

BROADWAY, OUR LITERARY SIGNPOST

By Kenneth Andrews

With Sketches by the Author

DURING the war we heard a good deal about the new spirit of world brotherhood which was to follow hostilities; and at one time there was something said about a League of Nations. It is not good form to speak of this now, of course; it is like telling a man how he made a fool of himself when he was drunk. For now the world has left all that behind—all the world, that is, save the theatre. The theatre has just caught up with the international idea. In this matter it is only about three years behind the times, which is, after all, something of a record. And the theatre reacts to this new idea with a stolid faith that is beautiful to behold.

It is taken for granted, in the light of the new international brotherhood, that what has thrown the Czechoslovaks and the Pan-Levantians into raptures will have the same effect in New York. We haven't the figures at hand, so it may confidently be stated that there have been more plays of British and French origin produced in New York this year than plays of native origin. The average groundling's idea of country life in England does not now centre around a hazy image of a mediæval baronial castle. He is as familiar with the 'shires as he is with the Oranges. His idea of Parisian life is not so advanced; but he knows that occasionally a Parisian is found who is not engaged in seducing his neighbor's wife. The theatre really does it. It takes it all serious-

ly. The drama, this year, in New York, is truly international. At the moment you can, by taking a taxi to Times Square, spend an evening in London, Paris, Vienna, Budapest, Petrograd, or Moscow.

The notable thing about this large volume of imports is that, even after going through the adapter's mangle, they are still imports. In, say, half the cases the distinctly foreign texture has survived unmutilated. That is praiseworthy, and surprising. The adapter is inclined to work too hard for his money. Starting off with boisterously defended convictions as to what the domestic market requires, he seizes the play of European make, jams it into his machine, and turns the crank. When the play fails he deplors the lack of mental vigor of his countrymen.

As a matter of fact, more often than not, the adapter is the one at fault. The one quality which can possibly make a play of foreign origin a success is usually a quality too delicate to be tampered with in the slightest. Few plays rely upon their skeleton plot. Some rely upon the evolution of a unique central character who can be done over into American terms, but not many. Ninety-nine plays out of a hundred gain their peculiar effectiveness from some elusive little quality which grows out of an indissoluble blend of tradition, custom, native humor, passing mood which cannot possibly be grafted on

any culture save the one which produced it. An adapter who tackles his job with an eye to twisting his material into something which he supposes the American public is used to has no business laying his hands on a manuscript. His purpose should be exactly the opposite one. He should assume that the play's appeal will lie in the fact that it is something they are not used to. The play, not its public, must be studied. It is for the adapter to find that nebulous quality which gives it the glow of life; and preserve it at any sacrifice of his producer's artistic convictions. Even if the finished adaptation is totally alien to everything in the native scene, even if there is not a single analogy between its cultural premise and our own manners, its chance for life will be far brighter than if that little spark were squelched. That spark (however incomprehensible its composition) is the thing that made the play live in its native city. It is its source of life. It may or may not be as effective in a foreign environment, but it cannot be dispensed with and it cannot be faked.

The Theatre Guild has given some enlightening demonstrations of what can be achieved by plays of alien extraction that have, in no sense, been Americanized; in which, rather, the distinctly foreign traits have, if anything, been encouraged and made much of. But it remained for a roving band of Russian troubadours (and the roving Morris Gest) to do the truly audacious, the splendidly foolhardy, thing. "Balieff's Chauve-Souris" is the name of the latest experiment to be practised on the always willing New Yorker. The name itself could scarcely be considered illuminating. It became known, as these things

become known, that the show, or whatever it was, came from Russia. Yet here it appeared under a French name; and a French name that did not mean anything. For what "Balieff's Bat" might mean must have puzzled even the squint-eyed, weather-bitten curb speculators who watch the electric signs as they are assembled in the



LAURETTE TAYLOR

In "The National Anthem" she reminds us that, among her other gifts, she has great ability as an emotional actress. She makes a tragic figure of the loyal young wife whose life was wrecked and nearly terminated by jazz.

forenoons, and who know everything.

The "Bat" of the title, as everyone knows now, refers to the little restaurant in Moscow where the actors of the town used to gather after working hours and devise stunts to amuse themselves. We may suppose that a few of the Muscovite men about town, the specially privileged camp followers of the theatre who call all the celebrities by their nicknames, began to talk about these exclusive shows to the young ladies they wanted to impress. And eventually the meeker sun dodgers, who pay for their tickets, heard about them, and demanded that they be allowed to spend money to see them. So at last the doors were opened. Balieff became a fad. Later he became a fad in Paris. He tried London, but did not do quite so well. Then under the wing of the intrepid Mr. Gest he came to New York. Here



NIKITA BALIEFF

He is one of the rarest works of God—a natural funny man. Speaking the most atrocious English ever heard in an American theatre, he is nevertheless able to Raymond Hitchcock the audience into a festive frame of mind whenever he appears.

he has become a fad—but within a limited circle.

Wise M. Balieff and wise M. Gest made no attempt to edit the entertainment. They did an infinitely cleverer thing: they did not even translate it. They knew that if it was to prevail they must preserve that quite untranslatable *abandon* that is Russian and nothing else. The mad spirit of after-theatre, vodka-warmed revelry was the soul of what they had to offer. It could not be touched. That strangely intoxicating, irresponsible gaiety blazed its way through a bizarre language, through the incomprehensible mannerisms of an alien society, and struck fire. It was indeed remarkable. The spirit of gay madness was all the American audience got; it was all they could have got if they had understood every word that was spoken. While the wild music of "Katinka", for instance, was blaring away, there was no doubt that the charmingly lascivious looking, bewhiskered old peasant was, in his chant, saying things that

would have blanched the cheek of a truck driver. His wicked delight was positively demoralizing. He could not possibly have been more obscene if his *chanson* had been translated by Avery Hopwood.

It is very pleasant entertainment; but the audience was annoying. Balieff has been overpraised, to his injury, by his admirers. His show is not one to cause hysterical mirth, yet the spectators were so determined to laugh that the slightest movement of an eyebrow or an ear threw them into transports of falsetto merriment. We were reminded of Mark Twain's remark when he appeared for the first time in a silk hat. The village boys were giving him a hearty, midwestern razz. Mark turned and faced them. "No, boys," he said. "Not that funny. It's not that funny. *Nothing* could be *that* funny."

However, the "Chauve-Souris" is surely an extreme proof that when the elusive quality which gives a play its peculiar individuality cannot be readily analyzed it may much better be left untouched.



ROLAND YOUNG

His Pierre Cottrel in "Madame Pierre" is a subtly wrought, splendidly finished piece of work. It is the first part in many seasons which he has played with his natural feet.

The delicacy of the adapter's task is impressed most forcibly on one when he contemplates a really skilful adaptation—such an adaptation as the one made of Brieux's "Les Hantons" by Arthur Hornblow, Jr. Mr. Hornblow did many things supremely well. He managed to infuse into his English version a pleasantly acrid irony that is Parisian. This he preserved with all the care and reverence with which Pierre himself might have transplanted one of his precious ferns. He recreated Pierre Cottrel with a fidelity no less meticulous. The minor characters he broadened and flattened a bit, but remained within his rights. But when he came to Madame Pierre herself he wavered. What could he do with her? She needed no introduction to her public in Paris. Though she had taken up her abode with Pierre without benefit of clergy, she was still a person in Paris, not merely a type. The Parisian would not adopt the slummer's attitude toward her. In New York she would be, from the beginning, on the defensive.

We think Mr. Hornblow may not have quite realized this. In Paris, in spite of her rather cruelly capricious tempers, her sinuous methods of "holding" Pierre, the true pathos of her was never lost. Child of the night that she was, she still obviously cared for Pierre. According to her lights she was defending what was most precious to her. We missed this in the present adaptation. Indeed when she left at the end of the second act, balked in her little ruse of leaving her dog behind as an excuse to return, it was with something of a start that one realized that she was after all rather a forlorn and moving person. This sudden sympathy did not in the least grow out of the act itself.

For most of it we wanted her to be choked and thrown through the window. But this understanding of Charlotte should have been sedulously nurtured. She should not of course be sentimentalized; but the American audience, if possible, should have been made to regard her as the Parisian audience would. Only thus could the values of the story be retained. That is the spark in this play that must not be squelched.

It is a memorable and admirable piece, as it stands, however. Because of our misconception of Charlotte the play seems unsatisfactory and unfinished; but the irony of the man and woman held fast to each other by a million bonds of their own unlawful making—bonds much stronger than those imposed by church or state—is most intelligently and amusingly conveyed.

Another adaptation which was probably even more difficult to accomplish is "The Deluge" made by Frank Allen from Henning Berger's "Syn-dafoden". This Swedish play has had a great success in Europe, and no doubt it was deserved; but it cannot succeed in this English version, and the poor old public is not to blame for it. Something has been lost in the transplanting, something integral and vital. It has been highly praised in this country, it is true; but, as it stands, it is not a great play. It is, of course, the sort of play one likes in the abstract; it would make good reading; but on the stage it puts an unsupportable burden on the actors.

We have a group of people whose lives are, save in the case of a wayward broker and a soiled dove, entirely unrelated to one another. Thus it is impossible to derive any continuing, cumulative drama from the people

before us. Each scene must develop its own motive power; there can be little increase of momentum from scene to scene. We feel of course the gradual approach of destruction in the shape of an overflowing river, but it is difficult to keep one's mind fixed on that invisible—and crudely suggested—menace for two hours and a half. Inevitably, we get the whole play in the first act. We know that the unlovely human specimens are to be trapped in the saloon, that in the presence of death they are to become redeemed, and that they will revert to type when the danger has passed. We are given all this before the first act curtain falls, then are asked to observe how the author works out his proposition.

The ensuing two acts might conceivably have been vividly ironical, or amusingly sardonic and genuinely absorbing; but in this version, we do not think they are, and we are inclined to be defiant about it. What comment on human nature there is seems obvious and young. The points are bludgeoned home as though they were profound revelations; whereas they were all familiar to most of us after the first semester of Philosophy A. In the original play, no doubt, they were made to seem penetrating by the skill of the dramatist, which would make all the difference; providing, indeed, that nebulous (and perhaps untranslatable) spark of life which would make it glow.

But in this production one feels that the play never quite gets in resonance with its audience. The actors seem to feel it, also. Not being buoyed up by a mounting dramatic theme, they try to dig it out of themselves; and are merely noisy. The nearer death comes the louder they shout. It seemed false. We have the

feeling that men are inclined to sulk and brood, not yell, when faced with death.

"The Nest" from the French of Paul Graldy is a story of quite delicate sentiment told with a fine discretion, an air of impersonal detachment, a lack of emphasis, an entire lack of sentimentality which makes it quite poignant, and actual. This story needed no adaptation; it has what the technicians call universality; it is what happens in most homes in most lands. We strike into the life of the Hamelin family at that point where the father and mother discover with surprise, a little terror, a touch of resentment, that their children have grown up and that they themselves are old and are to be left behind. The lives of the two children have, quite suddenly, they find, untwined themselves from those of their parents. There no longer is a common meeting-ground. Little casual happenings, in their daily routine, prick this fact into their consciousness. They try fumblingly to preserve the old relationships; but in vain. In the end—after the death of her husband—Madame Hamelin, quite naturally, resigns herself to her place outside. It is a play that might easily have been ruined by the slightest overacting, but the discretion of the manuscript is scrupulously observed by the actors; especially deft were the performances by Lucile Watson, Frank Burbeck, and Kenneth MacKenna as mother, father, and son.

At the beginning of the first act of "The National Anthem" by J. Hartley Manners we listen in on a casual conversation on the veranda of a country club. They are talking about where to get it, and how much it costs, and

the rumor that it is coming down. We listened absorbed. Then suddenly the talk shifted, and we realized that this conversation had been merely an illustration, an object lesson showing what our young people had come to. It was disconcerting; we had been honestly engrossed. From force of habit we had been carefully listening in the vague hope of picking up something useful. That fact really is quite a comment on the play; it is as close to the current mood as that. Also the theme underlying the story is transmuted into terms as objective and ingratiating as that. Mr. Manners believes that jazz is ruining the race; and writes his play to prove it. So incessantly, throughout the evening, the air quivers with jazz from an invisible orchestra. It has a curious effect. After a time that twitchy, unescapable wailing comes to have a sinister force. But the author does not write a very logical brief. Liquor actually does more to unhinge Marian Hale and her dissolute husband, than jazz. Indeed as the play develops it veers away from its premise; and we are back on well trodden ground. What the play really establishes is that a woman should not marry a man to reform him. Even the most casual theatregoer has had that proved to him; but "The National Anthem" does it in a different way, a most adroit and novel way.

"The Law Breaker" by Jules Eckert Goodman is a fairly well concocted crook play, with a gloss of philosophizing which wears thin after the

first twelve speeches of the opening scene. Edward Goodman's production of "The Pigeon" is a worthy revival, galvanized into something

THE DRAMA SHELF

"Will Shakespeare" by Clemence Dane (Macmillan). A four-act drama in verse recounting the love story of an ambitious and over-diligent young writer and a girl, named Anne, who loved him. Considering this graceful and fanciful play in connection with "A Bill of Divorcement" one concludes that there must be two Clemence Danes, but there is only one.

"Shakespeare" by Clifford Baz and H. F. Rubenstein (Houghton Mifflin). Curiously enough the two lovers in this play have the same names as those in the one mentioned above. No doubt this is an odd coincidence since the love stories themselves in no way resemble each other. The play had the good fortune to be regarded by many in England as an outrageous irreverence.

"Plays of Old Japan" translated by Leo Duran (Seltzer). Four plays which give in convenient capsule form quite a lucid idea of what classic Japanese drama was like. It was—literally speaking—bloody.

"Plays of Edmond Rostand" translated by Henderson Daingerfield Norman (Macmillan). Two attractive volumes containing admirable translations of Rostand's works. In the preface the translator explains once more what Rostand really meant by that play about the rooster.

"Masterpieces of Modern Spanish Drama" edited and prefaced and documented by Barrett H. Clark (Stewart Kidd). Three of Spain's dramatists are represented. There is a biographical sketch, a bibliography, and a chronological list of plays for each author.

"Eather and Berenice" by John Massfield (Macmillan). Adaptations of two of Racine's plays in verse designed to be practicable for the amateur stage.

quite memorable by the acting of Whitford Kane. "Marjolaine" is "Pomander Walk" in a musical setting which, happily, is merely a setting. At times it is very charming and quaint, at other times it is merely very quaint.

THE LONDONER

C. E. Bechhofer—Mr. Liveright and the Young Angles—The Theatres—Is the Novel an Exhausted Form of Art? A Debate Between Cicely Hamilton and Hugh Walpole—Women's Clubs—James Agate's New Book—First Editions.

LONDON, February 1, 1922.

AMERICAN writers have a good friend in England in the person of C. E. Bechhofer, who has been writing in their praise in both "The Times Literary Supplement" and "The New Age". Bechhofer is a young man who first attracted attention to himself by work on the subject of Guild Socialism. He wrote a good deal some years ago in "The New Age", to the columns of which paper he has recently returned to write a regular causerie on literary subjects. He has traveled widely all over the world, and all his travels have been recorded in the shape of articles for the press upon the countries which he has at the time been visiting. He has been in India and, I think, Japan; he is an experienced traveler in Russia, both north and south, and speaks Russian well. His wife, in fact, is a Russian. It is to Bechhofer that we owe one of our translations of that rather remarkable but perhaps over-rated work of the Russian Revolution, "The Twelve", and at one time it was announced that he had in preparation a translation of the "Tales" of Saltykov. This latter volume has never appeared, and I suppose the hope of it must be abandoned. Saltykov is, I understand, one of the most difficult of all Russian writers to render in another language, and the "Tales" are described as among the delights of Russian literature.

Having twice visited America (the United States), Bechhofer has in

some degree taken upon his shoulders the task, the admirable and valuable task, of interpreting the literature of the United States for the benefit of English readers. It was time somebody did this; for in spite of much good-will English readers are still unaware of much that is occurring in America, and it will make for the better friendship of the two countries if Bechhofer's task is carried successfully to fulfilment. He has written a series of letters to the editor of "The Times Literary Supplement" dealing with the books of Sherwood Anderson (in particular), Willa Cather, James Branch Cabell, and others; and in "The New Age" he has come out with the sweeping statement that on the whole American novels of the day are better than those of the modern English writers. Bechhofer has thus all the enthusiasm of the convert; and if he can do something to dispel the clouds of ignorance which conceal the best American novelists from the really willing but hampered appreciation of English novel readers, even English novelists will forgive him his apparent ignorance of what is being done in this country.

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We have had lately a winter visit from several of the most interesting of New York and Boston publishers, all very much alive to the very writers whom Bechhofer is inclined to disregard in his love for the Americans. It has been most interesting to hear from these publishers that American