

Seeing Things

BLITHE SPIRIT

WITH reason the lights on New York's and London's theatres were dimmed in memory of Gertrude Lawrence the night after her funeral. They came on again within a minute, seeming to burn as brightly as they had before she died. But this was only an illusion. It fooled no one who had ever seen her.

Miss Lawrence was one of the irreplaceable performers of our times. One of the irreplaceable people, too. Even when she was a scraggly, long-legged girl of thirteen—"one of Pharaoh's lean kine," as her grandmother described her with a loving relative's frankness—there was something about her that was different. A friend of her father had the perception to realize this. "You've got something, Gertie," this older woman said, thereby proving herself to be one of the more reliable of latter-day prophets.

Most assuredly, Miss Lawrence did have something. It was not one thing; it was many things; and in time all of them united to form a sort of grand alliance of endowments which made her resplendently unlike anyone else.

There were dancers who could dance better than she. There were singers whose voices were truer. There

were women who were greater beauties. There were actresses who proved their deeper abilities by testing their strength in more important plays. Yet none of them combined in their persons all the gifts and graces which set Miss Lawrence apart.

When she danced—when, for example, she sent her huge hoopskirt dipping and billowing to the rhythm of the polka in "The King and I"—no one bothered to remember other dancers. They recognized only Miss Lawrence. She was the epitome of grace, and did not cease her dancing when the music stopped. Even when she walked across a stage or romped on a sofa, she moved with a dancer's lightness.

Miss Lawrence did not have to sing like an angel to sound like one. No one could capture more completely than she the lilt and nuances of such a ballad as "Jenny" in "Lady in the Dark." Or be funnier and rowdier in such a parody of a music hall turn as the sailor bit in "Red Peppers." Or more enslave an audience than she did when she took possession of "Limehouse Blues." No one could be more alluring than when in "Private Lives" she surrendered to the sentiment of

"Some Day I'll Find You." Or more captivantly gay than when in "The King and I" she swung round the stage to "Shall We Dance?" She may sometimes have failed a song, but she never failed to put over a number. Even toward the end when she was very tired and some of the high notes eluded her, her speaking voice was in itself a song, rippling and lovely and glowing with warmth.

When it comes to beauty, Miss Lawrence had long ago, in Noel Coward's phrase, appropriated it to herself. Though by her own admission she was plain as a child, she became one of the most glamorous of women. She was lithe and slim, and had great style. Her face, with its ever-shining eyes, its up-turned nose, and mobile mouth, was never in repose. Its animation was so sparkling and incessant that it created the impression of beauty. Certainly, because of its vivacity it possessed an interest and an invitation unknown in women with more perfect features whose becalmed faces are merely beautiful and therefore dull.

WHETHER Miss Lawrence dreamed about the theatre, no one has disclosed. But during all her waking hours she was an actress, carrying the theatre with her wherever she happened to be. By temperament and training, and because of the supercharge of personality and energy which was hers, her every appearance on stage and off was an entrance. Life for her was an unending show, and she always put on a good one, giving it everything she had.

Miss Lawrence did not bother with



—Culver.



—Vandamm.

Miss Gertrude Lawrence at the poles of her career: "Charlot's Revue of 1924" and "The King and I"—"you've got something, Gertie!"

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What Is a Star?

IN every great theatrical artist there is ambition and industry. These qualities beget craftsmanship. In every great theatrical artist there is the capacity for human understanding and sympathy. In a star—in a true star of the theatre—there are all these things . . . and one thing more! And that one thing is mystic and intangible. It cannot be learned or imitated. It belongs to its owner and to no one else. It is a kind of glow that emanates from only one, and communicates itself to all. It is just as unearthly as the glow of a heavenly star, and just as hard to explain—harder perhaps, because astronomers and mathematicians have learned more about stars in the sky than producers or authors or critics have been able to learn about stars in the theatre.

This magic light is not always with them. You might be sitting across a table from one of them and not be conscious of it. It is a light that begins to shine only after all the lights in the auditorium of a theatre have gone out. Then, up there on the stage, you see it—and feel it—and succumb to it. Gertrude had this light.

—OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN, 2ND,
at the funeral of Gertrude Lawrence.

the Greeks, Shakespeare, and Ibsen. "Pygmalion" was the only standard work in which she acted, and then with marked success. Hers was not the theatre of the classics. It was of a different kind. It was neither literary nor formidable. It was a place of delight, a palace of unashamed make-believe and beguilement. It offered sanctuary to those whose search was for entertainment and enchantment. Miss Lawrence knew and treasured the importance of pleasure. By giving it she rightly won both importance for herself and an enormous and devoted following.

She was a far brighter and more beckoning star than those shown at the Hayden Planetarium. Her skill was as extraordinary as her versatility. She could do almost anything—and did. She could play seriously, as in "Susan and God," and by her magic persuade audiences to take seriously even the psychoanalysis offered them in "Lady in the Dark." But until she achieved the full serenity and control of her Anna, comedy was her forte; the kind of comedy she played to perfection in "Private Lives" and in the

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laughing sketches in "Tonight at 8:30."

Miss Lawrence was a musical comedy performer who, though she grew into an admirable actress, had gifts which the legitimate theatre could not release. For the full freeing of her powers she needed the singing, dancing, color, and direct communication with an audience made possible by the poster-like values of a musical.

She was charming and irresistible when in 1924 she first conquered New York in "Charlot's Revue" and Manhattanites sang:

Lillie and Lawrence,
Lawrence and Lillie,
If you haven't seen them
You are perfectly silly.

In the following years she remained equally charming and no less hard to resist. Although sometimes her enthusiasm was greater than her discrimination and her exuberance misled her into overplaying, Miss Lawrence was a performer who continued to grow. It was as an actress who had mastered the legitimate stage and her own ebullience that she added to the delights of such a musical as "The King and I" by giving the most glowing and disciplined performance of her career.

Restraint cannot have come easily to her. Her spirit was too buoyant to be harnessed. Her vitality was tremendous. Compared to Miss Lawrence, a windmill in a hurricane seemed lethargic. She was as extravagant with her energies as she was overgenerous with her money. She never spared herself. No entertainer worked harder during the war, first for the British, and then for our own troops. In the midst of long runs and strenuous tours she was forever rushing to the aid of charities and taking on outside tasks. To play Anna, you might think, would have been a full-time job. Not for Miss Lawrence. She was giving a course in acting at Columbia and had become so excited about it that only illness could keep her away.

Playgoers responded to this warmth of hers. It leapt across the footlights. Even people who had never seen her realized that her heart was as big as her talent. This was one of the reasons she was loved with unique affection, and men and women everywhere felt a sense of personal loss when they heard of her sudden death. They realized that something gay, ornamental, and delectable had gone out of their lives. Something good, too.

Miss Lawrence seemed like the most fortunate of worldlings. The outer gloss of the International Set appeared to be hers. She could sound English, look French, and be the perfect expression of American rhythms and the Amer-

ican tempo. But alluring as she was as the symbol of Mayfair and Park Avenue, she never lost touch with nor denied the simplicities of her upbringing in Clapham. This was one of the most winning things about her, and a source of her wide appeal.

She was so vital a part of the gaiety of our past and present and such a guarantee that gaiety would endure that it is hard to lose her. Without Miss Lawrence the theatre is undoubtedly diminished. But this we must say to comfort ourselves. She died at that luckiest of times—when the tide was high. She was too young in spirit and looks ever to be asked to face the humiliations of age.

—JOHN MASON BROWN.

Broadway Postscript

SURFEITED with the "Billy Budd's" and "Mr. Roberts's" in which injustice must bow to rank, enlisted men can now rejoice that Broadway has a play where an Able Seaman gets away with punching a Chief Petty Officer. The rejoicing is apt to be brief, however, as "Seagulls Over Sorrento" has little else with which to woo the discriminating playgoer.

The play concerns a group of British sailors working on a dangerous peacetime experimental project on a bleak North Sea rock which they jokingly name Sorrento. There is plenty of plot but no real story, and it is only the capable performances of Pat O'Malley and his all-boy band that keep Hugh Hastings's sentimental comedy from going figuratively on the rocks.

The play has lasted three years in London, possibly because the cockney humor and sticky patriotism evoke from Britishers the kind of immediate response comic actors must have in

order to take charge of their audience. Over here the cast must run for it, for the seagulls who soared so strongly in their native habitat, seem, in the less friendly atmosphere of a foreign country, a grounded flock of lame terns.

—HENRY HEWES.

Drama Notes

THE INCIPIENT & THE INSIPID: The one-act play is the misfit of our commercial theatre. Only three or four times a decade does a Broadway producer dare to present an evening of short pieces. Yet the past fourteen years of Margaret Mayorga's anthologies have included distinguished first efforts by playwrights who have gone on to bigger and better things in the world of drama.

The current crop, "The Best One-act Plays of 1951-1952" (Dodd, Mead, \$3) is a worthy one, but in general the plays are short on originality and well-defined styles. Included in the volume are folk pieces by E. P. Conkle and Peter John Stephens, some soul-searching attempts by Theodore Apstein, Howard Stein, Eric Kocher, and Arthur Kelly, a racial play by Goldie Lake, jobs of slick playwriting by Nicholas Bela and Hedda Rosten, and a morality-fantasy by Stanley Richards.

Playwriting Professor Conkle's dialect-ridden skit about a boy who comes to understand himself and God in an afternoon of comic violence is probably the best play in the book and should be exempted from the general charge of staleness. Also, Stanley Richards's piece about a group of Brooklyn characters who think they might be better off in different circumstances contains imagination and some fresh humor.

—H. H.

The Criminal Record

The Saturday Review's Guide to Detective Fiction

Title and Author	Crime, Place, and Sleuth	Summing Up	Verdict
LILY IN HER COFFIN Ben Benson (Mill-Morrow: \$2.50)	State Detective Wade Paris (New England boy) tangles with <i>haute politique</i> , wraps up mayor-ess's murder.	Some artless spots, but yarn has good pace and is free from gimmicks.	Plus mark
UNFAIR COMMENT UPON SOME VICTORIAN MURDER TRIALS Jack Smith-Hughes (British Book Centre: \$4.50)	Seven British capital cases, '70s-'80s, all likely to be brand-new to American readers, reviewed by legal authority.	Admirable presentation, erring (if at all) on side of over-detail; told with great skill, telling wit.	Good

—SERGEANT CUFF.