

A Plea for Playgoers' Education

By JOHN WHARTON

THE conflict between dramatists and critics is much like Thurber's War Between Men and Women; endless, with neither side able to do without the other, and ultimate victory impossible. Would there were another Thurber to give us a brilliant pictorial history of this struggle! His pictures would, I am sure, make crystal clear what I shall try to explain in words: that the ignorance of *playgoers* as to how our critical system works is a force working against the best interests of the playgoer, the theatre, and the critic himself.

The news about a new play, or other entertainment, spreads by a miraculous process, quite incomprehensible, of the same sort that can spread a rumor from New York to San Francisco in a matter of hours. When "Death of a Salesman" began rehearsing for its try-out run there was almost literally no advance sale and nothing resembling a line at the box-office. Three nights before the opening a small audience was invited, none of whom was drawn from the opinion-making class. The next morning there was a line at the box-office which continued daily through the run.

When Howard Cullman was engaged in pulling the Roxy Theatre out of bankruptcy he frequently gave special premieres of pictures which had never been reviewed. The good pictures drew big houses; the bad ones almost no one. As one of his assistants said, "They smell 'em."

If all this is true, how, then, can seven reviewers on New York dailies make or break a play? How can one critic in Chicago ruin the run of a road company?

Well, they can, and they do; partly, as we shall see, because their reviews fall into the process just described, and partly for another reason which I shall now make clear.

Man and boy, I have been reading dramatic criticism for nearly fifty years. During thirty of those years I have been professionally connected with the theatre. I have been on the fringe of at least one violent dramatist-critic open warfare skirmish. From all of this certain facts have emerged which almost always (there is no "always" in the theatre) hold true.

A small number of critics know

the theatre thoroughly, respect its power, and seek to help direct that power into progressive channels. For after the world of books, and a few magazines, the theatre is the field where challenging, progressive ideas next make their appearance. (They are sometimes picked up by motion pictures ten years later, and by radio and television only when they have lost all challenge.) The reviewers who recognize this force are the Great Critics, who make a lasting impact on the art.

A smaller, but much more ebullient, group use their columns merely as a place to display their own wit, usually of the wise-crack type. They naturally seek for plays they dislike since their powers of wit are not capable of injecting it into a favorable review. Some critics pass from the first group into this one. They are, quite rightly, the special hatred of the dramatist and producer.

The overwhelming majority of critics take their task soberly and seriously and endeavor to state their personal opinion of a play frankly, fearlessly, and honestly. I assume they believe that their readers have come to trust their judgment and that their function is, therefore, primarily to make that judgment clear. I assume this because, unless this is their conception of their function, they must either consider themselves hacks working for pay only or be suffering from advanced megalomania.

This is a perfectly reasonable and logical concept, but it has one great vice. It inevitably leads the critic into confusing fact with opinion. Almost everything in the usual dramatic review—other than the meticulous and dull recital of the plot—is a statement of the reviewer's opinion, but only seldom is it presented this way. The reviewer does not say (what is true), "In my opinion, this play will not stir up the emotions of the audiences who come to see it." He states, as with the voice of God, "This is not a moving play." Moreover, he frequently gives no reason for the statement. Furthermore, he will unhesitatingly make such a statement although the audience around him were visibly moved; and he is apparently in no wise abashed to read the next morning that some fellow-critic wrote, "This is a tremendously moving play." Of course that critic was confusing fact and opinion, too, but dramatists don't see the confusion



there. I have often wondered how critics square their *ex cathedra* pronouncements with exactly opposite critical comment, which happens more often than the public knows. Even two reviews agreeing on the merits, or demerits, of a play will frequently contain diametrically opposed pronouncements about individual performances, direction, sets, or costumes. But, then, I have often wondered how other professional theatre people square their own papal bulls which prove so fallible.

I recall a production which nearly collapsed in rehearsal because the star refused to appear unless all of the costumes, which he asserted were patently ugly, were redone. The critics acclaimed these same costumes as a triumph and the designer received some kind of special award for them. When I did a stretch of time in the picture business the Great Minds of Hollywood constantly told me of pictures which were thought so bad that the studio hesitated to show them, but made millions when they were released; in the next breath they announced as an indisputable fact that such and such a story could never be made into a really successful movie.

PLAYGOERS are not immune, either. Indeed, playgoers' opinions can be held the most stubbornly of all. A summer theatre opened with "The Moon Is Blue." At intermission an elderly patron chided the manager for his selection of such a salacious play and told him bluntly "it would not do." The manager timidly asserted that the play had done very well for some three years, in New York and elsewhere. "Young man," said the patron, "I knew the great George M. Cohan personally. I went back-stage to see him on one of his try-outs. He told me the play was no good; it had a dirty word in it. I tell you, this play will never run." And he stalked off into the night.

Hence, let us not be too harsh on the critics' confusion of opinion and fact. None of us, this writer included,

is in a position to throw the first stone.

What the dramatists, producers, and other creative theatre people really object to is that in this game of promulgating opinions as facts the critics play with loaded dice. The critics can and do make their assertions come true, because most entertainment seekers are as susceptible to conditioning as Pavlov's dogs. *By the same mysterious process described in the opening paragraphs, the general tenor of the reviews sweeps over New York immediately, and succeeding audiences come conditioned to applaud or decry.* This in itself is a second mysterious process, frequently overlooked by even professionals, but there is no doubt about it. "They smell 'em," and the more opinionated the reviews the faster the perfume, or the odor, travels.

Garson Kanin when a young man played a bit in "Three Men on a Horse." He told me that during the try-out everyone was hopeful of success, but thought the play slow in getting started; the first laughs were long delayed. The play duly opened and received extravagant praise, which it certainly deserved. On the second night the curtain rose, Miss Joyce Arling walked on-stage, and called to her husband, "Erwin." A roar of laughter went up from the audience which almost threw the bewildered actors off their cues.

Any professional can cite endless examples, for good or bad. I particularly recall the opening of a play by one of our major dramatists. He himself did not consider it a masterpiece, but it held the audience and at the close the audience comment was decidedly favorable. The morning reviews stressed all of the weaknesses of the play, of which there were, as in any play, quite a few. Within twelve hours even members of the first-night audience were parroting these criticisms, and the succeeding conditioned audiences killed the play forever.

Of course, some playgoers maintain their own critical faculties, but under our unfortunate economic handicaps these people are not enough to keep most plays alive.

AT this point someone should enter the conversation armed with a list of plays which he contends became great hits despite unfavorable reviews. I welcome this contention because it leads directly to my most important point—the type of play which suffers most at the critics' hands.

Generally speaking, although the distinction is, of course, not airtight, there are two types of play: those written purely to attract people to the box-office, usually farces, comedies, and melodramas; and those in

which the dramatist believes he has something to say. These latter are usually comedies, dramas, or stark tragedies, although even a tragedy may have some hilarious scenes.

The first class of plays when well done certainly have their place and I have no patience with critical snobbery in regard to them. I also recommend them as the least speculative investment. However, they certainly are unimportant to a vital and progressive theatre, and if they were the only plays produced we should soon sink to the early nineteenth-century English stage. It is the "important" plays which keep the theatre dynamic. During the past thirty years the plays by men such as Rice, O'Neill, Anderson, Sherwood, and their younger contemporaries have given the American theatre its stature (I am disregarding musicals for the moment); this is true despite the fact that some farces and trivial comedies may have had even longer runs and made even more money. It is also certain that without playwrights of this caliber dramatic criticism would become trivial reporting.

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All of the plays cited as those which turned into long-run hits despite bad reviews are either musicals or fall into the first group mentioned above, or succeeded on some sensational element: "Abie's Irish Rose" and "Tobacco Road" are the prime examples always used. Occasionally a drama with an extremely popular star can make the grade. I once asked a group of theatre veterans if they could name one serious play with like success. The closest they could come was Maxwell Anderson's "Winterset." In that case, however, some of the critics wrote second reviews, reversing their original opinions; even so, the play never achieved smash hit proportions.

Time and again the reviewers will stress the good points of some trivial farce, praise the actors, and send audiences there conditioned to laugh at the opening line. The important play is subjected to quite different treatment. It is frequently judged not by what it is, but by what the reviewer thinks it should have been; there is a tendency to stress the shortcomings of both script and actors, and to attack the veracity and purpose of the theme. The foregoing statement is not opinion. For anyone who will pay the salary of a researcher I will prove it chapter and verse.

To some extent this is inevitable. When a dramatist presents a first-rate play with a challenging idea he must expect that the challenge will be picked up. Perhaps the clearest state-

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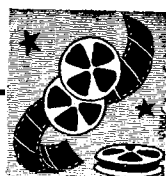
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ment of this problem is to be found in a review by the Master-Critic, Bernard Shaw:

One of the great comforts of criticizing the work of Mr. Henry Arthur Jones is that the critic can go straight to the subject matter without troubling about the dramatic construction. In the born writer the style is the man; and with the born dramatist the play is the subject. Mr. Jones's plays grow; they are not cut out of bits of paper and stuck together. Mr. Grundy or Sardou, at their respective worsts, perform such feats of carpentry in constructing show-cases for some trumpery little situation, that the critics exhaust all their space in raptures over the mechanical skill displayed. But Mr. Jones's technical skill is taken as a matter of course. Nobody ever dreams of complimenting him about it; we proceed direct to abusing his ideas without delay. This is quite right and natural. If you invent a mechanical rabbit, wind it up and set it running around the room for me, I shall be hugely entertained, no matter how monstrously unsuccessful it may be as a representation of nature; but if you produce a real rabbit which begins running about without being wound up at all, I simply say, "Why shouldn't it?" and take down my gun. Similarly, on Mr. Jones producing a live play, which starts into perfectly natural action on the rising of the curtain without being wound up during an act or two of exposition, I say "Why shouldn't it?" and, as aforesaid, take down my gun.

This is the essence of the serious dramatist's complaint. He feels—and I believe, quite rightly—that there is an essential unfairness in praising the mechanical antics of the trivial play, but coaching the audience to train its sights on the elements which keep the first-rate serious play from being a masterpiece.

I can offer no solution, but I do believe that if playgoers understood these facts the damage would be considerably lessened. The real joy of a first night is that one goes without conditioning. How to make playgoers understand this, how to make them bring their own critical faculties into play, and "see for themselves," is the problem. There should be enough writing and promotional talent in the Dramatists' Guild and the League of New York Theatres to accomplish it, if those organizations set their minds to it. I am only a lawyer who believes, in these matters, that one picture is worth a thousand words (including these thousands) and hence longs for a Thurber to make the situation clear.



SR GOES TO THE MOVIES

A Bouquet for the Brides



—From "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers."

"... When a lynching party turns up the girls refuse to budge."

JUST to prove that you can't always tell about a movie from its stars, M-G-M has put together a bright, beguiling little musical with Howard Keel and Jane Powell called "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers" (which also proves that you can't always go by title, either). Actually, behind that title, with its suggestions of "Snow White" and the Disney studios, lies Stephen Vincent Benét's winning bit of Americana "The Sobbin' Women," a sly, modern rendering of Plutarch's "Rape of the Sabine Women." And behind Keel and Miss Powell are the fetching songs of Gene de Paul; the fresh and agile lyrics of Johnny Mercer; a more than serviceable musical-comedy script by Albert Hackett, Frances Goodrich, and Dorothy Kinsley; Michael Kidd's exhilarating, inventive dances; and a smooth, supple integration of all these elements by director Stanley Donen. Probably there are others who deserve credit as well—orchestrators Alexander Courage, Conrad Salinger, and Leo Arnaud, for example, who somehow managed to get along without M-G-M's full 120-piece symphony in devising suitable accompaniments for the songs and dances; and producer Jack Cummings, who would bear the ultimate responsibility if any of the charmingly off-beat notions

that continually crop up in "Seven Brides" were to fall flat.

It takes a lot of people to make a movie, and the just distribution of credits for a job well done is generally a difficult matter. In the case of "Seven Brides," however, one has the feeling that everybody connected with the film was pulling in the same direction. There are a swing and a style to it, a zest that extends through every last foot. Even the awkward shape of the CinemaScope screen has been used to attractive advantage—aided, of course, by the fact that the film features seven brides and seven brothers. Perhaps the crew was entranced by the whimsical story. Perhaps there was an awareness that something if not quite new, at least more than a little different, was being attempted. Whatever the reason, the picture flows gracefully, rhythmically from start to finish.

Its setting is the Oregon territory about a hundred years ago. Keel drives into town one day to pick up some groceries and a wife (Jane Powell) to keep house for himself and his six lunkish brothers. Back at the farm the brothers get the notion that they too might like to be married. Schooled by Miss Powell, they court the town girls but are beaten off by their local swains. Then, inspired by Plutarch,