

Seeing Things

NOW — AND THEN

NO American musical is more treasured as a memory than "Of Thee I Sing."* It holds a special place (shall I say evergreen or Wintergreen?) in the affections of those lucky enough to have seen it when first it captured the country more than twenty years ago. "Funnier than the Government and not half so dangerous" was Brooks Atkinson's happy description of it. Funnier than the Government it was, and not dangerous at all. Instead, the irreverence with which it dealt with the White House, the Supreme Court, the Senate, and the zany features of a national election were healthy proofs that America was still safe for democracy.

No wonder, "Of Thee I Sing" was the first musical comedy to win the Pulitzer Prize. Its merits were irresistible. George Gershwin's score was one of the best that even he ever wrote. To this day it is impossible to hear "Wintergreen for President," "Love Is Sweeping the Country," or "Of Thee I Sing, Baby" without having the heart dance. Ira Gershwin's lyrics and the book by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind were so gay that at every performance they put an end to the Depression, at least for those who had managed to squeeze into the Music Box.

The very notion of having a candidate run on a platform limited to "Love" was inspired. So was the idea of having Senators halt impeachment proceedings against the President merely because his wife was about to become a mother. Both were hilarious and deserved thrusts at our sentimentality as a people. Then, there were the wonderfully mad slogans carried by the marchers in the political parade. And those lantern-slide election returns which were glorious in their idiocy. Above all, however, there was Alexander Throttlebottom, that most forgotten of forgotten men, the Vice

President, who both as written and as played by Victor Moore was one of the most original and winning characters the modern theatre has produced.

"Let sleeping dogs lie" is a precept upon which we have all been raised. In the majority of cases it would be wiser if precious memories were also left undisturbed. Recollections have an active life of their own. Usually they are safest when they remain unchallenged by the present. They are the products of what was and what we were, and both of these are bound to change. I must admit I dreaded seeing "Of Thee I Sing" again. I could understand, as who could not, why in an election year its revival was almost inevitable. But my admiration for the original production was so warm that I hated to risk having it chilled.

I could not imagine anyone, however well-meaning or gifted, replacing Victor Moore as Throttlebottom or, for that matter, William Gaxton as John P. Wintergreen. Remembering how dizzily this twirling planet has spun since December 26, 1931, and how dif-

ferent America and America's role in history have become, I had my natural misgivings about encountering again the light-hearted nonsense which had once been so right and delectable a feature of "Of Thee I Sing."

The first half of the present production persuaded me my fears were groundless. The overture was a sheer delight. The old melodies were all there, creating their old joy. The introductory scene, with its slogans brought up to date, was as funny as ever. The projected election returns, also refurbished, were as convulsing as anything I remember in years. Jack Carson, though lacking William Gaxton's shiny exuberance, was an acceptable Wintergreen. Betty Oakes had as Mary Turner, his bride-to-be, much the same bloom and bounce as Lois Moran. Even Paul Hartman, so different from Mr. Moore and faced with the appalling assignment of trying to fill his shoes, was serviceable enough. Indeed, only Lenore Lonergan, as Diana Devereaux the by-passed bathing beauty of the Southland, seemed lost.

AS I say, this recaptured pleasure was something I felt during the first half. Feeling it again was a giddy and welcome experience; a sort of sentimental orgy in which hearty belly laughs replaced what can be an agreeable indulgence in melancholy. I knew what I was seeing was not quite what it had been. It was really a road com-



—John Bennewitz.

Paul Hartman, Betty Oakes, and Jack Carson—"warm admiration chilled."

*OF THEE I SING, a revival of the musical comedy. Book by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind, music by George Gershwin, lyrics by Ira Gershwin. Directed by Mr. Kaufman. Settings by Albert Johnson. Costumes by Irene Sharaff. Musical numbers and ensembles staged by Jack Donohue. Presented by Chandler Cowles and Ben Segal. With a cast including Jack Carson, Paul Hartman, Jack Whiting, Lenore Lonergan, Betty Oakes, Florenz Ames, Joan Mann, Jonathan Lucas, Howard Freeman, J. Pat O'Malley, Donald Foster, Robert F. Simon, Loring Smith, etc. At the Ziegfeld Theatre, New York City. Opened May 5, 1952.

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pany version of a Broadway success. Yet in this age of oleomargarine it was near enough to the original to pass.

After the intermission, however, a strange, unwanted thing happened. At least it did to me. When once the scene was past in which Throttlebottom gets his first view of the White House as a tourist, the evening's fun began to wither on the vine. I wanted to keep on laughing. I tried desperately to do so. But, to my surprise and sorrow I discovered I was sitting straight-faced and bored through most of the second act. Like a party that starts gaily and suddenly dies, "Of Thee I Sing" had languished so far as I was concerned.

I began to wonder why I had ever found anything funny in the stuff about the French Ambassador, in the impeachment proceedings as written, or in Mary Turner's twins. The book ceased to be fresh and witty, and seemed old and tired. The performances lost their hold. They appeared increasingly colorless and finally downright inadequate. Only Mr. Gershwin's music retained the gaiety and sparkle I had associated with every instant of the first production.


It is hard to find a precise explanation for this. Certainly, the ways of Government have not lost their humorous aspects. Certainly, the practices of politicians and methods of campaigning have not become joke-proof. Such materials as these are as ripe in the opportunities they offer satirists as they ever were. But many of the targets for satire have shifted or are different. And patching up an old script, written for and about a vanished world with topical references born of another day, is not enough to make that old script new. In fact, the patches only call attention to its age.


Campaign slogans, election returns, smoke-filled rooms, the machinations of party bosses, the windiness of convention orators, and the susceptibility of voters—all these remain as unaltered as the validity and inspiration of Throttlebottom's character. It is because it deals with these that the first half of "Of Thee I Sing" still seems true and timely. From then on, however, when its plot depends upon the possibility of France's going to war against the United States because of Diana Devereaux, the nonsense has little sense behind it. It wanders into a Cuckooboro-on-Cloud and loses touch with reality. The truth one demands of satire dwindles into silliness.


Once upon a time none of us complained about this. If the second half of the book represented a falling-off, we did not object. Why do we do so now? One reason is ironic. It may be the penalty "Of Thee I Sing" is forced


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Introducing *Dress rehearsal*


 MONICA STIRLING's new novel, *Dress Rehearsal*, is just published. (\$3 at your bookseller's). It is coming out simultaneously in a French edition with an introduction by COLETTE.


 This bilingual launching is the sort of thing that naturally happens to MISS STIRLING, who is almost as French as she is English: her father founded the English Theatre in Paris; her sister was the first English actress admitted into the working company of the Comédie Française.


 MONICA STIRLING is, as a matter of fact, the only non-acting STIRLING. The heady theatrical atmosphere in which she was reared is responsible for much of the flavor and charm of her novel.


 *Dress Rehearsal* is the light-hearted story of an unequal contest.


 In one corner is Miss Jocelyn Melisande Julie Scott, cosmopolitan daughter of cosmopolitan parents, both great names in the theatre.


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 MISS STIRLING has a fine, sly time describing the School's desperate attempts to make an uninhibited, stage-bred young creature into a Stiff-Upper-Lip, Playing-the-Game, Not-Letting-Our-Side-Down Heath Towers Girl.

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 *Dress Rehearsal* is MONICA STIRLING's second novel and the first to be published by us. She has had stories in *The Atlantic Monthly* (whose editor first encouraged her to write, during the war), *Harper's Bazaar*, *The New Yorker*, and other magazines here and abroad.

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to pay because of having so raised the standards of intelligence in satiric musical comedies. There are other possible explanations. As a people, we are no doubt as sentimental as we were twenty years ago, but we are no longer so simple. The cruel barrage of events during these two decades has seen to that. Conditions of the recent past and threats of the future have forced us to acquire a sense of the preciousness of time we did not formerly possess.

When there is so much to be said about our Government and the issues of the present, we resent not having these points made as wittily and tellingly as only Mr. Kaufman and Mr. Ryskind could make them. They do make them in the first half of "Of Thee I Sing" but not in the second. Even in the first half we find it hard to believe with our old assurance that "Love Is Sweeping the Country."

It would take a lot more rewriting than occasional lines about Stassen, Warren, General Vaughan, Dewey, Rita Hayworth, or mink coats to bring "Of Thee I Sing" up to date. Although it still has its hilarious moments, much of its hilarity belongs to the past. That it seems dated during so much of the second half is one way of measuring how much we and the world have changed since that memorable December night in 1931 when first it astonished and delighted us.

—JOHN MASON BROWN.

Russian Symbolist

CHEKHOV THE DRAMATIST. By David Magarshack. Auvergne, New York. \$4.50. Mr. Magarshack contends that Chekhov's plays have almost always been misinterpreted by actors, directors, and critics, and he attempts to prove his point by the use of excerpts from Chekhov's letters and comparisons between early and late versions of the playwright's scripts.

Since directors and actors know the problems of their trade and the practical necessity of handling audiences first-hand, they are seldom able to make much use of an author's abstract ideas in their work. Chekhov's symbolism, his notion of using some of his characters as chorus or counterpoint, and his belief that "The Sea Gull" and "The Cherry Orchard" should be played as ludicrous comedies are difficult to translate into theatrical results. (This is, perhaps, why some of the people who talk the most intelligently about the theatre flourish least in it.) However, there is no denying that Mr. Magarshack's book is a valuable aid to anyone reading or seeing a Chekhov play. —HENRY HEWES.

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