

Apples from Teacher

George Jean Nathan's "The Theatre in the Fifties" (Alfred A. Knopf, 298 pp. \$4.50) is a new collection of the criticism of the most provocative living writer on the American stage. John Van Druten, who reviews it here, is a highly successful dramatist, known for his "Voice of the Turtle" and other plays.

By John Van Druten

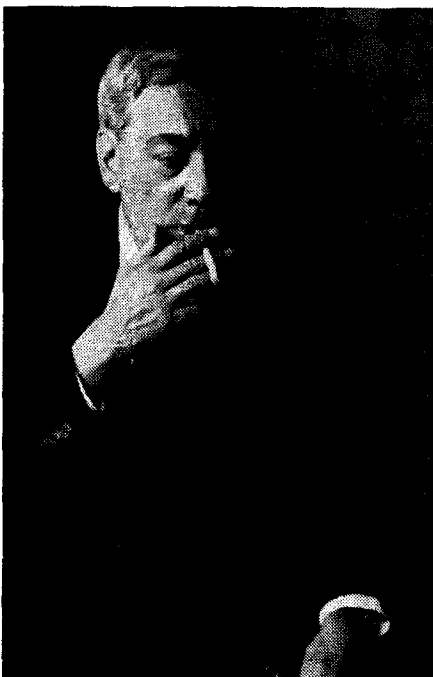
WHEN I came to this country in 1926 it was my job to become acquainted, as fast as it could be done, with the equipment of the American theatre, which was a vitally stimulating one. Almost the first guide was a book by George Jean Nathan, which revealed a devastating and unfoolable criticism that I had known before only from George Bernard Shaw. The sound of the smashing of hallowed images is always the pleasantest noise to a youngster's ears, and Mr. Nathan's instruments were the rowdiest that had yet been heard. I had just emerged from a belief in the God-likeness of Maurice Maeterlinck, and I heard Mr. Nathan saying: "We used to consider Maeterlinck a voice in the wilderness. We have come now to realize that he is only a wilderness in the voice." I decided then that he was my man in the theatre, a truthful debunker, to use a period phrase, the determined figure of honesty that in the Fifties he still is.

I know him to be unpopular in many theatrical circles, and that my pleasure in his judgments is usually attributed to the fact that he has been generous to my work. I cannot deny that that factor has a value, though I must also point out that his latest book, "The Theatre in the Fifties," gives me one very excellent notice and one very destructive one. If I consider the latter to be exaggerated in its view, I must also admit that the piling-up of every weapon of ridicule, from the sledge hammer to the rude-noise instrument, has always been his especial weapon, and that if it has delighted me when I have agreed with his judgment I must be prepared not to argue with it when it is turned on me.

Attack has always been his approach to clearing the way for the theatre he admires, and I must admit that his attacks, rather than his rarer enthusiasms, have been the things I have shared best with him. We see the same things as deadwood and underbrush in the jungle pathway,

even if we do not always agree on the ultimate objectives. From the present volume (as from all the past ones that keep pushing lesser works from my limited bookshelves to make room for them) there are dozens of devastating phrases that I wish I had space to quote. They rank with lines from Bernard Shaw's musical and dramatic criticisms as permanent in my mind. There is Shaw's description of a certain tenor's singing as being "tasty yelling," which covers an acreage of concert and operatic ground for me. Nathan has a description of a Southern set where "the surplusage of hanging moss made the stage look like a bargain fire-sale of tons of wet, imitation lace." These are word pictures that one can never forget.

In the circles where Mr. Nathan is disliked there is a theory that he is an old-fashioned critic. To this he has given the final reply in the first line of this volume. It is a startling and wonderful sentence. "Undoubtedly, one of the things that has injured the theatre with much of its public is the improvement it has shown in its later years." This rarest of admissions from a critic who has been writing of the theatre for forty years, this recognition of an advance in the styles of writing and acting is something so valuable and so heartening that I am willing to clear more and more volumes from my shelves for all those that I hope Mr. Nathan is going to give us. The theatre is improving. I have always believed that. It is wonderful to read it here. Three cheers for Mr. Nathan.



—Louis Faurer.

George Jean Nathan—"three cheers."

Jeeves on Broadway

"Bring on the Girls," by P. G. Wodehouse and Guy Bolton (Simon & Schuster, 272 pp. \$3.95), is the joint memoir of two men who collaborated on a series of musical comedies that delighted Broadway a quarter of a century ago.

By Lee Rogow

SHOW-BUSINESS memoirs being a publisher's staple, like horehound drops at the chemist's, we get our share of them each year, twining some individual's life around the trellis of remembered shows and songs. But suppose it were to happen that one of the brighter lives in the theatre had been lived by someone who could write with the wit and charm of P. G. Wodehouse? Wouldn't that make for an engaging memoir? You'd have all the spangles of the theatre, and all the delight of Wodehouse's urbane foolery, and it might turn out to be a sinfully pleasant piece of reading.

Well, it just so happens that that is exactly what has happened. Mr. Wodehouse is already sufficiently celebrated as the owner and proprietor of an improbable literary dominion situated approximately within the bounds of the English empire. But only those who are old enough to be President may be aware that he was also a felicitous lyricist whose theatrical collaborations with librettist Guy Bolton created a sprightly new style of musical comedy when the century was in its teens.

Now, in the Indian summer of his career, Mr. Wodehouse has set down his recollections of those Princess Theatre days, and the result—"Bring on the Girls," by name—is a tender and whimsical triumph of personal storytelling. Mr. Bolton's name is joined with Wodehouse's on the title page, as it was on the program of "Oh, Boy," "Leave It to Jane," and many another tinkling success. This book is the story of their collaboration, and there is no dividing line to show where one pen left off and the other typewriter began; if both wrote, they made the transitions as neatly as horn-players cutting up the Tschaikowsky Fifth. In any case, the quality of the book is unmistakably, deliciously Wodehouse.

Enclosed find sample.

Here is the dialogue at the first meeting of this happy couple:

Bolton: "Kern says you write good lyrics."

Wodehouse: "'Good' is a con-

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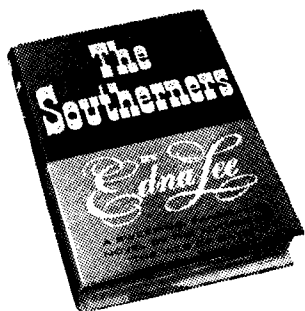
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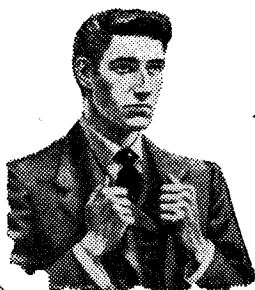


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servative word. 'Superb' is more the *mot juste*."

Bolton: "Have you done any over here?"

Wodehouse: "Not yet. But only the other day I missed landing a big job by a hairsbreadth. Somebody gave me an introduction to Lee Shubert, and I raced round to his office. 'Good morning, Mr. Shubert,' I said. 'I write lyrics. Can I do some for you?' 'No,' said Shubert. Just imagine if he had said, 'Yes.' It was as near as that."

Bolton and Wodehouse had this meeting when Jerome Kern was looking for a new rhymester for a show to follow "Very Good, Eddie" at the intimate Princess Theatre. Their first production together was "Miss Springtime"; the last Broadway appearance for either of the team was when the revival of "Showboat" in 1946 included P.G.'s imperishable lyric for "Bill."

Between these two occasions were experiences in New York, London, and Hollywood which brought them

into contact with a gallery of theatre nabobs. There was the Napoleonic A.L. Erlanger, who could cure a sensitive tenor's laryngitis by shaking him like a dust mop and commanding, "SING!" There was the thrifty Colonel Savage, who settled arguments over authors' royalties by flipping a coin with two tails. There was Flo Ziegfeld, who has been turning up in several memoirs this season, but never more entertainingly than in this one, for before the eyes of W. and B. he put his yacht into port to pick up a special chef whose touch with the terrapin was the only one the great glorifier could abide.

The two friends had wonderful fun, made pots of money, and had good conversation. Wodehouse even had a real live butler who was the living counterpart of Jeeves. At this point, as at several others in the book, it is hard to determine whether nature is imitating art or the other way round, but the stories are delightful and only a churl would complain.

Knight Under Lights

"The Oliviers," by Felix Barker (J. B. Lippincott. 371 pp. \$5) is an authorized biography of Great Britain's foremost acting couple, Sir Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh.

By Maurice Dolbier

IN 1923 when St. Edward's School, Oxford, gave its Christmas term production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" a member of the audience noted that the best performance was by the boy who played Puck—and wore (it was his own idea) two green lights attached to a pocket battery. He seemed to have more "go" in him than the other actors. He still does.

Some later critics have felt that Sir Laurence Olivier's "go" has on occasion gone too far. In 1935 when he alternated with John Gielgud in the role of Romeo one distressed reviewer wrote: "Mr. Olivier plays Romeo as though he were riding a motor-bike." In 1937 James Agate said that Olivier's Hamlet at the Old Vic was the best performance of Hotspur that the present generation had seen. The actor himself regarded his death scene in "Coriolanus" (complete somersault down a staircase, three side-rolls, and a crash just short of the footlights) as rather show-offish, but saw that "this sort of thing" brought up the applause. His latest film appearance, as Mac-heath in "The Beggar's Opera," caused some headshaking over his temerity in offering himself as a singing star, but the public reaction is best summed up in the admiring comment I overheard at one showing: "That Olivier's a smart cookie!"

Yet, as one reads Felix Barker's absorbing biography, "The Oliviers," even the Olivier failures are seen to have marked advances, rather than retrograde steps, in the history of the modern theatre and in the creative life of one of its foremost history-makers. His Romeo "dashed the poetry to smithereens," but this was because Olivier was determined to be the real Romeo, "an adolescent Italian . . . a tongue-tied boy fumbling for words." His Iago bewildered audiences who expected the usual sinister schemer, because Olivier had worked out the part according to a theory advanced by Freud's friend Dr. Ernest Jones. The failures have been problems unsolved, but the player had the sense to see that they were problems and the courage to attempt to solve them. And when, as in his Lear, his Oedipus, his Henry V, the problems are completely solved one can only repeat John Mason Brown's words:



—From "The Oliviers."

Sir Laurence and Lady Vivien—"even the failures are seen to have marked advances."