

# Irish Extravaganza

By WALTER STARKIE

**I**T IS A consolation to listen to the record of Brendan Behan's singing of Irish Folksongs and Ballads, (Spoken Arts SA 760, \$5.95) and his random anecdotes of his experiences as political prisoner, his exploits in the hills with the rebel boys, and his wanderings from pub to pub, bumming, ballad-mongering, and getting an earful as well as an eyeful. In the nineteenth century the English ascendancy welcomed the stage Irishman with open arms. As Bernard Shaw declared, he was a positive godsend to the Sinn Fein revolutionaries, for he created good will in England and thus enabled the hard-hitting Irish patriot to get in his blow at the Sassenach enemy, who was relaxed through laughing at the stage Irishman. During the troubled years from 1916 to 1922 the Irish were grim,

thin-lipped, and taciturn, vindicating the prophecy of G. K. Chesterton, who had said in 1905 of his English compatriots: "While we were laughing at a comic Irishman in fiction, we were creating a tragic Irishman in fact."

Brendan Behan cheers the heart of the Irish exile by his songs and his patter, and we feel that he has buried the political hatchet and converted into minstrelsy the battles between the Black and Tans and the I.R.A. columns; he sings of them with the same gusto found in the ballads of a hundred years ago. To prove he has buried the hatchet, he pokes fun at the English in his Irish pub travesty of an Oxford accent, and he can admit that the Anglo-Saxon is a sport when he sings, "We sigh for dear old England and the captains and the kings." There is a certain poignancy about the tramp's song, "The Old Triangle," as it forms the leitmotif of Behan's striking play "The Quare



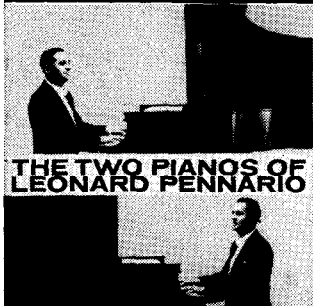
Behan: "the complete personality . . . his pathos, his whimsical inconsequence . . . above all, his broad tolerance . . ."

Fellow," which was first produced in London in 1956—a gruesome play that reminded us of "The Last Mile," which we saw in New York way back in 1929-30. The song recalled for us the genuine stoicism of this good-natured vagabond, whose father first saw him from his cell window during the Irish Civil War in 1922. Brendan was only six weeks old when his mother brought him to the jail and held him up on the road outside for his father to see.

One of his most haunting songs is "I Will Give You a Golden Ball," which refers to his childhood amidst the ruined grandeur of the slums of Dublin, still haunted by the ghosts of the dandies and fair ladies of eighteenth-century Ascendancy Dublin. Little Brendan was one of the gay street Arabs who played in those alleys and fed themselves on *gur* cakes, which were made from the stale rich cakes which were returned to the bakery, and the song also is a theme-tune to remind us that the street Arabs' next stage would be Borstal, which he has described so vividly in his recent autobiography. One of the great merits of this recording is the uncensored freedom allowed by the artistic director. We get the complete personality of Brendan Behan: his pathos, his whimsical inconsequence, his asides (even his nose-blowing!), his cynicism, and above all his broad tolerance, which ends in the bubbling good humor of the two final ballads. The only Irish folk touch we missed was the note of fierceness tinged by tenderness that is found in such street songs as "Johnnie, I Hardly Knew You" or "The Night Before Larry Was Stretched." But after all, they were written before the Flood.

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## Moscow Art Theatre

CHEKHOV: "Women's Luck"; DOSTOIEVSKY: "Christmas Tree and a Wedding"; "Three Russian Folk Tales." *Russian Readings by Actors of the Moscow Art Theatre.* Monitor MR 103, \$4.98.

**T**HIS ALBUM would certainly be of more interest to American Russians who are nostalgic about the famous Moscow Art Theatre artists than to those who are learning Russian. For you have to be very fluent in, and extremely well acquainted with, the language in order to follow the speech of these artists. Three of the readers — Alexander Kiselev, Alexei Gribov, and Georgi Kulikov—belong to the new generation, while Madame Evdokia Turchaninova, I understand, was a member of the theatre even before the revolution.

It is a faultless performance, as might be expected from the artists of an institution with such a great reputation. Their diction is perfect and the natural flow of their speech is gratifying. Nothing is done for effect, not a single phrase is exaggerated, except for a slight nuance accentuating the derogatory attitude toward "the rich," which, I must admit, might not be noticed by a casual listener.

Among the five chosen stories only Chekhov's "Women's Luck" is entirely free from this sort of naïve propaganda. It is masterfully delivered by Alexei Gribov. Dostoevsky's "Christmas Tree and a Wedding," from "Anonymous Writings," was included in this album with good reason—there are not many Dostoevsky short stories portraying so pointedly a successfully calculating rich and influential man who increases his wealth by marrying an innocent sixteen-year-old heiress.

In the folk tales the rich man appears to be cruel, arrogant, dishonest, and stupid, while the poor man is clever and kind. Obviously in each case the rich man is properly punished. In the "Gentryman and the Carpenter" the carpenter "teaches the gentryman a lesson." The rich man had ordered the carpenter thrashed when he refused to give the right of way on the road. On two subsequent occasions, he mercilessly whips the "Gentryman."

In "How the Poor Man Dined with a Gentryman" the poor man succeeds in outwitting the rich man. "The Cock with the Golden Comb and the Miraculous Mill" is an old Russian fairy tale, somewhat reminiscent of "Jack and the Beanstalk." Its rendition by Madame Turchaninova is so charming that it almost loses its "propaganda" goal.

—VICTOR SEROFF.

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