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# Seeing Things

## TOPS AND SECRET

IN HAPPIER times the man who once described himself to Woodrow Wilson as "your one and only Vice" contended that "what this country needs is a good five-cent cigar." Years later, when depression stalked the land, FPA amended Vice President Marshall's statement to read, "What this country needs is a good five-cent nickel." His amendment stands. Five-cent nickels would still come in handy. Though the theatre also bristles with needs, one need that it has suffered from for far too many seasons is a first-rate courtroom melodrama, a gap now happily filled by the arrival of Agatha Christie's "Witness for the Prosecution."\*

There are people whose distaste for courtroom melodramas is militant. The crackle of questions throughout an evening annoys them. If they dabble in crime literature at all, they want their horrors straight.

The vast majority of theatregoers (count me among them) feel differently. Even if in my fashion they never succeed in guessing the guilty, they enjoy trying to do so. When it comes to devising such Cock Robin games, Miss Christie is an old hand and has seldom been more ingenious than in "Witness for the Prosecution." In a melodrama of this type the dialogue can, as writing, be as undistinguished as the words spoken daily by witnesses and lawyers in any courtroom in any land. But literature is not the object of this kind of playmaking and, quite rightly therefore, is not the concern of Miss Christie or her devotees. Hers is an engineering rather than an architectural endeavor, a matter of building instead of decorating, and the murder puzzle she builds in "Witness for the Prosecution" is highly diverting.

The program requests audiences not to divulge Miss Christie's solution of her plot. This is as it should be. To spoil the fun of future playgoers by telling them what happens would in itself be a crime. Suffice it to hint that Miss Christie is telling the story of a young husband whose only chance of not being convicted for the mur-

der of a rich spinster depends upon the evidence of his unpredictable wife. Perhaps it is fair to add that never have more startling twists been crowded into the concluding scene of a melodrama than in the last ten minutes of "Witness for the Prosecution."

As surely as Miss Christie knows how to keep such shenanigans suspenseful, amusing, and properly perplexing as they shuttle between the defense counsel's chambers and the courtroom, so do the actors in the New York company under Robert Lewis's expert direction. Patricia Jessel, who created the part in London, plays the wife brilliantly. She is frightening in her coldness and her mixture of power and instability. Ernest Clark's attorney for the prosecution is wonderfully arctic in his chilliness, his hauteur, and quiet condescension.

Gene Lyons seems to me to overplay the hysteria of the husband being tried, though by doing so he may contribute values unsuspected by Miss Christie. Horace Braham is a suavely dominating judge; Una O'Connor amusing as the old Scots servant who is a complete individualist; and Michael McAloney highly entertaining as an insolent expert for the Crown. Excellent as the cast as a whole is, however, the performer who gave me my most abiding delight is Francis L. Sullivan.

Mr. Sullivan is not an undernourished man. To see him at work is to see the theatre in the round. His face resembles a double exposure of a photograph of Charles Laughton. But if his girth and jowls are large, so are his gifts. He can pant at one moment like a beached whale and at the next read a long speech with incredible fluency and innuendo. His full moon of a face can assume an expression of childlike innocence with the same ease that it can be diabolical, insolent, gay, or immensely likable. He is as fat as the part and makes the most of it. He, his fellow actors, Gilbert Miller and his associates, and, above all, Miss Christie have the heartfelt thanks of all of us who have been hungering for an excellent courtroom melodrama. I cannot imagine a more agreeable form of jury duty than seeing "Witness for the Prosecution."

—JOHN MASON BROWN.

\* WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION, by Agatha Christie. Directed by Robert Lewis. Settings by Raymond Sovey. Produced by Gilbert Miller and Peter Saunders. With a cast including Francis L. Sullivan, Patricia Jessel, Ernest Clark, Gene Lyons, Una O'Connor, Robin Craven, Horace Braham, etc. At Henry Miller's Theatre, New York City. Opened December 16, 1954.



## BROADWAY POSTSCRIPT

## What Every Lady Learns

**"Portrait of a Lady"** William Archibald's adaptation of the 900-page Henry James novel, can perhaps best be described as a cameo reel. In it Mr. Archibald has faithfully spliced together isolated frames from almost every chapter (except the last), but very seldom does the play accumulate any momentum of its own. Since the first half of the novel is devoted to "putting some wind in the sails" of its heroine, Mr. Archibald's deficiency is in part the passing on of an aspect of the original. Yet wouldn't he have been better advised to confine the stage action to the more dramatic second half, in which Isabel Archer is tested in the crucible of a malignant marriage, and to build the entire play around these episodes of revelation? Possibly, since Henry James was a unique novelist, an unconventional technique should be found to bring the novelist's fine but not theatrically-tailored dialogue into more focus.

Failing these things we can only hope to find a rare and accomplished actress who can express simultaneously the outward grace and inner torment of Isabel Archer. Such an actress Jennifer Jones in her Broadway debut is not. And, in general, the supporting cast never succeeds in creating much of a base for the highly-polished and enigmatic surface that James left them. True, James felt that it was difficult to know very much about anyone, but this is of no help to actors working in a realistic tradition. There is, nevertheless, one effective performance by Cathleen Nesbitt as the Countess Gemini. Being pretty much outside the sensitive zone of the story, she is free to make quips at the expense of the others. "What did he say in the letter?" she asks Isabel. "Nothing," replies the heroine in a ladylike effort to keep her troubles leashed. "What an odd letter!" says the Countess with a knowing grin that echoes the theatre-goers' own attitude towards a play that seems determined not to let them know what it's all about.

\* \* \*

To see what a rare and accomplished actress *can* do with a play that is more old-fashioned if less un-theatrical than "Portrait of a Lady" one has only to visit the City Center and watch Helen Hayes cut capers in J. M. Barrie's "What Every Woman

Knows." As Maggie Wylie, the plain but canny woman who makes the perfect complement to a humorless but ambitious husband, Miss Hayes plays each situation with marvelous unreticence. She challenges and vanquishes the white knight of sentimentality, whom most actresses consider their essential ally in any Barrie play. She observes at all times the contrast between the practical and the romantic. She seems never a girl in love with a man, but rather a prospective wife who sees in her marriage the chance of doing something more interesting and valuable than wizening and drying up in the Pans. Even in her burst of romanticism, when she offers the still single John Shand a chance to withdraw from his financially motivated agreement to marry her, Miss Hayes makes us feel that she does not tear up the contract until she is sure that his pride in keeping his word is still more binding.

After the marriage Miss Hayes does not let us down. Maggie wears the pants in the Shand family, but her desperate concern is to keep them hidden under her modest petticoat. Feverishly she protects her work on his behalf, and more feverishly still she contrives to defeat the beautiful young lady who falls in love with what she has helped him become. But most feverishly of all she overcomes a friend's interference which has revealed to Shand the part Maggie has been playing in his career. In this scene Miss Hayes darts about the room until she finds a place where she can stand face-to-the-wall in embarrassment. This is farcical exaggeration but delightful amusement.

There are many reasons why Helen Hayes was the ideal actress to play the thirty-three-year-old Maggie when she first revived it twenty-seven years ago. There are even more why she now is ideal for a Maggie whose age has been arbitrarily increased to thirty-nine. There is her Yankee-Scottish "I-take-nothing-for-granted" toughness, made innocently charming by her diminutive stature and her unabashed proclamation of small weaknesses. There are her speed and timing reminiscent of an electric cash-register. And there is her ability to inflect an ordinary line into a very special shape.

"How is everybody?" she asks casually, but her *everybody* can only refer to one specific fact about one specific person. —HENRY HEWES.

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