



## From Tonio to Tony (In Twenty Hard Years)

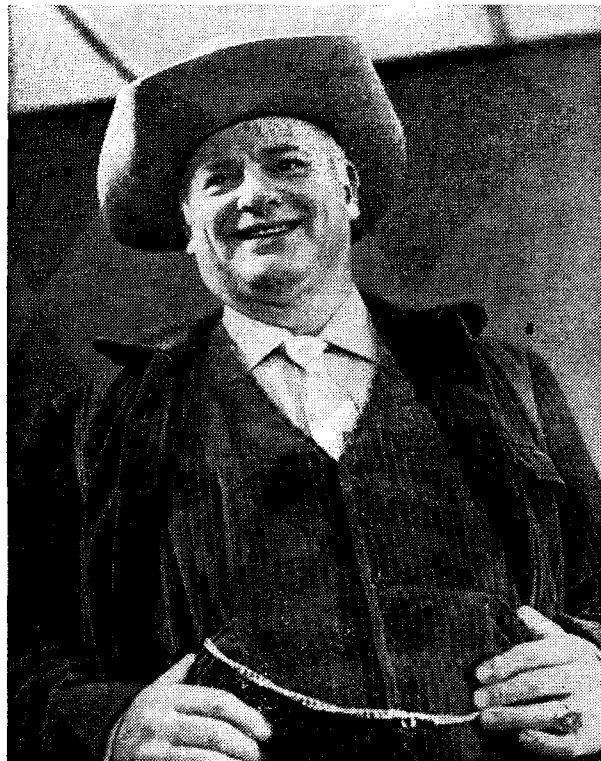
**O**PERA singers are generally considered to operate, so to speak, within such a limited frame of theatrical competence that when one breaks through into a wider area of public attention, as Robert Weede has in Frank Loesser's "The Most Happy Fella" (a musical based on Sidney Howard's Pulitzer prizewinning "They Knew What They Wanted"), the usual reaction is surprise and curiosity. Anticipating both, it seemed appropriate to visit with Weede in Philadelphia just before the New York opening and put matters in suitable perspective.

How tough is it to master a long part, as Tony Esposito is; to transfer the focus of a career from forgetting one is English-born in order to speak Italian to forgetting one is Italian-born in order to speak English, etc.? "Look at it this way," said Weede, moonfaced and relaxed on an off-day. "We had five weeks' rehearsal before we went out of town. We had about five weeks more in Boston and down here. The last operatic thing I did prior to this was Verdi's 'Macbeth' in San Francisco. The part of Macbeth alone takes one hour and fifty minutes to sing through. Take it to the piano sometime and try it. The first time any member of that Macbeth cast met Fausto Cleva, the conductor, was eight days before the show went on. I don't say that's the way to put on a great opera like 'Macbeth' and believe me it is great. I think Verdi reached back for a good deal of it when he wrote 'Aida' and 'Otello.' But that is what you have to do in opera. Don't forget, anybody who survives twenty years of opera at the Met, in San Francisco, Chicago, City Center"—in all of which Weede has had a distinguished part—"is a graduate of a pretty tough school."

"It's an odd thing," he went on "that everybody seems to be surprised I can act." [EDITOR'S NOTE: I was surprised too.] "But what do they think I have been doing all these years in 'Rigoletto,' 'Tosca,' 'L'Amore dei Tre Re,'—naming some of the works with which he has been especially identified. "The difference really is in the languages in-

volved and what the audiences get out of the performance. When you do a 'Rigoletto' in Italian and Gilda comes into the room in Act III to tell her father she has been 'ruined' by the Duke, you have the lines 'Piangi, fanciulla' ['Weep, daughter']. If I just lean forward and whisper to her like this, or I draw back like this"—and Weede transformed himself into the image of a distraught parent—"does the average audience know the difference? I doubt it. But in a show like 'The Most Happy Fella,' where every word can be understood, well, then acting technique comes through."

How about working with an English text, then, wasn't it something of a novelty? Weede had a good-natured answer for that, too. "Not really. After all, I did the first radio performance of Menotti's 'The Old Maid and the Thief.' I did Bernard Hermann's 'Moby Dick' with the Philharmonic-Symphony conducted by Barbirolli. I was in W. G. Still's 'Troubled Island' at City Center. When the Met did 'Khovantschina' in English during Johnson's last year they called me in. And just last year there was Walton's 'Troilus and Cressida' in San Francisco."



—Friedman-Abeles.

Robert Weede—"preconditioned for the whole thing."

Recollections of San Francisco caused a smile to flit over the Weede face. "I even sang in an English version of 'The Girl of the Golden West' out there. Merola [the longtime impresario of the Coast, who died recently] told me he was going to put it on. 'O no, Maestro,' I said, 'Don't.' 'Why not?' he said; 'with Caruso it was a big success.' With Caruso anything was a big success, I thought to myself. But in these days, when every kid knows Hopalong Cassidy, Puccini's idea of the American West just doesn't add up. But Merola was determined. So the first performance in Sacramento, which is a preseason subscription, is sold out. The first performance in San Francisco, which is the opening night and a subscription, is also big. Comes the second performance a week later, and three days before they have about \$10 in the box office. So they give 'Pagliacci' and 'Cavalleria' instead. I meet Merola and he says: 'You were a-right, Weede, you were right. The public no want opera in English.'"

**S**AN FRANCISCO, where Weede has appeared in every opera season since 1940, is a recurrent motif in the singer's own personal music drama. "Strange," he recalled, "during those years I made many friends, and I went to visit them out in the Sonoma Valley and we'd drive to Napa. I had seen the movie version of 'They Knew What They Wanted' with Carole Lombard and Charles Laughton, and the

atmosphere of it often came back to me when we visited the vineyards. When the idea for doing a musical version of it came up I was preconditioned for the whole thing. It may seem absurd, but it all sort of tied in together." It's an interesting footnote, too, that Loesser came out to San Francisco to hear him do "Macbeth" last fall, and the arrangement for his appearance in "The Most Happy Fella" was settled there—though it had been substantially agreed upon before in New York.

Was there any special idea in the back of his head about the way the middle-aged Italian vintner who woos a young bride by mail (using in the process a picture of a much younger man as decoy) should sound relative to his mangled English? "Well," said Weede, "if you have been around opera as long as I have it comes more or less naturally. Everybody around is always doing take-offs on everybody

else. But I think part of it came from Baccaloni" [the great Italian buffo] "who was a special pal of mine, wherever we'd be working together. Much as I would want to talk Italian to him, he'd want to 'talka his Engleesh' with me. A lot of it comes out in this part, I suppose. And don't forget Frank Loesser. He has a remarkable instinct for the right sound in the script he wrote. Very good."

Weede regards the vocal part of "The Most Happy Fella" as the equal of such an opera as "Rigoletto" in its demands on the baritone's vocal output, and nobody sings "Rigoletto" six nights a week, plus two matinees—not for long, anyway. "However," he added "I have a strong vocal foundation, thanks to my early training, and it holds up all right [knocking the nearest piece of wooden furniture]. My first real teacher in Baltimore, where I was born [the name was originally Wiedefeld, derived from a German father and Irish mother] was a man named George Castelle, a fine baritone who had sung with the Hammerstein company. However, he was on the small side for opera, and became a cantor and teacher. He did a great deal for me. Then, about 1928, when I was just a student, I had an opportunity to go up to Rochester as a member of a group that did stage shows in the Eastman Theatre, which was a combined movie and 'presentation' house in those days. What sold me was the promise of two lessons a week at the Eastman School with Adelin Fermin, a Frenchman who had been previously in Baltimore and had taught John Charles Thomas." Various things happened after that, including some prizes and studies in Italy, but the next important episode in Weede's career is associated with S. L. Rothapfel of Roxy Theatre fame.

"I was sent to him by a mutual friend and he liked me. But he decided my name was too long for a radio audience. 'We will call you W-E-D-E, it will sound like an announcement for a radio station.' However, when we went on the air he sort of stuttered in the middle of it and it came out W-E-E-D-E, and it has been that way ever since."

The link with John Charles was an instructive one, for there are those, like myself, who have long felt that Weede had more the "sound" of that illustrious artist than any contemporary, without knowing there was any actual relationship. "That Fermin was a wonder," said Weede reverently. "He had only one weakness with baritone. He couldn't tell us how to cover the upper register. But he gave John that 'yawning' legato [a wonderful description, for those who re-

member it, of the easy production of the Thomas voice] and a special sound of his own. Thomas was fine in opera but as a singer of songs I don't think he had an equal since McCormack."

Following Weede's Metropolitan debut, and a highly successful one as Tonio in "Pagliacci" in the spring season of 1937, there have been recurrent queries why he appeared only on a now-and-then basis rather than regularly. "Better to have people say 'Why the hell isn't he there than why the hell he is,' I prompted, "but even so. . . ." "I can't answer for the management," Weede responded, "but I didn't like the idea of sitting around, waiting, on call. I preferred to work. I had a family to look out for. I did all sorts of things, and have no regrets. The only dull time came around 1946, after I had been doing the 'Celanese Hour' on the radio for four-and-a-half years. I didn't get any offers for a while, because everybody imagined I was 'on the air' even a year after it ended."

The "family" includes two sons, now in their twenties, Richard and Robert, Jr., both determined to be singers. "I'd like to cut their throats," said the fond parent, recalling his own knocks, "but they've both got good voices, so what can I do?" What he has done is to arrange for one (Bob) to further his tenor studies in Italy under the guidance of Tullio Serafin, the eminent maestro with whom he sang Montemezzi's "L'Amore dei Tre Re" recently in Chicago, while the other (Dick), but recently out of the Army, is sharing the pre-Broadway preparation of "The Most Happy Fella" with his father, preparatory to embarking on further studies of his own, also as a baritone.

"It's an odd business," Weede said reflectively. "You work like a dog for years on end to get somewhere, and what happens—something like this when you least expect it. Mind you," he said, "I am not complaining. When a man like Serafin, with his background, comes to you after a performance, as he did in Chicago, and says 'I am happy to have you sing in this opera with me,' that is something." On the other hand, it must be something to know that for an indefinite time to come there will be no more parts to get up, no more uncertainties. . . ."

"How about some more opera, afterwards," I queried, "the big fling you didn't have?" "The days are a little short for that," said Weede, realistically. "I don't think so. After all, in the words of the play, 'I ain'ta so young, and not so good-lookin'." But, apparently, a pretty happy fella.

—IRVING KOLODIN.

## RADIO CITY MUSIC HALL

Showplace of the Nation  
Rockefeller Center

**GRACE KELLY  
ALEC GUINNESS  
LOUIS JOURDAN**

in  
**"THE SWAN"**

with  
AGNES MOOREHEAD  
JESSIE ROYCE LANDIS  
BRIAN AHERNE  
LEO G. CARROLL  
ESTELLE WINWOOD  
VAN DYKE PARKS

An M-G-M Picture  
in Cinemascope and Color

**ON THE  
GREAT STAGE  
"MERRY MINSTRELS"**

Produced by Leonidoff, with  
the Rockettes, Corps de Ballet,  
Choral Ensemble . . . Symphony  
Orchestra, under the direction  
of Raymond Paige.

"ONE OF THE BEST MUSICALS  
OF THE CENTURY!" ATKINSON, TIMES

**REX JULIE  
HARRISON-ANDREWS  
My FAIR LADY**

with  
STANLEY CATHEEN  
HOLLOWAY NESBITT

MARK HELLINGER, 51 St. W. of B'vy  
Eves. 8:30. Mats. Wed. & Sat. 2:30

## WRITER'S WORKSHOP BY CORRESPONDENCE

Television—Plays—Short Stories

The world-famous Egri Method of Dramatic Writing for professional and beginning writers. Work in your home under the personal direction of the master teacher

**LAJOS EGRI**

author of "The Art of Dramatic Writing" (Simon & Schuster, 6th printing. "This book will live through the ages."—Gabriel Pascal.)

**Collaboration & Criticism Services**

**EGRI METHOD OF DRAMATIC WRITING**

Established 1930 Licensed N.Y. State  
2 Columbus Circle, New York 19, N.Y.

Please send information on your  
Correspondence Course without obligation.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_  
ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_  
CITY \_\_\_\_\_ ZONE \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_



"A TREAT FOR MOVIE-GOERS! Great pictorial excitement and cinematic vitality!" —N.Y. TIMES

"STUNNING! Ulanova is magnificent!"

—N.Y. HERALD TRIBUNE

**S. HUOK** presents  
A spectacular motion picture in Color—Grand Prize winner, Cannes Film Festival

**The Ballet of ROMEO and JULIET**  
Music by PROKOFIEV  
starring ULANOVA  
and the Dancers, Corps de Ballet and Orchestra of the BOLSHOI THEATRE, Moscow

in N.Y.: PARIS Theatre, 4 W. 58th St., MU 8-0134  
in Wash., D.C.: DUPONT CIRCLE Theatre, 1332 Conn. Ave. N.W., DU 7-7300  
in Denver: ESQUIRE Theatre, 6th & Downing Sts., SP 7-0791  
in Chicago: Coming, SURF Theatre, 1204 N. Dearborn Ave., DE 7-1763

**NEW YORK ART THEATRES**

**MAURICE CHEVALIER** in his new hit **"My Seven Little Sins"** in color!  
Gould 50s 33 W 52nd St. at Rockefeller Pl. • PL 7-2406 T

"Is everything that a movie should be."  
—Zinsser, N.Y. Her. Trib.

**CAROL REED'S**  
**A KID FOR TWO FARTHING'S**  
in Eastman Color  
PLAZA 58th St. Nr. Madison

featuring  
Celia Johnson  
Diana Dors  
Jonathan Ashmore  
David Kossoff  
by Wolf Mankowitz

**Help  
Train  
Tomorrow's  
Doctors  
Today**



Join the  
**NATIONAL FUND for  
MEDICAL EDUCATION**

BOX 313, NEW YORK, N.Y.



## BROADWAY POSTSCRIPT

### Mankind in the Merdecluse

THE American theatregoer is apt to find "Waiting for Godot" an exasperating play whose allegories fascinate but never quite decipher. He may also find its lack of plot and its unremarkable dialogue a pale compensation for sitting two hours in the theatre.

But for Godot supporters these very deficiencies seem its greatest virtues. Irish expatriate Samuel Beckett sets his play in the Vaulcuse section of the unoccupied zone of France during World War II. In the middle of this bleak limbo sit two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon. They are waiting for a mysterious Mr. Godot (God) who has promised to meet them there. Along comes a well-dressed European landowner named Pozzo (Capitalist-Aristocrat) followed by a wretched, exhausted slave named Lucky (Labor-Proletariat) whom he leads by means of a long tow-rope tied round the neck. Then comes an entertainment in which Lucky is forced to perform an agonized, convulsive dance, and to give a demonstration of "thinking," in which he runs together a series of phrases expressing man's confusion as a result of having accepted "a personal god with a white beard outside time without extension." After this pair depart one of Godot's two sons shows up to inform Vladimir, whom he calls Mr. Albert... (Schweitzer?), that Mr. Godot won't come this evening but will surely come tomorrow.

The next day (we assume World War II has passed during the night because the dead tree has sprouted a few leaves) Estragon returns to Vladimir to report he has been beaten by ten assailants. After more conversation Pozzo (now blind) stumbles in still leading Lucky (now dumb, "he can't even groan"). Pozzo asks them to help him up again. And the two tramps decide this is a more prudent course of action than helping Lucky, because Pozzo is the only one who can keep Lucky from running amuck. Pozzo and Lucky leave again and the same boy (who we assume is Mr. Godot's other son) shows up with the same message as before. He also informs Vladimir that Godot has a white beard. Vladimir falls to his knees crying, "Christ have mercy on us." Estragon suggests dropping Godot, but Vladimir refuses because "He'd punish us." So they decide to hang themselves unless Godot comes tomorrow, in which case Vladimir

stoutly maintains they would be saved.

Mr. Beckett has sprinkled his text with mysterious allusions. His Vladimir likes the New Testament Gospels and is loaded with anxiety about the fact that only one apostle mentions that one of the two thieves crucified with Jesus was saved. The less inquisitive Estragon likes the Old Testament with its map of the Holy Land, where he had once planned to go on his honeymoon. Vladimir is constantly saving Estragon from suicide attempts and persecution. But Vladimir refuses to listen to Estragon's nightmares, and upbraids him for not being ashamed to ask money for services rendered and for whiningly blaming the world for his own misery. Vladimir points out to Estragon that he is beaten not for what he does but for the way he does it. Despite the knowledge that each functions better separately they find themselves bound together. The same unhappy marriage exists with Pozzo and Lucky. And this suggests that "Waiting for Godot" is primarily concerned with the basic human problem of dualism, whether it be psychic, religious, social, or economic. The last fifty years' widespread acceptance of the ideas of Freud and Marx have decreased man's individuality and dignity and tended to make him the pawn of paired opposing forces without and within.

THOUGH these interesting ideas and many more emerge from the American production of "Waiting for Godot," the actors seem to accept the play more as fancy than as fact. While Bert Lahr brings both pathos and his own brand of pretension-puncturing humor to Estragon, he too often punctures the pretensions of the play itself. E. G. Marshall plays Vladimir in a consciously intellectual manner, and his embrace of Estragon becomes merely symbolic. Kurt Kasznar's Pozzo emerges rather more of a villain than even a capitalist need be. Alvin Epstein's Lucky is a compelling and expert performance and seems closest of all to the spirit of the play.

Herbert Berghof's direction uses some expressionistic techniques and keeps the vitality-level high onstage. Keeping it high in the audience is another matter. There Mr. Beckett's skeletal synthesis of postwar European despair engenders less dramatic excitement than it provokes post-theatre discussion. —HENRY HEWES.