

## Theater

GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

**I**F the present theatrical season does nothing else, it should prove more or less conclusively just how right or how wrong the contention is that playwrights who go to Hollywood for any length of time seldom come back without a fatal *streptococcus septicus*.

Having deserted the theater in its late hour of need and having heard that it is now firmly back on its feet again and in the money, the doughboys are either permanently or temporarily returning in sizable numbers, some elaborately pretending that their souls, at least, have never really been away, some eagerly trusting that their dereliction may find extenuation in the gifts they are about to re-bestow upon the stage, and others cockily, if rather pathetically and ludicrously, seeking to whitewash their Hollywood harlotry with defenses of and even hosannas to the film art.

Among those who are scampering back to the ship, now that they have found it isn't sinking after all, are: Ben Hecht, Laurence Stallings, Clifford Odets, Clare Kummer, Bayard Veiller, Arthur Richman, Bartlett Cormack, Zoë Akins, Herman Mankiewicz, Reginald Lawrence, Max Marcin, Vincent Lawrence, Zona Gale, Louis Weitzenkorn, Sidney Howard, Francis Faragoh, John Emerson, Edward Childs Carpenter, Valentine Davies, and Aben Kandel.

Several of these, before they sold themselves down the river, demonstrated themselves playwrights of a very pretty competence, and some of their plays were among the best that the American theater at the time had to offer. Some of the others never amounted to anything even before they betook themselves to the great Western cultural center, and so do not figure in the present speculation. But what Hollywood has or has not done to the better ones, as we shall determine from the plays they disclose to us, should in the season's final reckoning constitute the first considerably tested and substantial argument either for or against the Hollywood influence.

While I duly and fully appreciate that a professionally hired critic's concern is not with playwrights personally but solely with the plays they produce, and while I, who have a disrelish for almost everything that Hollywood represents—equaled only by my distaste for the libretto of Schubert's *Alfonso und Estrella*, the two nude holy creatures in Bellini's *Madonna, Child and Six Saints*, and French beer—nevertheless for the sake of the theater hope for the best, I privilege myself a snack of disquiet when I contemplate the recent conduct and public utterances of a number of these more material dramatists.

Take, for example, Ben Hecht. This Hecht, fundamentally a fellow of talent and some brilliance, started on his career with independence, integrity, and high pride; and his work in the field of letters and drama reflected his honesty and inviolable personal and professional standards. Then, with the surprising suddenness of a hot-seat, Hollywood's gold electrified him and bounced him like some esurient neo-Forty-niner out of his erstwhile composure. That, since Hecht abandoned himself to its influence, he has written nothing which, up to the present season, has not clearly and unmistakably indicated the habit of invalidating character and standards which that influence seems to have, does not necessarily argue that he may not prove himself reclaimed and redeemed. We shall see what we shall see.

But we may perhaps be allowed a moment of pause when we pick up the amusement trade journal, *Variety*, and observe on the first page the announcement that Hecht has accepted a writing contract with Samuel Goldwyn for \$260,000 a year and on the back page of the very same issue this toothsome advertising blurb conspicuously signed by him:

"I've always had the notion that the theater could hit harder than the screen, bounce higher, say more and dig deeper. After an hour and a half look at Mr. Goldwyn's production of *Dead End*, I

entered Mr. Goldwyn's office with head hung and ready to join the true faith, and murmur that I may have been wrong. It is a more unflinching, undecorated and brilliant attack on the emotions than any stage play, including its own Broadway origin, I've seen in years. . . . Among the things I did when I broke down and begged Mr. Goldwyn's pardon for not having adored the art of the cinema before, was ask his permission to square myself with the Muses by coming out once flat-footed with a hosanna for a movie. Mr. Goldwyn graciously granted me this permission."

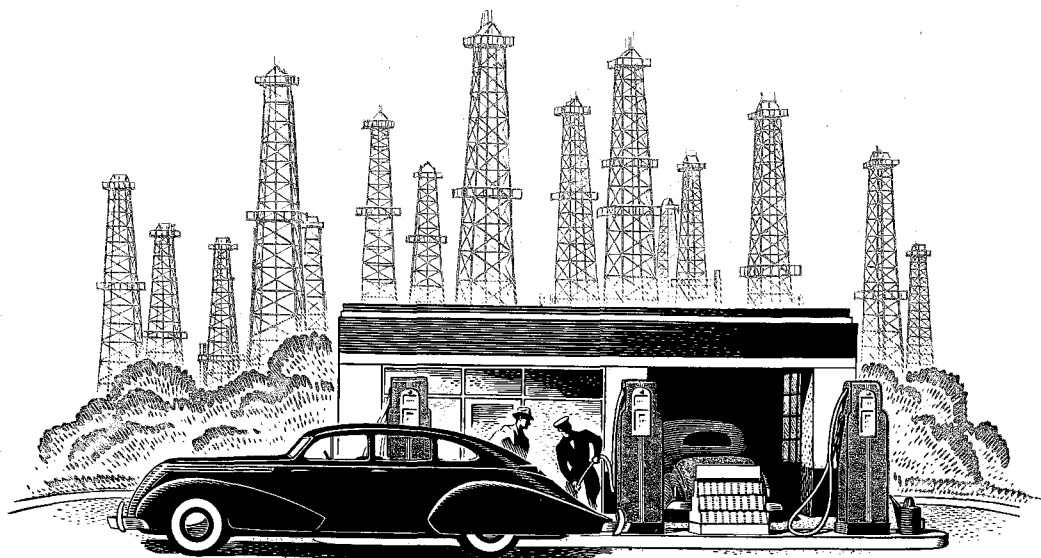
That there could be any slightest connection between a Goldwyn contract for \$260,000 and the pronouncement that a Goldwyn movie is superior to any stage drama produced in years—the period covering the plays of Synge, Shaw, O'Neill, O'Casey, Pirandello, and most of the other outstanding world dramatists—is, of course, to be believed only by the most ignorant, scurrilous, and libelous of knaves.

Like Hecht, Laurence Stallings, before the glitter of Kolossalwood mica tempted him, was a writer with a firm, fine belief in himself, in the theater, and in the cause of drama; and everything he did for the theater—surely no one forgets his share in the memorable *What Price Glory?*, among other things—emphasized it. Now, read this, from an article lately published in *Stage*:

"Even now in this relatively enlightened age, a fine critic such as Richard Watts, Jr., of the *Herald Tribune* is moved from his first-class reporting on the new films to shell out the usual woe-begone contemplation of the legitimate drama, and this move is called a promotion for Mr. Watts—though the difference is comparable to that of a man leaving the post of tackle on a football team to crawl under grandma's chair for a good old-fashioned cry. . . . In the meantime, the world was going to the movies. . . . Chinamen in remote villages of Suiyan longed for spectacles like Harold Lloyd's, or for women like

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Overlooking for the moment the unconscious, rich, paradoxical humor, to say nothing of the corrupted intelligence, of such Hollywood bowwowism, what are we to think of the dramatic mind and character of the writer responsible for it? If, as in the instance of Hecht, Stallings is completely honest in the matter, it becomes painfully evident that he has at the same time also become deplorably dumb. If, on the other hand, he is dishonest and is merely catering to Hollywood's favor and good will—which is obviously wholly unthinkable—he is contemptible.\*

Passing over Zoë Akins, that once highly propitious writer for the theater who long since surrendered her virtue (esthetic) to the Timons of the celluloid Athens and who since has sought to exculpate herself with such *pâtés de foie gras* as "Anyone who goes to Hollywood simply for the money to be got out of it and not with a great faith and pride and artistic belief in writing for the pictures should be allowed no place there," we come to Clifford Odets, the young man in whom the great majority of drama critics, though hardly the present commentator, once saw enormously promising dramatic gifts.

Like some of the other playwrights mentioned, this Odets began to write for the stage with passionate fidelity and conviction and, whatever might have been held critically against him, there could be no denying that he possessed an inexpugnable probity and even a boiling ardor when it came to the business of sitting himself down and writing his ideas into drama. Then came Hollywood beckoning with its easy money and warm skies and flattering flunkies and facile veneer of grandeur and—almost overnight—this from Mr. Odets to an interviewer for the *New York World-Telegram*:

"The movies, if you ask me, have taken over the field of entertainment in this country. The theater, which once had a potent and powerful voice, has dwindled to a little squeak that sometimes, but not often, sounds something cultural."

That the playwrights I have quoted,

\*Since the above was set in type, *Virginia*, an historical musical romance with its book largely the work of Mr. Stallings, has edged under the dead-line. The aforesaid book very pointedly and very sadly substantiates at least one of the fears which I have expressed.

together with those whom I have not, may prove to us, through their plays which are to be presented this season, that the Hollywood influence is just what the American drama has long sorely needed for its coming to maturity, is possible. But one wonders how a sneering contempt for the theater and drama, if it be honest and not merely apologia pro vita sewer, may be reconciled with the achievement of sound dramatic writing, even as, on the other hand, a similar contempt for the movies might be reconciled with the writing of superior screen scenarios.

A dramatist of any worth at all writes not simply with his pen but with all the depth of his mind, his emotions, and his

OUTSTANDING PLAYS are unusually late this season in making their appearance on Broadway. In the next issue Mr. Nathan will review: Maxwell Anderson's *The Star-Wagon*, Teresa Deevy's *Katie Roche*, Ben Hecht's *To Quito and Back*, Valentine Davies' *Blow Ye Winds*, and other plays which are ushering in the season. Several of these—*French Without Tears*, *George and Margaret*, *Shadow and Substance*, among them—Mr. Nathan has already commented on in manuscript, and he has also reviewed the tryout performance of *Amphitryon*.

inmost character, and when a man's mind, emotions, and character are traitors to his immediate purpose, the result can hardly be other than bastard. It is difficult to imagine any American playwright of true merit and personal honor, whether he has been in Hollywood or not, delivering himself either sincerely or insincerely of such movie baboonery and such drama increpations as the writers noted.

Try to imagine it, if you can, of O'Neill, who would not allow himself to be jimmied into Hollywood with a ten-million-dollar crowbar. Try to imagine it, if you can, of Maxwell Anderson, who took a brief fling at the pictures and got out so quickly that the suction of his flight almost pulled down Grauman's Chinese and the Carthay Circle movie palaces. Try to imagine it, further, of S. N. Behrman and Lillian Hellman, for all the circumstance that both of them have periodically gone to

Hollywood to do some writing for the screen. To drop far down the scale, try to imagine it today of even Sidney Howard, and in the face of the fact that he spends a great deal of time in the film factories.

If the plays of the returning prodigals succeed in shattering the qualms and misgivings that I have expressed—a dispensation devoutly to be wished—the event will provide a welcome phenomenon and will be hailed by no hailer more pleased and more vociferously apologetic than myself. But until they have shattered those qualms and misgivings, I shall have difficulty in keeping myself from meditating, indirectly albeit quite relevantly, on the fate of John Drinkwater after he had been persuaded to take \$10,000 to write the life story of that great immortal, Mr. Carl Laemmle, and on the fate of that one-time able journalist, Will Irwin, after he accepted a similar amount to celebrate between covers the glory of that other great immortal, Mr. Adolph Zukor, and on the fate to come of that presently even more able journalist, Alva Johnston, now that he has devoted himself to the literary consecration of that third even greater immortal, Mr. Samuel Goldwyn. (Incidentally, please, dear God, let me not forget this climactic tribute from Mr. Johnston's well-known biographical performance: "Next year is Sam's real silver jubilee. It is something for everybody to get patriotic about.")

And I shall also, until that happy hour, have equal difficulty in keeping myself from meditating on what Hollywood did, if only, fortunately, for the time being, to a writer of infinite superiority to all and sundry whose names I have herein recorded. His name, H. G. Wells. His magnificent arch-boloney: "The motion picture is a greater art than the arts of music, drama, literature, painting and sculpture all combined."

## THE SNOB APPEAL

### 3. Dishabille

Mrs. Two is a lady who entertains easily. She lives in a farmhouse cottage on Long Island and is used to having people drop in all day long. Giving Sunday suppers is routine to her. She flings "Come at eight" to all her friends and they just keep on coming. She covers card-tables with dark green linen and bowls of violets and primroses from her woods, and scatters them all over the house. She uses the dining-room table as a buffet and piles everything on it, so late guests can help themselves. She always serves the dinner on ordinary peasant earthenware pots and plates, but she uses her lovely flat silver. She generally wears something brief and comfortable, such as black jersey pants and a pink chenille jacket with diamond buttons.

—*Harper's Bazaar*.

SCRIBNER'S



# The Birth of a Nation

(continued from page 46)

*The Clansman* had inspired Griffith; it had also, says Terry Ramsaye in his history of the motion-picture industry, inspired an obscure gentleman named Joseph Simmons, who was looking for a lodge to promote. Originally he planned to call his white-robed order "The Clansmen," but discovered that the name had been pre-empted; as a result he formed the Ku Klux Klan of recent unhallowed memory. Says Ramsaye: "In subsequent years they [the film and the Klan] reacted upon each other to the large profit of both. The film presented predigested dramatic experience and thrills; the society made the customers all actors in costume."

There was trouble everywhere, much of it venial. The threat of Negro opposition was used by many politicians in a futile effort to "shake down" the management. In Chicago it was shown under a permanent injunction restraining the police from interference after the management had agreed not to admit children under eighteen. There were legal difficulties in that city even when the picture was revived in 1924. Aitken remembers that Harold Ickes was retained by the city to prosecute two of the twelve jury trials and that, after a courtroom excoriation of the drama, Ickes turned to him and said, behind his hand, "Best picture I ever saw in my life."

## V

THE camera has learned many lessons since Billy Bitzer (his associates called him "Eagle Eye" and said he could focus on a pin at the end of a room) photographed *The Birth of a Nation*. Camera work has become soft and, at times, surpassingly beautiful. Yet without today's artificial light and with the crudest sort of technical equipment (Bitzer had to carry a bicycle lamp on location to keep his camera warm), *The Birth of a Nation* still stands up as a great picture. The harshness of the light gives it an authenticity that all the soft camera work of today cannot equal. The panoramic battle scenes are tremendous; they have no smell of artifice, but, instead, seem to be photographs of actual war. I have never seen a more moving or significant shot than the one utilized by Griffith to tell the story of Sherman's March to the Sea. The camera "irises in" (Griffith invented the iris

MAGAZINE



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by focusing the camera through a hole in a cigar box) on a starved mother with two crying children hanging to her skirts. Then the perspective enlarges; the mother and children are on a hill-top. The camera shifts, and with the mother's eye we look down into a broad valley where in far distance an army column shaped like a scythe moves along while haystacks and houses burn.

There are flaws, to be sure—times when the pantomime is oversimplified, when the actors "act" too generously. And the continuous movement quite definitely is strange to eyes conditioned to the more deliberate pace of sound films. Yet the old magic is not lost. An epic story has never been told better—so far as technique is concerned.

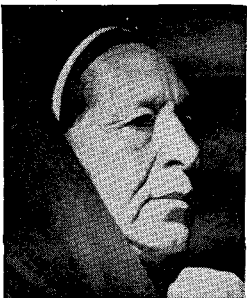
Twenty-two years have passed since *The Birth of a Nation*, unforeseen and unprecedented, burst before a wondering world. Today Griffith makes his home in Kentucky. For the moment, at least, he is retired. Thomas Dixon, seventy-three, not particularly affluent, is living in North Carolina, where he recently was appointed to a Federal court clerkship. The actors Bobby Harron, Henry Walthall, and Wallace Reid, who had his first part in the picture, are dead. Lillian Gish, a first lady of the

screen, is now one of the first ladies of the stage. Mae Marsh lives in Los Angeles and has three grown children. Miriam Cooper married Raoul Walsh, the director. Joseph Henaberry, who played the part of Lincoln, is now head of the Vitaphone Studios in New York. Elmer Clifton, who was cast as Phil Stoneman, later directed one of the most beautiful silent pictures ever made, *Down to the Sea in Ships*. George Seigmann and Walter Long are still playing parts in Hollywood. Ted Mitchell, incapacitated several years by illness, now is manager of the Majestic Theater in Brooklyn. Billy Bitzer, no longer young, still photographs an occasional film in the East Coast studios.

## VI

WOODROW WILSON saw *The Birth of a Nation* at a private showing in the White House and paid the picture its finest tribute. The President had lived in the Carolinas as a child during Reconstruction days. When the two hours and forty minutes of camera reporting at last were over, he rose from his chair and wiped his eyes.

"It is," he said, "like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."



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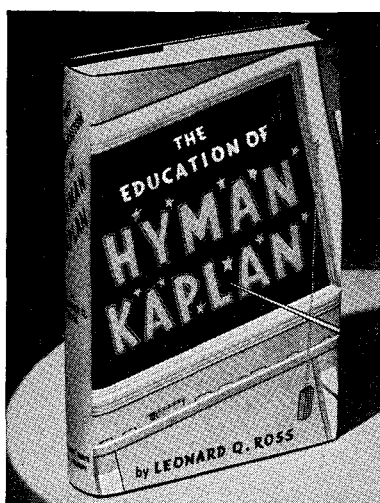
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## Books

JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

JEAN GIONO's *The Song of the World* (Viking, \$2.50) has been likened to the *Odyssey* by those who praise its "primitive drama" that goes "to the very root of the human adventure." The author himself, a Frenchman from the hilly fastnesses of the Basses-Alpes, has been hailed as a "giant" whose "voice is new in the world." He has been commended as timeless, a novelist to take you out of contemporary space and time and into a wider, purer, more heroic world than the world of the Popular Front, the Bank of France, and "piracy" patrols in the Mediterranean.

The comparisons and the furore will do Giono little good in the long run. For his voice is not "new" in French letters, nor is he wholly comparable to Homer. A romantic, he likes to write about primitive stress and people who are ten times life size; but so have innumerable Frenchmen ever since Rousseau canonized the Noble Savage. Only a superficial acquaintance with French literature will enable you to recall Chateaubriand and Pierre Loti; and just a few years ago French critics were making a fuss about Alain-Fournier whose romanticism differs very little in its basic spirit from that of Giono. The French seem to run to extremes; they produce a Céline and a Giono with equal facility. But Giono is not Homer, although his scenes are often Homeric in their conception. He is not Homer for the simple reason that his images are often strained (at least in the translation of Henri Fluchère and Geoffrey Myers, which Giono has himself approved). In the very first paragraph a river "shoulders" its way through a forest, and a ford whinnies. Now and again, as when he speaks of the "lyre-horned bulls," Giono achieves a Homeric aptness and simplicity, but there is nothing quite so good as the "wine-dark sea" or the "rosy-tinged dawn," or "Poseidon, the earth-shaker."

The story itself is Homeric in plot and character. While it unfolds in the circumscribed region of Giono's native

Basses-Alpes, it is obviously a syncopation of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, a story of elopement and kidnaping, of men who go forth in battle and dally long before returning home. Twin, the only living son of Sailor, the man of the forest, has disappeared upriver, into the Rebeillard country beyond the gorges. Thinking his son must be dead, Sailor sets out with the Golden-Mouthed Antonio, the man of the river, to bring back the body. But Twin is not dead; he has adventured into the demesne of Maudru, the ox-tamer, and has dared love his daughter, Gina, who is Helen the Queen and Calypso the Nymph rolled into one. Maudru is the patriarch incarnate; he rages like one of his bulls whenever he is crossed. And Twin, naturally, has crossed him by loving Gina.

When Sailor and Antonio arrive in the country of the Rebeillard, the chase is on; Twin is hiding out. But Twin manages to retain considerable freedom for himself in spite of his pursuers; he manages, for example, to slay his rival for Gina's hand. This killing eventually results in a reprisal in which Sailor is stabbed to death. The enraged Twin can't put up with that, so, instead of slipping away through the gorges to his own country with Gina, he stays on to do battle. With the help of Antonio he comes down like a wolf on the Maudru farmstead, burning barns, bashing in the heads of drovers, killing the cows, and scattering the bulls. The carnage is terrible. It is also a miracle when you consider the odds against two men who are far from their homes.

So much for the *Iliad* in *The Song of the World*. The *Odyssey* commences when Twin (with Gina) and Antonio (with Clara, the blind woman) set sail down the river on a raft. It is an easy home-coming; the Greeks have already done their dallying before Troy, when they might have been fighting or escaping. Twin could have skipped with Gina long before the great battle at the farmstead, and Antonio could have gone off with his blind woman, too. Even Sailor

might have escaped if Twin had had any sense.

All of this is thriller stuff; it will fall with a familiar ring upon the ears of Americans who have read Jack London or James Fenimore Cooper, or even James Oliver Curwood. The telling of the story is, however, something that is not usually known to thriller literature. Even in spite of the strained images Giono is always *en rapport* with his scene; he loves the river, the trees, and the hills of his country with a love that is fortunately nine-tenths curiosity. Whether the Homeric psychology of his big scenes is true or not I have no means of knowing; I have never felt like Helen or Ulysses. But the attitudes of some of the minor characters—of Toussaint, the apothecary, for instance—are always perfectly comprehensible and perfectly real. Even if you can't stand Homeric madmen you should be able to find much to your taste in *The Song of the World*.

The real idiocy is not the story, but Giono's attitude towards his own product and his own world. The present time, he says, disgusts him; hence his desire to escape from contemporaneity to the far more "natural" world of the primitive Basses-Alpes, where the peasants still live as they lived two or three hundred years ago. Clifton Fadiman has already pointed out the fallacy of identifying the "primitive" with the "natural"; as he says, anything that man does is natural to man, whether it is killing an ox or sticking a test tube in the flame of a Bunsen burner. (The brain is as "natural" an organ as the heart or the spleen.) But there is a second fallacy involved in Giono's attitude towards his material. He seems to be telling us that primitive man lived a much less conventional and inhibited life than we moderns; he also implies, somewhat paradoxically, that values and order both exist for primitive people, whereas confusion and disorder make the world a hell for the people of 1937. Just why he should think thus is beyond me. Maudru, the patriarch, lives by rigid convention and ex-