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BROADWAY POSTSCRIPT

CRITICS ON A TIN ROOF

THE AWARD for the Best Play of the Season by the twenty-two members of the New York Drama Critics Circle is a valuable practice. It serves as a means of reassuring the winning playwright that the superlatives heaped on his play opening night were more than hasty homage to a first impression. And, surprisingly enough, writers of greatest reputation seem to require such reassurance most. The higher the roost, the shakier the perch. Then, too, the award helps the winning show extend its run by several months, giving extra employment to all concerned. But, because these and all other consequences of his actions must be disregarded if the reviewer is to remain honest and impartial, perhaps the most important function the award-giving has is the better understanding of each critic's standards by himself and his public.

This year nine critics (Atkinson, Brown, Dash, Freedley, Gibbs, Keating, Sheaffer, Watts, and Wenning) found "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" the best play of the season. Eight others (Barron, Colby, Cooke, Gaver, Hawkins, Kerr, Kronenberger, and McClain) selected "Bus Stop." Three (Bolton, Chapman, and Shipley) picked "The Desperate Hours." Robert Coleman voted for "The Rainmaker" and this writer chose "The Bad Seed." George Jean Nathan registered a protest against a subnormal season by refusing to vote.

Does this division of opinion mean that at least half of the critics are wrong? Absolutely not. Perhaps fifty years from now one of these plays will seem a masterpiece and the others trash. But for the moment each critic has merely applied his own working criteria. They are inescapably nearsighted criteria, for critics work day-in, day-out with relatively little time for reflection.

Actually, when one says that "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" is the best play of the season one only means the best with "qualifications." While my own recent review registered certain dissatisfactions with the play, I would certainly admit that it contained the most original, forceful, and recklessly honest writing by an American playwright this season. And then, too, Tennessee Williams has since the opening revised his third act to eliminate the drawn-out dirty joke which Big Daddy tells to assert a Rabelaisian immoral victory over impending

death. In the new version Big Daddy returns to talk not of a pleasant aroma of fertility raising a ruckus in the elephant cage, but rather of the obnoxious odor of mendacity in his own house. This (and a poetic final speech reinstated from an intermediate version) is an improvement, for whatever the playwright's original intention the theatregoers are primarily interested in this mendacity theme. A letter just received from Oscar Hammerstein II states the case. He says, "It is the discussion of mendacity between father and son which stays with me now and towers over the rest of the play. Too many plays cannot be written to show up the 'mendacities' by which we live. The big mendacities must be slain. The smaller mendacities—I should like to have them remain with us for a little. Let them remain like springs on an automobile to relieve the shock of the trip. Also before we shed *all* mendacities let us make sure that we find out what the truth is."

Certainly Mr. Williams can be proud of having faced such a vital subject, and the Critics' Award should encourage him to continue to follow his own genius whether it leads to Broadway acceptance or not.

The near-victory of "Bus Stop" may be due to the fact that the more ordinary themes of that play were more neatly dealt with and that the total effect of the production was warmer, more natural, and more gently moving. "The Desperate Hours" had similar virtues plus a strong suspenseful construction but minus William Inge's great gift for characterization. "The Rainmaker" was big-hearted, and it is understandable that it might charm its admirers into a subjective ecstasy powerful enough to cause them to overlook its many shortcomings.

"The Bad Seed," which was this reviewer's personal choice, doesn't have very much warmth, naturalness, or direct force. It is at best a skilful patching together by a master playwright of a novel written by a man on the verge of insanity. Many who see it regard it in the category of a thriller. Yet there is no play this season which assumes so strong an attitude towards its material, no play which so firmly pinpoints our society and times, and no play which leaves the theatregoer with so much to consider in himself. Like "Camino Real," it is the best of the season, but only if these are the things that matter most to you. —HENRY HEWES.



SR GOES TO THE MOVIES

GHOSTS IN THE REEL

THE talking picture is a haunted medium of entertainment. There are ghosts in it everywhere—ghost-talkers, ghost-singers, ghost-musicians, and the whole roster of spectral talent. Adding disembodied sound to the shadow movements of the actors is called “dubbing,” and its use goes far beyond the mere mechanical conversion of a film from one language to another. It has become a force in the basic dynamics of movies, like the unseen wind in a billowing sail.

Ghosting is going on everywhere. The juvenile lead in a music story can pound away at the piano with his closed fists if he wants to, because someone like José Iturbi will be supplying the virtuosity on the soundtrack. In Italy actresses are chosen on the theory that the silhouette is all-important. You can always hire someone to speak the lines (it is rumored that even Magnani and Lollobrigida have ghost-voices, at times, in their own language).

This thing is spreading all over the place, from the movies to television. One Midwestern TV star is known as a “syncher” of songs. She is a pretty girl who appears on the screen and pretends to sing numbers played on records by a disc jockey. She does not sing songs, she just moves her lips and “synchs” them.

The most famous synching job to date was that of Larry Parks standing in for Al Jolson's voice in those biographical movies. The first was “The Jolson Story”; and in the second, “Jolson Sings Again,” there was an ingrown triple-ghosting job to

top all others. Here's how it went: Larry Parks as elderly Al Jolson was watching Larry Parks playing young Al Jolson in the first movie—in other words, Parks ghosting for Parks. At the same time, Jolson himself was ghosting the voices for both of them.

There's nothing so complicated in the latest synching extravaganza, M-G-M's “Interrupted Melody,” but this new CinemaScope biography of Marjorie Lawrence ought to rank with the best of them on the spectral honors list. In it, Eleanor Parker plays the Australian farm lass who became an international opera star. In the music scenes Miss Parker is turned from a quail into a lark by the lovely voice of Eileen Farrell vibrating from the stereophonic sound speakers while the star moves her lips.

Miss Parker, who is very clever at the techniques of acting, has become letter-perfect in singers' mannerisms and traditional opera gestures. She drapes her golden hair over Tristan in the finale of “Tristan and Isolde”; she magnetizes Samson in “Samson and Delilah,” and she befuddles Don José in “Carmen,” while the rich, full notes seem to pour from her half-parted lips. With Miss Farrell ghosting the job, this is a splendid illusion.

The melody is interrupted, as it was in Miss Lawrence's life, by an attack of polio which left her physically helpless and spiritually broken. This script has more honesty, and much more backbone, than most movie biographies of celebrated persons. Her success story and her career-clashes with her husband (an



—From “Interrupted Melody.”

Eleanor Parker “. . . is turned from a quail into a lark.”

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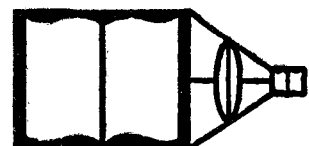
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