CHRONICLE AND COMMENT OF THE STAGE

Popular Writers Keep Secret of Success

By Heywood Broun

We have come to believe in the power of the press because whenever we write that some play or other is not at all to our taste it almost invariably proceeds to make several million dollars for its producer. In fact, upon one occasion a playwright whom we knew begged us to stretch a point as a special favor and say a bad word for his piece if we could do so conscientiously. Unfortunately, we liked the play and felt obliged to say so. It ran just a week, and the playwright is still rather bitter about our action.

One general press representative scores off us whenever we meet by announcing the record weekly totals of his particular play which we set down as among the worst of the season. When we attempt to defend ourselves by saying that we knew from the beginning that the play would be a success, and merely recorded our individual opinion, he counters by asking if that doesn't stigmatize us as a snob who has no respect for the general theatregoing public. We are hardly willing to admit that. Upon the occasions when we are one with the public we have the highest respect for its judgment.

It seems to us that there is a big public for any truly great play. There are not enough of these to go round, and so it is inevitable that there should be a big public also for some plays which are not even good. And when we say "good" we mean from our point of view. From its own point of view the theatregoing public is wise indeed. It goes to the plays which it likes and stays away from those which it detests. That seems to us reasonable enough. We would adopt exactly the same system if we were not under obligation to attend all first nights.

But we find it impossible to placate our friend the press agent by any such show of humility. "It seems to me," he says, "that when a play is a great big popular success you owe it to your readers to explain why, whether you like the play or not."

An article along those lines would be most interesting and we would like to write it if we could, but we might spend a whole afternoon on the job and not think up a single reason why one or two of the season's hits have attained such great popularity. The subject is much too subtle and complex for us. Now and again we see articles by popular playwrights in which they explain the theories by which they always hit the public taste. These are never convincing. Perhaps the popular playwrights work by intuition and have no carefully formulated theories by which their methods are governed. Or, and this seems to us more probable, they are much too shrewd to spread their valuable secret broadcast. Like prestidigitators they only explain their simplest tricks and never take the audience into their confidence about the difficult ones.

We are willing to admit that many of the elements in these plays which we lambast as mistakes are among the most carefully considered contrivances of the author. Very likely they are among the most successful strokes. These popular plays, some of which seem to us to be so bad, are not accidents. They are premeditated. This only widens the gap between us. There seem to be no extenuating circumstances. Such popular playwrights as fashion cheap materials into huge successes have undoubtedly a shrewd technique. They are, moreover, excellent business men, but it does not seem to us that even with all this admitted there is any obligation upon a critic to hail them as great or even good playwrights. After all Mayor Hylan was elected by a majority of more than a hundred thousand and there is still some doubt, we understand, as to whether he is a great Mayor.

Perhaps the most insistent plea for universal tolerance comes from managers and playwrights who insist that their product is "wholesome," and therefore deserving of critical approbation. The chief trouble is that there is room for a good deal of dispute as to just what is wholesome. The general theory seems to be that the playwright's chief obligation to morality is to show that the forces of good invariably triumph over the forces of evil. This is well enough for some, but it is apt to discourage estimable persons in the audience whose luck is not of the best. We are not absolutely certain either that the constant triumph of the righteous in popular plays does not tend to thy with the forces of evil. In pararouse a rather dangerous sympaticular we could grow enthusiastic about any play in which an adventuress triumphed over an ingenué. It seems to us that ingenués are getting unduly perky and self-confident. They seem to feel that they have no particular responsibility in life except to be good. We rather fear that this has a demoralizing influence upon a community in which so many young women are so busy being useful that they hardly have time to think about being good.

Among our errors of the week we find that we mistook wistaria for heliotrope in "39 East." Heliotrope, we learn, does not grow in vines. In reviewing the same play we forgot to mention Victor Sutherland, although his was among the best performances of the evening. We also failed to give due credit to Miss Crothers for the adroit manner in which she has staged her play. She has great facility in handling groups upon the stage and in shifting the attention from one set of conversations to another. In reviewing "Bernice" last week we made no mention of the fact that the excellent performance was in part due to the stage direction of E. J. Ballantine.

The Lofty Calling of the Low Comedian

By Rebecca Drucker

A contradiction has only to be current long enough to become the tradition. For instance, in going out to find Ed Wynn amid the back-stage debris of "Some Time" at the Casino Theatre I leaned hard on the formula that a humorist in private life is usually a profound pessimist. Mr. Wynn being an extremely satisfactory comedian, it was naturally to be expected that off stage he would be saturnine and intellectual, with a decided bias in favor of tragedy. But Mr. Wynn did not seem to realize what was expected of him. He was persistently genial. He seemed unaware of the opportunities I gave him to own to an unsatisfied longing to play serious parts. Only once did he grow tragic. When he found I thought he might be intellectual he earnestly implored me not to suspect him of it.

Ed Wynn takes a high pride in being a low comedian. There are satirists and comedians who subtly provoke thought. But he elects to be the Perfect Clown. He doesn't want even the suspicion of meaning to attach to his fooling. The more unreasoning the laughter he provokes the greater is his satisfaction. To put the most ancient gags and wheezes into circulation again is his greatest triumph. Openly and unashamedly he worships at the shrine of Joe Miller.

At some points Ed Wynn departs from the conception of clowning that has been current until now. He believes that laughter that is forced by artificial devices defeats its own purpose. Pure nonsense, yes, but we have outgrown slapstick comedy. The safe rule is that the thing which you would not laugh at spontaneously in a small roomful of people does not belong on the stage. Any ordinary group of people would not enjoy the sight of two men belaboring each other with sticks, nor would they enjoy unclean wit. It would probably embarrass them. Wynn believes that the same holds good in the theatre, if you are to keep the kindly, sympathetic friendly intimacy in which nonsense flourishes best.

Ed Wynn comes from Philadelphia. His real surname is Leopold. While he was a senior at the University of Pennsylvania seventeen years ago he wrote a burlesque on the flamboyant college boy of the period, in which he appeared at a Mask and Wig Club production with great success. After that triumph the paternal millinery business to which he was to be dedicated on his graduation, appeared a cold and distasteful future. He wanted to go on the stage. The family was not encouraging, so he bolted one day and joined Corse Payton's company in Atlantic City. Shortly afterward the leading lady seceded from the organization to form a barnstorming company of her own, and Wynn linked his fortune with hers. The company stranded in Kenosha, Wis. After he had been ignominiously rescued by family funds he returned for a chastened year at the millinery business. During that time he revamped the college play into a sketch and brought it out in vaudeville with a partner. It scored a great hit. Wynn says one of the reasons for its success was the audience's amazement that two men could get laughs without having to hit each other over the head for them.

Thereafter Wynn continued in vaudeville, writing and acting his own sketches. It took a long time for audiences to get Wynn's slow, hesistant fun, and his was not altogether an unbroken arc of success. But he had the conviction that the kind of fun with which he amused his friends would amuse an audience—and he followed his own particular style, even when it seemed disastrously stubborn not to follow somebody else's. After ten years in vaudeville Wynn became a comedian in musical productions.

He has never acted a line that he has not written himself, and he is in constant process of changing and adding to his material, even while he is playing the same part. In the last few seasons Ed Wynn has attained the deserved recognition that he is one of the three or four most genuinely spontaneous and individual comedians of our stage.

Special Farewell Performance At the French Theatre

The final appearance of the members of the French Theatre du Vieux Colombier for the season will be Monday evening, when a special programme will be given by the company. M. de Billy, Deputy High Commissioner of the French Republic, and Otto H. Kahn will deliver addresses. The play selected for presentation will be a revival of "La Coupee Enchangoe.". The net proceeds will be devoted to the reinstitution of the Theatre du Vieux Colombier in Paris.

'Sporting Widows' at Columbia

The Sporting Widows company will come to the Columbia Theatre this week and present a new two-act burlesque called "All in Fun."

Anniversary Celebration At Century Grove

The Century Grove will have been open to-morrow night one year under the management of Morris Gest, and the event will be celebrated with a grand anniversary ball, in addition to the regular performance of the Century Midnight Whirl.

Vaudeville

PALACE—Bernard Granville, recently of the flying service, shares the place at the top of the bill with Marguerite Sylva, the prima donna. Others on the programmes are Maud Lambert and Ernest BBall, Felix Adler, Ed Gallagher and Joe Rolley, Bennett and Richards and "Art," in which war posters are reproduced in tableaus.

RIVERSIDE—The Riverside all-star bill includes Stone and Kaliz, Whiting and Burt, Franklyn Ardell and Leo Donnelly, the Melletto Sisters, James and Betty Morgan, John Regay and the Lorraine Sisters and Howard's Animal Spectacle.

ALHAMBRA—Marie Cahill, the popular musical comedy star, is the star feature. The supporting bill includes Harry Green and company in a new act, Herman Timburg and company, Billy Rhodes, Mr. and Mrs. Mel-Burne, Ward and King, Loughlin and West, Ishikawa Japs, Samaroff and Sonia and the Alhambra News Pictorial.

ROYAL—Bert Williams, the darky comedian, is this week's star. Others are Robert T. Haines and company, Shattuck and O'Neil, O'Donnell and Blair, Mirano Brothers, Slim Klaiss and Saxe, Francis Renault and Catherine Powell and company.

LOEW'S AMERICAN—The Riegler Sisters head the vaudeville bill the first part of the week. The feature picture is Fred Stone in "Johnny Get Your Gun." The Chung Hwa Four, a Chinese quartet, are the stars the second part of the week. William S. Hart, in "The Poppy Girl's Husband," is the picture.

At the One-Week Houses

STANDARD—"The Invisible Foe" comes here directly after its closing at the Harris Theatre.

SHUBERT-RIVIERA—"Maytime," with Peggy Wood, William Norris and other members of the original cast, comes to play a return engagement.

LOEW'S SEVENTH AVENUE—Bertha Kalich in "The Riddle: Woman" is the attraction.

BRONX OPERA HOUSE—Walker Whiteside and Tyrone Power will appear in "The Little Brother."

Brooklyn

MAJESTIC—Leo Carrillo will be seen in "Lombardi, Ltd."

MONTAUK—The Irish drama, "Sweet Innisfallen," with the tenor, Bernard Daly, is this week's attraction.

Dance Recital by Paul Swan At the Selwyn Theatre

A dance recital will be given by Paul Swan, the classic dancer, on Thursday at 3 o'clock at the Selwyn Theatre. Paul Swan will be supported by a specially selected orchestra of symphony players conducted by Victor Kolar, assistant to Walter Damrosch, of the New York Symphony Orchestra, and six beautiful young dancing girls.

On the programme are dance interpretations to the music of Rachmaninoff, Kreisler, Gluck, Grieg and Qui.

"Ten Nights in a Barroom" Recived at Lexington Theatre

Robert L. Downing, the actor-evangelist, will appear at the Lexington Theatre in a revival of "Ten Nights in a Barroom" the coming week.

Matinees of Hindu Play At Greenwich Village Theatre

At the Greenwich Village Theatre, beginning next Tuesday, Frank Conroy will present for a series of Tuesday and Friday matinees "Shakuntala," the ancient Hindu play of Kalidasa, the Shakespeare of India. It deals with the love and trials of Shakuntala, the daughter of a nymph by a mortal, and of her final happiness after thrilling adventures with gods and men.

Livingston Platt has designed the stage settings, W. Francke Harling has adapted original music to Occidental ears and the original dances are being rehearsed by a Hindu scholar, who has reproduced them as given at a recent revival in India.

The members of the cast are Frank Conroy, Harold Meltzer, Beatrice Prentice, in the title rôle, Geoffrey C. Stein, Joseph Macaulay, Grace Henderson, Ruth Boyd, Marjorie Deen, Grace Morse and Theodore Doucet.

Theatre Guild First Production A Spanish Comedy

"The Bonds of Interest," a satiric comedy of modern Spanish life by Jacinto Benevente, is the play with which the Theatre Guild will inaugurate its tenancy of the Garrick Theatre on April 12. Benevente, who is the leading force in the present-day Spanish theatre, is known here chiefly for several volumes of published plays and for two one-act plays produced at the Neighborhood Playhouse and by the Washington Square Players.

Philip Moeller is directing the production. Among the players are Helen Freeman, Helen Westley, Augustine Duncan, Amelia Summerville, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Samuel Jaffe and Dudley Diggs.

New Plays This Week

MONDAY—At the Little Theatre F. C. Whitney will present "Papa," a comedy of "smart" life, by Zoe Akins. The cast includes Violetta Wilson, Ann Andrews, John L. Shine, Barnett Parker, Robert Andrews, Miriam Battista, Nina Varesa, Adolphe Millar and Jobyna Howland.

TUESDAY—At the Harris Theatre H. H. Frazee will present a new American play, "The Good Bad Woman," by William Anthony Maguire, with a quartet of players who have recently ended their starring tours—Margaret Illington, Robert Edeson, Wilton Lackaye and Katherine Kaelred. The supporting company includes Richard Taber, Hazel Turney, Amy Ongley and Howard Boulden.

At the Forty-eighth Street Theatre "Come On, Charley," a fable in three acts and five scenes, by George V. Hobart, will be presented with a cast including Charles Abbe, Lynne Overman, Frank McCormack, Amy Leah Dennis, Robert Rendel, Maurice Barrett, Eunice Elliott, Lilyan Tashman, Estella Tylor, Vincent Freedley, Dan Kelly, W. H. Dupont, James Hester, Russell Parker and Marguerite Forrest. The play is founded on a series of stories by Thomas Addison, but the plot and characterizations are Mr. Hobart's.

At the Nora Bayes Theatre "Come Along," a musical comedy, with book and lyrics by Bide Dudley, a writer on "The Evening World," and music by John Louw Nelson, will begin an engagement. "Come Along" is in a prologue and two acts, the scenes being in New York and Alsace. It is said to have a bit of war flavor. The cast includes Harry Tighe, Regina Richards, Paul Frawley, Billy Clark, Jessica Brown, Marcelle Carroll, Patsie de Forrest, Allen Kearns, Ethel Du Fre Houston, Charles Stanton, Dan Dawson and Ernest E. Pollock.

WEDNESDAY—At the Plymouth Theatre Arthur Hopkins will present John and Lionel Barrymore in "The Jest," an English version of Sem Benelli's "La Cena Delle Beffe." This is the first play of the contemporary Italian stage to be brought to America, and although it is by a living author, it is already one of the classics of Italian repertory. It had a magnificent premiere in Rome, and since that time has never been off the stage of Italy. It was produced by Sarah Bernhardt in Paris in a version made by Jean Richepin, and it has been played with brilliant success in England and Belgium. Arthur Hopkins has directed the putting on of "The Jest" and Robert Edmond Jones has designed the scenes. The cast includes, besides John and Lionel Barrymore, Maude Hanaford, Gilda Varesi, Margaret Fareleigh, Maude Durand, Martha McGraw, Arthur Forrest, E. J. Ballantine, Warner Richmond, Ralph Davenport, Cecil Clovelly, Alexander Frank and Paul Irving.

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