



## A Muse of Fire

THERE is a new kind of free-swinging and unpretentious expression of theatrical artistry in *Oh What a Lovely War* that demonstrates why it was voted London's best new musical of last season, and why it carried off top honors at the Paris Festival des Nations. Its materials are marvelously simple: a collection of World War I songs and music-hall turns performed by clown-suited entertainers amid John Bury's dynamic and colorful setting. The latter consists of a couple of portals studded with colored lights, a miniature Times Square electric sign across which can move short news headlines, and a square screen that is lowered frequently to present us with projected images of old recruiting posters, newspaper advertisements, and grotesque photographs of wartime horror.

The entertainment begins amiably as the Pierrots and Pierrettes greet their audience with the sad jollity of people whose job it is to lift us temporarily out of our daily routines and worries. Their ringmaster, Victor Spinetti, is brilliantly sardonic. First he woos us with the patter of a music-hall comedian, then introduces "Row, Row, Row," in which the entire cast uses balloons and miscellaneous props to recreate the carefree prewar atmosphere of 1914 England.

But soon ominous war bulletins begin to appear on the moving sign, and we watch the company making light of it all with jokes and amusing war songs. A saucy soubrette, the long-limbed Valerie Walsh, sings optimistically about Belgium putting the kibosh on the Kaiser, while reluctantly the sign and screen contradict her with news of the fall of Brussels and the horrible casualties that resulted from antiquated and unprepared armies meeting the efficient German war machine. Indeed, the sad sight of a group of civilians being quickly trained for such uneven combat is turned into utter hilarity as Mr. Spinetti impersonates the abusive and sarcastic tone of a British army sergeant, using only doubletalk phrases and bullying gestures to make preposterously comic the situation of his awkward, cowed recruits. Another number, "I'll Make a Man of You," sung brazenly by Barbara Windsor and implemented by four semi-nude World War I Bunnies, amusingly suggests that girls enjoy wartime because it turns sex into a patriotic gesture.

Switching from the home front to France, a droll spoof of an important

strategy meeting between the British and French High Commands merrily unrolls. The British spokesman, Sir John French, played with uproarious pomposity by Brian Murphy, is represented as being so ridiculously self-confident that he refuses to have an interpreter, and his stumbling mistranslations are as funny to us as they are exasperating to the French General. Yet in these scenes and songs, as throughout the evening, there seems to be no personal malice. While no one could do anything more vile than the show's Sir Douglas Haig (who bullheadedly insists upon squandering the lives of British soldiers in a wasteful attempt to exploit the Allies' numerical superiority) or the grouse-shooting gathering of international munitions-makers (who sell to enemy countries because if they don't somebody else will), even these are drawn as victims of self-delusion and ignorance acting only as the world's apathy and economics have encouraged them to act.

But if Joan Littlewood, who has so imaginatively staged *Oh What a Lovely War*, resents this apathy, she also seems to admire the impulse of ordinary people to be friendly, sensible, and accommodating. Thus we are touched rather than angered by their acceptance of the monstrous conditions of war and class distinction. Who would not be moved by the Christmas Eve scene in the trenches when the Tommies and the Jerries exchange presents and meet in no-man's land for a drink of schnaps? For their situation gives them more in common with each other than either group has with its own officers.

There is also something romantic in the songs the soldiers wrote in which to express their troubles humorously. First they will describe how one staff officer passed over another staff officer's back, and then they gaily chorus, "But they were only playing leap frog, they were. . . ." And in a sacrilegious parody of "Onward Christian Soldiers" they blithely change the words to "marching without fear, with our brave commander safely in the rear." But best of all is the play's finale, "And When They Ask Us," in which the soldiers agree to keep alive the myth that war is a noble and picaresque adventure.

With a deeply felt sorrow that shines through the gay nostalgia of the melody, they sing that they will never tell how dangerous it was, but instead will pretend "We spent our pay in some café and fought wild women night and day. It was the cushiest job we ever

had." It sums up beautifully the richness of an evening that doesn't try to present any new intellectual insights into the subject of war. After all, Shaw and Brecht have already done this, and to Miss Littlewood the irony is that while the evidence is so overwhelming, not very much is changing in our willingness to accommodate ourselves to the probability of war despite our unquestioned recognition of its absurdity and its futility.

Instead of a thesis, *Oh What a Lovely War* presents us with a glowing experience of total theater, which eloquently conjures up the tears and laughter that accompany the human race's courageous yet foolish acceptance of tradition-bound, selfishly expedient, and arrogantly stupid leadership. Even though it uses Great Britain's participation in World War I for its detail, it is neither dated nor remote. For the conditions it portrays are basically unchanged in today's England, and although America has less tradition by which to be bound, we have our share of profit-driven ruthlessness, and there is a shocking lack of humanity and wisdom in the utterances of some of our leading political and military figures. But most important is the production's friendly vitality and imaginative artistry, which surmount most of the difficulties of British dialect and customs. Anyone who enjoyed *Stop the World—I Want to Get Off* will not want to miss this unique and luminous new use of musical theater.

ONE kept telling oneself that *The Last Analysis* was written by one of America's top novelists, Saul Bellow, and that the marathon dance of futile farcical fiasco and depressingly domestic discord would suddenly come into focus. As Bummidge, the harassed, successful comedian who has turned to self-psychanalysis in search of a workable sanity in an insane and predatory world, Sam Levene took on the longest and most trying role of his career. Despite dogged determination and energy, Mr. Levene appeared as baffled as we were with what he was doing, and one suspects that he may have been miscast in the role. However, it is hard to see how anyone could make entertaining his sticky journey from placenta to a renovated old theater which he will transform back into an academy for comedians. Was Mr. Bellow trying to satirize the futility of psychoanalysis by showing us how the world has used this new science to justify degenerate autistic behavior? Possibly. But even if his intention had been clearer, the gloomy literal details of *The Last Analysis* would depress all but the hardest theatergoing optimists.

—HENRY HEWES.



### "Fifty-four Forty or Compromise"

I AM at a loss to determine just what the catch phrase is that is sparking this Presidential election campaign, unless it be the Republican candidate shouting "Mayday" into his ham radio. No such searching was necessary during the campaign of 1844 when James Polk shouted "Fifty-four Forty or Fight!" and rode into the White House on the wind of its jingoistic rhythm.

As it turned out, I spent several days in the Fifty-four-Forty-or-Fight country this summer, a mess of islands now called the San Juans that lie scattered between the coast of Washington and the east end of Canada's Vancouver Island. There is little that bristles about the islands these days, but there are some memories of those hostile times more than 100 years ago, and these are pointed out to tourists with consummate glee. After all, there is precious little else of historical import about, and the locals have to make the most of what they have.

In my case I was driven from Seattle, where I was pleasantly installed in a tower nest of the Olympic Hotel, a perfectly marvelous situation from which to listen to the groan of the ferry boats, to the harbor settlements known, for reasons that escape me, by the ungainly title of Anacortes. There is an arts-and-crafts festival in Anacortes every August, but it wasn't in evidence when I was there, and so, if the local pushers are to be believed, I sailed from the harbor without having had a chance to gaze upon the paintings, sculptures, photography, woven goods, and jewelry that had been fashioned by more than 200 artists who inhabit the area.

While missing the festival I did not miss the boat, and soon I was aboard one of the fine ferries that belong to Washington State and it was busily threading its way among the 172 San Juan Islands on what it likes to call "a miniature ocean voyage." Islands came and went on starboard and port, and from the wheelhouse, whither I was transported, a gleaming tableland of sunlit sea and fuzzy green islands stretched as far as one could look.

The ferry stood a steady course while the passengers munched hot dogs and swilled coffee from paper cups. In due course we fetched up on the island of San Juan itself, which from my map's-eye estimate looked to be the largest of the archipelago. We rumbled off the ramp past the Moore Motel, the San

Juan Hotel, and the Sea Breeze Trailer Corral, and drove for Roche Harbor at the opposite end of the isle. It turned out to be a small sample of Nantucket or Martha's Vineyard or some village on Cape Cod that had somehow been misplaced on the opposite side of where it ought to have been. There was the long wooden walk and the maze of masts and the agglomeration of yachting gear and all those people in their expensive white sneakers, ready at the drop of a cloud to break into bright yellow oilskins all bought at the same yachting supply house.

At the end of the walk stood the Hotel de Haro, festooned in blossoms and dripping with ivy, like a dowager swathed in beads that were modish in some other century. After all, the Hotel de Haro is *d'un* certain age, dating back to the 1840s, nearly thirty-two years before these lands had ever come under the shelter of the U.S. flag. It had become a hotel in 1890, had been an overnight home for Teddy Roosevelt in 1906, who had come visiting his old friend, John McMillin, a patriarchal industrialist who had mined lead in the area.

There are places in the Hotel de Haro where the logs show or, if one believes the management, are displayed purposely to show the methods of construction. There are twenty rooms for let, and despite the antiquity they still rent readily in summer. Rather than disguising its years, the hotel makes a point of them. There are old sleigh beds, fresh flowers in old gilded vases, and flowery paper on the walls. At least four of the rooms have their own bath, and these are at a premium. A room without such hifalutin necessities rents for \$7.50 a night.

All about the property were old wagons full of petunias, kids drinking soda pop in front of the general store, and other bits reminiscent of the Atlantic seaboard's summer look. At sundown a squad from the hotel done up in white

shirts shuffles down the boardway in a sort of tattoo, playing taps and "God Save the Queen" on their bugles while the flag is run down. Looking on are the sun-washed yacht people and the weather-bitten old cottages on the hill where \$105 will carry the week, maid service included. Most of them have two bedrooms and fully equipped kitchens.

Roche Harbor is a day's yacht sail out of Seattle, but it is a short spin in a small plane. Oddly enough, considering all the agedness of the place, there is a 4,000-foot runway and a tie-down area. Besides yachting and swimming in the huge Olympic pool and fishing in the channels, there are night hunts for rabbits, a considerable sport ever since someone dropped a covey of Belgian hares here some years back. Jim Capron, at the metropolis called Friday Harbor, runs a rabbit netting service providing cars, drivers, spotlights, nets, and cages for this nocturnal sport. By day the inquisitive can rummage in the underbrush to gawk at the tombs and monuments left by John McMillin, the lime king who built a big industry here, even importing a whole town of Japanese coopers to make his barrels. McMillin left a mausoleum ringed by six whole columns and one broken one. In the center is a table with chairs for all the members of the family. Their ashes repose in the seats of the stone chairs. The broken column represents the broken column of life, but the family is gathered around the table as McMillin was hopeful they would be in the hereafter.

San Juan Island was once the claimed property of the Hudson's Bay Company, that ubiquitous group of merchants and colonialists who roamed through the northern lands. They not only erected a tablet on the island, but they landed sheep there to graze. None of this sounded right to the U.S. Collector of Customs for Puget Sound, who was busy collecting taxes in the area. As it turned out, the Hudson's Bay arrival was a year after Polk had been elected on the fiery slogan, a campaign promise that was never filled. We had not settled for Fifty-four-Forty, but for a forty-ninth parallel, and moreover we hadn't fought.

Even though Polk had found a solution, and a peaceful one, incidents such as the Hudson's Bay landing and the collectors who were trying to collect tithes from citizens of other countries occurred with increasing frequency. One fabled incident involved an American who owned a pig, and a Canadian who had a farm. The American pig was forever foraging in the Canadian farm. The situation was fearfully escalated, as the State Department likes to say nowadays, and soon Captain George Pickett landed with sixty men, nearly running into a British magistrate inbound from

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