

# THEATER

A Princely Return to Conventional Musical Comedy

by Martin Gottfried



Martina Swope

Dittman, Coe, Cullum, and Coca in full cry—"On the Twentieth Century is a marvelously polished and funny musical that represents something new and rich for its collaborators."

THE BROADWAY MUSICAL is at a crossroads, and Harold Prince stands at the juncture. His new show, *On the Twentieth Century*, represents a step down one road, and the fact that he has taken the step is even more significant than the fact that the musical is a good one. For more so than anyone else, Prince has been the dominating figure in modern Broadway musicals. As a producer, he oversaw Jerome Robbins's wall-to-wall staging of *West Side Story*. He produced as Robbins meshed dance with drama for *Fiddler on the Roof*. When Robbins abandoned Broadway for classical ballet, Prince—by then a director himself—took up where Robbins left off. His seven-year collaboration with composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim resulted in the most significant series of musicals in our theater's history: *Company*, *Follies*, *A Little Night Music*, and *Pacific Overtures*. These

brought the musical stage close to an ideal of interwoven music, drama, and dance. A new form of stage art was near realization; some of these productions already stood as major works. A breakthrough had been made—there was no question of it.

Broadway, however, is a theatrical mixed breed born of art and commerce, and its business side could not long support Prince's and Sondheim's artistic ways. Despite the acclaim, most of these shows did not do well enough at the box office to repay their backers. Those who invest in the commercial theater are not prone to support million-dollar successes of esteem. Sondheim was not about to write the music for a conventional musical. The nearest he would come was *A Little Night Music*, a cool operetta. Prince, however, was having trouble functioning as a producer, since producers short of money aren't producers at all.

He had to reestablish his commercial credibility, an irony indeed for a man whose moneymaking track record had once been incomparable. So he was virtually forced to break with Sondheim, at least temporarily, and to direct *On the Twentieth Century*, the sort of conventional musical he had been struggling to replace. Was this a surrender, proof that the commercial theater is inimical to the artistic?

Prince's new collaborators are not of Sondheim's inclination. Like Sondheim, Betty Comden and Adolph Green are in love with show business, but they never looked on it as a basis for more than musical comedy. Their lyrics have been for songs; Sondheim's, for scenes. Cy Coleman, like Sondheim, is a schooled musician, but his orientation has always been toward pop music, while Sondheim, a student of musical theater, has sought to develop the vernacular of show music

into something finer. In working with Coleman, Comden, and Green, Prince was dealing with no slouches but neither was he dealing with fellow aspirants to high musical theater.

However, they too are at crossroads. Although Comden and Green have been musical comedy fixtures ever since the production of *On the Town*, in 1944, in the past 20 years they have had only one hit, *Applause*, a 1970 musical that succeeded despite their routine libretto. Coleman has a current success in *I Love My Wife*; but it is an intimate (four-character) musical without the pizzazz associated with Broadway, and it is his first success in a dozen years. Could Comden and Green ever outgrow their outmoded brand of satire? Could Coleman become theatrically minded enough to work with Prince? Could Prince himself come back to the orthodox musical theater he left so many years ago? Would his work be condescending? Would it represent capitulation to yahoo theater?

The show itself was an unlikely choice for a radical or a conservative. It is based on a play called *Twentieth Century*, best known as a John Barrymore-Carole Lombard movie, which deals with three basic characters and is set on a train. It is hardly the foundation for a big show with lots of sets; yet it has been made into a marvelously polished and funny musical that has stimulated the talents of these ostensibly mismatched collaborators. Coming at each other from separate theatrical directions, they have not exploded but have imploded creatively. The show represents something new and rich for all of them. Coleman has actually written a comic opera score, abundant with duets, quintets, and counterpoint ensembles. It is not only a break from his past of pop numbers but an ambitious, musicianly, and thoroughly theatrical score, the like of which hasn't been heard since Leonard Bernstein's mock operetta, *Candide*, which it recalls. Comden and Green responded as if at last they had the chance to write the lyrics for the self-same *Candide*, a show they surely ached to do with their friend Bernstein back in 1956. Once more, as if reborn, they are the most musical of lyricists. Their words for Coleman's tricky and witty music are technically immaculate, appropriate in sense, and genuinely clever in a modern, offbeat way. In directing the show, Prince has provided a breathtaking fluidity despite a big company and a tremendously complex physical production. What's more, he has revealed a flair for comedy that his work with Sondheim never suggested. This is a very comic

opera set in authentic Broadway style. It is as if Prince had decided that since he was going to do a conventional musical, he might as well demonstrate how it really should be done.

The story of *On the Twentieth Century* is set in the Thirties and deals with a hammy theatrical producer whose pretensions to art and costume pageants have put his career on the skids. Fleeing a Chicago failure, he boards the famous train The Twentieth Century Limited so that he can run into his onetime mistress, now a movie star. Perhaps she can rescue his failing fortunes. By chance, as was not so chancy in such period comedies, also aboard the train is a religious fanatic (Imogene Coca) with unlimited funds and an eagerness to invest in the theater.

The situation is predictable, as it must have been when *Twentieth Century* was first presented on Broadway 45 years ago. This doesn't make a difference because the comedy is predicated not on situation but on the clash of two outrageous characters: the flamboyant, egotistic producer and the flamboyant, egotistic actress (the breadth of their personalities is what makes the comic opera music apt). Casting, obviously, is essential to the story's success. Madeline Kahn is near to ideal as the actress, having comic flair and the trained soprano necessary for the difficult music. Her performance is reminiscent of the late, beloved Judy Holliday, for whom the part seems nostalgically written and with whom Comden and Green worked for many years. While John Cullum has the necessary voice, he hasn't the humor or exuberance necessary for the ham-bone producer.

It is with Cullum that Prince has done not his most striking work but his most necessary. He has pushed, shoved, heckled, and finagled Cullum into a performance of comic broadness. One is still aware of this actor's reluctance to move in any direction and in any fashion. He seems embarrassed by clowning when he should revel in it, and his physical humor seems positively mechanized. Yet he has been amusingly made up to resemble David Merrick, and the makeup seems to have psychologically helped his performance. A funny mask can help break down inhibition, making the wearer feel he won't be recognized and laughed at. Cullum does get laughs, and of course he has the powerful, true voice necessary for Coleman's music.

There isn't much dancing in the show. The story and the tremendous amount of music leave no time for it. Larry Fuller's choreography is limited

to a quartet of pullman porters who neatly mock the period's bigotry by doing tap dance variations. This matches the fresh and quirky humor in the Comden and Green script. They are satirists no more. As for the look of things, it is frankly gorgeous. Robin Wagner has designed art deco settings of stylish flamboyance for the train's compartments, car interiors, dining car, even its engine, not to mention the scenes set in flashback. He and Prince have arranged for these sets to be changed in the full view of the audience, with a dexterity belying the sets' cumbersome size and the surely limited storage space in the wings of the St. James Theater.

The show, then, is the very model of musical comedy expertise. While antagonistic to the artistic kind of musical theater that Prince has been pioneering, it demonstrates what even conventional shows are capable of, especially in the realm of adult spirit and humor. The polish and professionalism are simply breathtaking, and one must admire that.

More important, though, is Prince's perseverance in seeking a different and much more significant kind of musical theater. For while good work is its own excuse, without a dream to pursue the theater becomes mere production and reproduction. It would be painful if in succeeding with the orthodox *On the Twentieth Century*, Prince only made it harder to convince investors to support the unorthodox. It would be maddening—and this is possible too—if even this show were to prove too grown-up for Broadway theatergoers. ●



"This is Mr. Crysedale. He manages a supermarket."

# “Take a

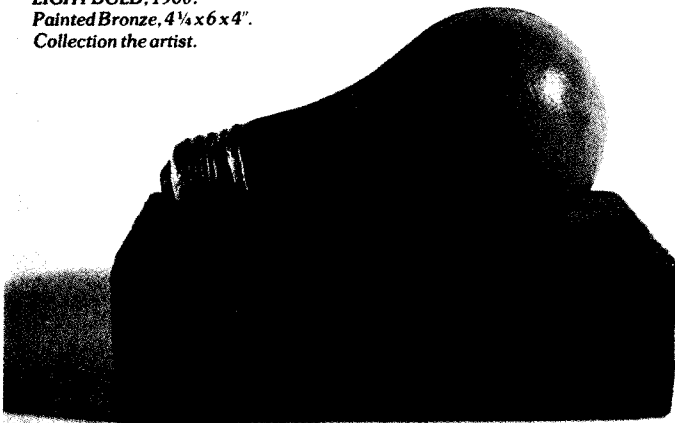
**GRAY NUMBERS, 1958.** Encaustic and collage on canvas, 67 x 49 1/2". Private collection.



**MAP, 1963.** Encaustic and collage on canvas, 60 x 93". Private collection.



**LIGHT BULB, 1960.**  
Painted Bronze, 4 1/4 x 6 x 4".  
Collection the artist.





# n object.

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Do something else to it.  
Do something else to it."**

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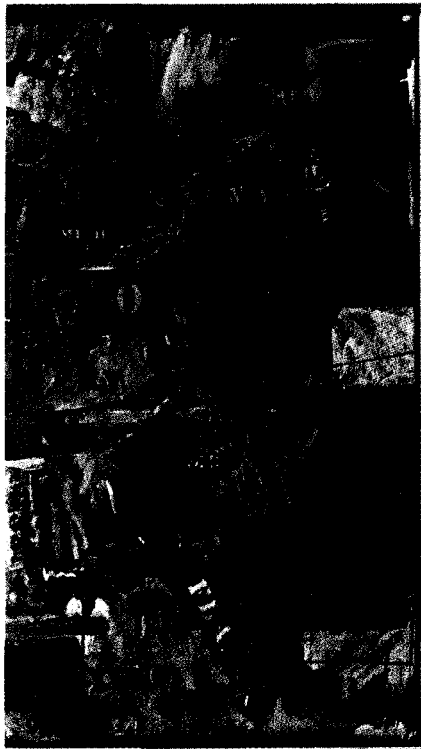
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"Jasper Johns," an exhibition organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, N.Y. appeared there from Oct. 18, 1977 to Jan. 22, 1978. Subsequent showings include: Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Feb. 12 to March 26, 1978; Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, April 18 to June 4, 1978; Hayward Gallery, London, June 21 to July 30, 1978; The Seibu Museum of Art, Tokyo, Aug. 19 to Sept. 26, 1978; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Oct. 20 to Dec. 10, 1978. The exhibition is made possible by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and Philip Morris Incorporated.



FLAG, 1955. Encaustic, oil and collage on fabric. 42 1/4 x 60 3/4". The Museum of Modern Art, N.Y.

# TELEVISION

One Cheer for Cavett

by Karl E. Meyer

AFTER a dismayingly inept start, Dick Cavett has come back into stride and may yet be able to achieve what I thought was impossible—the civilizing of the barbarous talk show. My verdict remains conditional because Cavett has dreadful lapses. Whenever he interviews show business celebrities, his questions seem to veer from fan magazine gee whiz to discreditable prying into third-rate matters. I thought he would never stop asking Joanne Woodward why she hasn't become a superstar.

In any event, with *The Dick Cavett Show*—which is produced by WNET in New York City—we are getting a fair test of a problematic form. For 30 uninterrupted minutes each weeknight, Cavett has a chance to talk with one guest or more in a moderately adult vein. The time, 11 P.M. on most public stations, is about right: When the show is good, it is like a postprandial cognac.

On two recent evenings, for example, there was a superb symposium on the troubled state of the English language. The guests were intelligently chosen: Edwin Newman (author of *A Civil Tongue*), Agnes de Mille, John Kenneth Galbraith, and the Savonarola of critics, John Simon. So spirited was the back and forth that I wanted more. Why, for one thing, did Cavett fail to bring up the problem of such ideologically imposed atrocities as *spokesperson*? There was matter enough, I felt, to warrant a monthly program on the same subject, preferably with the same troupe.

Curiously, the Cavett show seems to work best when it features words and writers and is at its feeblest when it deals with films and actors. There may be a sensible explanation for this paradox. The professional entertainer is always on camera, confronting us with an eyeless Greek mask. Cavett's worst excesses—such as impertinently asking Geraldine Fitzgerald whether Orson Welles had fathered her son—spring evidently from his wish to penetrate the mask and reveal the flesh below. (In the case of Fitzgerald, Cavett was more flustered than his imperturbable guest.)

Authors, or any nonprofessional entertainers, bring private faces to public places. Aside from such practiced performers as Gore Vidal and Norman

Mailer, writers as guests evince an inviting spontaneity. They do not arrive at the studio with pretaped answers to predictably banal questions. One of Cavett's better interviews was with the critic and novelist Wilfrid Sheed, who was asked at one point if he was being himself. Startled, Sheed said he wasn't sure and couldn't tell what the red-eye was doing to him. (Cavett confessed, revealingly, that after a show is taped he can hardly remember what he may have said; on camera, he flies by autopilot.)

In short, when it comes to television talk, the amateurs outdo the players. This is apparent in the flawless conversational style of Alistair Cooke, host of *Masterpiece Theatre*. Cooke does not use a TelePrompter or cue cards but writes and then memorizes his introductory words. He talks on camera with the casual tone of someone thinking aloud. Since Cooke has written his own script, he knows the value of his words and compels our attention.

When John Gielgud and John Houseman attempted to play in Cooke's court as hosts of *The Pallisers* and *The Best of Families* respectively, the results were undistinguished. Each could be seen to be reciting a script and using stage tricks to simulate a spurious spontaneity.

If what I am saying makes sense,



"The whole world is going to hell, and you're complaining because the little light on your waffle iron flickers?"

Cavett ought to steer clear of players in his choice of guests, however tempting the glamour of a Sophia Loren or a Jason Robards (neither of whom had anything of real interest to say). Far more memorable than any film star was Charles Schulz, the creator of *Peanuts*, who was as wide-eyed as Charlie Brown and as winningly unabashed as Lucy.

Part of the problem is that Cavett came to the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) after too many years on the networks. It is to his credit that he was dropped by ABC because his ratings were deemed to be anemic. To my mind, network talk shows are uniformly loathsome; hosts rely on mindless one-liners to keep us watching through the interminable commercials. Much that is repulsive in American life—the cynical engineering of hype, the abject courtship of the media, and the blithe ignorance about anything that happened a week ago—is mirrored in Johnny Carson's plastic grin. Carson leans on his admitted gift for repartee to avoid getting into anything deeper than a demitasse saucer.

When Cavett made his PBS debut last fall, he seemed almost to miss the commercials and to be turning to established stars as if to prove he was back in the big time. Initially, he fired questions like a breathless spastic, sometimes (and unforgivably) cuing a response. One of his early guests was William F. Buckley, Jr., who was asked if he had ever concluded that he was totally wrong about something he had said or written—a very good question. Alas, Cavett then blurted, as I recall, "Such as the Edgar Smith case." Buckley was spared the pain of reflection and embarked on a lengthy disquisition about his defense of a murderer in New Jersey who turned out to be guilty as charged.

It has taken Cavett months to unwind and to learn to address a smaller audience with a longer attention span. Given his verbal dexterity and the wide range of his curiosity, he may yet turn the talk show into something more substantial than bubble gum. If I had any say in the matter, I would vote for a second season for the glibbest talker from Nebraska since that other gust of prairie wind, William Jennings Bryan. But I would implore Cavett to lay off the stardust. ●