



THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

Yes, We Have Some Bananas

Another Casualty. — Tottering and bleeding, drama criticism emerges as yet another victim of the war. While it can still get on its legs in the presence of a farce, a vaudeville show, a musical comedy or even, in certain instances, some play that has no concern with immediate events, it falls flat on its face when asked to contemplate any exhibit that deals with the current world struggle. The veteran of a thousand peaces has cracked with the boom of the first gun.

The noble old fellow's wounds were first observable some three years ago and now cover his entire body. And they drip anew and mortally on the occasion of almost any play that has to do with us or our allies in arms. Patriotism then triumphs over the once analytical old fox and, try as he will, he can come out only a bad second. For one critic who can't see just how a mediocre play is arbitrarily converted into a good one simply because its theme is soothing to the national or allied sensibilities there are a dozen who seem to be able

to see it with their eyes closed.

It isn't, true enough, that all these plays of war are invariably praised as masterpieces. A number are not. But even where criticism manages heroically to retain a little of its old poise, its grievous injuries are still discernible. In evidence whereof, I set down literally six sample comments on the plays in point culled from the present New York practitioners of the craft of Aristotle:

1. No one whose heart is burdened by the human misery of a cruel war can face Mr. Anderson's play with equanimity. After the war it may be possible to have a detached point of view about *The Eve of St. Mark*. There is, in short, some ham in it. But as things stand in the world today no one is prepared to cavil at (such) minor details.
2. It is easy to forgive the grave faults of Mr. Williams' *The Morning Star* in view of the bravery of our English brothers which it so sympathetically pictures. The mind may say no, but the heart proclaims a loud yes.
3. The matchless heroism of our British allies makes Lesley Storm's *Heart of a City* what it is: a play deserving of the plaudits of criticism. Who would dwell on dramatic defects when moved by such a theme?

4. The nobility of Mr. Steinbeck's drama, *The Moon Is Down*, comes from the fact that he demonstrates, however now and again faultily in a dramaturgical sense, that the Nazis are in the end doomed.

5. In *Watch On the Rhine*, Miss Hellman evokes the high admiration of criticism with her sympathetic delineation of the anti-Nazi underground movement in Germany. Her theme is hard to resist.

6. Mr. Sherwood's *There Shall Be No Night* preaches the folly of unpreparedness. What more, in these days, can one demand of a play?

There are scores of other such examples of what once was dramatic criticism. The craft seems to be in sore need of the ministrations of the Red Cross.

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Decline of Polite Comedy. —

Such recent productions as the John Van Druten-Lloyd Morris indifferent *The Damask Cheek* and the Philip Barry wholly vapid *Without Love* again bring home the fact that in late years American light comedy has declined from its high even more than B. & O. common, H. G. Wells and the Blue-point oyster. Van Druten (he has lived over here for years, has taken out citizenship papers, and so may be regarded as an American), while still indicating skill has not negotiated anything in seasons to equal his early *Young Woodley* and *There's Always Juliet*. Barry has

gone off precipitantly since the days of his *Paris Bound*, *Holiday* and somewhat later *The Animal Kingdom*. And Behrman, the most adroit of the lot, has not done anything that has come anywhere near his *Rain from Heaven*, produced in 1934. His present *The Pirate*, which scarcely comes under the nobby heading of polite comedy, is good Lunt and Fontanne and hence very good box-office, but no credit to his old standing.

As for the others, Rachel Crothers, never of much consequence, has since not touched even her *Let Us Be Gay* and *As Husbands Go*, done in 1929 and 1931 respectively. A. E. Thomas, after *No More Ladies* in 1934, has critically disappeared. Paul Osborn did a nice job in *The Vinegar Tree* and a fairish one in *Oliver, Oliver* a decade or more ago and has latterly gone off in other dramatic directions with minor accomplishment. Arthur Richman, who began promisingly, has done little worthy of note since *The Awful Truth* in 1922. Vincent Lawrence, with all indications of a fine talent, wrote two or three intelligently amusing polite comedies, went to Hollywood and, like so many others, died there. After her *The Marriage Game*, produced many years ago, Anne Crawford Flexner faded into noth-

ingness. Lynn Starling, who began with *Meet the Wife*, subsequently confected several lesser comedies and then went down the Hollywood chute. Donald Ogden Stewart, author of the entertaining *Rebound* in 1929, ditto.

Aside from some of these obvious cases and regarding only the better writers who have persisted in the polite comedy field, what may be the reasons for the collapse, either complete or comparative? The first that comes to mind is the war and the upset state of the world, allegedly hardly conducive to the writing of such comedy. But recollection proves the reason hollow. During the last world war there came from both America and England a plenitude of sufficiently deft light comedies, including among others Alfred Sutro's *The Clever Ones* and *The Two Virtues*, Monckton Hoffe's *Things We'd Like to Know*, the Smith-Mapes *The Boomerang*, the Ditrichstein-Hatton *The Great Lover*, W. S. Maugham's *Caroline* and *Our Betters*, Clare Kummer's *Good Gracious*, *Annabelle* and *A Successful Calamity*, and the Harwood-Jesse *Billeted*. Also Haddon Chambers' *The Saving Grace*, William Hurlbut's *Romance and Arabella*, Jesse Lynch Williams' *Why Marry?*, Milne's *Belinda*, Maugham's *Too*

Many Husbands, *Love In a Cottage* and *Caesar's Wife*, Arnold Bennett's *The Tuile*, Kummer's *Be Calm*, *Camilla*, Cyril Harcourt's *A Pair of Petticoats*, and Gladys Unger's *Our Mr. Hepplewhite*. So war and the upset state of a world don't seem to be exactly the answer.

A second commonly heard argument is that our America is not, and never was, possessed of the right social background and tone for the comedy of manners. That it may not have been in the past is more than possible, although out of it even then emerged such commendable exhibits as Langdon Mitchell's *The New York Idea*, Clyde Fitch's *The Truth*, and various others. But that it has in later years been at least the equal of England in that respect should be more or less evident. This largely and paradoxically has been brought about by the English themselves, who for the past twenty years have flooded the American metropolitan social scene and become, to a considerable extent, part and parcel of it, often — if rumor be true — chiefly parcel. Thus, more and more, what with economic conditions in England what they have been, with manifold British-American intermarriages, and with similar phenomena of time, New

York gradually grew to be the capital of gay society where things came to such a pass that one could no longer familiarly throw a champagne bottle across the room without hitting at least a couple of Lords, three Dukes and several Ladies, not to mention divers French and Italian counts, Rumanian princesses, Russian grand-dukes, and maybe a Greek or Spanish royalty or two. And the scene, accordingly, became so much meat for comedy of the Maugham *Our Betters*, Lonsdale *The Last of Mrs. Cheney* and even general Haddon Chambers-Hubert Henry Davies species. So that doesn't seem to be exactly the answer either.

Then what is the answer? I answer the question simply and confidently. I don't know.

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Fantasy. — Fantasy may be superficially described as being weak serious drama filtered through a poetic imagination into beauty. The definition, however, does not fit the Ketti Frings-Robert Ayre *Mr. Sycamore* by a long shot. In this case, all we get is a fantastic idea, to wit, a postman who takes a cue from the Philemon and Baucis legend and turns himself into a tree in order to get away from crowding humanity, filtered through a prosy

imagination into woefully weak comedy. Fantasy consists in something more than a mere initial extravagant conceit. It is the quasi-realistic conversion of such a conceit into wonder and charm and loveliness and ache and laughter and commiseration through the wonder and charm and loveliness and ache and laughter and commiseration of a literate and whimsical mind.

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Theft Note. — There hasn't been a good revue title hereabout since Ed Wynn offered us *Boys and Girls Together*. Such recent ones as *Laugh, Town, Laugh, Keep 'em Laughing, Of V We Sing*, and *Priorities of 1943* are enough to discourage even the most avid seeker after amusement. Since invention seems to be lacking, I suggest that producers cabbage a likely one used some twenty-seven years ago by the Messrs. Stuart and Cliff for a revue produced in England. As no one remembers it, the producers can pass it off as original. The title: *It'll Tickle*.

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Alt Wien. — It is hardly news in this day that whether it be called *Die Fledermaus, The Bat, One Wonderful Night, The Merry Countess, Night Birds, Champagne Sec, Rosalinda* or whatever else, the

libretto of the operetta afflicts Strauss' grand score with the pox. It was, in point of fact, hardly news when it was first uncovered and duly gagged at 'way back in 1874. If the tale of the philandering husband who goes to a ball and there encounters his wife in a two-inch mask and, not recognizing her, makes loving overtures to her, to say nothing of embarrassed obligatos to her maid who is also present under false colors — if the tale was stuporous nigh seventy years ago, its deficiency in enormous dynamic power may be understood in the present era. Worse, when the libretto, as in the current *Rosalinda* production, is treated to acting that seems persistently to be beset by the conviction that high Alt Wien spirits are best to be interpreted by comportment indistinguishable from a number of chamois frisking with an equal number of kangaroos, that deficiency becomes doubly apparent. There are times during the evening, indeed, when one can't be sure that what one is watching isn't a mixed troupe of high divers and flying trapeze artists.

The stage is unfortunately also gravelled in other directions and is only in the Strauss spirit when director Felix Brentano steps aside and permits George Balanchine to

take over with the ballet that brilliantly concludes the second act.

This Mr. Brentano appears to be infected with some peculiar ideas, one of which he shares with most directors of the musical stage. I allude to drunks. Whereas on the dramatic stage a gentleman in his cups is generally presented as bearing some slight resemblance to a gentleman in his cups, on the musical he is invariably pictured as an unrecognizable cross between an adagio dancer and a case of Parkinson's disease, with overtones of the late William Jennings Bryan on one of his good days. A portion of the second act, laid in Prince Orlofsky's ballroom, and a larger portion of the third, laid in the warden's office at the jail on the following morning, consequently offer the appearance less of ladies and gentlemen of old Vienna who have looked upon the champagne when it was amber than of a crowd of current 52nd Street boulevardiers full of wood alcohol.

There is also the matter of legs. Whoever selected many of the ladies, the dancers foremost among them, must have a mother who in childbirth was not scared by a grand piano.

But if the physical stage on the whole suggests considerably less the

romantic Vienna of yesterday than a Broadway night club of today, the Strauss score led by Erich Korngold and amplified by the interpolation from other Strauss sources of *Wiener Wald*, *Wein, Weib und Gesang*, etc. — and in the main ably sung — makes more than sufficient amends. But I can only pray that the next time the eminently worthy sponsors of the New Opera Company produce the operetta they will have the orchestra play it and the singers sing it with the curtain down. Or at least not raise it until the second act waltz ballet and then again promptly drop it.

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Critical Redefinition. — Two terms commonly employed by journalistic drama criticism call for clarification, to wit, *imagination* and *originality*. Both are indiscriminately held to be synonymous with virtue, yet close scrutiny proves that often they are not. Some of the best plays are lacking in such “imagination,” as some of the worst are full of it. And so, too, in the case of such “originality.” There is no more imagination, in the accepted critical use of the word, in some such relatively worthy play as, say, Brieux’s *The Red Robe* than in some such unworthy one as, for example, Brieux’s *The Woman on*

Her Own. There is, in all truth, more of this so-called imagination in a rubbishy play like Davis’ reincarnation nonesuch, *The Ladder*, than in an upright play like Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. As for originality, there is surely far more in a mystery and detective play like *The Bat* than in a considerably greater contribution to dramatic art like Sudermann’s thematically and basically stale *Honor*.

Imagination, it seems, is too often critically identified with a fancy flight into space, however meaningless, whereas the greater imagination frequently exercises itself with its feet firmly planted on the ground, as witness, in the first instance, Albert Bein’s mediocre *Heavenly Express* and, in the second, Hauptmann’s *The Weavers*. Originality, it also seems, is too often identified less with treatment than with first use of theme and a second-rate play like Yeats’ *Deirdre* consequently accorded the compliment and a first-rate subsequent one like Synge’s *Deirdre of the Sorrows* arbitrarily deprived of it.

That Thornton Wilder’s newest offering, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, has both imagination and originality in the above accepted sense is freely to be granted. Its scheme of showing mankind’s struggle for certainty and security down the

ages through anachronisms visited upon the present is both novel and fanciful. But, though it has scenes of humor and pathos that get their effect, it is emphatically not the kind of play that results from imagination and originality in the higher and purer sense.



WIND INFERTILE

BY GEORGE ABBE

WIND that burns and beats and burrows,
Underneath thy burning side
Curls the yarrow's white in furrows,
Nestles light in golden tide.

In thy passion cries the cedar,
Twists the empty stream with pain;
Meadow blower, pollen breeder,
Softener of soil with rain.

Crouched behind the hounds of thunder,
Bursting over, clouds aswarm,
Flail and whip and limbs that blunder,
Levelling the earth to storm,

Past the thinnest red of dying,
Past the last translucent water,
Comes from darkened west thy sighing —
Empty still of son or daughter,

Barren giver of all motion,
Turner of the leaves to light,
Still more lonely than the ocean,
Rest thy fruitless heat in night.

DOWN TO EARTH

BY ALAN DEVOE

The Mind of the Wild

RECURRENTLY, in the woods chronicles and sky chronicles and water chronicles that occupy this section of THE AMERICAN MERCURY, there has been concern to show that the characteristic behavior patterns of pre-human and sub-human lives are determined and fixed by instinct, and are not resultant from private processes of mentation and decision in the in-

dividual. There has been concern to show something of how instinct works: how an instinctive act is compounded of reflexes and tropisms, and how thus the flight of the hawk-moth to the white blossom of the phlox is no more a conscious action than the phlox blossom's own phototropic striving toward the sun, and how even the behaviors of far higher animals than



Raccoon Trapped

Frank Utpatel