

BOOKS

of success achieved by this ambitious novel. It is a major fictional exploration into America, no less—the America that is vanishing and the problematical America of today. And without abandoning its fictional premises, it draws us into a sobering meditation on the possible shapes of our immediate future. It tells no lies yet ends with a refusal to accept despair. It does all this at the same time as it involves us in an absorbing and intricately interwoven story. This is a great deal for any one novel to do, and it should be recognized immediately for what it is—a very impressive achievement. □

A Life in the Theater

BY ALEX SZOGYI

DON'T PUT YOUR DAUGHTER ON THE STAGE. By Margaret Webster. Illustrated. 391 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$10.

Margaret Webster's incredibly busy life touched ours in America meaningfully and in many ways as she shuttled back and forth between her native England and the American coasts. (Appropriately, she was born here when her father, Ben Webster, was doing a play on Broadway.) In the various guises of actress, director, producer, one-woman theater impresario, purveyor of Shakespeare and the classics to a new world beyond New York, and most especially educator in the best sense of that much maligned word, she successfully enacted the most varied creative roles in the complex world of theatrical experience.

Just a few months before her untimely death, her latest volume of memoirs—her fourth—*Don't Put Your Daughter on the Stage* appeared. The book has a most curious ring of truth; it radiates a prescient sense of herself as she recounts the ways she tilted at the windmills that stood in her theatrical path. "By nature a truth-teller," Miss Webster, in a strong, hearty style, sums up in this volume her "transatlantic schizophrenia." At first she re-enacts her earliest incarnation, as Dame May Whitty's loving daughter and Maurice Evans's gracious sidekick. She loved and doted on her famous actress mother, who slowly mellowed and aged like a vintage wine. Maurice Evans was her other touchstone to success. She directed him in *Richard II*, *Henry IV, Part I*, *Hamlet*, and *Twelfth Night*. So many of the famous Shakespearean produc-

Alex Szogyi, chairman of the romance languages department at Hunter College in New York, has translated and adapted many plays.

tions that remain memorable were hers, including Paul Robeson's *Othello*.

The most amusing moments of her book are devoted to her sudden, exciting encounter and years with Rudolf Bing of the Metropolitan Opera. From the very first, when she was summoned by Sir Rudolf to direct, despite her better judgment, his initial production at the old, beloved opera house, she became mistress of the Verdi spectacles, *Don Carlo*, *Aida*, and *Macbetto*. Aching to direct Mozart, she was nevertheless relegated to making sense of Verdi's flamboyant libretti. She analyzed them, made "horse sense" of them, sought to communicate her understanding to the artists of the opera house. She battled with the great voices, crusaded to make opera more accessible, winning the loyalty of the chorus who loved and understood her. The stars resisted her, and she sheds considerable light on the reasons why grand opera was so rarely grand. We witness her single-minded determination to bring order to a chaotic world of primeval instinct and gorgeous sound. One realizes anew that the Marx Brothers' vision in *A Night at the Opera* was perilously close to the truth.

The book also tells what it was like to be hounded during the McCarthy era with a constant fear and trepidation of losing one's job through the dangers of unproved insinuation. Her understated accounts of how it felt to be attacked without reason remind the reader most forcibly of what so many decent human beings suffered in the theater, as elsewhere, during those dismal years.

She toured the length and breadth of the United States in her one-woman show, a portrait of the Brontës. Ambassador plenipotentiary of the theater arts, she gave countless lectures to untutored, potentially enthusiastic audiences, initiating them into a theatrical experience. With her great friend, Eva Le Gallienne, she fought the good battle to give America a classical theater worthy of the name and to bring this theater to the eyes, ears, and consciousness of a nation perhaps not yet fully ready for it. Along the way, she became the conscience of university theaters, insisting that theater training had to be relevant to the life of the theater itself.

Her book cuts deeper than its milieu. For theater, as is often forgotten, can be life's most eloquent offshoot—and Miss Webster, the fifth-generation representative of Websters on world stages, the final flowering of a long and distinguished theater tradition, vibrantly demonstrated that working in the the-

ater was the ultimate fulfillment for those who gave it their very souls. In the epilogue to her book, she assesses the meaning of her life by sharing G. B. Shaw's credo: "This is the only true joy in life: the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap-heap; the being a force of nature, instead of a selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."

She echoes the old saying to the effect that you never grow up until your mirrors turn into windows. Like Auden, Calder, the Lunts, to cull artists from disparate worlds, she gave indications of having reached a higher awareness. Her mother had reached it before her, with more time to do it. Here and there in this most moving book we intuit that remarkable state of an artist who has come to meaningful terms with her existence. Her book transcends most theater memoirs by its involvement beyond ego. It points to a saner world and makes us glad she waged the battles that she did. □

The Devil Wore Spats

BY WILLIAM ABRAHAMS

THE JOHN COLLIER READER. By John Collier. 571 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$10.

It is twenty-one years—twenty years too many—since we have had a book from John Collier, and that, *Fancies and Goodnights*, a collection of fifty of his stories, was in considerable part drawn from two earlier collections. This is one writer, evidently, who is determined that his admirers won't suffer from a surfeit of his work. But twenty-one years are twenty-one years, and famished Collierites, not to speak of a new generation of readers who ought to be Collierites, will settle down happily with this new volume—and no matter that very little of its contents are, strictly speaking, "new." It brings together in a handsome format his novel of a sensitive and attractive chimpanzee who fell in love with her master and ultimately became *His Monkey Wife*, written at the end of the 1920s and redolent in its luxuriant style and whimsical ironies of that vanished epoch, and forty-seven of his stories, six of them in book form for the

William Abrahams is coauthor, with Peter Stansky, of the recently published The Unknown Orwell and editor of the annual Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards.

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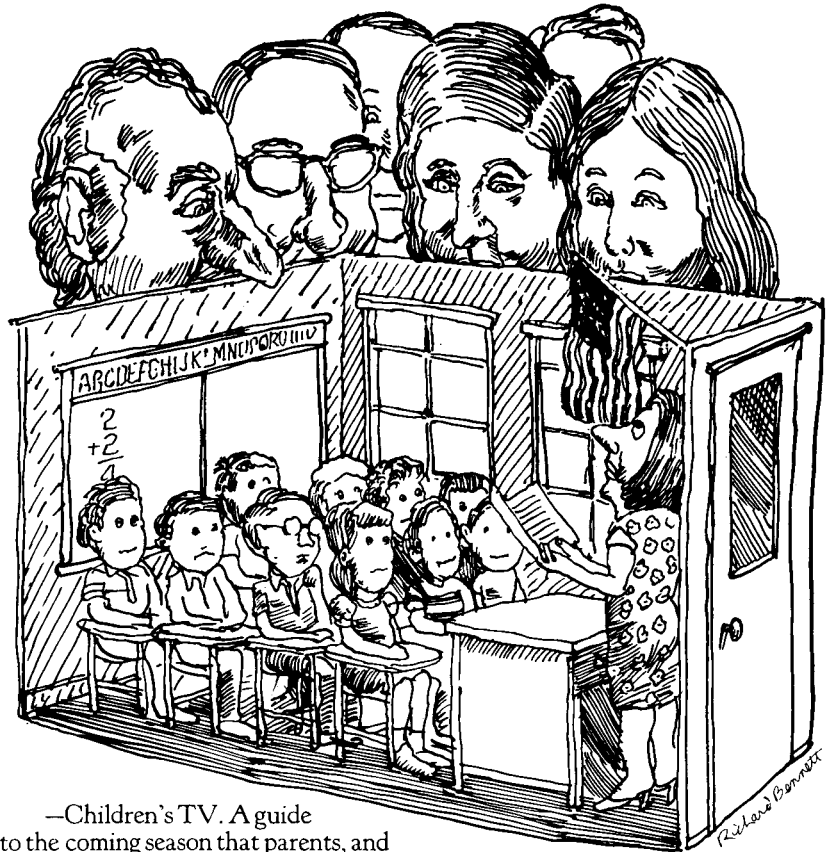
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BOOKS

first time, and all of them elegant, mischievous, slightly sinister, and a source of continuing pleasure.

Anthony Burgess, in an enthusiastic introduction to the present volume, remarks that "people who read Irving Wallace and Irving Stone and the other Irvings may not be expected to read Collier," which is almost certainly the case, though I am constrained to add that there is at least one Irving (Clifford) whose misadventures might serve as material for a Collier story—suitably re-styled, of course. Burgess then goes on to balance the sentence and give vent to a grievance that Collier has been unduly neglected in serious quarters, complaining that "scholars who write about Edith Wharton and E. M. Forster may also be expected to neglect him." Again, very likely. But surely, what John Collier doesn't need—no more than do Saki, or Hans Christian Anderson, with both of whom he has noticeable affinities—are scholars to criticize, explicate, and interpret his work, but readers to enjoy it. I feel reasonably confident, judging by my own experience, that readers of Whar-

ton and Forster, especially the latter, can become readers of Collier without feeling they are letting the side down.

This is especially true of the tales, in which the real and the fantastic most plausibly cohabit. The Devil is frequently on the scene—as, for example, in one of the best of the stories, "The Devil George and Rosie," where he turns up in the Horseshoe Bar at the bottom of the Tottenham Court Road, "a smart and saturnine individual . . . who had the rather repulsive look of a detective dressed up in evening clothes for the purpose of spying in a nightclub." This is Mephistopheles with a difference, and George Postlethwaite, the hero of the tale, is very much a latter-day Faustus, "a young man who was invariably spurned by the girls not because he smelt at all bad, but because he happened to be as ugly as a monkey." What happens to George after he seals his compact with the Devil is his and the Devil's and also pretty Rosie's story; as in so much of Collier, it is the unexpected, yet inevitable, *dénouement* that counts.

"Story" is the operative word in any

case, for Mr. Collier is always shamelessly and superbly the raconteur—to revive an old-fashioned word that seems appropriate to the occasion—who keeps us asking that most primitive of questions, "What happens next?" and who is never at a loss for a sophisticated and irresistible answer. □

Popcorn at Eight

BY JOSEPH KANON

RULE BRITANNIA. By Daphne du Maurier. 336 pages. Doubleday. \$6.95.
GREEN DARKNESS. By Anya Seton. 591 pages. Houghton Mifflin. \$8.95.

"I'm not moving any fiction," a bookseller told me last month. "They're just not writing *stories* anymore." Well, is storytelling in trouble? It's pointless in this case to look to our "serious" novels; apparently customers' fingers skim over those glossy wrapped downers like fireflies. If storytelling—that is, writing whose sole purpose is to be an entertaining companion by the fire—is really going downhill, we should look to the storytellers them-

COUTURE: An Illustrated History of the Great Paris Designers and Their Creations. Edited by Ruth Lynam. Illustrated. 256 pages. Doubleday. \$25.

BY MARY McLAUGHLIN

French couture, that haughty business of designing, making, and selling clothes to fashionable women, has a rich past. Stories abound of the lengths to which a great couturier would go to perfect a seam or to guard the secrecy of his collection. Pride in the originality and quality of work has been the very spirit of couture. Here, however, is a history of couture whose custom jacket is covering up the ready-to-wear affair inside. A desultory trick.

The least one would expect of such a book is a selection of great photographs, elegantly printed and stylishly laid out. After all, it's a short walk to the newsstand, where first-rate photographs crowd the pages of fashion magazines. Instead we are presented with color plates that resemble early color TV (the sketches of Poiret and Schiaparelli models excepted) and black-and-white photographs so cheaply reproduced that they appear in two tones of gray.

The text these photographs accompany (laid out, incidentally, so that a page describing Ungaro designs

Mary McLaughlin is a former woman's-page newspaper reporter and fashion writer for Harper's Bazaar.



Haute couture at Chantilly, 1935

is illustrated by a picture of Cardin at his desk) is a regular gumbo soup. Thirteen ladies and one man are responsible for the eleven chapters, the repetition of which is predictable. All but two of these ladies work, or worked, for the fashion press. Madeleine Ginsburg, whose chapter on the Thirties is authoritative and specific, is in charge of costumes at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Ginette Spanier has been *directrice* at Balmain for the past twenty-five years.

It is the latter who gets the book off to a cranky start with a first chapter entitled "The Classical Tradition, Inside Couture." (To get further inside, I suppose she'd have to be a pin.) She begins, "In spite of all the obituaries pronounced in its honour, *haute couture* is by no means dead. Our numbers may have melted, but those of us

who still carry on the tradition are very much alive."

But there are a few lighter moments: Penelope Portrait's chapter, "A Paris Model," is one. Fashion correspondent for the London *Daily Mail*, she once worked as a mannequin in the houses of Grès and Balmain. Describing a job interview with Cardin, Miss Portrait explains that her French was not up to his polite rejection. "Seeing my blank look, he kindly translated into English: 'Very nice, but too beeg 'eeps.'"

Reading about Chanel is always fun, even when the anecdotes surrounding this audacious figure have appeared elsewhere. Iris Ashley, former fashion editor for the *Daily Mail*, is in charge of the chapter called "Coco." She gives us this characteristic Chanelism: having made costume jewelry chic, Chanel said of gems, "It does not matter if they are real, so long as they look like junk!"

Other chapters tell us of the great Vionnet, the silent master Balenciaga, Dior, Fath, and so forth. The last two pieces contain an onslaught of information about the vigorous young designers and the boom of *prêt à porter*. There is worry that the heyday of French couture is over, and undoubtedly it is. What a nuisance, then, that this big book will probably preclude the appearance of another, proper history. Now we are stuck with a second-rate treatment of a first-class past. □