The Critical First-Nighters

BY FRANKLIN FYLES.

New York, June 7.—Between Memorial day and Labor day stretches a torrid time in stage amusements, but it is not an arid waste of space, nor scant in peculiaritise. The three roof gardens that top off five theatres at the corners of a Broadway triangle, mingle their lights and music again in summer rivalry. The Aerial, Paradise and Jardin de Paris are open again this week with outputs considerably novel. It was at the initial performance of "The Honeymooners" that George M. Cohan outdid Richard Mansfield in putting a chip on his shoulder and daring the audience to knock it off. Never does much love go to waste between star-stagers and first-nighters in New York. Marie Dressler hit it off by coining "the death watch" as a phrase for those who, to judge by their demeanor, would rather be present at the funeral of a failure than the birth of a success. The professional critics are not conspicuous among these death-watchers; not many of them prefer to be abusive, and some of them would rather praise than censure; but years and years of usage forbids a newspaper reviewer to ever applaud, and his habit is to never smile when he is amused, or laugh out loud even when inwardly spasmodic with merriment. These men and their women mates don't number more than a hundred on an opening night. But there are three or four times as many amateur critics, all cynics, who occupy the seats within clear view from the stage, and whose blase manner and air of ennui are enough to loosen the tension of all but the most self-poised actors, leaving them scared, limp and out of tune. Charles Frohman once said to me: "If it were not that it would be a discourtesy to folks who have no intention to be other than helpers to the drama, but who really are hinderers, I would if I could shut out on first nights all habitual first-nighters, and let every new play make its first appeal to an audience that didn't assume a dilletante pose, nor take on the attitude of critics, but sat with their minds and their hearts wide open to conviction."

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Kindly permit a reminiscent paragraph. Edwin Booth's ambition, as I once heard him say, was to be as able an actor as his father had been. He fondly desired to play with success every role in the repertory of his sire. So, in a New York engagement nearly a third of a century ago, he revived such all-but-forgotten dramas as "The Apostate," "A New Way to Pay Old Debts" and "The Iron Chest." It was in "The Apostate" that the biggest of the Booths (to my mind the greatest actor that ever lived) was for one night a crushed tragedian—crushed by the unsympathetic cynicism of a New York first-night audience. I recall it with the vividness of a recent incident. Pescara in that drama is a human monster of vengeful malice, and, being foiled in his malign purpose, he has a spell of paroxysmal rage. Now, Edwin Booth endeavored to act the part in loyal imitation of his father; and so, when Pescara's ferocious malignity was thwarted, he bobbed up and down, with a face grimacing wry, and arms flinging wild. It was a grotesque demonstration of emotion, there's no doubt of that, but the actor had the authority of his revered parent for the extravagance of manner; and he had carefully prepared himself for it. The audience as a whole knew naught of the obsolete play, nor of the senior Booth's way of personating the apostate. Therefore, appreciating nothing in the outburst of wrath save grotesquery, it laughed outright. So, as I said, Edwin Booth was for one night a crushed tragedian. He never acted in "The Apostate" again.

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To drop back to George M. Cohan: His complaint is that New York's first-night assemblages don't laugh at him as subsequent ones do. "Frappe friends are chillier than icy enemies," was once his way of describing those whom he looked at across the footlights upon the introduction of a new show in Broadway. In anticipation of the stony stare from rocky faces at "The Honeymooners," Cohan put into his topical song, as one of the things for which "we'd thank you very kindly, Mr. Bingham," (meaning our reformatory police commissioner), a wish that he'd arrest those who won't smile a smile, much less laugh a laugh, at an opening performance. He was mistaken if he expected to limber up the grim visages of those who were accustomed to invisible laughter. He was so disconcerted that he couldn't remember the next verse of his own song, but stuck fast in the middle of it, started again at its first line with a repetition of lapsed memory, went off the stage, had a hasty consultation with the prompter, and came back to make a third and this time triumphant attempt to bring the song to a climax.

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There was a further disturbance of Cohan's placidity leading to the salient oddity which I have been aiming at. He is firmly opposed, and God bless him for that, to the first night usage of unreasonable encores. Every song, dance or other thing that is liked at first has to be done over and over until it gets to be disliked at last. Cohan had made up his mind to run "The Honeymooners" through with a celerity not to be halted by repetitions. In the final act, the girl mimic that seems to be deemed essential to a summer roof garden show was introduced. She was Gertrude Hoffman, a follower of Cissie Loftus a long way behind, but nearly alongside of Elsie Janis, and a very enjoyable impersonator. Cohan had so arranged the action that Gertrude, instead of giving her imitations as an interpolation complete, scattered them through a half hour of the play, thus gaining time to dress and make up for the differing caricatures. But the encore idiots wouldn't catch the idea. They raised such a persistent row-de-dow after each of Gertrude's stunts that the other players' utterances were lost in the applause. Evidently, Cohan had ordered them not to give way to the clamor. The consequence was that the third act of his play was pantomime, yet pantomimically meaningless. It was an easy guess that he got angry over this refusal of the people to behave as he wanted them to, and that impulsively he dictated a new and resentful tag to the play. A rustic constable had figured in the evening's fun; and not Cohan, as custom prescribed, but the actor of that minor character, spoke the concluding line.

"You," he said, coming right down to the footlights, and throwing his words like so many missiles at the audience, "are the wu'st lot uv guys I ever seen, an' I'm darned glad this performance is over."

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Nevertheless, "The Honeymooners" is a good Cohan show, old with "Running for Office" for a libretto, but new with fresh songs and some originalities in the exhibition of girls with boys. When Cohan comes home with his schoolmates, they look really juvenile, the dozen boys all copying his mannerisms and looking like a row of Cohans, while the dozen smallish girls in short frocks and sunbonnets appear like genuine youngsters. They frolic at once in a song and saunter which they describe in the refrain as "an old-fashioned walk, and an old-fashioned talk, with an old-fashioned girl you love." When Cohan made his first break into Broadway with "Running for Office," his sister, Josephine Cohan Niblo, was his dancing partner. In a reproduction of the play, Ethel Levy Cohan, his wife, was Josephine's successor. But Ethel has divorced herself to marry Robert Edeson, and there are three successors in the present revival—Miss Hoffman to do the talking, and a pair of dumb mut agile girls to dance with him. But Papa and Mamma Cohan are there as ever.

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Small young women are so numerous on the summer stages that the Gerry agents must be overworked looking up birth records to see that they honestly date back of June, 1891. Five sets of girls who don't look 16, with their hair in long braids and their feet in short socks, are antic in as many entertainments in Broadway. Eight coupled with boyish playmates are at the Paradise Garden, in a school romp scene, and some one with masterful control has drilled them in what to do not only, but even more carefully in what not to do. The girls have no soubrette tricks of coquetry, but frolic with such a manner of spontaneity that they don't seem aware of the audience. The White and Thaw rounders, who have for a year been under restraint, anyway, inspect these 'teeners with uncertain eyes, and don't seem to know exactly how to take them—or let them alone. The kiddies introduced this week in the Jardin de Paris are imports from London, and in the make-up of mechanical dolls they do old things with new vivacity. In a fourth summer show, consisting of "His Honor the Mayor," freshened for a return to town, the eight "pony ballet" girls compelled by some legal complication to forswear their name, are now "the dancing dolls." So there is more of juvenility in this summer's show girls, from baby stares and goo-goo pratttle to remarkably natural childish buoyancy that is seasonably blithe and cheerful.

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A skating scene is new in "His Honor the Mayor." The stage is darkened, and on a gauze screen is produced electrically the effect of falling snow. Then, when a light behind is turned on, in place of a summer garden at Budapesth there is a winter scene, with a snowy foreground against a massive house that looks like a cross between the Castle of Elsinore and the George Gould home on Fifth avenue. It doesn't matter which it is. Mabel Hollins skates into view in a gown and furs of white, and sings an indefinite waltz song about "my roller-skating girl." For the chorus eight couples of girls, similarly dressed, skate about the stage, forming quadrille-like figures and gracefully accentuating the rhythm of the song.

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The shows at the Paradise and the Jardin de Paris are vaudeville, some of which is uncommon and serves to introduce strangers from over sea. Celia Galley lets us see what Paris approves in mimicry by giving impersonations of Bernhardt, Rejane, Otero and Guilbert. Daisy James comes from London with a batch of music hall songs that, in contrast with Galley's Parisian subtlety, seem rather vulgar. In one character ballad she is a Melinda who keeps a shop that is a rendezvous for her admirers; in another she is a chap who wants his girl to tell him why she prefers a policeman, and in a third she gets into the prevailing drift of juvenility with the song of a child who, being promised by her mother a baby brother in the morning, expresses her choice of a horse and cart instead. And she appears, too, as a Gibson girl. If you have had enough of the Gibson girl, and wish to see no more of her, yet would like to view the schoolgirls in the various roof gardens, you'd better buy a seat close to an exit, so as to escape at the first sight of the Gibson creature, for she lingers in all these entertainments.

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A foreign Vasco, who plays twenty-eight instruments so expertly and so rapidly, from cornet to bagpipes, and grand piano to tin whistle, besides singing from deep bass away up to yodeling falsetto, that all our "musical teams" ought to take to farewell tours before he gets around. The Barnold company of dog and monkey actors give a pantomime with a French poodle for such a comedian—in a jag pantomime showing his expulsion from a cafe, his dazed zig-zag to a lampost, and his final fall into a gutter—that it seems as though he must positively have a human sense of humor.

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A point is made at the Paradise of importing every summer a new illusion. Last year it was the puzzling production of a young woman in a glass tank of water, and I went to see it several times before I was able to write an account of how the trick was worked. This year it is "the reduction of a living woman to ashes." A box long enough to hold her is placed on supports, precluding the possibility of her exit through a trap. She is placed in a drawer of a size to completely fill that box, and inflammable fluid is poured on her clothes and lighted, the drawer containing her is slid into the box, smoke issues from it, and after two or three minutes there is shown to be no other contents than the glowing ashes left by a cremation. That was done so simply that the process was clear at the first sight. The drawer has no inner end, and so it can be pulled out empty, leaving the woman in the box. The box has a double front, so that when it is turned on its side, with the lid open toward the spectators to show that the woman is gone, the inner front becomes the ostensible bottom, and she is hidden behind it. You can easily present this cremation act at your next church entertainment; but be careful about the blazing liquid, unless there is a girl in your circle to burn.

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By placing palms in pots here and there, opening the windows wide, lifting a skylight lid, and operating hidden electric fans where they make the foliage sway as with a balmy breeze from outdoors, an upstairs cheap theatre up Harlem way is turned into a summer roof garden. If the stage show were similarly freshened in aspect the enterprise would seem more seasonable. But it is not so. The performers are named the Daisy Devilenes, the Saccharine Sirens, the Honey Hellions, or something equally indicative of outbreaking vice beautified. The pictorial poster at the front doors twirls, swirls and whirls girls in a delicious delirium of airy loveliness. And what a bargain at 50 cents for a close view, or 25 for sight from a little way off. There is as yet no federal law to make the contents of a theatrical package keep the promise of the label. So the person who buys this show can't even get his half dollar or quarter back, much less have the showman fined, when the contents of the can turn out to be stale to a rancid degree.

The company is one of those wretched ones that make the rounds of the country's burlesque houses. It may have had vim at the outset last autumn, but a hard winter has been followed by a still harder spring, and now at the beginning of summer these theatrical wayfarers are worn and weary in demeanor, soiled and slouched in costumes, and the faces of most of them bear a grouchy expression. As the chorus ballet of sixteen march out with what may once have been a blithesome start of what the program said was a gay French ball, their gait dragged at the heels, as though they walked the ties of a railway of late; and when they lined up for the audience's first scrutiny most of their mouths were smileless, and those who showed the dental grin at all did it with teeth that looked ready to bite. Of course, the words of the opening chorus were unintelligible, but their voices had a snarling tone, and it was easy to imagine that they were scolding everybody connected with a long season on routes that had been hard roads to travel. The ensuing extravaganza was so joyless that, on going out, I looked to see if the women on the billboards still had the nerve to be frisky in the faces of the people who had seen the women on the stage.

IS CHICORY INJURIOUS?

London, June 8.—During the hearing of an action for slander which was decided in favor of the plaintiff in the high court yast week, one witness stated that the selling of 50 per cent chicory and coffee mixture was likely to cause a great deal of disease in a poor neighborhood and a medical man also stated that from his experience in poor districts coffee mixed with chicory often sets up irritant poisoning.

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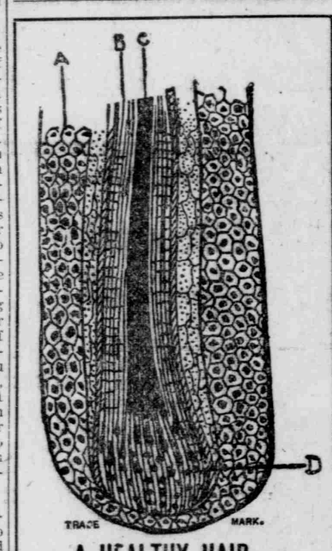

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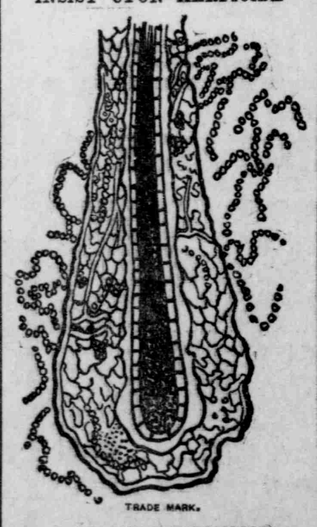

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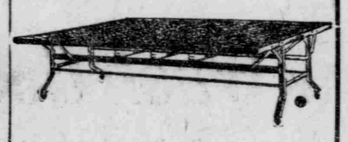

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