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BROADWAY POSTSCRIPT



The Venetian Summer of Miss Tina

A NOVEL sometimes employs a technique whereby — as sometimes happens in life—we only discover what it is all about as we approach its end. Can this same technique be used with equal success on the stage? Probably not, but Sir Michael Redgrave's adaptation of Henry James's "The Aspern Papers" attempts it, and according to the London reports achieved a fair measure of success when it was produced there two years ago.

With a different cast, the Broadway production emerges as a painfully slow melodrama that suddenly shifts into something much better in its final scene. Director Margaret Webster has permitted the proceedings to start as an out-and-out quest as we meet Henry Jarvis, the American publisher who has come to Venice to obtain a trunkful of papers left by a deceased poet with his now aged sweetheart, Miss Bordereau. As played by a dapper Maurice Evans, Mr. Jarvis immediately impresses us as a canny opportunist whose desire to obtain this literary treasure is entirely motivated by its projected effect on his own career. When he meets Miss Tina, the middle-aged niece of Miss Bordereau, we sense her need to escape the seclusion of caring for her invalided and impoverished aunt. Wendy Hiller, who plays the role, is all timidity as she seems to ask for nothing more than the flowers Mr. Jarvis promises to plant in their dried-up garden. If there is some rapport between Mr. Jarvis and Miss Tina at their first meeting, the performances do not suggest it. Each appears to regard the other as a possible means to an end unrelated to any romantic aspiration. And thus it continues as we meet Miss Bordereau, who, as portrayed tartly by Francoise Rosay, also seems interested in Mr. Jarvis only as a source—in this case, of a high rental for their empty upstairs rooms. The high point of the first act is Miss Tina's shocked terror when she learns that Mr. Jarvis is interested in obtaining the Aspern papers.

In the second act we watch Miss Bordereau try to make a match between Mr. Jarvis and her niece, despite the evident fact that she loathes and mistrusts the man. But this appears to be a side issue to that of obtaining the papers. It is quite clear that Jarvis's rascally manservant could steal them, but Jarvis is not quite willing to face himself as *that* unethical. There is ob-

viously a whole rich area of subtle conflict between his desire to live up to the code of gentlemanly behavior and his feverish obsession for the papers. Yet Mr. Evans's sharpness as an actor, which makes him ideal for many roles, here serves his characterization less well. The Jarvis he gives us would not have hesitated for an instant. Furthermore, his Jarvis never, either intentionally or unintentionally, encourages Miss Tina in any romantic direction. Thus it is that Miss Hiller must play the emotion of the final scene against a businessman rather than against another sort of unsuccessful romantic. Her final anguished attempt to trade the papers for marriage, and her eventual journey back from the depths of humiliation to a pride in herself more durable and honest than fashionable existence and false relationships is magnificent theatre and makes us aware of the play we may have missed in the inexplicably drawn-out earlier scenes.

Ben Edwards's glorious setting of the run-down Venetian house also has a richness of texture which suggests the relative unimportance of the surface of life vis-à-vis the unstated, ununderstood human interrelationships which are eternal. "They say it is a great thing to be alive," says Miss Bordereau. "That depends upon what you compare it with," replies Jarvis. This is the kind of consideration that brings "The Aspern Papers" alive, but unfortunately that aliveness seems insufficiently sustained to stand a great deal of comparison.

SOL HUOK has brought the Old Vic Company to City Center, and their first offering, "Macbeth," affords us an opportunity to see the kind of pictorially stylish production the English seem to appreciate more than we do. John Clements and Barbara Jefford portray the tragic couple as if they were consciously fulfilling the vision of some eighteenth-century lithograph, and the play is full of eerie processions and bloodstained hands and faces. Vocally the production is monotonous; actors tend to speak each line reflectively, suiting the word to the image rather than to the action. And Mr. Clements chooses to pluck the "Tomorrow and Tomorrow" speech into a pile of chicken feathers. It is one of director Michael Benthall's most distinguished productions, a thing of light and beauty, signifying nothing. —HENRY HEWES.



Later Than You Think

"I HAVE not done a re-make of 'The Children's Hour,'" William Wyler declared recently. "This time, I have actually filmed Lillian Hellman's play, which we were not able to do twenty-five years ago." In 1936, when Samuel Goldwyn had purchased the rights, and Wyler turned the play into a movie called "These Three," not only was there no reference to lesbianism, but Goldwyn was specifically enjoined by the Hays Office from even indicating the source of his picture. "Audiences of today have matured," Wyler concluded. "Today we can handle such material quite openly, if we do it with honesty and good taste."

Honesty and good taste are abundantly present in this new version of "The Children's Hour." Although the specific nature of the charges against the two headmistresses of the Wright-Dobie school is concealed by whispers and by conversations glimpsed at a distance through doorways, Shirley MacLaine's passionate declaration to Audrey Hepburn that they might all be true leaves little room for ambiguity. But the startling thing is less what is said than the fact that, once said, it carries so little impact. What was considered too daring for 1936 is almost too tame for 1962."

Indeed, although set in the present, the entire film seems curiously dated, as if all the characters had been strangely insulated against any knowledge of modern psychology. Granted that a doting grandmother might believe the scandalous accusations of a ten-year-old without scruple or hesitation, but one might expect the child's teachers to have some awareness of her mendacious tendencies. One longs to see the trial for defamation of character, described at some length in the dialogue. Did no one there suspect the child was lying? Was she able to brazen her falsehoods through examinations and cross-examinations? Did the entire town, hitherto warm and friendly, turn against the two teachers simply on the word of an obviously neurotic little girl? By failing to anticipate these questions, the script strains the credulity of today's viewer, and seriously weakens the film itself.

On the other hand, in terms of sheer moviemaking, William Wyler again proves himself the master of the cinematized stage play. Whether his camera is still or roving, it invariably matches

the pace and tension of the scene being played before it. The precision of his shot-to-shot relationships is unexcelled by any other director. When he shows us a face at a window, for example, the reverse angle could have been photographed from no other position. He is still inventive in the creation of cinematic effects, as in the sense of panic he evokes with a rapid series of shots of Audrey Hepburn racing across a lawn to the locked room of Shirley MacLaine. Always a perfectionist, he obtains top performances from every one of his principals (although, in the interest of verisimilitude, Hepburn and MacLaine might well have switched roles). The hitch is that all this technique has been lavished on a story at once slender and remote. Not that Miss Hellman's theme, the power of a lie to destroy, has lost any of its significance. It simply needs new dramatic machinery to put it across today.

THE makers of "Black Tights," starring Jeanmaire and Roland Petit, would have us regard their presentation as a big musical, rather than a dance film; but since, apart from some over-determinedly charming introductions by Maurice Chevalier, it is composed entirely of four ballets, the facts might as well be faced. Petit's several visits here with his Ballets de Paris have clearly indicated both his virtues and his weaknesses as a choreographer—wonderful verve, an appetite for the chic, an electrifying precision in his dancers, a touch of wit, a lack of warmth. All are apparent in the ballets assembled for the film, and vividly captured by the wide-screen color cameras. Strongest remains Petit's adaptation of "Carmen," with its masterful *pas de deux* in the bedroom and outside the bullring; weakest is a gloss of "Cyrano de Bergerac" that is long on story and almost devoid of dance (and denies beautiful Moira Shearer the chance to be anything more than decoration). Most typical—and most fun—is "La Croqueuse de Diamants," an apache romp made sparkling by Jeanmaire's sheer exuberance and superb technique. Best of all, Terence Young's direction suggests how well ballet—at least the narrative ballets of Roland Petit—can be adapted to the screen. "Black Tights" is a big, stylish show, and a welcome experiment in a field neglected since Gene Kelly's ill-fated "Invitation to the Dance." —ARTHUR KNIGHT.

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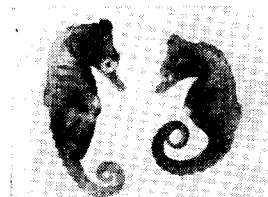
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