

Easy Essays

AS THEY APPEAR. By John Mason Brown. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co. 258 pp. \$3.75.

By DAVID MCCORD

IN a small town in southern Oregon, known to me when both the town and I were young, I went occasionally to see the flickers. They weren't much more than that. About the only film I remember was a sneak preview of Hopalong Cassidy. It was a very short short. In the end, the unnamed Hopalong was thrown from his unnamed cayuse. There was nothing remarkable in that. But the town soon knew that a local Indian (probably a Cayuse) kept returning to the nickelodeon night after night. He said, when queried, that he thought the cowboy was a good rider, and he hoped pretty soon to see him stay on.

I apply this comely story to my approach to a new book by John Mason Brown. It is a very human application. I look first to see if something in life or letters has thrown him, but nothing ever has. As if I did not know it! He can ride anything from an unbroken verb to a poltergeist pun, let alone the world as it is; and today the flying JMB is a brand recognized and respected from Shaw Gulch to Hazlitt Four-Corners. Let us inspect the present roundup.

Part of the charm of Mr. Brown's writing is that his headlong style remains a stimulating combination of the quiet reflective essay and straight newsburst reporting. Mr. Brown is more the born journalist than essayist, if you care to resolve the two components and examine them. At the same time, his approach to a subject or theme is so fresh and enthusiastic, his glance so sharp, and his literary background so catholic and allusive, that the essay comes through as the distinctive dominating element. It would be wrong to say that Mr. Brown addresses himself to a subject. He addresses himself to a target. Trajectory and velocity are high. The reader in his arm chair is jet propelled. Yet in the end there is neither an explosion on the one hand or a crash landing on the other. It is rather as if a satisfactory mutual destination were reached, with all parties safe and perhaps a little saner.

In some respects the present collection of Mr. Brown's contributions offers the best view we have had of his enormous vitality and many-sided interests: the theatre, Shaw, Shakespeare, the essay, education, children, reading, criticism, people, wit, philosophy, ideas, and everybody's war and

peace. For me there are two things lacking: relative poetry and art. I may be wrong; but I think Mr. Brown has small interest in the lyric. So be it. Sir Max Beerbohm, great stylist that he is, seems to have got on incredibly well without poetry, which he almost never quotes, and which he must read, if at all, in secret. As to visual art, Mr. Brown is uncommonly skilful at sketching scenes by indirection. Witness the remarkable instance of Alfred Lunt as a lighter of candles. And I think he could use the brush when the brush seems called for; but he doesn't. "Authors cannot subpoena genius," he says with his own sweet genius for phrase. But neither can they subpoena poetry, else he would not carelessly have spoken of "the Met's huge stage," or penned phrases like "edifices of sand," or failed now and then to mend his cast when the current of his vigorous prose is running a little too strong. I say all this in minor criticism simply because I cherish his Elia service to the essay.

A dramatic critic attains his pejority quicker than most of us. Mr. Brown was a natural to join that small company of critics who are always looking for the kill. That he never did is to his everlasting credit. "Criticism," he says in this book, "is usually bound to have its reservations in the midst of praise and to recognize that merits can exist along with faults." Mr. Brown looks at a play or a book or a man from all possible angles. If the north view is



bad, the southwest may still be good.

That is why, when he comes to the matter of Dr. Edith Sitwell's recital of scenes from "Macbeth," he can say that "Shakespeare was murdered along with Duncan and Banquo" and leave no doubt in his reader's mind that this is no wisecrack but his considered and fair opinion. No man could agree with all his opinions. Mr. Brown in his own squatter's right is something of a New World Shavian. "Socrates Without Plato" is one of his chapter titles; "Brown Without Shaw" is a chapter as yet unwritten. No praise is too great for most of the drawings by the macabre Charles Addams; but when Mr. Brown similarly applauds a juvenile delinquent who collects such public signs as "STOP—Bridge Out," "Dangerous Undertow," "Keep Clear—High Voltage," my last few hackles rise. Why, I ask, is this critic so disarming?

Of John Mason Brown, a great many of us can always take more.

The Still Master

STEPHEN CRANE: *An Omnibus.* Edited by Robert Wooster Stallman. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 703 pp. \$5.

By ALBERT J. GUERARD

THE spectacle of early success and dramatic ruin is attractive to the sentimentalist. Hence Stephen Crane, like Scott Fitzgerald, has invited much romantic biography but little serious criticism. The present very handsome volume—containing the best of Crane's work and some 50,000 words of bristling commentary by Robert W. Stallman—may well provoke the critical attention long overdue. It is one of Mr. Stallman's established virtues that he leaves no reader indifferent. He sends one back to the texts one had no intention of rereading—perhaps puzzled, perhaps angry, but in any event interested.

The essential texts are here: "The Red Badge of Courage" (with a few manuscript variants not published before in America), "Maggie," "The Open Boat," and those two astonishing "Western" stories—"The Blue Hotel" and "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky." It is on these Crane must rest his case—whether as a realist with symbolic overtones or as the most economical of the naturalists, and most strikingly as a "writer's writer" who yet has considerable popular appeal. But Mr. Stallman collects much else that is worth having: the novelette "George's Mother," seven short stories or sketches, a few pieces of Crane's own reporting, the factual background for "The Open Boat," a sheaf of poems and unpublished letters, a useful bibliography.

Crane's output during his decade of writing was very uneven, and it takes an historian's charity to include "An Experiment in Misery" in anyone's "best." Still, Mr. Stallman's principles are the right ones: attention to the work and not the man, and only the best of the work. From that best we are bound to construct each our own version of Crane, this very important "ancestor." What I find is a deep and genuine inwardness combined with an unobsessed and highly-energized interest in life itself, plain, unregenerate life—a less intellectual Conrad crossed with a more economical
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Broadway Postscript

STARS WHO DANCED



"Gigi's" Audrey Hepburn—"Madame Rambert would give us a good rap."
—From "Secret People."

THERE is a common myth that young men and women with no other assets except a pleasant personality and a passion to go on the stage can, in the wonderful world of show business, become stars overnight. Without denying the possibility of an occasional fluke, the truth is that 95 per cent of the cases in which this miracle seems to have occurred are actually people with very thorough training who have just never been fortunate enough to work their way up the ladder slowly. Two performers who have seemed to arrive overnight are Audrey Hepburn, whose first acting role in "Gigi" made her an immediate star last season, and Robert Helpmann, who keeps popping up in leading roles without ever having played small ones.

Miss Hepburn, now playing "Gigi" in Chicago, and Mr. Helpmann, currently supporting another Hepburn in "The Millionairess," recently got together with this writer to discuss how, in reality, one kind of very arduous training, the ballet, was responsible for much of the quick success they enjoyed when they made

the jump into the legitimate theatre.

Said the vital young actress with the chopped haircut: "Ballet is the most completely exhausting thing I have ever done, but if I hadn't been used to pushing myself that hard, I could never have managed the tremendous amount of work necessary to learn in three weeks how to play a leading role in my first real acting job."

Mr. Helpmann smiled, perhaps more in anticipation of a middle-age free of the rigors that go with dancing than in retrospect of a career that is already a legend. "Ballet," he acknowledged, "is exhausting, because you're working with the full extent of your body. When we point, our finger snaps out like a jackknife because our muscles are trained that way. I remember one day when I was playing in the Cleopatra plays with Olivier, I caught Larry flexing his fingers against the side of a chair. He said to me 'I wish I could point straight out, the way you ballet people do'."

"Yes," chimed in Miss Hepburn, "our director, Raymond Rouleau,

used to be very amused at the way I stood with my toes pointing out and my legs stiff whenever I'd lean down to pick something up." She jumped up and demonstrated the bending action, adding, "I wasn't conscious of doing it. It just came automatically."

Having movement come automatically is a great help to actors, because it allows them to concentrate on the vocal part of their work. This was particularly so in Miss Hepburn's case because of her meager acting experience. While she started her ballet training at the age of twelve, she had to spend her formative years in Occupied Belgium away from the English-speaking stage. Her health weakened and her adolescence lost, Miss Hepburn shifted immediately after the war to more lucrative musical comedy and cabaret dancing and finally into the cinema where Colette, the author of "Gigi," saw her and recommended her for the title role.

Mr. Helpmann, on the other hand, was fortunate enough not to have his training period interrupted. He began his ballet training in Australia at the age of fourteen. By the time he joined Sadler's Wells Ballet School in 1932, he had already studied with Novikov, Pavlova's partner, and with Karsavina, the master of the mime. Helpmann rose rapidly to leading dancer with Sadler's Wells and created six dramatic ballets for them. These included Milton's "Comus," Shakespeare's "Hamlet," and an original titled "Miracle in the Gorbals." He was thus more mature and theatre-wise by the time he jumped into playing "Hamlet" at Stratford. In his "Hamlet" he "choreographed" for himself a backward fall down a flight of steps in the ghost scene.

"That's another advantage of modern ballet training," explains Helpmann. "We learn to relax completely, which permits us to take stage falls without getting hurt. In 'The Millionairess' Cyril Ritchard, who used to be half of a celebrated dance team, has to be thrown around by Kate, and it would have taken weeks of training if a non-dancer were in the role. The ability to relax is particularly important in Shaw, because there are all those long speeches where you have to stand and listen without moving. The ordinary actor can't possibly prevent himself from doing some little thing which slightly distracts the audience's attention from the speaker. I remember that in 'Caesar and Cleopatra' we were all wearing sandals and I would notice that just before it came their turn to speak the toes of some of the actors would occasionally arch and curl up. I thought I'd discovered something