

## Theater

## Summer Solace

BY HENRY HEWES

Summertime puts Broadway and Off-Broadway to their severest test. Many highly praised shows that would have flourished between September and June have to fold, simply because the audience for theater decreases considerably in July and August. This year the number of shows in Broadway playhouses has dropped to nine, which must be the all-time low since the invention of air conditioning.

On the brighter side are the sold-out performances at Lincoln Center's Beaumont Theater, with its original-star revival of *Man of La Mancha* and the gradually improving business at both the Edison, one of Broadway's "middle houses," where *Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope* is cheerfully offering a mixture of blues, hand-clapping gospel friendship, and self-reliant vigor, and the Ethel Barrymore, where *Don't Play Us Cheap!* is drawing a sizable black audience to Broadway.

As usual in summer, shows occasionally replace their original stars with new ones, and for the critic it is interesting to see how the replacements' different personalities and approaches to their roles can change a play. A case in point is Neil Simon's *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, in which the star roles originally played by Peter Falk and Lee Grant are now being undertaken by Art Carney and Barbara Barrie.

When the show opened last December, it seemed, for the most part, to be just a man and his wife making the same jokes about the discomforts of living in New York City that nightclub comics and late-night TV hosts toss around. Nevertheless, it was a hit.

Although the new performers have not really changed the show's substance—it is still a scenario of jokes and still a hit—they have made it a little more of a story. Art Carney's portrait of Mel Edison is, from the beginning, that of a desperately anguished fifty-year-old executive on the verge of a breakdown. Eschewing the comic technique almost completely, he snaps out his complaints with compulsive anger. Is he paranoid? If one thinks about it, most of what Mel complains about is reasonable. However, Carney

makes Mel seem psychotic because he doesn't see why he should put up with the discomforts everyone else accepts and because he is aware that twenty-two years on Madison Avenue have left him unfit to exist in any other environment. Mel's reasonable revolt appears all the more insane because Barbara Barrie, as his wife, Edna, calmly and quietly resigns herself to everything. While this makes her less funny in the first act, it pays off in the second when her underplayed put-down of Mel's horrendous relatives is controlled emotion at its best, and in the final scene when she loses her job and goes berserk.

Off-Broadway the summer roster of shows is about normal. It includes the New York Drama Critics' Award winner, *That Championship Season*; the Chelsea Theatre Center's delightful revival of *The Beggar's Opera*; Arrabal's impassioned, shock-studded *And They Put Handcuffs on the Flowers*; Tennessee Williams's sublime *Small Craft Warnings*; Video Free America's composite of video tapes, *The Continuing Story of Carol and Ferd*, in which two young people deliberately and cruelly explore, with TV cameras, the intimacies of their relationship; and a comic double bill, *The Real Inspector Hound* and *After Magritte*, by Tom Stoppard.

The Stoppard comedies do not pretend to be much more than clever exercises. *The Real Inspector Hound* sets out to combine a parody of a mouldy British whodunit with a witty fantasy in which a third-string drama critic nefariously manages to become number one.

It shows us two critics, Birdboot and Moon, watching a new bit of trumped-up nonsense about a madman who may be one of the house guests at Muldoon Manor. The critics' pre-curtain conversation reveals that some of their colleagues have written their reviews in advance. Birdboot also urges his colleague Moon to recognize the talent of the play's ingénue, whom Birdboot has been seducing. Birdboot and Moon seem ridiculously vain when they compare their blurbs that have appeared blown-up in front of theaters, with poor Moon, the second-stringer, being able to boast only about one "unforgettable" for a play he can't recall. The pair are also preposterous as they scribble ponderous, fashionable-sound-

ing criticism that is either totally unrelated to the play they are seeing or that attempts to find hidden profundities in the trivial. Moon says, "I think we will find that within the austere framework of what is seen to be on one level a country-house weekend, and what a useful symbol that is, the author has given us . . . the human condition."

Ridiculous, yes. But Stoppard then does accept the difficult challenge of making his two spoofs merge into something that both adroitly completes the exercise and also reflects a certain degree of surreal truth. The cast, headed by Tom Lacy and David Rounds as Birdboot and Moon, is amusingly accurate. Nevertheless, this production often emerges as boringly facetious and repetitious, just barely saved by the subtlety in Stoppard's lampoon of the critics, and our awareness of a good erratic mind at work.

The shorter of the two pieces, *After Magritte*, is an interesting and remarkably successful attempt by the playwright to create a theater piece that has the quality of the Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte, or, that is, the quality Magritte would have had if he had been dealing with aspects of British middle-class society.

The play takes place in a home where people seem to be logically pursuing a bizarrely routine existence. A mother-in-law plays the tuba, and a husband and wife getting ready to go out and perform their dance act carry on oblivious of the eccentric images they present. They have been arguing about a strange sight they saw—a white-bearded, one-legged football player hopping down the street in striped pajamas—when a detective enters to question them about a crime he suspects them of having committed. The detective's pursuit of his own inquiry ingeniously leads to an explanation of both the crime and the couple's apparition.

Magritte once wrote, "Likeness is not concerned with agreeing with common sense or with defying it, but only with spontaneously assembling shapes from the world of appearance in an order given by inspiration." This formula also defines Tom Stoppard. □

Answer to Wit Twister, page 63: sager, gears, rages.

# Films

## Portrait of the Con Artist as a Young Man

BY THOMAS MEEHAN

*Marjoe*, a sleazy but fascinating documentary about a twenty-eight-year-old, smalltime evangelist named Marjoe Gortner, is like one of those as-told-to Hollywood confession books that were making the best-seller lists a few years ago. Instead of to Gerold Frank and his tape recorder, however, Marjoe has told his story into the lens of a 35 mm. movie camera, and he and the directors of the picture, Howard Smith and Sarah Kernochan, may indeed have stumbled upon a new genre of film—the *True Confessions* movie. Next year: Eva Gabor.

What Marjoe has to confess is that he's been a hypocritical rat fink who hasn't for a moment believed in the fire-and-brimstone, "thank you, Jesus" sermons that he's preached for years to holy-roller audiences around the Bible Belt. And that, overcome with guilt and a yearning to break into Las Vegas-style show business, he's now getting forever out of the evangelist racket. For Marjoe Gortner, there will be no more hustling money out of the black and poor-white dupes.

He's two-faced, Marjoe admits with a boyish grin, and in the film, which was made last year during his six-week farewell tour around the circuit, we get to see both of his faces. That is, the picture is mostly made up of *cinéma-vérité* footage of revival meetings—at which Marjoe, preaching into a microphone while strutting and wriggling about like Mick Jagger, cons the crowds not only into accepting Jesus in their hearts but also into parting with up to \$20 for red-checked "prayer scarves" that look as though they might have cost a quarter apiece in Woolworth's—intercut with straight-on shots of Marjoe telling the truth about himself ("I'm bad, but not evil") while lounging about in motel rooms between performances.

The motel-room moments would appear to make it certain that he'll never be tempted to go back into preaching—once word about *Marjoe* gets around

in holy-roller circles, he'll clearly be *persona non grata* forever under every revivalist tent from the Florida panhandle to Los Angeles. Which is one of the most fascinating things about *Marjoe*—it's a portrait of a con artist who is burning his bridges permanently behind him.

Coming onto the stage in a hip, Italian-cut suit, a flashy black-and-white sports shirt, and an American-flag tie, Marjoe seems to be so obviously a con man that it's difficult at first for us to believe that anybody could possibly be taken in by him. But, we gradually realize, this is part of the point of the picture—for those whose religion forbids them to go to the movies or even to watch TV, the revival meeting is a spirit-lifting form of entertainment, and at some level of consciousness the holy rollers are aware of the fact that they're being conned. They don't really mind, so long as they get to see a good show. It's hard to say whether or not Marjoe would have put on the same act or the revivalists would have behaved so hysterically (fainting, rolling on the ground, etc.) if the cameras hadn't been on them. This is the built-in Catch-22 of all *cinéma-vérité* films—one never knows how much the cameras influence the actions of those being filmed.

Perhaps the best moments in the picture come at its beginning when we see old 16 mm. clips of Marjoe as "a boy evangelist" on the revivalist circuit in the late 1940s and early 1950s. He is the son of a pair of broken-down, tent-show preachers who named him Marjoe, a Desilu-like combination of Mary and Joseph they'd dreamed up, and who then proclaimed to the world at large that their son had been personally called by Christ to spread the word of the Lord. In short, they used Marjoe, who began preaching at the age of four, as a come-on to attract crowds to their tent meetings. And he preached on the circuit for ten years, during which time, Marjoe claims in the picture, his parents made \$3 million out of him.

The film's most poignant bit is a clip of Marjoe, at the age of four and a half, serving as the minister at the marriage of a nervous, red-faced sailor and his heartbreakingly ugly bride. Tiny, frail, curly-haired, and jug-eared, Marjoe recites the wedding ceremony

in a piping, mechanical voice, and he looks visibly relieved when he gets to the end of it without having made a mistake. It had taken him months to memorize the ceremony, the grown-up Marjoe now explains into the camera—his mother had drilled him for hour after hour. And when he'd get it wrong, Marjoe tells us, she would hold his head under a water faucet or smother his face with a pillow—any sort of punishment that wouldn't leave marks on him for the holy rollers to notice.

Boy evangelists, like boy sopranos, are evidently pretty much washed up once puberty comes along, and at the age of fifteen Marjoe ran away from his parents to take up residence with "an older woman" in Southern California. He hung around Los Angeles for a couple of years, went briefly to college, dropped out, and then at twenty went back into evangelism, apparently because he didn't know of any other way to make a living. And, despite all of his guilt about not believing in the old-time religion he preached (even as a child, he hadn't believed in it), he might still be working the revival circuit if he hadn't run into Smith and Kernochan, whose idea it was to make the film we're now seeing. Marjoe immediately agreed—the movie, he realized, would at once destroy his career as a bush-league Oral Roberts and be a full-length showcase for his acting and singing talents. His consuming ambition, Marjoe tells us, is to be a pop singer like Mick Jagger, who is his idol, and on the evidence of *Marjoe*, in which he does some gospel singing, he certainly seems at least as talented as, say, Englebert Humperdinck.

*Marjoe*, by the way, is fairly short—only eighty-eight minutes long—and so you can go out for an evening, see the picture, have a couple of cheeseburgers at McDonald's, and still get home in time to catch the last half of the Billy Graham Crusade on TV. Anyway, though the picture is itself something of a con job, a promotional hype for Marjoe's prospective show-biz career, it's worth seeing. □

### LITERARY I.Q. ANSWERS

1i & 4j, *Paradise Lost*; 2g & 6h, *Passage to India*; 3k & 7l, *Winter's Tale*; 5b & 12a, *Portrait of a Lady*; 8d & 10c, *Invisible Man*; 9e & 11f, *Marble Faun*.