



The Comedy Kingdom

UNTIL three years ago, the Greeks had pretty much relegated ancient comedy to the bookshelf. Tragedy was timeless, but comedy depended too much on knowledge of the politics and art of 2,400 years ago. What, for instance, will jokes about Eisenhower or rock 'n' roll mean to audiences of the future? And there was an additional difficulty in the modern taboos violated in the old comedies. Jokes about the male and female anatomy were in abundance and were an accepted and essential element of the proceedings. If the tragedies reminded people of their moral capacity, the comedies reveled in demonstrating their immoral frailties. Perhaps in the remains of today's American burlesque we have a modern near-equivalent of this unpretentious coarseness. And in the modern Greek revue "Omonia, Splash! Splash!" (the title ridicules the recent modernization of an Athens square) we find some of the Aristophanic satirization of public figures and events.

But having had such success with reforming the pedantic presentation of the tragedies, two Greek directors ventured a new exploration of the comedies. The more cautious and superficial of these was tried by Alexis Solomos, whose latest presentation of Aristophanes's "The Frogs" at Epidaurus has scored a mild success. In it the low comics are Dionysius, a short and cowardly demigod, and his overworked servant, Xanthias. About one-third of the play's fun comes from their earthy antics. Some of their clowning is inventive and amusing, particularly the moment at which Dionysius and Charon try to row with each pulling in the opposite direction and another scene in which they bargain with a corpse to carry their luggage to the underworld for them. However, a lot of it is arbitrary and trite tomfoolery.

The second third of the play's fun comes from the satirical battle between Euripides and Aeschylus for the poet's chair in Hell, and the right to return with Dionysius to Athens for the purpose of revitalizing the theatre there. The performance here is as unsubtle as the actors can make it, with the overdrawn characters represented as two boxers who are towed and massaged between rounds. By judicious cutting and stress on the per-

sonal rather than the literary affectations, these scenes hold the audience's interest. Finally, there is the chorus, which carries the play's poetry. Here the members of the chorus have been most fortunate in having modern music to help them. Composed by the young Greek composer, Manos Hadjadakis, it is easily the star of the evening. Its comic pomp and bouncy rhythms lead the chorus into absurd numbers as delightful as what the Harvard University Band used to do at a football game with "Wintergreen for President."

SIGNIFICANTLY, Mr. Hadjadakis has composed the bulk of his theatre music for the justly famous Art Theatre of Charles Koun. Mr. Koun has been fighting a one-man battle for twenty-five years to free the Greek theatre from the influence of both a French acting style and the Max Reinhardt school of producing. His production of Aristophanes's "Plutos" two seasons ago shook up Greek audiences by using such modern items as a victrola and a hurdy-gurdy. Mr. Koun defends such anachronisms by pointing out that the ancient scenic elements are actually a distraction for modern audiences who need contemporary symbols in order to relate the events of the plays to their own lives. He says, "we modern Greeks happen to live in the same land as did our ancient forefathers. No matter how many cultures have gone by or whether or not we believe that our race has undergone certain alterations, we do live under many of the same conditions which influence our everyday life and way of thinking. The shores and distant line of the horizon, the stones and bronze mountains, the long sunsets, the sky strong and clear—these are all the same.

"The shepherd, before the sun rises, will tread the same stones and paths to lead his sheep to the pasture. The fisherman will beat the octopus on the same rocks. The street vendors with their baskets will search for shade in the same manner to protect their merchandise from the burning heat of

midday. In the Greek village, on the Greek island, and in the countryside, which has not yet been influenced by the mechanical civilization of this century and where men still live and toil in direct contact with nature, the pace of life, the shapes, even the sounds, must necessarily bear a resemblance to those of ancient Greece. These living elements which influenced Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, can help us to understand and interpret the thoughts and poetry in their work much more than all the secondary books and historical knowledge concerning the external form of an ancient Greek performance. Let us who live in the country search around us and discover out of its real life many ways to present these plays to modern audiences without betraying their spirit and intention of the original writing."

Mr. Koun practises what he preaches, both in his occasional excursions into ancient theatre and in his repertory company, which does mostly modern plays. His company is young and their approach to acting is Stanislavski inspired. He has directed twelve plays by Tennessee Williams, who he feels is the greatest of all modern playwrights. And the rest of the repertoire consists mainly of Lorca, Brecht, Wilder, Miller, and Chekhov. "I like plays that begin with emotion," he says.

Unfortunately for Greece, Mr. Koun, who like Circle-in-the-Square's José Quintero has built up an audience for the best in modern theatre, has a heart condition that is the result of the constant overwork and the worry that comes from trying to keep his 230-seat theatre financially sound in a country where ticket prices rarely go above a dollar. Although the Greek National Theatre is given a large subsidy, Mr. Koun gets none. The only substantial private contribution he has received comes from John Goulandris, owner of the Greek Line, who generously donated the money for a lighting switchboard. How much longer Mr. Koun will be around to direct such beautiful and truthful performances as the ones I saw of "Blood Wedding" and "Suddenly Last Summer" is probably a matter of how soon someone in Greece will see to it that he is relieved of his financial anxieties. However, the Greek Dramatic Festival has recognized his artistry by inviting him to produce Aristophanes's "The Birds" in August. This, too, will have music by Hadjadakis and not only promises to be one of the top events on the 1959 festival circuit, but also to clear the way for a more effective modern presentation of ancient comedy. —HENRY HEWES.





Zürich, with Wagner on the Side

ZÜRICH, SWITZERLAND.

IF THE following reads more like a travel chronicle than music reportage, I can only apologize to Horace Sutton and plead the excuse that it is, after all, about Switzerland. There is something about this lyric land—"something" being a weasel word for lakes and mountains, vigorous air and incomparable vistas—which turns any writer into a travel writer, at least once. If he cannot drop the role of critic and turn appreciator while in Switzerland, he might as well go to the Catskills and be captious.

Even in such a metropolis as Zürich, one need only turn his back on the thriving Bahnhofstrasse, with its watches on parade and every other kind of merchandise known to the marts of trade, to look up-lake at an eye-filling spectacle of rolling green hills, with snow-streaked mountains in the distance. No wonder there are few *Zürchers* elsewhere (they take the almost daily rain in stride, as part of the price for the magnificent vegetation); who would want to emigrate from its manifold attractions—commercial, physical, spiritual—to live in some less favored place?

Migrating to them is something else again. Zürich has a long list of the creative people ill-favored elsewhere who found a hospice for the spirit as well as a home for the body within walking distance of the lakeside promenade. Musically, the most illustrious of them was Richard Wagner, who enjoyed the hospitality (to say the least) of the Wesendoncks at "Green Hill" while writing "Tristan." The one-time suburb of Enge is now just one more residential area of the town, and Wagner's presence is hard to trace, for the reason, perhaps, that the domestic complications it involved hardly lend themselves to guide-book prose.

Not so, however, the beautifully situated "Tribschen" on Lake Lucerne, which can be reached in a comfortable hour-and-a-half drive from Zürich. By the time of this Swiss residence, ten years after "Green Hill," Minna had died, Wagner's liaison with Cosima had become legalized, and he was in the full tide of creativity which led to the completion of "Meistersinger," the "Ring," etc. Never a niggard where living on other people's finances were concerned, Wagner's Tribschen (magnificently maintained as a museum by the city of Lucerne)

still commands its own peninsula, boat house and breath-taking vistas to the lake, the town, and the mountains beyond. The brief shower of my day's visit brought forth a shore-to-shore rainbow whose counterpart, some other July afternoon nearly a century ago, might have cued the orchestral colors for the end of "Rheingold."

So much for what the vicinity of Zürich has to offer to honor the great man of its past. What it is doing to honor him in the present is another matter. It has, during this year's annual June festival, taken the form of a presentation of the "Ring" in the Stadt-theatre which, by American standards, seems about "Figaro" size. But the audience took with all sobriety a recent performance of "Götterdämmerung" with nearly eighty members of the *Tonhalleorchester* in the pit, Robert F. Denzler conducting, and a mixed bag of performers on stage.

How "Rheingold," "Walküre," or "Siegfried" might have fared, there was no evidence; but for "Götterdämmerung" producer Karl Heinz Krahel has taken the current Bayreuth line with hook and sinker. Most of the stage is occupied by a round platform, on which other platforms can be angled, tilted, or stuck on end. From time to time, slide projections to the rear suggest forest or mountains, and there is electrified "fire" as Siegfried



comes and goes from the mountain top. In the illness of Birgit Nilsson and her alternate Hildegard Jonas, Martha Mödl was imported from Amsterdam to sing Brünnhilde. As her previous night's occupation was Isolde, curtain time was set back from six to seven o'clock, while the audience promenaded or fretted in their seats till Mödl could be made ready.

In some circumstances, one might have been apprehensive for the success of a Brünnhilde in a "new" production for which she had no rehearsal. But Mödl has been through much the same thing elsewhere so many times that it hardly bothered her at all. Standard Bayreuth costum-ing, gestures, and movements (also her

authoritative if short-ranged singing) more than sufficed. My sympathies, instead, went out to the little pigtailed girl beside me who had to absorb her first "Götterdämmerung" with never a sight of Brünnhilde's horse, Grane (either live or stuffed), no glimpse of the Rhine at the hall of the Gibichungs (some red curtains were all there were to suggest barbaric splendor), and Rhinemaidens who all too palpably lolled on the floor with never a pretense of swimming. If this is the brave new world of opera to which today's young are being exposed, it is hardly surprising they should prefer the authentic excitement of Elvis Presley.

Denzler (a local favorite now based in Madrid) had some good moments when he had Mödl to work with, or the notable Hagen of Kurt Böhme, or the promising Gunther of Erwin Dehlitz. He could hardly look the other way when the Bert Lahrish Siegfried of Bernd Aldenhoff usurped attention, but there was balancing pleasure in the younger talents of Mary Davenport as Waltraute and the well-sounding Guttrune of an attractive soprano-soubrette named Hilde Koch.

THE durable Swiss musicians were back again, barely hours later to prepare the climaxing events of the June concert series: a pair of performances of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in the Tonhalle, directed by Dr. Volkmar Andreae. A native of Bern whose long life in Swiss music was memorialized in these concerts that celebrated his eightieth birthday, Andreae's projection of the great work was marked by a kind of simplicity, power, and devotion that also characterized his conducting of Bruckner. To be sure, there were moments when problems over which generations of conductors have pondered were resolved merely by going slower or faster (whichever left the listener less perturbed) but there was, also, a gathering momentum that made the choral finale an irresistible affirmation. In the absence of the long announced Hilde Gueden, the soprano part was sung by Eva Maria Rogner, her quartet-mates being Elsa Cavelti, mezzo, Libero de Luca, tenor, and Heinz Rehfuss.

It was, on the whole, a more gratifying evening than the one of the previous week in which André Cluytens directed glossy and rather superficial performances of a Haydn symphony (No. 104 in D) and Mousorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition," with Ricardo Odnoposoff as violin soloist in the Brahms concerto. In any case, the thronged Tonhalle left no doubt that, for natives of Zürich, the festival is a festive time.

—IRVING KOLODIN.