

BROADWAY POSTSCRIPT



Blessed Are the Quiet

THE quiet charm and genuine humor so absent from this season's Broadway musical comedies can now be found at the Golden Theatre, where Betty Comden and Adolph Green are appearing for a limited engagement. Their performance is titled simply "A Party," and this exactly describes it. Two friendly people who look as ordinary as the people next door casually agree to entertain us for their own pleasure.

And since Miss Comden and Mr. Green have been writing lyrics, skits, and musical-comedy librettos for some twenty years, they have plenty of material upon which to draw. In this case, the quantity is less important than the kind. For, relieved from the pressure of mounting a Broadway Blockbuster, they have selected numbers for which they retain a particular fondness, and thus they reveal a personality that is more essentially themselves than what comes across in a full-scale show performed by others.

The numbers they do choose extend from the days when they performed as "The Revuers" in a Greenwich Village nightclub up through "The Bells Are Ringing," currently playing at the Alvin Theatre. The earlier material is of the clever, parodying variety. But they endow it with such relaxation and fun that the frequent obviousness of their notions can be overlooked. And a sketch in which they capture the essence of the moviegoing experience at Radio City vs. Loew's vs. the Little Carnegie vs. a 42nd Street all-night house is as fine as it ever was.

However, it is the second part of the proceedings, in which they sing songs they wrote for others, that is most enchanting. Miss Comden has behind an intelligent, unglamorous facade a deep beauty and easygoing sadness. These reveal themselves when she sings "Bad Timing," a song that lightly catches the daily tragedy of missed chances. She also has a well-disciplined and versatile ability as a singer and actress, which she uses equally effectively in comedy.

Mr. Green also is able to switch. He achieves a nice pathos with "A Quiet Girl," which he does better than it was performed in "Wonderful Town." And then he is raucously funny as he sings "Broadway Blossom" in the Harry Richman manner. Like his partner, he seems amazing for a non-practicing performer as he rattles off "The French Lesson" at Danny Kaye speed.

For most of us, Miss Comden's and Mr. Green's performing effectiveness is a warmly welcomed surprise. But "A Party" is more than just surprise and skill. During the course of the evening there is a gradually increasing glow of awareness that Miss Comden and Mr. Green in their total work have quietly become the theatre's leading exponents of the working-man's view of New York City.

A "Whoop-Up" seems to be a pagan orgy in which Indian maidens are wrestled, tied, and carried off by intoxicated young braves. Indeed, the presentation of this indelicate wooing constitutes the climax of the new musical of the same name now at the Shubert Theatre. Perhaps, for the same misguided reasons that Rodgers and Hammerstein picked the melting of the Chinese in the American pot as a subject for their recent musical, Feuer and Martin have selected Dan Cushman's novel of the American Indian's amalgamation into modern Montana ("Stay Away, Joe") for theirs. And the results are equally uncharming, with widely assorted actors cast as Indians and an occasional pinch of interracial fair-mindedness to suggest that the show has a message.

The producers have avoided the usual round of resignations and intramural fights by themselves adapting the novel with Mr. Cushman, and by entrusting the job of direction to Mr. Feuer. What Mr. Feuer lacks in imagination and taste he makes up with loudness and a determined underlining of the show's already blatant sexual suggestiveness. Possibly, one can occasionally admire his hard-working precision in such a number as the one where the Indians do a difficult hoop-dance, or in a parody of a cowboy song titled, "I Wash My Hands." While the score by Moose Charlap and Norman Gimbel is only fair, a stomp titled "Nobody Throw Those Bull," and a patter-song called "The Best of What This Country's Got Was Taken from the Indians" (Racetrack names and Manhattan telephone exchanges, etc.) supply brief, pleasurable interludes.

However, the only performers not inundated by the show's noise, coarseness, and weak plot are Paul Ford, as a diehard automobile dealer, and a dancer named Asia, whose pelvic motor is left running all evening.

—HENRY HEWES.

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What the Currency Changes Mean

DURING the holiday week, France introduced new regulations that for a time, at any rate, will have a great bearing on travel by Americans abroad.

The official rate of the franc, which was pegged at 420 to the dollar, was devalued 17.55 per cent, and now stands at a rate of 493.7 to the dollar. A number of other European countries, among them Italy, West Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Great Britain lifted their foreign exchange restrictions. While the relaxation of currency restrictions by these countries mostly affects foreign trade, it will have a side effect on tourists, too. Some of these countries, notably the Scandinavian nations, had a ceiling on the amount of their currency that could be brought into their respective countries. This limit has now been removed. Secondly, these nations have now made their currencies convertible into currencies of other nations, including the United States.

In the case of Britain and the Scandinavian countries, it means that citizens of those countries will now be able to convert any amount of money they wish into dollars if those dollars are to be spent on tourism. With French francs, a convertible currency too, it means that we can very likely expect a certain amount of European tourist visits to the United States.

Before this Christmastime currency reform, American tourists en route to France and Spain did well to buy francs and pesetas before departing. The saving on francs bought in the United States was about 13 per cent; on pesetas, about 20 per cent. Under the new arrangement, the American tourist need not, before departing, buy all the francs he intends to use during his stay abroad. The French Government actually has made francs available to the tourist at a better rate than he could have realized on the American free market before the devaluation. Now he need carry with him a small supply of francs and other currencies to tide him over the first few days stay until he has an opportunity to exchange dollars at a reliable local bank.

However, the sophisticated tourist will do well to carry not only dollar travelers checks, but travelers checks made out in foreign currencies. This practice will circumvent the usual haggling over the exchange rate

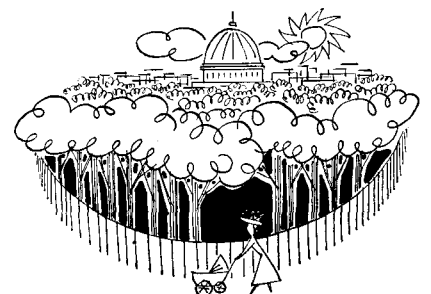
should it become necessary to buy currency at a hotel, or other establishments.

Moreover, it extends to foreign currencies that formerly had to be carried in cash the same safeguards that Americans hitherto realized in carrying dollar travelers checks. Such checks for travelers made out in foreign currencies are available in foreign exchange houses in all the major cities of the United States and Canada and at most U. S. international airports.

Since most European currencies have now become fairly convertible, there will no longer be any restriction on the amount of currency that a foreign tourist can take home with him. (Most countries are retaining restrictions about moving entire blocks of capital.) Travelers checks made out in foreign currency or foreign bank notes themselves can be exchanged back into dollars.

On the face of it, the devaluation in France means that hotels, food, Dior dresses—indeed, whatever the American tourist buys—will be cheaper by 17.55 per cent than it was before Christmas. The prices probably will hold for several months. But if the experience of past devaluations is to be taken into account, the small advantage that the tourist entertained will last for sixty or perhaps ninety days, before prices begin to rise. By the time the summer rush begins, the advantage very likely will have evaporated. The benefit for the tourist that remains will be the privilege of carrying various currencies back and forth without restrictions and exchanging them at will. So far, no news has been heard from Spain and there is still, in that country, at least, a 20 per cent advantage for those who buy pesetas before departure.

—NICHOLAS L. DEAK,
president, Perera Company, Inc.,
the oldest foreign currency
exchange in the United States,
and also of Deak and Company.



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Thomas Schippers, Wagnerian

THE name of Richard Wagner, which has sometimes led all other composers in the total performances of a Metropolitan season, finally made its appearance after two months of the 1958-1959 sequence had gone by. It was less than a glorious beginning, even so, with an improvised production of "Lohengrin" directed by Thomas Schippers, who has no record of the sort previously in America and nothing of note elsewhere.

Thanks to his inherent talent, which is considerable, the production began and ended in good order, and did not suffer a breakdown along the way. But conductors of Wagner are not made overnight, or over a summer. Schippers led a good performance of the Prelude, and his enthusiasm for the task in hand frequently communicated itself to the musicians in the pit, and the onstage ensemble. But the common assumption that a conductor of experience and insight conveys some of that accrued knowledge to the principals, who respond to the guidance thus provided, was obviously non-operative on this occasion. The only advantage discernible was that he had the score before him, and they didn't.

This is not to say that he didn't "do well," in a trite reading of that phrase. He "did well" by his own talent, in showing a grasp of the idiom and a feeling for the style. But he didn't do nearly so "well" by the helpless composer. Where the vocal and instrumental elements were loud or soft at the same time, a reasonable balance prevailed; where the orchestra should dominate and carry the voices, he tended to underplay the score, with the kind of nuance that makes musical points out of black marks on paper mostly absent. Doubtless, Rudolf Bing has some future purpose in mind in preferring the inexperienced Schippers to the vastly more experienced Leinsdorf, but the present results are hardly self-justifying.

Of the associated cast, four performers—Brian Sullivan (Lohengrin), Otto Edelmann (King Henry), Margaret Harshaw (Ortrud), and Hermann Uhde (Telramund)—were holdovers from the previous "Lohengrin" of 1955. Each is at least competent, meaning that a director of suitable impulse might have promoted them a notch or two to "distinguished," if not "outstanding." Schippers, however, was clearly more dependent on their routine than they were on his impulse. Sullivan's voice has grown impressively in size, if his powers of characterization or suggestion of a dramatic illusion still lag. Few native singers of the present crop have a better opportunity to fill a worldwide demand than this one, but the keys to that kingdom continue to elude him.

Lisa della Casa's first Elsa was an experience to anticipate—she would seem to have all the qualities of voice, appearance, and dramatic appeal required—but, for one reason or another, it did not fuse into a totality this time. She is, for one thing, the kind of performer who needs to be taken in hand, rather than taking charge of a performance. For others, she was hampered rather than en-

hanced by a headdress for Act I which diminished the picture her fine features could make. And her projection of "Euch luften" in Act II lacked the sharp definition, the magnification by judicious overproduction (in the dramatic aspect) required for this large theatre. In a word, Miss della Casa did her Elsa pretty much on her own, which is far from a workable formula in music of this complexity. Mario Sereni, as the Herald, sounded like a conscientious Italian baritone trying to sing German—which he is.

As for the visual aspect of this "Lohengrin," it certainly rates consideration among a great newspaper's "Hundred Neediest Cases." More specifically, it rates consideration by some of the Metropolitan's good friends with impressive bank accounts. The improvisation which produced it out of the remnants of the old Joseph Urban production was ingenious, but improvisations, like well-told jokes, do not bear repetition. What the composer-dramatist would have thought of the "duel" in Act I, I prefer not to imagine.

—IRVING KOLODIN.

The Flooded Yard

By Beren Van Slyke

WE hauled the old hose up the cellar stairs,
Struggling and laughing as the ghost of summer,
A maple leaf in skeleton profile,
Crumbled away to dust between our palms.

Into the zero wall of night we thrust
A jet of water warm from the kitchen pipes;
Drowning the hissing ground, we roofed the roots
Of grass and garden, apple tree and rose,
Until a black lake spread from steps to fence.
By morning it was silver laid on iron
And all school long we dreamed of afternoon.
Then when our skates took us into that dream
And like small gliders posed upon the wind
We coasted, slipped and slid from tree to tree
And rocking clung to apple boughs and racing
Felt the cold ache of teeth against our lips,
We knew ourselves first separate from earth,
Not yet in heaven but scaling near that bliss.

Heaven came later and literally too
For star by single star the snow came down
To spark the black ice with its burning flakes.
Dizzy we drifted through candescent whorls
Beamed from two lanterns by the woodshed door
And as we spun across their glow we thought
We saw the grass-blades pillaring up the sky
That we had made. There was no joy on earth
To match our joy, not then, nor at the dawn
When that fine sheet of snow flushed into pink,
Slashed with our tracks; shivering as we dressed
We knew that once at midnight we were birds
Who moved in magic yet left certain signs.