

NEWS AND VIEWS OF THE DRAMA



BY W. HERBERT BLAKE

A SINGULAR involuntary confession of the power of dramatic criticism through the daily press may be found in the July number of Everybody's magazine, from no less a pen than that of the frequently inebriated, but always piquant Paul Armstrong, author of "Salomy Jane" and "The Heir to the Hoopah." Justly scathing such newspapers as send the police reporter to "cover" a serious dramatic opening, with the single aim of ridiculing star and play, he extends the scope of his sweeping diatribe in a way which agrees with neither logic nor the simplest observation of the man in the street. That many drama critics are "incompetent, conceited and purely destructive" I unhesitatingly grant. So are many theologians, plumbers and playwrights. But that the easiest manner of writing a certain number of words on a given play is to poke fun at it and that this is the settled policy of any considerable number of widely circulated American newspapers of Park Row, are contentions almost too ludicrously childish to answer.

In the first place, the hardest way to write entertainingly on any given subject on earth is to poke real, human fun at it. The easiest thing in the world is to praise it, especially if it be a play. There is a well worn path of laudation over which certain indolent play reviewers trudge their regular daily trip, like any good, substantial commuter. Such adjectives as "brilliant," "superb," "excellent," "baffling," "conscientious" and a whole glossary more are right at the critic's elbow in those few hours of the morning in which the vital assistance is lowest and the natural inclination to praise is at high pressure.

Next to such indiscriminate praise, against which Playwright Armstrong says not one word of protest as an honest artist, the easiest thing to do with a play is frankly and seriously to "roast" it. There is not one play in a year in a high-class house which deserves absolute excommunication, and such is usually objectionable either on grounds of poor construction or perverted morals. In either event, scientific critic not merely condemns but tells why he condemns, and in the case of the ethically warped drama the alert press agent sometimes halls an explicit denunciation as the finest sort of commercial asset. Here, at least, is one angle of the game of reviewing by which many a shoddy show is bound to reap a considerable harvest of prudent curiosity. We all know the story of the comedian who won a packed house for a wobbly show by standing in front of the theater and crying: "This is the worst play I ever staged. Come and see how funny a rotten show can be." With the exhortation suppressed this is the outcome of most outlandish ridicule which is not conceived in the spirit of kindly satire.

When Paul Armstrong, to take an instance for the mere sake of clarity, writes a good play entitled "Going Some," what more natural than that a merry-minded reporter, sent to cover the theater, should follow the lead of the slanging title and retort, "Going Some" is a frost. It hasn't got the goods. This alone, of course, like the title itself, is too antediluvian as slang to push a mediocre play (which "Going Some" is not) to the S. R. O. pinnacle. But if, as is usually the case, the reporter goes on to reiterate the humor of the most tragic situations, as they appeared to his irrelevant fancy, his write up is undeniably advertising—and might go down as a masterpiece of the art of public relations. Since Mr. Armstrong in his philippic consistently aligns himself with the commercial rather than the artistic view of the playhouse, he can have no more justifiable objection to such remunerative publicity than his good friends, the theatrical managers. That kind of stuff gets the dollars, and it is the dollars that most managers prize frankly, blandly after. If "many plays have been ridiculed off the stage which need but little to give them life," as Mr. Armstrong petulantly cries, how many more have been galvanized into an eight days' wonder by a little judicious levity? Consult the records of current New York successes for the answer.

But perhaps, in spite of his unwillingness to accredit the drama critic's claim to be an artist, Mr. Armstrong would lay siege to that designation for himself and such of his fellow playwrights as strive to build careful, workmanlike drama. What if some plays do "need but little to give them life"? Is it the business of the reviewer to supply the dramatist that little gratis? As Mr. Hartley Davis diplomatically remarks in the same magazine which stages the Armstrong attack:

"It is the business of the dramatist and producer to provide plays that the public is willing to pay money to see. The business of the critic is to inform the public whether or not, in his judgment, it is worth while to pay good money to find out if it likes the play. The managerial and playwrighting intel-

ligence doesn't subscribe to this definition of the critic's function at all. It is convinced that the critic should write favorable reviews, closing his mind to all the weaknesses and defects, bending his efforts to persuade the public to pay good money at the box office for the only critic thoroughly satisfactory to theatrical interests would be one who could be persuaded to accept the views of the press department. There are such, I believe, certain newspapers being controlled by considerations of dramatic advertising and of exclusive theatrical news stories. But the Public That Pays feels this when it does not know it, and the reviews thus directed have but little weight."

When Mr. Armstrong inveighs against the impossibility of a theater manager "protecting his business," as does the merchant or manufacturer, and urges "those in authority to combine to put a stop to the present intolerable condition," he strikes a blow not only at free speech, but at the liberty which now permits playwrights to pillory such merchants or manufacturers as have incurred public resentment by their methods of doing business. Everybody recognizes the two principal characters in "The Lion and the Mouse" as fairly accurate replicas of a conspicuous American trust magnate, and the young woman journalist who of recent years has strewn thorns in his path through the columns of such radical magazines as Everybody's. The likeness of the stern old captain of industry in "The Dollar Mark" to the late Henry H. Rogers was so marked that there was even talk of delaying the New York opening of the play until a decent interval had elapsed after the latter's death. In Chicago a few years ago a mayor of notorious allegiance to the interests of capital censored certain vulgarly natured fun at certain captains of industry, then rather scandalously in the public eye. "The Man of the Hour" was kept off a Cleveland stage for an entire season simply because the owner of the theater feared its brave exposure of corruption controlled politics would injure the chances of his political puppets in the approaching municipal election. Tammany openly relies half a dozen New York playhouses. Is this the sort of "protection" for an American "industry" with which Mr. Armstrong would saddle the American drama? If so, let him hush his whimpering over present critical treatment of the "artists" (not merchant or manufacturer, now, mark) as a "dog or a pig to be kicked or pickled by whosoever

has the whim to lift a foot or unstopper a vinegar decanter." Business men invoke the libel law in extreme cases, but they are not troubled with hysteria or "nerves." That is the exclusive prerogative of the artistic temperament.

If all literary critics were as ladylike as Everybody's department of "Household Hints," what would become of an art which has been adored by such names as Hazlitt, Charles Lamb and Edgar Allan Poe? Must the strap of business interests also muzzle the mouths of the writers on art and music? Was it high treason for the American press to report at accurate length the trial of Signor Caruso after the comedy of the monkey-house—"The Organ" controlled by the rich vampires who have batted on San Francisco's life, of course, would never found the feelings of Mr. Calhoun or Mr. Tully Ford, but they do not particularly consider the "business interests" of Mr. Henry or Mr. Phelan. If Mr. Armstrong's idea of a curb for drama critics were logically extended in the interests of the "merchant and manufacturer," as certain influential individuals no doubt, honestly think it should be, must the present loyal defenders of the public weal be suppressed by "those in authority?"

Alas! "all the world's a stage," and the traditional attitude of manager and many a dramatist toward a fearless critic has been given unenviable precedent in every attempt to curb honest expression of opinion from the days of the Inquisition to the sad case of Mr. Metcalfe of "Life." Mr. Armstrong's greatest offense against accuracy is the superior way he passes over the great majority of serious, honest theatrical reviewers who are neither piqued nor purchasable, but quietly cognizant of their duty to that portion of the public which looks to them for guidance. "Certain shining exceptions" to his rule of universal critical blackguardism, Mr. Armstrong reluctantly concedes, but his belated qualification does not draw the sting from his sweeping categorical grouping of honest men with "unsuccessful playwrights and disgruntled actors who are using criticism as a vehicle of revenge on the institution that cast them out."

Mr. Armstrong doubtless prides himself on his gift of sarcasm. Most merely sarcastic people do. Perhaps that is why they rarely achieve, or understand, the finer method of satire. If the public is not disgusted at the sometimes clownish antics of the police reporter masquerading in critic's shoes,

FIRST AID TO THE PUZZLED PLAYGOER

(Being a few lines of gentle counsel among current bills in Los Angeles theaters.)

BURBANK—There's something wrong with the composition of the man who can't enjoy "Sherlock Holmes" either between book covers, or in the swift, masterly Gillette acting version which the stock company will stage, beginning this afternoon. It's melodrama, romance and realism judiciously blended. You ought to be ashamed if it doesn't give you the proper thrill—The Burbank company is well fitted to give it a capital production.

GRAND—"A Girl of the Streets," Mortimer melodrama. Opening this afternoon.

MAJESTIC—"Sergeant Kitty," a rather odd but dainty musical comedy which comes dangerously near being comic opera. Harry Girard, Agnes Caine-Brown and Henry Stockbridge, who are in the new company, can be counted on to make the most of its attested comedy. Opening tonight.

BELASCO—Hoy's "A Day and a Night in New York," with those celebrated musical comedy stars, Richard Bennett and Miss Florence Reed, tripping the light Terpsichorean toe, and Fay Bainter imploring some lucky man to be her "Billie Possum." Opening Monday.

MASON—Fred Mace has his first fair chance at our risibilities in "The Umpire," opening Monday matinee. It's a good, satisfying show, of the Adams-Hugh-Howard brew, with plenty of fun.

ORPHEUM—Cheridah Simpson is the surest attraction on the bill which opens Monday afternoon. There is a big circus act, which is highly recommended by the management. The Donnas and Claude Gillingwater, of the holdovers are not to be overlooked.

LOS ANGELES—What looks like the best bill this playhouse of many up and down has offered in several weeks. Nadie, posing model; Weston and Young, in a newspaper skit, and a dancer ought to afford good amusement.

UNION—Kelly and Violette, singers, are the best bid for pastebards, and there is another Kelly comedy.

FISCHER'S—Vaudeville and Boly Poly choruses.

AUDITORIUM—Dark.

If it gives him a hearing, and finally laughs with him, it is evidence that the reporter has written "good stuff," which, translated from the argot which the author of "Going Some" so detests,

is simply one form of literature. The highest praise can be deftly mingled with the jolliest chaff and the kindest possible irony. If Mr. Armstrong and his kind sometimes miss the point of the joke perhaps it is because a little deserved success has chloroformed their sense of humor.

In a pertinent article in the authoritative dramatic columns of the Chicago Record-Herald Elizabeth R. Hunt, incisive writer on theatrical themes, slips a few darts under the average American actor's armor of conscious cosmic superiority, and, in round English, says he doesn't talk plain. The English stage, with all its miracles of indistinct articulation, she finds, may well serve as a pattern for Brother Jonathan. "I wish surprised that it cannot believe it. It is a mistake." Such slurring as this she finds in the current "afflicting diction" of other wise capable actors. In the overvaluation of dialect as a comedy outlet she sees one possible explanation of our slovenly use of the mother tongue.

Rather, I should say, the undervaluation of dialect. Genuine French, Irish, Scotch or even negro dialect requires, first of all, careful study, then even more careful speech. It is a psychological certainty that the careful, discriminating use of a foreign language increases the purity and precision with which one speaks one's own tongue. To read the works of Chaucer or Spenser, who spoke a radically different sort of English from that of modern Americans, purges the gross from our vocabulary and liberates our vocal powers. The same painstaking habit of speaking English may be observed in cultivated visitors from continental Europe who are amazed at the gibberish spoken in many an American drawing room.

Almost without exception those vaudeville players who make a study and practice of careful dialect will be found to articulate distinctly when transplanted to the legitimate stage. In learning the dialect they formed the habit of speaking clearly and with precision. "Die Versunkene Glocke" and "Monsieur. Deaucaire" are crammed with German and French dialect, respectively, the former of a particularly obscure and isolated type. Yet the German artists, who interpreted the former over seas are noted for their purity of utterance and Richard Mansfield ran to oratoriness and precisely rather than to "negativity." If the cheap purveyors of a vowel and consonant hash which

neither Scot, Teuton nor Gael ever masticated could be eliminated from vaudeville, and every legitimate actor be compelled to take a course in rudimentary elocution, one vexing vice of our national stage would cease to affront the well bred ear and invite the jeers of hostile foreign critics.

PROMPT BOOK FOR PLAYHOUSE BORES

III. The Stage Hand

When rival press agents begin to boost each others' shows, when vaudeville circuits decide to give their play-ers a Sunday holiday at the same salaries, when every dramatic critic is in love and charity with every manager, when Papa Fischer builds a new theater in Los Angeles and one John H. Blackwood ceases to match for cherry sundae; in fact, when the Shuberts begin to book their attractions at the Mason; then—

Why, then, the stage hand will smile, and you may know the era of universal brotherhood is upon us.

For the stage hand is the original grouch. He is the only man in the world who doesn't know what it feels like to enter the theater for the first time. Back stage is "Home, Sweet Home," to him. The wings are his conservatory and reception room. Dinnery he suspects that some people are going insane over the play way out there beyond the flare of the footlights. It doesn't interest him, so long as every "prop" is in its place.

From the corners of the orchestra circle a niche in a box you can see him, if you look sharp, gazing contemptuously on the tragedy enacting just in front of R. E. E. Hamlet's soliloquy and Chester Stevens' devilish smile alike are lost on his stolid equanimity. He deigns to nod to Mike Donlin and La Valera; they are newcomers from another and more interesting world. Next season he will never know them. With fortitude his eye is fixed—on the cheering yellow gleam of next Monday's pay envelope.

No actor is a hero to the stage hand. He has seen too many fair hopes crushed under the weight of the waning years. He has lost mankind's immortal cue to happiness, for he has forgotten how to be surprised.

Maxine Elliott will return to America in October to open the New York theater bearing her name.

"SANDWICH DRAMA" IS CHARLES FROHMAN IDEA

Charles Frohman has a novel idea which he proposes to put into execution in New York and, later, in London, next season. It is a sort of "progressive play" scheme, with automobiles as the motive power for the players taking part in its necessitated changes of base.

At four of his New York theaters an act from four of Mr. Frohman's greatest New York play successes will be played by the companies appearing in the several productions.

"The companies will tour by automobile from theater to theater, playing a different act of their plays in each house."

That part of the audience desiring to see a complete play will be afforded the opportunity of following the company performing the particular play they wish to see, from house to house. The other part of the audience will be entertained by the several productions.

(Continued on Page Nine)

ROBERT LEONARD GRAND.

MISS MAYBELLE BAKER AND NADJE LOS ANGELES.

PRINCESS CHORUS IN "THE UMPIRE"

THE MASON.

MISS CHERIDAH SIMPSON, ORPHEUM.

FAY BAINTE BELASCO.

AGNES CAINE-BROWN, MAJESTIC.

DRAMA THRIVED IN FIRE-SWEPT FRISCO

BY SAM LOVERICH

(Manager Princess Theater company).

Your typical Californian never is half so ready to enjoy himself as when he is dead broke, his house is afire and he is expecting to meet death at any corner any moment. I found that out after the San Francisco fire, when I started the first playhouse amid the ruins of every theater the city had had. I never made so many people happy in my life as I did that day, six weeks after the disaster, when I opened the flaps of a big circus tent at Stinson and O'Farrell streets in a howling windstorm and watched those crowds of amusement, pack it to overflowing and stand around the entrances bidding any price I wanted to name just for standing room.

For four weeks San Francisco had been as dark at night as the Sahara desert. I got my tent from Denver, and the Santa Fe hauled it free. We had genuine sawdust underfoot and the roughest kind of wooden benches for seats. It was the middle of May that we opened with a vaudeville bill, while they blocked the streets trying to get near the box office.

To meet this demand we built a theater right over the tent without missing a single performance under canvas. At the north end our vaudeville turns went on while a new stage was being erected on the east side, and the hammering of the carpenters sometimes drowned the points of the best jokes. The first day the new stage was being erected on the east side, and those patient people just turned on their benches to see the acts on the east side of the building.

Gottlob & Marx, the present Van Ness theater, who, like everybody else, had been burned out in the fire, asked me to put Maxine Elliott on for one week. I consented, and, at Stinson and O'Farrell streets, we kept it filled until Gottlob & Marx built the present Van Ness and agreed to split their attractions with me.

Vaudeville acts went up 50 per cent after the fire, and they've stayed just about that ever since. Legitimate actors got about the same increase. All they had to do was to ask for it. Of course there were drawbacks. We used a small tent in a sand lot next door to a dressing room, and a narrow plank runway connected this with the big tent. Nobody minded.

Many a time I have seen a little fellow of 10 or 12 come up to the big tent entrance with that wistful look on his face that told of a good show appetite and a bankrupt pocket. I always passed 'em in. The big, grateful smiles I got in return were worth double the canceled admission fee.