



## BROADWAY POSTSCRIPT

## Two Masterpieces in Search of an Audience

**P**IRANDELLO's "Six Characters in Search of an Author," when properly revived—as it was at the Comedie-Française two years ago—is a gripping exploration of several levels of reality. These include the bogus and conventional "stage truth" of ham actors, the not totally comprehended truth beneath the surface of "ordinary" lives, and the truth of fictional characters whose lives are eternally defined by the few actions an author invents for them. Pirandello dramatizes all this by bringing a family of six fictional characters into a rehearsal where they try to convince actors to portray them not in stage clichés but as they are.

The Phoenix Theatre production of the thirty-four-year-old play uses a new adaptation by Michael Wager and Tyrone Guthrie. Mr. Guthrie also directed it, and the result is a badly-blended mixture of the director's uncontrollable weakness for theatrical shenanigans and Pirandello's austere journey. The emphasis has been shifted from the six real characters to the actors, whose foibles and pretenses are absurdly exaggerated. The six characters, whose stark reality must clash with the posturing performers, seem genuine only at moments. The key role of the tragic stepfather, as played by Whitfield Connor, appears almost as melodramatic and artificial as the actors'. And Betty Lou Holland brings an inappropriate Sally Bowles quality to the part of the stepdaughter. While Michael Wager makes a deeply intense and highly ascetic son, in whose suffering we believe, and Katherine Squire also a genuinely anguished mother, one rarely senses any interrelationship.

In addition to all this emphasis on the unabashedly theatrical, Mr. Guthrie is unable to resist introducing the equally flashy element of prestidigitation, as he has an actress disappear leaving only an empty dress behind. He ends the play with the discovery that one of the characters, whose death has shocked everyone, is just a straw dummy. These devices merely call attention to themselves and away from the main line of Pirandello's theme. Perhaps it is better not to find an author at all than to find a director who acts as if he is one.

**I**N THE field of the novel, James Joyce's "Finnegans Wake" occupies a position at the top of last genera-

tion's *avant-garde* heap similar to that attained by Pirandello's play in the field of drama. Since this ambitious tome is virtually impossible to read and must be pursued like a foreign work with a translating key, and even then only has full meaning if we are thoroughly familiar with a great many other books, the notion of presenting sections of it onstage before an unprepared audience would seem to promise two hours of irritating pretentiousness and exasperating obscurity.

Happily, the Poet's Theatre production of "Finnegans Wake" at New York's YMHA Poetry Center turned out to be an entertaining and meaningful evening with no homework required. After a prologue between a Dubliner and Shawn, the first act begins as does the book at the wake where Shem, Shawn, and H. C. Earwicker (Finnegan's *alter ego*) are among the mourners. This is followed by the "Anna Livia Plurabelle" sequence, with its gossiping women washing clothes in the River Liffey. And to close the act there is a tavern scene. The second act devotes itself to a series of Mr. Earwicker's mostly ribald dreams, until at the end we circle back to the beginning scene.

While the lay listener may find the dialogue gibberish, a fine company of actors succeeds admirably in reflecting the Dublin atmosphere and in speaking with genuine emotion and thought. They hold on to Joyce's fundamental, simple feeling for human mortality, illustrated by the line, "The pleasures of life outlast a lifetime." The play contains some moody ballads and these too help us to catch Joyce's universal compassion. Humor is also present in abundance, with Joyce bequeathing us outrageous puns, literary jokes, and spontaneous Rabelaisianism. "And how are Julietta's huggermuggers?" murmurs Jaunty John in one of the dream sequences, as he peers down the middy blouse of an adolescent schoolgirl.

Mary Manning, who adapted "Finnegans Wake," Edward Thommen, who directed it, and an excellent cast of actors which include Tom Clancy, Edward Chamberlain, Grant Kilpatrick, Jack Rogers, Sarah Braveman, and Kate Curling did nobly in providing us with the best imaginable introduction to perhaps the most unapproachable work in modern literature.

—HENRY HEWES.

## RADIO CITY MUSIC HALL

Showplace of the Nation  
Rockefeller Center

**"KISMET"**

In CinemaScope and Color Starring  
**HOWARD KEEL**  
**ANN BLYTH**  
**DOLORES GRAY**  
**VIC DAMONE**

with  
MONTY WOOLLEY • SEBASTIAN CABOT  
Screen Play and Book by  
CHARLES LEDERER and LUTHER DAVIS  
Music and Lyrics by  
ROBERT WRIGHT and GEORGE FORREST  
Photographed in Eastman Color  
Directed by  
VINCENTE MINNELLI  
Produced by  
ARTHUR FREED  
An M-G-M Picture

**THE MUSIC HALL'S GREAT  
CHRISTMAS STAGE SHOW**  
**"The Nativity"**

Far-famed pageant, produced  
by Leonidoff.

**"Joy Bells"**

Holiday spectacle,  
produced by Russell Markert,  
with the Rockettes,  
Corps de Ballet,  
Choral Ensemble,  
and Symphony Orchestra,  
directed by Raymond Paige

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of love you've ever been  
permitted to see!



Paramount presents

**BURT LANCASTER • ANNA MAGNANI**

in Hal Wallis' production of  
**TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'**

**THE ROSE TATTOO**

also starring **MARISA PAVAN • BEN COOPER**  
with Virginia Grey • Jo Van Fleet • Sandro Giglio

Directed by **DANIEL MANN**

Screenplay by **TENNESSEE WILLIAMS**

Adaptation by **HAL KANTER** • Based on the Play,  
"THE ROSE TATTOO" by Tennessee Williams

**Astor**  
8-way & 45th St.

Doors Open  
**9:45 A.M.**



## Rehearsals at the Box Office

**H**ABITUES of the New York theatre frequently fill those unnerving moments before the curtain rises (generally five to fifteen minutes after the announced hour) by scoring themselves on their attendance at current plays listed in the program. "If your score is 10 or more," *The Playbill* says, "you are a star; 9, you are featured; 8, you're a bit player; less than 8, you need more rehearsals at the box office." It is curious how many people feel they have to catch ten or more plays out of, say, a possible dozen to be really *au courant* during the theatrical season, but will cheerfully dismiss all movies on the basis of a handful of pictures. In fact, in some circles it is considered vaguely degrading to admit to having seen any great number of movies in the course of the year (foreign films excepted, of course)—although this by no means disqualifies one from clucking over how dreadful Hollywood has become.

Perhaps the trouble is that movies are too popular, in the most literal sense of that word. They are made to appeal to great masses of people. They must, because they cost anywhere from several hundred thousand to several millions of dollars to produce. To get that money back—plus the costs of distribution, advertising, and a profit for the local theatre manager—they have to attract a large slice of the estimated 45,000,000 moviegoers a week here in the United States. Occasionally, however, the producers will reach beyond the "habitués," beyond the people who go automatically to the movies every Tuesday and Saturday, seeking to attract the more discriminating public—the portion of the potential audience that always claims it wants better pictures. They do something as off-beat as "Marty" or "Night of the Hunter" and send them out as trial balloons, hopefully. If they succeed the producers are always delighted to try again. If not . . . well, there is always a public for Lana Turner in a tight dress.

This year has seen more than the ordinary number of such attempts, primarily as a result of the rising tide of independent film production. But independence in the movies is an especially risky business. A large studio can amortize an occasional flop over twenty pictures or more; the independent often stands or falls on

the reception of a single film. His independence can be maintained only by the support his pictures receive at the box office.

In putting together *SR's* list of the best for 1955, Hollis Alpert and I were struck by the fact that many of the year's most interesting pictures had come from these independents. We also felt that more, many more, than the customary "best ten" deserved inclusion, but compromised on the dozen listed alphabetically below. If you have seen ten or more you are a star; less than eight, you need more rehearsals at the box office—at least, before you can start complaining about the quality of our current movies.

**BAD DAY AT BLACK ROCK:** Native fascism was exposed in this taut, spine-tin-gling melodrama, magnificently photographed and distinguished further by Spencer Tracy's strong, quiet performance.

**THE GREAT ADVENTURE:** Arne Sucksdorff's lyric description of a year of growing-up in Sweden sensitively noted a child's wide-eyed discovery of nature, while documenting nature herself with a sensuous camera that made this the visual delight of the year.

**GUYS AND DOLLS:** More favored by my colleague than myself, this lavish transcription of one of Broadway's greatest musicals retained much of the brash charm and unconventional humor of the original, aided further by the off-beat star casting of Marlon Brando.

**LETTERS FROM MY WINDMILL:** Marcel Pagnol continued to prove himself the most literate and witty scriptwriter in the world in these adaptations of three Daudet stories, and a director who distills his own warm love for the sunny south of France into every frame of film he shoots.

**LOVE ME OR LEAVE ME:** The "new look" in film biographies—far more backbone, more verisimilitude, more credibility than this *genre* could ever boast in the past, augmented here by a marvelous feeling for its period, the late Twenties, and an amazing performance by James Cagney as Ruth Etting's gangster husband.

**THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN ARM:** A bold dramatization of a "forbidden" sub-

ject, the narcotics traffic, directed by Otto Preminger with uncompromising concentration on the sordid environment of his characters and its pivotal role flawlessly performed by Frank Sinatra.

**MARTY:** Paddy Chayefsky's TV play not only spotlighted television as a profitable source of fine film material but, in its story of a homely butcher and a plain schoolteacher, reminded producers that more important than either CinemaScope or Todd-AO is a simple, well-told, human drama.

**NIGHT OF THE HUNTER:** Charles Laughton's first directorial effort, James Agee's last script, while neither entirely successful, explored the expressive qualities of the movie camera more thoroughly and originally than any other film of the year to reveal the heart of Davis Grubb's novel.

**THE PRISONER:** Despite a somewhat static camera, this thoughtful and timely British importation created on the screen an intellectual conflict of unremitting suspense; Alec Guinness was superb as a "subversive" Cardinal in a totalitarian state and Jack Hawkins excellent as his psychological tormenter.

**THE ROSE TATTOO:** Anna Magnani, the lusty, brawling, agonized heroine of Tennessee Williams's comedy drama, gave the top performance of the year—if not, indeed, of the generation—in a vehicle in every way worthy of her superb talents.

**SUMMERTIME:** Venice, not Katharine Hepburn, was the real star of this beautifully made, handsomely mounted adaptation of "The Time of the Cuckoo," but neither its surface charm nor Hepburn's glamour obscured the main points in Laurents's study of a spinster secretary thawed by Italian romance.

**UMBERTO D.:** More favored by me than my colleague, this moving, modest film by Vittorio de Sica, an unsentimentalized tragedy of old age, seems like the last flower of Italy's famed "neo-realist" movement, an effort to portray life as it is without sensationalism or editorial comment and with a warm feeling for the essential dignity of mankind.

Here, within a single year, are a dozen films—eight American, four foreign—that in taste, maturity, and forthright handling of important themes certainly challenge both the theatre and the popular novel. Artistic success alone, however, is not enough. Their popularity at the box office will in large measure determine whether we are to have more such films in 1956.

—ARTHUR KNIGHT.