



Comédie-Française

ON Tuesday evening, October 25, the world's oldest and most prolific repertory company will make its first appearance in New York. To those fortunates who have visited Paris the Comédie-Française needs no introduction. It is the solid cornerstone of the French theatre and the most elegant fleur in the proud bouquet of French culture. Associated with it through the years have been such celebrated figures as Clairon (1743-66), Talma (1787-1826), Rachel (1838-58), Sarah Bernhardt (1862-80), Mounet-Sully (1872-1916), and—among moderns—Raimu, Fernand Ledoux, Madeleine Renaud, Jean-Louis Barrault, Marie Bell, Edwige Feuillère, and Pierre Fresnay.

In a brief interview at the Comédie-Française's hallowed Paris headquarters its present administrator, Pierre Descaves, explained the choice of plays for this American tour: "What we would like to do is to present the American public a rose without thorns, and in an effort to do that we decided to bring only comedies." Three M. Descaves considers to be the foundation of the Comédie-Française comic repertory. Leading off Oct. 25-Nov. 1 is Molière's "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme," which New Yorkers last saw with Bobby Clark in 1946. Following that will be Beaumarchais' "Le Barbier de Seville," with Marivaux' "Arlequin poli par l'Amour" (Nov. 8-13). For the final bill the company will present Marivaux' "Le Jeu de l'Amour et du Hasard," with Musset's "Un Caprice" as a curtain-raiser. Incidentally, there is a recording of this last Marivaux comedy available (Period Records, \$5.95), which will make it possible for those of shaky French to attune their ears to the dialogue in advance.

There are other and practical reasons for confining the repertoire to comedy. The Comédie-Française's two theatres in Paris must continue a full schedule of plays without the services of the performers sent overseas. If it had to send over enough top tragedians and comedians to handle both tragedy and comedy domestic operations would be paralyzed. Therefore, the plan is to send a different company here next season with Racine, Corneille, and one modern dramatist. This second tour of course depends on our enthusiasm for the comedies this fall.

M. Descaves promises that the

company will not be disappointed if the reception in New York does not equal that they received in Moscow season before last. Not only were all seats sold out weeks in advance, but the first performance was attended by Malenkov, Molotov, Bulganin, Gromyko, and every other prominent public official. While this spectacular interest might have been a tribute to the Comédie-Française, M. Descaves admits that curiosity about the first foreign company to penetrate the Iron Curtain since the war was responsible for part of it. One actor was asked, "You must be very unhappy in France. When will you have the revolution?" and "Why aren't your schools compulsory? If they were you'd have fewer illiterates."

THE actors America will see on this first tour include twelve of the thirty-two *sociétaires* in the company plus four out of forty-eight *pensionnaires*. (A *pensionnaire* is a young actor on salary who may leave the company if he so desires. When a *pensionnaire* has proved himself he may be invited to become a *sociétaire*, in which case he must play exclusively with the Comédie-Française for twenty years, although he is permitted to make motion pictures. When he signed his contract M. Charon saucily described his fate as "un enterrement première-classe." A *sociétaire* shares in the profits and has a voice in the company's policies, although the administrator appointed for a six-year period makes most of the important decisions. This age-honored system provides the actor with great security, but restricts his freedom, with disputes developing on such matters as the roles actors must play and the casts directors must accept.)

Included in the sixteen total are the handsome Maurice Escande, the flawless Jacques Charon, the buffooning Louis Seigner, the bursting Beatrice Bretty, and the musical-voiced Mony Dalmes. As a special treat the Comédie-Française also brought along Marie Sabouret, considered to be its most beautiful actress. With the company, too, is *sociétaire* Jean Meyer, regarded by many as the finest director in the French theatre. M. Meyer has directed "Port-Royal" and "Les Amants Magnifiques," currently the two most successful plays in the Paris repertoire—not to be given here. In addition to



—Sam Levin.

Marie Sabouret—"most beautiful."

acting in two of the plays here, M. Meyer had his hands full breaking in French-Canadian dancers for his production of "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme." His introduction of a ballet into this play refutes the myth that the Comédie-Française performs Molière *exactly* as he was performed in 1680. As M. Descaves puts the conservative theatre's attitude towards new *mise-en-scenes*, "We welcome the spirit of innovation so long as it does not contradict the spirit of tradition."

But tradition is very important in France, and even more so at the Comédie-Française. Its primary reason for being is the reincarnation generation after generation of the great plays of the French theatre (the best of the more than 2,500 the Comédie has produced during 275 years of existence). If it also produces new plays of quality by such writers as Molière, Cocteau, Obey, Mauriac, and Claudel, these new plays are chosen cautiously. First they are submitted to Robert Kemp, drama critic of *Le Monde*. If he approves they are then passed on to a commission of three. If they still survive the author of each is invited to read his play before a final commission of nine *sociétaires*.

To make all this possible the French Government gives the Comédie-Française a subsidy of \$1,000,000 a year, in addition to relief from taxes. While the American tour has been undertaken by impresario Sol Hurok, who risks a possible operating loss during the troupe's short stay on Broadway, the production expenses have to all intents and purposes been paid for by the French Government. It is a rich present for American

theatre-goers who wish to enjoy and understand traditional French theatre. Even those of us who are inclined to quibble about the conventionality of some of these productions must concede that the Comédie-Française is a unique, living museum of theatre.

ANOTHER rich present from France, by way of England, is "Tiger at the Gates." Although it was translated only this year by Christopher Fry from the late Jean Giraudoux' "The Trojan War Will Not Take Place," the original Louis Jouvet production in Paris took place in 1935. Unlike most anti-war plays of that period, this work seems perfectly applicable to contemporary conditions. Perhaps this is because Giraudoux was not concerned with the specific precursors of World War II, but with the conditions by which wars have flourished since the days of Troy.

He picks a situation that is simple and very human. Hector, who intimately knows the terrible nature of war, with the women of Troy and especially his wife, Andromache, sets out to forestall the Trojan War. By the greatest efforts they manage almost to prevent the catastrophe, but Giraudoux makes it clear after each bit of progress towards peace that destiny will demand the war nevertheless. Cassandra feels it like a blind man standing in the midst of truth; Helen sees it in her private technicolor. And even Ulysses reasons that "when destiny has brought up two nations to a future of similar invention and authority and given to each a different scale of values: when the nations' architects and poets and painters have created for them opposing kingdoms of sound and form and subtlety; when we have a Trojan tile roof, a Theban arch. Phrygian red, Greek blue: the universe knows that destiny wasn't preparing alternative ways for civilization to flower." Here then is a nice argument for world government, imagined by Giraudoux well before the world became divided into our two camps.

But the play is seldom this solemn. Only a minute earlier Ulysses was tossing off an epigram ("Water leaves more mark on a duck's back than dishonor does on a woman"). Throughout the play M. Giraudoux has used the bright scalpel of wit rather than the hammer of philosophy. Helen he draws as a self-centered doll who goes along with everybody, always ending up having her own way. Her repartee has the charm of Marilyn Monroe's unthinking directness. For example, when Paris—after kissing her in front of Troilus—remarks that this kiss was different from

usual she replies simply, "It was the kiss I had ready for Troilus."

The other characters are also seen with humor. There is Busiris, the international law expert who can under pressure arrive at any desired interpretation of the facts. Moral: law by itself cannot cope with the problems of war. Science is represented by a mathematician, who by rationalizing the real into the abstract becomes politically useless. And, although they have been eliminated from the Broadway production, the published version (Oxford University Press, \$2.75) also shows us the gods (the Church) too preoccupied with internal squabbles and political affiliations to put a stop to bloodshed. Finally, there is Demokos, the poet, who like all writers to come chooses to glorify war rather than paint it as the horror it is. M. Giraudoux allows him the leading role in forcing on the war.

Michael Redgrave as Hector achieves a marvelous mixture of intelligence and passion, and he makes Hector's oration to the dead a masterpiece of hot-blooded irony. Perhaps he isn't able to stay very long on this intense level, but he does reach it frequently and with the utmost sincerity and acting skill. Diane Cilento's sanguine Helen is expert and constantly smile-provoking, though a bit on the cool side even for Helen. Leueen MacGrath as Cassandra has a delightful feline moment as she squeaks "Helen" to announce the arrival of the *femme fatale*. And Walter Fitzgerald's Ulysses has worldly authority. Harold Clurman's mixing of acting styles is not as noticeable in this unusual sort of play as it would otherwise be. The one place where it does hurt is in the case of John Laurie, whom he allows to play Demokos as ridiculously comic through most of the play, only to ask us to take him seriously in the final scene. These defects notwithstanding, it is a joy to have "Tiger at the Gates" Gallically roaring at Shubert Alley.

THE Diary of Anne Frank" consists in a series of episodes which take place in an Amsterdam garret during the last war. As dramatized by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, the flickering candle of hideaway life burns most brightly in the person of a fifteen-year-old girl who spends most of her play being a precocious brat. The close quarters in which she and seven other Dutch Jews must hide out from the Nazi army of occupation stretch her ingenuity and resources. The presents she manages to scrape together for her fellow inmates at Chanukkah, her love-affair with the only young boy available—romantic despite the difficult conditions—

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and her gradual maturing towards a consideration of others, these are the action of the play. The fact of her eventual death at Belsen seems accidental and has no real effect on the action.

As Anne, Susan Strasberg gives an amazingly clever performance in her Broadway debut. She knows what she is doing every step of the way, and the deliberate way she flips the end of her scarf over her shoulder in vampish sauciness on returning from her first successful date is delightful theatre. Yet there is a remoteness about her performance which keeps her from engaging our sympathy completely. Perhaps this is the art of director Garson Kanin, for if ever a director has achieved the appearance of life exactly as it is down to the minutest detail, and without editorializing, this is it.

The rest of the cast is fine in more subdued roles: Joseph Schildkraut as the practical-minded and wise Mr. Frank, Gusti Huber as the mother who has lost Anne's affection, Eva Rubinstein as the quiet older sister, David Levin as the shy boy with whom Anne falls in love, Dennie Moore and Lou Jacobi as a rather disgusting pair of selfish refugees, and Clinton Sundberg and Gloria Jones as their contact with the outside world. There are no false notes here. But most memorable of all is Jack Gilford, who goes beyond the demands of naturalism to bring us moments of art. His pantomime with some ear-plugs he cannot get out of his ear, or as the man who finds himself in the way wherever he turns, is superb. And when Mr. Van Daan is undergoing noisy personal remorse for having raided the icebox, the same time that the tenants learn of the Allies' landing in Normandy, Mr. Gilford's mouselike "Please stop, you're spoiling the invasion" catches exactly the pathos of this little man.

Boris Aaronson's setting not only gets the whole dingy apartment on stage, but by means of a wonderful aerial backdrop Amsterdam as well. He, Garson Kanin, and the actors may not have many of the normal requirements of a play to work with, but with what they have they have achieved a terribly true slice of life.

PETER GLENVILLE'S disciplined production of Ugo Betti's "Island of Goats" succeeds in obscuring some interesting ideas about the relationship of sex to sin and the slight but important difference between human beings at their lowest point and animals. Partly at fault is Laurence Harvey's mannered performance, which gives a neurotic flavor to a play that should be as earthy as one of the old goat-plays.

—HENRY HEWES.



TV AND RADIO

Committees and Commercials

WORTHINGTON MINER, executive producer of NBC's "Medic," wrote a letter recently to the Pulitzer Prize Committee. Miner originated and long guided the career of CBS's "Studio One"; before that he was a Pulitzer Prize-winning director on Broadway (Maxwell Anderson's "Both Your Houses"). He operates chiefly in Hollywood now; and the rapprochement which has begun this year between the film studios and the TV networks has affected Mr. Miner very much as a hurricane born in the Atlantic agitates an East Coast weatherman. His letter to the Pulitzer Prize Committee urgently asks that television writing be included in the Committee's annual awards. The Committee must do this, Mr. Miner affirms, in order to save TV's "generous supply of creative, young dramatic writers" from being turned by the movie industry into "high-priced hacks."

The producer's appeal is commendable: he respects a writer, as the tradition of the theatre has taught him. Whether or not television, as long as it serves not theatre but advertisers, can merit America's highest cultural kudo is a matter the Pulitzer Committee will decide. But as for our video-literary white hopes being turned into "high-priced hacks"—perhaps their defender needs a brushup trip east. The big bit in New York among the television writers is, "Write an hour-show that the movies will buy and then I'm in!" One talented TV writer I know made

it last month—with an adaptation of another man's work. He's on his way west now. He'd have to write ten TV originals or more to earn what he will get from this single film assignment. With his eye on the movie-money would a Pulitzer Prize turn him back?

Paddy Chayefsky, television's most successful and celebrated author, would no doubt support Miner's argument. In a recent article in *Variety* he stated quite flatly that "the simple truth is the best dramatic writing done in our country is being done on television. There is nobody I can think of who has shown more insight, theatricality, and talent than Robert Alan Aurthur or J. P. Miller or Tad Mosel or Reginald Rose or quite a number of others." The author's enthusiasm for the work of his confreres is admirable; but I saw a play on television recently which persuaded me that, despite the encomiums heaped on TV's young writers by Messrs. Miner and Chayefsky, the video craftsmen have yet a deal of growing to do. The play I saw was not a TV original: it was Thornton Wilder's "Our Town." David Shaw adapted it for a "Producers' Showcase" performance on NBC. TV's new elements—Frank Sinatra as the Stage Manager-Narrator, several songs, choreography—may have made sense as plus signs of entertainment for a mass TV audience, but they added nothing to the play's stature.

There was a superlative smoothness to the performance, a respect for the

