



Edited by Martin Levin

The Man at the Door

"Didn't I hear the elevator?"
"Yes. Someone's at the door."
"He says he's the exterminator."
"What is he looking for?"
"For you."

—MORRIS BISHOP.

Fowler and the Critics

WHEN Gene Fowler and I wrote *The Great Magoo*, the critics greeted our play with the fury of a lynch mob. The play was strung up chiefly for being too lewd a tale for the Broadway stage. As Gene would say were he still around, we were over-restless and ahead of our time. Our merry drama today would sound no lewder than a Handel oratorio.

On the second night of its "run," three husky fellows appeared backstage. They wished to talk to our producer, Billy Rose.

Fowler, Mr. Rose, and I listened to the visitors in a closed dressing room, a room in which history was almost made. The three huskies were muscle-men from an underworld organization that had helped finance the production of *The Great Magoo*. (Magoo, by the way, means a female sexpot.) Our visitors wished to know which three of the nine anti-Magoo critics Mr. Rose would prefer to have bumped off.

"Just give us the names of the ones you think are the worst guilty. And you don't have to worry. When we go out of here, we never saw you, and you never saw us."

Mr. Rose asked the visitors to remain seated and spoke out firmly against the massacre of Percy Hammond, Burns Mantle, Alexander Woolcott, or any of their fellow fault-finders. The three visitors listened glumly, then departed; *The Great Magoo* was off the boards in a week, with no lives lost.

Fowler spoke coolly of Mr. Rose thereafter.

"Of course, Mr. Rose did the right thing, but he is definitely not a man to have in your corner."

Fowler's response to the critic's mugging we had been offered surprised me. He was fearful of critics, but apparently it was a curious kind of fear; they seemed unable to hurt him.

I have known sturdy, spirited play-

wrights to take to their beds after an adverse verdict from our newspaper drama critics; to sob hysterically for days; to threaten suicide behind locked bathroom doors; to leave New York in a rage; even to migrate, bag and baggage, to some foreign, more amiable land.

Fowler's reaction was none of these. He seemed only to bloom in the shower of brickbats. He read out loud each of the critical blasts at our play and laughed with genuine amusement—over something. I couldn't quite figure out what, except that he seemed like a hardy mariner enjoying a good storm. Or, perhaps, a man enjoying a stroll around a hotel on a tenth-story window ledge.

Charlie MacArthur used to say when the critics rapped one of our joint works, "We're not going to answer back. Answering back is only showing your wounds."

Fowler had no wounds to show or hide. What, then, made him afraid of critics? I don't know. Possibly it wasn't critics he feared. One of the rewards of a good friendship is an almost total ignorance of your friend's flaws.

—BEN HECHT.

Forget the Tops, Pop— Work on the Hops

WALKING to work through the local college campus these cool, early spring mornings, I am monotonously conscious of a shiny new item of Americana decorating the curbstone litter. Tiny pieces of metal wink back at the early sun and seem to reproduce themselves from day to day, for their size and flatness resist the matutinal rounds of the steel-bristled street sweeper. These sequins are the toss-away tabs of our newest packaging triumph—the self-opening beer can.

The keystone-shaped pendant will be



with us for a long time, I fear. The new can was smiled upon by the wizards of motivational research and applauded in test marketing surveys. Yet how costly and futile the metallurgy, the engineering, the retooling that must have gone into the creation of a "most ingenious paradox." For the truth is that all this effort went toward facilitating access to what still remains the world's worst beer.

Somewhere way back there between Heidelberg and Ellis Island, the granddaddies of today's brewers must have misplaced the formula. The trickle of foreign brau we get (at outrageous prices) confirms that something is, and has for a long time been, awry. We have grown accustomed by default to a brew that suggests a combination of ginger ale, vinegar, and just a *soupcçon* of alum for body. This is known as "a light, dry beer." You and I drink it, with resignation, at a clip of fifteen gallons a year. So say the people who keep the records. But no muscle-bound Clydesdale horses, frolicking Indian maidens, or cute cutups on the Chesapeake Bay can alter the flavor.

The ad men have been put to it these past few years: beer consumption has inched along a plateau on their graphs, crawling upward with exasperating slowness. I sympathize with them for the fables they are forced to invent (for a mere 10 per cent of the brewers' annual income) just to keep the curve from drooping. Doing something about the taste, alas, is not in their hands. They are left with only the foam and the bubbles.

I don't know what the next great advance in beer packaging will be—perhaps a can that glows in the dark for people who want to watch TV with the lights off. That there is a new wrinkle already on the drawing boards, you can be certain. (These things, like the Atlas missile, take time.) When brands of the same product differ so little, the strain of competitive urgency takes curious forms. Gasolines tend to compete in service station washrooms; cigarettes, in a wild tautology that makes advertising allies of small children who parrot the slogans; and razors, in their precision at mowing smooth the skin of a peach—though no one's sensibilities are really offended by a bearded Elberta.

I have a suggestion for the beer people. That graph will shoot upward when the first bold brewer forgets about improving the container and does something about the contents. Let him then can or bottle his brew however he pleases. Whatever forcible entry is required—by tin snips, ice pick, or hatchet—will be no problem. These are already the weapons I use to hack my way through the armor of the all-but-impenetrable six-pack.

—JIM SHORT.

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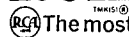
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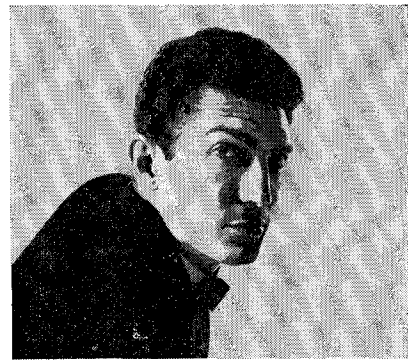
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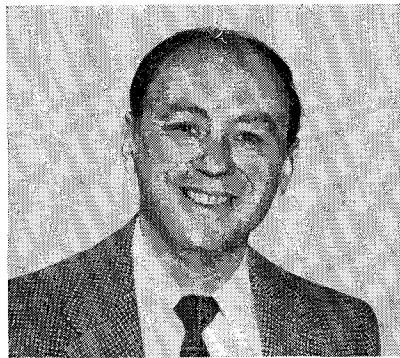
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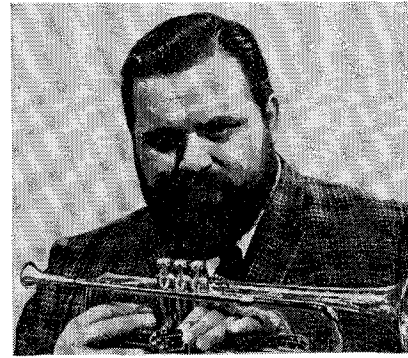
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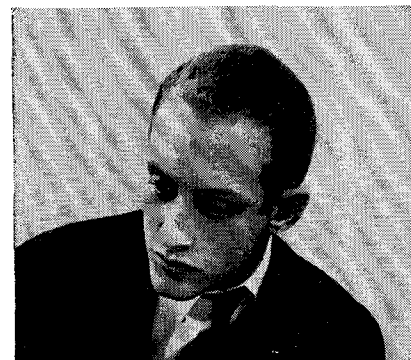
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Top of My Head



Good Evening, Good Night

CONVERSATION on television has improved perceptibly. This is not true, of course, on the strictly conversation programs, where a host and some newsmen sit around with a front-page "name" guest and attempt to wangle him into saying something quotable for next day's newspaper headlines. The guest looks a little startled and hurt when a delicate question is asked, as though he had been booked for the program on an "if" basis. ("I'll come on your program if you promise not to ask me about the Bay of Pigs, or whether integration is moving fast enough, or whether I'm for Medicare, or whether we should stop taking water from the Panama Canal.")

Most of the answers are a rehash or a confirmation of what the guest has been saying in the newspapers all week. Probably because this is a political year the front-page guests are a little wary of being pinned down. There is such hedging that the other day I came away from my set with the impression that the guest was in favor of the United Nations as long as our nation didn't get too united with any other nation. As for birth control pills, he was in favor of their use, but only in moderation—possibly in a case of slight pregnancy. At any rate, it's not the conversation we used to get on programs that made up the TV schedules of a brainy Sunday afternoon.

The talk on the half-hour situation comedies seems to be all right. I can't hear most of it because of the laugh

tracks that lace most of the films. I know that an actor walking across a room to open a door is not humorous. The laughs that spill over into this ordinary piece of stage business, I like to imagine, are the laughs of the audience, who take a moment longer than I do to get the point of a clever line spoken a moment before.

Where the dialogue has really improved the most is on the variety programs—the song and dance and vaudeville shows. In these programs the dialogue has disappeared entirely, and this is a vast plus. Once upon a time, two or three seasons ago, the singing host used to come into view after a song by Rosemary Clooney, for instance, and the dialogue fell into a pattern like this:

"Rosemary, that was beautiful."

"Thank you."

"I'm so glad you could come from Hollywood to be on our show. Are you enjoying your visit to New York?"

"Oh yes. So many shows to see on Broadway. I saw one last night—*My Fair Lady*—what a great song is in that show."

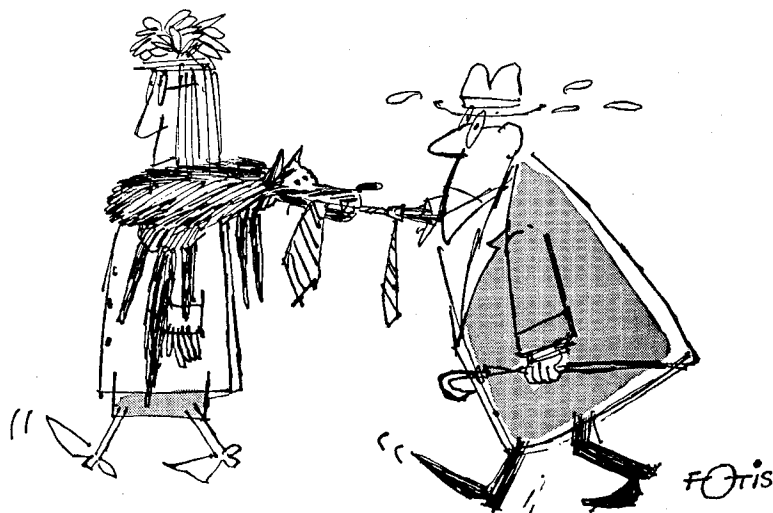
"You mean?"

(Music cue: "I Could Have Danced All Night.")

And they're into a duet.

But not any more. Now Miss Clooney sings her solo, and, as the audience applauds, the singing host waltzes out and takes her in his arms, and they dance a few steps indicating they could dance all night, and they sing it. Not an un-

(Continued on page 66)



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