



Conversation with a Sphinx

BOSTON.

LIKE Maurice Chevalier, author-director George Abbott is seventy-seven and still having fun in show business. His latest spree is a new musical called *Flora, the Red Menace*, of which he is the co-adaptor and director. Although the show is based upon Lester Atwell's novel, *Love Is Just Around the Corner*, the latter would never have struck Mr. Abbott as material for a musical. However, the supremely confident director has built a reputation on turning unlikely properties into Broadway hits, and since producer Harold Prince wanted him to tackle the job, he and his co-adaptor Robert Russell have, by elaborating on only a small portion of the novel's characters and events, come up with a musical that has been playing to standing-room-only audiences here.

They have been quite free in changing the book's two principal characters. In the novel, which takes place during the Depression, Flora is already a member of the Communist Party, has a disorganized personality that keeps getting her into crises in her job as a commercial artist, and is determined to marry another Communist artist, Harry. Although Harry is emotionally drawn to Flora, he eventually rejects her in favor of a better-disciplined Party girl who has worked to give him greater confidence in himself and who more unquestioningly

shares the political convictions that give his life meaning.

In the musical, however, Abbott has presented Flora as an innocent young girl pursued by Harry. His recruiting of Flora into the Party is done in a highly comic style, and indeed the entire show describes the American passion for Communism in the Thirties as patently ridiculous. This ridicule without rancor pretty much reflects the words in the director's autobiography (*Mister Abbott*, Random House, \$4.95), where he writes, "There is not an ounce of thinking in one's patriotism or religion. Conviction in these matters depends entirely upon where you were born. If Senator McCarthy had been born in Russia, he would have been an unrelenting Communist; if Khrushchev had been born in Illinois, he would be in the Senate."

Thus *Flora, the Red Menace* is concerned not at all with patriotism or politics, but rather with human predicaments. And Abbott's method appears to be to let the characters, as they materialize in performance, lead him through basic human predicaments to solutions that will ring true for them. For instance, the merrily objective director shows not a sign of anxiety about correcting the show's present ending, which he feels is unsatisfactory. Instead of worrying, he is working with a relaxed but canny patience to change the mu-

sical a little bit each day. He admits that he hasn't yet decided upon the ending, but with a sphinxlike sureness he adds casually, "I'll probably write it over the weekend."

His problem has been made more difficult because the show's ballet number is too unrelated to the progress of the story, and because the penultimate scene, in which Flora bravely crosses a Communist picket line in order to get to her job, is what he terms "soggy" and perhaps conflicts with some Americans' belief that crossing *any* picket line is taboo. But most responsible of all for his present dilemma are the performances of the show's two young and untried stars, who have turned out to be so winning that, as with Rex Harrison and Julie Andrews in *My Fair Lady*, audiences want to romanticize the couple's eventual getting together.

The director confesses that comedian Bob Dishy, who plays Harry, and nineteen-year-old Liza Minnelli have both surprised him by being even better than he had hoped they would. Mr. Dishy's comic technique includes a warm, Chaplinesque likability no matter what perfidious deed he is committing. And Miss Minnelli, who was really only barely adequate in her off-Broadway debut (*Best Foot Forward*) two seasons ago, has developed amazingly in both her singing (which is now a cross between that of her mother, Judy Garland, and that of Ethel Merman) and in her acting. Unfortunately, Broadway audiences may not see her most effective moment, the one in which she forces herself to believe Harry's lie in order to preserve her romance, for as the plot stands at the moment it had been dropped. However, it is already clear to all the reviewers who have seen the show that Miss Minnelli will be voted this season's most exciting new star, and will do for *Flora* what Barbra Streisand has done for *Funny Girl*.

Abbott is obviously pleased with his new star. "I'm just in love with her," he says. "Not as a personality, but as a performer. She's a hard worker, devoid of all pettiness, and has a sense of inner truth that would enable her to do leading dramatic roles. She responds to direction as well as Helen Hayes or Richard Widmark, and they are two of the most responsive I've ever directed."

This brought the conversation around to the question of how a director gets actors to respond to him. Abbott is perfectly willing to reveal his secret, which is simply that the actors must know the director is always right. Is Abbott always right? "Yes," the imperturbable director continued without the slightest trace of egotism. "I'm always right; not about the script, of course, but about how to treat the script, there I'm always right."

—HENRY HEWES.



Minnelli and Abbott—teen-ager and sphinx.

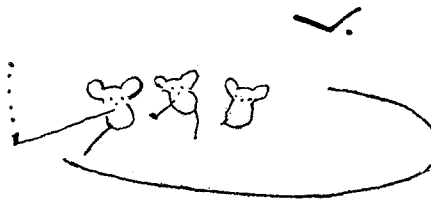


The Goldfinger Syndrome

IT IS PERHAPS a little late to start analyzing the traits that have so startlingly endeared the James Bond movies to audiences all over the world, but it is altogether pertinent to note the effect of this series on other movies. Even now good old Tarzan is being revived and refurbished in the Bond image. Americans have already met *That Man from Rio*, a French effort in this direction, while currently awaiting release is *Fantomas*, a rather heavily tongue-in-cheek revival of a Saturday-afternoon serial character popular in France around World War I. The combination of sex, sadism, and satire is paying off so handsomely that producers everywhere are tumbling over themselves to rush to the screen adventure stories that wink at the audience even as they shock.

Latest of the British imports bottled in Bond is disarmingly titled *Masquerade*, which sounds as if it should be a Viennese operetta but isn't. Actually, no one (or *practically* no one) in this swiftly paced thriller is quite what he pretends to be, and no small part of the fun is trying to guess which of the characters will be unmasked next—and if there isn't possibly still another mask underneath that one. Like *Dr. No*, it all starts straight enough when Jack Hawkins is called by Britain's Foreign Office to thwart a plot that would bring to the throne of a Near East state powers inimical to British oil interests. Hawkins calls upon Cliff Robertson, his junior officer in the desert campaigns of World War II, for assistance. The scene shifts to a gorgeous villa on the Costa Blanca in Spain, where we meet the inevitable sexy girl and a clutch of *mysterioso* types—and immediately people start getting banged on the head, shot at, kidnapped, and killed.

There is nothing in *Masquerade* that has not been done dozens of times before, especially in serials and low-budgeted haunted-house thrillers. The wonder is that the thrills are still there. The camera moving over cobwebbed statues in a shadowed and sinister hall can still raise the hairs at the nape of the neck—particularly when it comes to rest on a snub-nosed revolver poking out from behind a plaster saint. Still serviceable is the fight on a trestled bridge swung perilously over a rocky gorge, with the supporting ropes tearing loose one by one. But what makes them work is the director's wink, his tacit admission that he knows it's nonsense, but isn't it lots of fun? In *Masquerade*, director Basil Dearden and writers Michael Relph and William



Goldman go a long step farther. They wink not only at their melodramatics, but at the cynicism of the Foreign Office, the oil interests, and oil-rich Arabians as well. No small part of their picture's charm is the contrast between this worldliness of outlook and the ingenuousness of incident.

In sharp contrast, also from England is a new production of H. Rider Haggard's *She*, a curious compote of *King Solomon's Mines* and *Lost Horizon*. It is difficult to believe that in this day and age anyone could play with a straight face the hoary line, "She who must be obeyed." Especially with Ursula Andress as the wooden but curvaceous Ayesha, the "she" of the title. But straight it is—and square, too. All the preposterous nonsense—the medallion from 2,000 years ago that links our hero, John Richardson, with the ancient Egyptian priest Killikrates; the pseudo-archeological interests that persuade scientist Peter Cushing to journey across the Desert of Lost Souls and the Mountains of the

Moon to the fabled city of Kuma; the flame of eternal life that burns deep in its secret caves—is still there, and offered as solemnly as a fundamentalist interpretation of the Book of Genesis. "Is your world so much better?" Ayesha demands of the shocked Englishmen after she has dumped fifteen slaves who had revolted into a fiery furnace. A reassuring wink from the director indicating that he knew our world was better, but not much, would have helped.

While the Civil War was no laughing matter, *Shenandoah* manages to extract a modicum of humor from it—enough, at least, to make James Stewart, a Virginia farmer who believes neither in slavery nor war, a warm and appealing figure. It helps considerably, for as Stewart and his large family are drawn deeper and deeper into the conflict, the story increasingly comes to resemble the Book of Job as written by Margaret Mitchell. Unfortunately, neither the humor nor the momentum of the earlier sequences is enough to propel the film the entire distance, and it peters out into the kind of sentimentality that reduces some to tears and others to irreverent hysterics.

Finally, far away in time and place, is *Joy in the Morning*, based on the Betty Smith novel that recalls college life in the late Twenties. To be sure, the values that she celebrates are commendable—hard work, understanding, and, above all, tolerance. But Richard Chamberlain, from television, sleepwalks through his role of the dedicated young law student; while Yvette Mimieux over-emotes as the wife who almost costs him his degree.

—ARTHUR KNIGHT.

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Conducted by John T. Winterich and David M. Glixon

WORDS FOR MUSIC

Though usually a person of note in his own right, the librettist is often the forgotten man of opera. Nan Cooke Carpenter of Carbondale, Illinois, lists ten operas and asks you to harmonize each with its composer in Column Two and its librettist in Column Three. Face the music on page 76.

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|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| 1. <i>The Beggar's Opera</i> | () Britten | () W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman |
| 2. <i>Billy Budd</i> | () Gluck | () R. Calzabigi |
| 3. <i>Der Rosenkavalier</i> | () Meyerbeer | () E. M. Forster and Eric Crozier (after Melville) |
| 4. <i>Dido and Aeneas</i> | () Mozart | () John Gay |
| 5. <i>Don Giovanni</i> | () J. C. Pepusch
(et al.) | () Hugo von Hofmannsthal |
| 6. <i>Four Saints in Three Acts</i> | () Purcell | () F. M. Piave (after Hugo) |
| 7. <i>Les Huguenots</i> | () R. Strauss | () Lorenzo da Ponte |
| 8. <i>Orfeo ed Euridice</i> | () Stravinsky | () Eugène Scribe |
| 9. <i>The Rake's Progress</i> | () Virgil Thomson | () Gertrude Stein |
| 10. <i>Rigoletto</i> | () Verdi | () Nahum Tate (after Marlowe) |