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## BROADWAY POSTSCRIPT

### Off Their Trolleys

THE most benign comedy of the season is "The Ponder Heart," based on Eudora Welty's story of the same name. That story, it may be recalled, concerned a blissful, gracious, and overly big-hearted lunatic whose capacity for childish happiness challenged the normal code of "sane" behavior to the point where even manslaughter (by the somewhat unorthodox method of tickling to death) became allowable. In transforming this affectionate character study into a Broadway play Joseph Fields and Jerome Chodorov have kept "The Ponder Heart" just as colorful and amusing as the book, but have also made it considerably more innocuous. The revised Uncle Daniel Ponder is a harmless old man who in the third-act trial scene confounds the jurisprudence of the Southern town where he is being charged with a killing he did not commit. Uncle Daniel does to the law courts what Will Stockdale does to the Army in "No Time for Sergeants." He overwhelms his prosecutors with the Golden Rule. But before the trial is over the play's Uncle Daniel loses his blissful ignorance momentarily to see the world for what it is. This is effective if traditional dramaturgy.

On the other hand, the first two acts are a strange and affecting idyll of the trial marriage between Uncle Daniel and Bonny Dee Peacock, a stupid seventeen-year-old girl whom he lovingly describes as "smart beyond compare." While the bride is "in escrow," as the lawyer puts it, the marital relationship is one of children at play. Bonny Dee is happiest playing jacks or ordering fancy electrical equipment even though the house has no electric current to operate it with. But when the time for a physical consummation of her marriage approaches there is a violent thunderstorm in which a ball of fire rolls through the room killing her. While it may not have been the author's intention, the death might in some Maeterlinckian way be taken to symbolize her inability to exist in any other than a state of complete innocence.

David Wayne plays the eccentric uncle with delightfully unpretentious goodheartedness. Sarah Marshall as the scrawny and vapid Bonny Dee is delicious. Not only does she seem guileless, but she achieves the absolute spontaneity one observes only in children with a new toy in a bit of

business where she whips off her jacket and dunks it into a revolving washing machine. Una Merkel is wonderfully warmhearted as Edna Earle. And Will Geer, John Marriott, John McGovern, and Juanita Hall head a large group of memorable supporting portrayals.

Robert Douglas's direction seems sensitive and thorough. And Ben Edwards's sets capture the color and light whimsy of the story. Though it may lack some of the realistic undertones of the original, this dandelion puffball hovers prettily in the sun above Broadway's hardier plants.

AT New York's City Center a revival of Tennessee Williams's "A Streetcar Named Desire" has become the occasion for a surprisingly disciplined piece of acting by Tallulah Bankhead. For more than a decade now Miss Bankhead has sunk to the status of a theatrical joke, an African Dodger who was paid well for displaying an absurdly disdainful and dissolute personality in public. Yet in Blanche DuBois, a role which is not well suited to her natural recklessness, extroversion, and sophistication, Miss Bankhead demonstrates that she has not lost her ability to control a great talent. True, she has a couple of wild moments wherein she does slip back to caustic intonations that pull us out of the play, but considering the pressure of the audience's almost unendurable readiness to laugh at anything she does these are remarkably few and far between. Miss Bankhead perseveres against the current, and in those scenes where the play allows her to express her feelings about youth and age, or to recount the story of the boy she drove to suicide through a self-centered failure to understand his problem, she is right back in the top rank of American actresses.

As Herbert Machiz has directed her and the others in this revival it now seems much more the tragedy of Blanche than did the original. He has Gerald O'Loughlin play Stanley Kowalski as a sneering and unredeemably ignorant rat, which though it makes the play less realistic, also makes Blanche seem more pitiful. But Miss Bankhead never catches Blanche's pathological overrespect for gentility and refinement that made Maria Britneva's off-Broadway performance so beautiful last season.

—HENRY HEWES.



## SR GOES TO THE MOVIES

### Musical, Musical Hollywood

**H**OLLYWOOD, lately in the habit of ransacking Broadway for material, has come up with a hot item in "Carousel," so sturdy a light opera that it not only ran for more than two years, after opening in 1945, but has had two healthy revivals since, not to mention its continual use as a musical vehicle by several local repertory companies throughout the country. This, then, is a familiar and favorite work, and Twentieth Century-Fox has treated it with great respect. The original production was loaded with what might be termed "high-grade corn," as well as a fulsome musical score that many already regard as the highpoint of the work of Richard Rodgers. Those to whom "Carousel" is exceedingly precious can be assured that the screen version has kept practically the entire score (there are a few snips here and there, and only one song is missing) and that a loving polish has been applied to the work. Others, to whom the Molnar touch seems slightly synthetic, may find the going a little thick at times. No effort has been spared to ensure that lump in the throat.

Probably a lucky circumstance occurred when Frank Sinatra begged off from the Billy Bigelow role, on the grounds that Twentieth Century-Fox was actually asking him to make two movies for one, shooting it once in its new 55 mm. process, and doing a covering print in the normal process. Sinatra was abandoned and sued, and Gordon MacRae took his place. Mr. MacRae is, without doubt, the best musical man in Hollywood. He's a rugged looking chap, with a good voice, and a considerable amount of acting talent. After seeing him in "Carousel" it would have been unthinkable for the movie to have been made without him. He has been surrounded with a far above ordinary cast of singers, including Shirley Jones, a typical Broadway-type singing ingenue, Robert Rounseville, a fine tenor, and less well-known but nevertheless first-rate people like Barbara Ruick and Claramae Turner.

Of a good deal of interest is the process itself. Cinemascope 55, as it's called, is the clearest, sharpest screen image that the industry has been as yet able to come up with. The definition, both foreground and background, is remarkable, and there is no distortion to bother that usually unlucky

person—the fellow who has to sit in the first row on the side. So superior in its clarity to other big images is it that Hollywood may very likely find itself faced with the problem of converting to it on a general scale. The film negative is a new large size—55 mm.—and has been reduced to a 35 mm. print for showing "Carousel." No one as yet knows how it will look when shown full blown, but it works fine when reduced. The outdoor scenes look very real and very pretty in practically all degrees of light. The movie was made for the most part on location at Boothbay, Maine, and even some of the dance numbers were shot outdoors, a supposedly difficult feat. These dances, by the way, are freshly conceived and executed, and add a great deal to the charm of the picture. I suspect that when future historians try to decide what constituted native American opera in our time they'll have to give some careful consideration to "Carousel." In that case this movie version should be very helpful.

\* \* \*

A type of movie musical more indigenous to Hollywood itself is M-G-M's "Meet Me at Las Vegas," a paean to the pleasures to be encountered in Nevada's most celebrated municipality. It tells of a chap who came to the town for his yearly gambling fling and there encountered luck and love in the person of Cyd Charisse. Miss Charisse is seen as a very artistic-type ballet dancer who finds unsuspected qualities in Dan Dailey, the rancher-gambler.

A movie of this sort can be made only during a period of great prosperity; otherwise it might seem dreadfully offensive. Thinking about the matter further, I've come to the conclusion it's offensive anyway. Some examples of the type of "artistic" ballet Miss Charisse indulges in: a "Sleeping Beauty" ballet done in modern dress on a volley-ball court to the music of Tchaikovsky, and a Frankie and Johnny ballet in which this long-legged dancer manages to combine burlesque slinking with traditional ballet turns. It would not all have seemed so outrageous if the script had not several times made clear that what we were about to see was of the highest and purest order. I'll take honest rock-and-roll every time.

—HOLLIS ALPERT.

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