the Broadhurst Theatre, New York City. Opened January 3, 1952.

chantment is the utterly disenchanted evening it provides.

The night-club entertainer who is its central figure has no more relation to morality than Lady Godiva, at least on the occasion of a not forgotten ride, had to clothing. He is a cad, a heel, a braggart, a liar, a rabbit, and a gigolo. The world through which he moves is the world of hotspots in Chicago. With the exception of one nice girl who has the sense to turn him down, the people he knows are a shady lot. They include striptease molls, blackmailers, drunks, and a rich society matron whose habit is to forget that she is married and whose interest in young men exceeds the call of charity.

Mr. O'Hara observes these people and their underworld with brilliant and hilarious remorselessness. He writes about them with such commendable detachment and honesty that his book could probably stand on its own as a play without the aid of music. To make such an experiment would, however, be a pity. It would mean losing such delightful Rodgers and Hart songs as "I Could Write a Book," "You Mustn't Kick It Around," "Chicago," "In Our Little Den" "Take Him," and of course "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered." No one in his right senses would want to be deprived of such numbers as these. Or, for that matter, of the bursting vitality, the brassiness, and the humor of the dancing as directed by Robert Alton.

NOT all of us were bright enough to recognize the full merits of "Pal Joey" when it was first produced. I know I didn't, in spite of Richard Watts's valiant effort to make me see the light. It wasn't that I was shocked; it was merely that I was dumb. With bowed head and blushing face I have just reread the first-night review I wrote for the *New York Post*. I gather from that sorry notice that, though I enjoyed the first half, "Pal Joey" died for me thereafter. How completely I had missed the musical's point may be guessed from a line which complained that as the evening progressed Joey ceased to be a pal. What such a statement meant I have fortunately forgotten. One thing is certain. It was and is nonsense. Pal Joey was never meant to be the pal of anyone on either side of the footlights. Mr. O'Hara's title is a storm warning of ironies to come.

Before the initial production had run its course I did begin to realize I was wrong. How wrong, the current revival has made even clearer to me. For "Pal Joey" is far more than an enjoyable show. It is a distinguished

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contribution. It is distinguished in its music, its lyrics, its choreography, its writing, and once again in the manner in which it is acted, sung, and danced.

Vivienne Segal, as the Chicago matron, is if anything slimmer, trimmer, and more attractive than she was eleven years ago. Never dodging the sordid truths of the part, she projects them with a fine unfrightened gusto and yet maintains an assurance so quiet and well controlled that it has a dignity of its own. Right throughout the evening to the point of being irreplaceable, her singing of "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" is a notable experience.

Harold Lang may fail to bring to the young night-club entertainer the dark driving power that Gene Kelly had. Even so, his Pal Joey has its own excellence. He is as conscienceless as he should be, a figure with the right, cheap charm and easy smile who is spiritually shoddy. No one who saw him in "Look, Ma, I'm Dancin'" can be surprised at his incredible skill as a dancer. Let the music begin and his response to it is immediate and complete. His energy is matched only by his grace. The law of gravity is one of the many laws his Pal Joey disregards.

IT may seem unfair to set this Rodgers-Hart-O'Hara work on a pedestal apart, when so admirable an under-world musical as "Guys and Dolls" is one of the current theatre's most popular and prized productions. But, without meaning to subtract in any way from the joys and merits of the latter, it must be confessed that there is a difference. Grandly tough and superbly gaudy as they are, the touts and tin-horns in "Guys and Dolls" have hearts as large as valentines. They are sentimentalists who just happen to be mugs.

No such inner core of tenderness is present in "Pal Joey." Equally delightful though it is, it is pitched in quite another key. The toughness of its characters is more than skin deep. Their minds are tough, their speech is tough, their hearts are hard, and their lives as calloused as their points of view. A major contributor to the evening's fun is the utter and undeviating honesty with which Mr. O'Hara has dared to record the sordid world and nature of his night-club entertainer. So unflinching is Mr. O'Hara, and hence so right, that "Pal Joey" has had no imitators. When it comes to predecessors, one must, as already pointed out, go back over all those years to John Gay's "The Beggar's Opera," which was also diamond-hard and diamond-bright.

—JOHN MASON BROWN.

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Broadway Postscript

GEORGE KAUFMAN once defined satire as "what closes on Saturday night." While it may be stretching a point to call "Fancy Meeting You Again's" mild spoofing of reincarnation a satire, it can more or less be said that Mr. Kaufman has become the victim of his own witticism.

It must be admitted, however, that his co-author, wife, and leading lady, Leueen McGrath, glided through her role as unembarrassed as if she had had no part in its writing. Since a girl as beautiful as she is could hardly believe in a character who takes 5,000 years to get her man to the altar, Miss McGrath's poise was possibly due to a slow melodic over-enunciation that seems to protect British actresses from playwrights' foolishnesses.

And foolishness this was. Undoubtedly, Mr. Kaufman felt himself under the compulsion to write a play whether he had anything to say or not, for what he did say was painfully meager and dispersed. From a new playwright such a piece might rate a rousing ho-hum for the brief moments of genuine comedy in the play. But when a man of Mr. Kaufman's reputation and adroitness makes the elementary error of following these really funny moments with lame bits of humor, it is time for some prolonged head-scratching.

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Theatre-goers attending "The Shrike" (to be reviewed by John Mason Brown in a later issue) may wonder about the strange title. The program will merely state that the shrike is a predatory bird. However, Joseph Kramm, forty-four-year-old author of the play, has given us a fuller

Reformer

By Collister Hutchison

DAWN, it's not fair
To flaunt all of that gold
And ridiculous blue
Before poor little days
Who have nothing to wear
But dingy, old grays
That won't keep out the cold.
Dawn, it's shameful of you.
And all this to-do
Of flighty, young wings
That muss up the skies
With troublesome spots
That are bad for the eyes—
It needs looking into.
Dawn, can't you walk
Without getting the trees
All upset with that breeze?
I want to talk.

explanation of the appellation which was added to his script after it had been written.

"The Shrike," says Mr. Kramm, "is a bird who without malice impales its victim on thorns and eats out its brains. I think it symbolizes the kind of destruction that is visited on the man in the play, not just by his wife but also by the pressures in society which quite without malice force us all into hypocrisy and meaningless routine."

* * *

Another warning about misleading titles comes from Harold Clurman, director of ANTA's revival of "Desire Under the Elms."

"The love in the play is mostly lust and rape," he asserts, "and the only real 'desire' you have is for the getting of the deed to that farm."

* * *

"A Month of Sundays," the musical based on Victor Wolfson's play "Excursion," has closed for repairs. The producers hope to have it fixed in time for a Broadway opening late this spring.

—HENRY HEWES.

SRL Recommends

Caesar and Cleopatra and **Antony and Cleopatra**: Shaw's wise comedy and Shakespeare's soaring tragedy excitingly revived by Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh. A glittering addition to the season. (SRL Jan. 12.)

Saint Joan: Shaw's stirring masterpiece. disappointing in Uta Hagen's performance of the Maid, but including its excellent male performances and so staged that the greatness of the play comes through. (SRL Oct. 27.)

I Am a Camera: An interesting and sensitive play by John van Druten, based on Christopher Isherwood's "Berlin Stories." Excellently acted by William Prince and Marian Winters, and made memorable by Julie Harris's performance which has rightly established her as a star. (SRL Dec. 22.)

Point of No Return: An agreeable and sympathetic dramatization by Paul Osborn of John Marquand's novel. The production includes admirable performances by Henry Fonda, Leora Dana, John Cromwell, Robert Ross, and Frank Conroy. (SRL Jan. 5.)

The Constant Wife: A revival of Somerset Maugham's witty and engaging comedy, charmingly played by Katharine Cornell, Grace George, and Brian Aherne. (SRL Dec. 29.)

Remains to Be Seen: A farcical whodunit by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse which is jubilantly acted and offers as many laughs as it does thrills. (SRL Oct. 20.)

The Moon Is Blue: A comedy which playgoers everywhere have taken to their hearts, though there are some of us to whom it seems like an inferior version of "The Voice of the Turtle." It has its funny lines and scenes and is acted with great charm and skill by Barbara Bel Geddes and Barry Nelson.

Stalag 17: An exciting and hilarious comedy-melodrama about some Ameri-

can airmen in a German prison camp. Skillfully acted. (SRL May 26.)

The Fourposter: A two-character play dealing with all the familiar experiences of marriage, at least as it is known to the stage. Admirably played by Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn, and lapped up by playgoers regardless of what some of us may think.

The King and I: Another Richard Rodgers-Oscar Hammerstein triumph and one of the outstanding and most tasteful musical comedies of our time. Everything about it is right, especially Gertrude Lawrence's and Yul Brynner's performances of Anna and the king. (SRL Apr. 14.)

Guys and Dolls: Another musical of a very different kind but of the same distinction. In this case a Damon Runyon story has been brought to the stage in a stylized and delectable form which could not be bettered. (SRL Dec. 23, 1950.)

Pal Joey: Reviewed in this issue.

Call Me Madam: In the amusing Irving Berlin-Lindsay and Crouse musical, the great, the one and only, Ethel Merman in topnotch form as an American Ambassador who more than faintly recalls our representative in Luxembourg. (SRL Oct. 28, 1950.)

South Pacific: With Martha Wright and George Britton heading the cast, this Rodgers and Hammerstein triumph, staged with such color and vigor by Joshua Logan, remains one of the most popular and beloved of current hits. (SRL Apr. 30, 1949.)

Two on the Aisle: An entertaining revue in which Dolores Gray proves herself to be a new and welcome star and Bert Lahr is uproariously funny in some sketches worthy of his fine talents.

Top Banana: A musical comedy about a TV star and ex-burlesque headliner which is all Phil Silvers, and what an all Phil Silvers is. He is an incredibly energetic fellow who is as convulsing as he is dynamic. —J. M. B.

SRL Goes to the Movies

A CRY FROM AFRICA

"CRY, the Beloved Country" (Lopert) raises more questions than most movies I have seen lately, but it answers its own major question. Is it a movie to be recommended confidently and enthusiastically? For me, the answer to the readers of *The Saturday Review* is an unconditional yes.

The screenplay, written by Alan Paton, reflects but doesn't duplicate the essentials of his novel of African life. More than the book, this British-made picture illuminates the title. The action begins on the land, converges on the city, concentrates on the dreadful shantytowns in which the Negroes live; then a crime connects black man and white and the action reverses itself, moving from the hovels where the crime was germinated to the city where it is punished and finally to the country again where the catharsis of tragedy is rendered. This contraction and expansion are the pulse and rhythm of the picture; they create the time-beat that speaks to the subconscious of the audience; they carry the tragedy of the plot to a higher plane than the action itself.

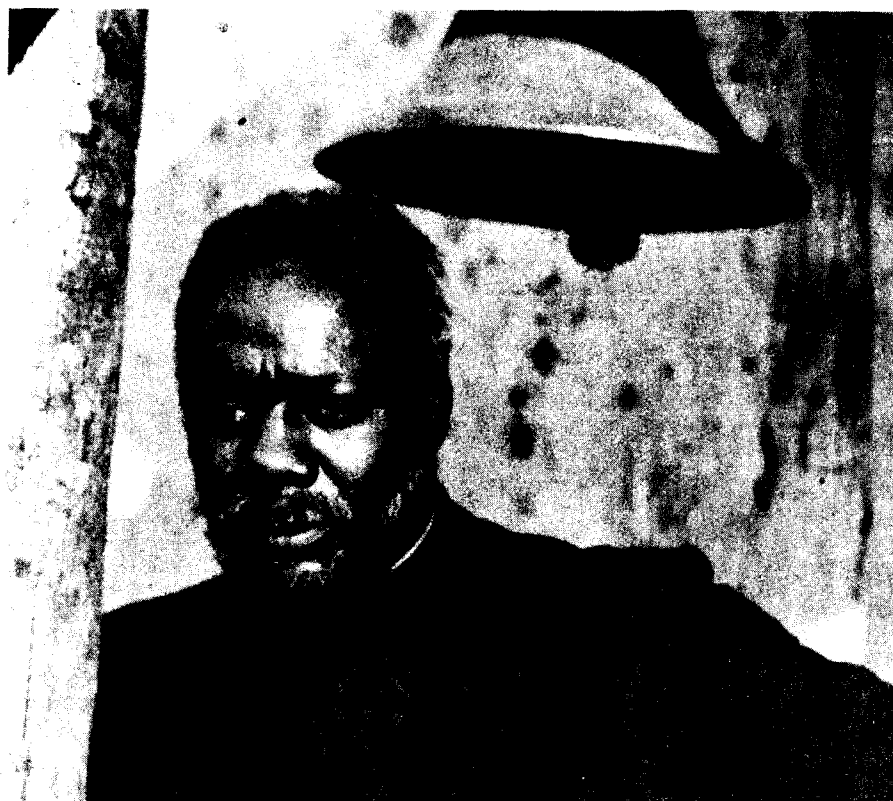
The action is a father's search for his son, and although the father is a

priest and the son a sinner, it is a real, not a symbolic, journey we follow. Along the way the priest redeems his sister from a tawdry and immoral life and rejects his brother's rebellion against the white oppressor; he finds the girl who is bearing a child to his son; but when the son, caught in a robbery, kills the best white friend the Negroes have in Johannesburg the priest cannot save him. A drama of reconciliation, not of victory and defeat, follows: the father of the murdered man, whose life had been twisted by prejudice and hate, is converted by his son's ideals and shakes the hand of the priest.

Zoltan Korda, as director, has told this story with a kind of massive simplicity, sometimes awkwardly in connecting his actors and non-professionals, but delivering without flaw the impressive performances of Canada Lee, as the priest-father, and Sidney Poitier, in the part of another Negro priest. As producer, Mr. Korda deferred too much to his author and allowed Mr. Paton to de-activate his picture at important moments. We are told about, but do not see, the benevolent work of the white man, which makes his death at the hands of a Negro so appalling; the conversion of the father is not the consequence of an action, but of reading a political testament; the conflict between the priests and the radicals is not grounded in events.

Perhaps because the picture is not too explicit, it stays at a high tragic level. In Africa, where the black man is the native and the whites are invaders, you might expect a movie to exploit violent hates, to be filled with denunciations, to snarl. Instead, you have the infinite sadness of the separation of the two peoples, the despair of the Negro's cry, "If only we could be told!" Black and white priests are shown in fellowship, but black laymen and white touch one another only through crime and the desolation of death. Only then does a kind of exalted goodness, shared by the two fathers, come into play.

We are not accustomed to goodness—the real thing, not a set of moral maxims—at the core of a moving picture, which brings me back to the questions raised by "Cry, the Beloved Country." Lacking the neat plotting and the glossy finish of the average American feature, without the sex-



Canada Lee—"impressive performance."