

BROADWAY, OUR LITERARY SIGNPOST

By Kenneth Andrews

With Sketches by the Author

IN the primer of play writing, which every dramatist must master before he is permitted to practise, the first twenty lessons are called "Things You Must Not Do". The professors of dramaturgy—whether collegiate or lay—are callous, ruthless men. Their job is to take the dewy neophytes who fall into their hands and cripple them. Before a young playwright is turned loose his wings are clipped, his claws are filed off until they are blunt and smooth, smoked glasses are fitted firmly over his eyes, and his bill is bound round with a woollen string. He is then let out of his cage and told to soar and sing to his heart's content.

The first thing one learns about the drama is that it is an exact and rigid art. Two and two must always make four. The square of the hypotenuse must always equal the sum of the three interior angles. The proscenium arch must never be ignored, and it is not made of rubber. It is a great gilt frame. What takes place behind it is, to those in front, the picture in the frame. That picture is all the spectators see. It is all they can know about the author's story. Therefore the playwright must so trim his tale that the portion of it which fits into the frame will include all he wants to say.

A play, like a piece of music, is an evanescent thing. It is a swiftly moving pageant of impressions, of moods which melt rapidly into one another.

Each scene, each line must be so turned that its full import registers at once. The spectator, unlike the novel reader, has no chance to stop and think—and not much to think with anyway. He has no chance to reread, to adjust his imagination to the bounding fancy of the author. Like pugilism, play writing is a matter of landing hard and getting away; and as in pugilism, the blows that count are not the ones that you think are good, but the ones the old timer has taught you.

In these harsh axioms and a half hundred like them the beginning playwright is cruelly schooled.

Well, we can imagine a young man of vigorous imagination, who for some reason is convinced that the stage is the medium God meant him to choose, going through this preliminary training period. He would realize that a good workman first learns his craft; and that apprenticeship of any kind, whether for the shoemaker's trade or a career as a pianist, is always irksome. During his formative years he would submit. Gagged and shackled, he would nevertheless do his best to sing his song and dance his dance. He might bend his manacles to his own ends, rise superior to them, master them. He might come at length to take them for granted, and through the middle years of his career, consider that the very dexterity with which he manipulated them was the proof of his greatness. He might

at last come to the fulness of his years successful, wealthy, and full of glory. In the autumn of his days he might sit down at his mahogany desk, take up his gold pen, stroke his white beard, and set about the writing of—his last play.

And the weariness, the pent up weariness of long years of conformity, might overcome him. The rebellion long choked down in his soul might at length well up. Tired of rules, tired of technique, tired of punishing and torturing his brain children, he might determine to write just what he wanted to write—for once.

Then the long imprisoned dreams, and the philosophies long hidden from the world would troop forth. Emancipated at last our tired old playwright would get up with a senile whoop of joy and kick all he knew about play writing through the window. Glowing with an enthusiasm he had not felt since he wrote his first allegory in blank verse at the age of fifteen, he would start to scribble. He might—and probably would—write terrible stuff. He might project something that would live forever, might adapt the stage to newer and finer uses, might go as far as thought can reach (on the stage). It was thus, no doubt, that Ibsen wrote "When We Dead Awaken", thus that Andreyev wrote "He Who Gets Slapped". And let us have in mind a flushed and rebellious old dramatist when we consider "Back to Methuselah".

For we think a good subtitle for this preposterous affront to Shaw's faithful followers would be "or The Rebellion of an Elderly Gentleman". Only from that human angle is it worth serious consideration. It certainly is not drama; and if it is to be presented on the stage as drama, it should be drama first of all, whatever

else it may pretend to. Also we find it impossible to delve into this mass of inchoate verbiage in search of some new revelation, some new gospel of living. Nothing of the kind is there; the raw material may be there, but the raw material for another "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" is to be found in quantity at Greenwood Cemetery. Shaw develops no coherent theme. He is as much at sea as the honest Ameri-



Albert Bruning

In "Back to Methuselah" bearing a striking resemblance to a certain elderly gentleman. With a hat too small for him and a part too large, Mr. Bruning was the busiest actor seen on the local stage in some time.

can flat dweller who left after the first part of "The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas" and remarked, "I've seen a picture of the guy that played Joyce-Burge. I didn't know he was an actor." Shaw, in the surging waves of his own unbridled fancy, is as helpless as a cork off the Ambrose Light Ship. From this churning sea of words no articulated theory emerges. We find that it is no more philosophy

than it is drama. To repeat, the only phase of it that is interesting is the spectacle it offers of a man who, finding his great powers waning, raises a mighty roar of resentment. From that point of view it is tremendously interesting, even tremendously dramatic. And one must record that there is a strange glamour about it, something indescribably stark, and a bit Olympian. It is, after all, Shaw. A great mind is at play, even if it is fretful play. Dull as much of it was we awaited each of the three performances with a keenness of anticipation that we have not felt since we stood in line of Saturday nights, as a wee lad, waiting to get into "nigger heaven" to see the latest burlesque show at the old town Opera House.

From another point of view it is of course at least thought provoking. No matter how mercilessly bored you may be you are likely to find yourself asking (as you used to in undergraduate days): "Well, what are we on this earth for anyway, and where do we go from here?" And you will observe with muddled emotions the muddled description which Shaw gives of the ideal goal for the human race. One notes, with this emotion or that, the phases of British culture of the present which Shaw singles out as targets for his swinging mace. One may (or may not) feel that the bleak existence which he advocates is not a higher plane of civilization, but a return to a particularly repellent kind of barbarism.

For Shaw would lop off the very things that differentiate us from the savages—who were very efficient breadwinners and who had plenty of time to lie on the sand and think. He snips his mighty pruning shears, for instance, at English country life, unquestionably one of the fairest

flowers of civilization. Surely one of the last lessons man has learned in his upward climb from savagery is how to idle properly. Surely that is one thing that England may teach the world. It is her glory that her "real life is from Friday to Tuesday". The superb and cultivated loafers, whom we call English country gentlemen, are probably the most highly civilized beings in the world. Should we not expect Shaw to be hymning his motherland for her finest cultural achievement? Indeed a country is not without honor save to her own prophets. We did not admire the wise ancients, in the play, half so much as we admired the wise and thoroughly indolent Burge-Lubin, who delegated the labor of his office to Chinamen and negroes and enjoyed himself with the games and women that amused him.

And after Shaw has weeded everything out of civilization that offends him, and has remolded the old world nearer to his heart's desire, what a dismal place we have! Suppose human beings did begin life at their majority, what, in Shaw's view, would they really accomplish? What do the ancients of his imagining glean from their long sojourn on earth except a vast disdain for their kind, and an almost gruesome efficiency? Do they, in this play, attain to anything more desirable than the venerable Charles W. Eliot, say, or Thomas Edison has attained to? Does Shaw prove, or suggest any formula of proof, that human beings would be more blessed if they did live three hundred years? He does not; and herein lies his colossal failure. For it is a colossal failure. This play is all Shaw has garnered from his own sojourn on earth, his long and passionate study of his fellow beings!

How curious it is! Since the dim

moment when the missing link first discovered that there was something above his ears that could think, man has been trying to convince himself that he is indestructible, immortal. Through the long centuries he has



Helen Hayes

The arch deaconess of all the flappers in America adopts a southern accent for her part in "To the Ladies!" It is estimated that already sixty-eight per cent. of the flappers in New York now say "Ah reckon." The man who put Miss Hayes up to it has left town.

been shaping solemn systems of logic to prove it. Since the beginning of thought he has been trying to project his finite imagination into the dark infinity that lies beyond the grave. He has been devising magnificent regions wherein he is to find his conception of perfect bliss. What a record of impotence it is. What appalling prospects he has imagined. What eternities of intolerable boredom he has laid out for himself. And these puerile fabrications are "as far as thought can reach". Shaw perhaps is the possessor of one of the most highly developed brains our poor race has yet evolved. Here he pictures a future even more awful than the land of milk and honey conceived by the oriental sybarites in

the childhood of the race. If Shaw has proved anything (which he has not), it is that we are lucky to have only three score and ten years of it.

Yet even such casual reflections as these are, we think, unwarranted. It was a splendid thing to put this play on the stage. The enterprise is the Theatre Guild's crowning glory. Beyond question the production is the great event in our theatrical history. But the Guild deserves the homage, not Shaw. As a craftsman he cannot be forgiven. His material is simply not dramatized. He was inexcusably lazy in putting his ideas into play form. If his Burge-Lubin is inefficient and indolent as a statesman, what shall we say of Shaw, who prides himself on being a "showman"? From the standpoint of craftsmanship he is atrociously amateurish. A strange word to apply to Shaw, but there is no other. No dramatist, whatever his purpose in writing plays, can, in his artistic maturity, be pardoned such workmanship. Shaw regards himself as a dramatist as well as a Messiah. He has frequently grouped himself with Shakespeare. He aspires to be a master. What if Michael Angelo or Beethoven had, at the end, been guilty of such grievous bungling in the arts they had mastered? Still again, we may remind ourselves of the exasperated and resentful old dramatist freed at last from his shackles.

We thought again of those same ruthlessly imposed inhibitions which the beginning dramatist submits to when we saw "The First Fifty Years". This is the first play of a young writer named Henry Myers, and contemplation of it should convince anyone that nothing but the purest piffle underlies the first few paragraphs of our present article. In

view of what young Mr. Myers (who probably is complacently unaware of the laws and shackles we spoke of) has accomplished, could any means of artistic expression be more plastic than the stage?

By means of seven scenes and two characters, two lives are reenacted during the time we sit in the Princess Theatre. As the oddly fascinating play moves on we realize that we are being fully informed about practically everything of consequence that happened to Anne and Martin Wells since 1870. We not only know what happened, but we know what it did to their souls. We know what they have been thinking about. The story that takes shape in the course of the seven glimpses we have of their home, is one of the most absorbing stories imaginable because it is really no story at all, but merely two lives. No invention of the most adroit playwright can match in interest the warm, faithful transcription of a human creature's life—no matter how humdrum a creature may be selected. Mr. Myers never thought of that; happily for him. He fashioned his play as it lay in his mind, not realizing that he was doing an outrageous and impossible thing. In his dramatic illiteracy he flooded his work with the soft light of the utterly commonplace. His two people, in themselves, were negligible atoms from the steppes of Harlem. Their life together was so thoroughly unadventurous, so entirely unromantic that, on the stage, it paradoxically achieved what all adventure tales and all romances seek to achieve: it beguiled you into believing implicitly the fiction before you. And that after all is the purpose and justification—so often lost sight of—of the "realism" which the well-known younger genera-

tion of our litterateurs is reaching for.

If this story—this history—had been written out in a six hundred page novel we fail to see what further light could have been shed upon these two, or what gentler nuances could have been expressed. Their life story is all there. And curiously penetrating, astonishingly effective it is behind the stiff proscenium arch which Mr. Myers ignored. The moments of crisis—and there are many—gather their force imperceptibly, they emerge from deep down behind the scene out of a thousand things that are never said, but which we cannot fail to know about. How plastic, then, how fluid a play can be. After all, anything can be said on the stage; anything can be dramatized. And, to revert a moment to Shaw, this play, by an obscure college boy, provides another measure of the incompetence shown by the sage when he cast his deepest convictions in play form.

Though we admire "The First Fifty Years" we cannot help wishing that the author had waited a few years—at least forty-five—before writing it. Actual as it is, we sense vaguely behind it a guiding hand that is inclined to be arbitrary. It flows logically along, but it is the logic of youth, rather than the logic of life. Toward the end it grows a bit synthetic. Time wears away and heals and softens more completely than the play suggests. When the illusions of youth go, it is resignation that sets in as a substitute, not regret. The play might have been a broader comment on life, perhaps a truer one; but, as a piece of play writing, it could scarcely have been more deftly contrived. And it could scarcely have been conveyed over the footlights more delicately than it was by Clare Eames and Tom Powers.

Still another example of how the conventions and traditions of the dramaturgeons may be turned wrong side out, stuffed into a pillow case and thrown out into the hall for the old clo' man, is presented by Mr. Cohan's "Madeleine and the Movies". The play itself is pretty weak stuff. But after Cohan gets through producing it (he himself wrote it, supposedly) you almost believe that you have seen something rather clever and funny. It is the most produced play of a dozen seasons. Cohan has done all that could possibly be done to make the thing stand up and walk. If anyone else had put it on the exits would have been dangerously clogged about midway of the first act.

Because it is such a bad play Mr. Cohan's display of first aid virtuosity is all the more impressive. It is as determined a case of forcible feeding as has been seen since "The Tavern". Indeed the Cohan magic, in the circumstances, is almost too good. Every known device is enlisted to stretch the scenes to their tautest, they are all played staccato; anticipation, suspense, is conjured out of thin air. The result is that there is constantly the implication that it all means more than it seems to mean; and the discovery that it doesn't mean anything ends the play on an unfulfilled promise. For in the end the last resort, the oxygen pump of the drama surgeon's equipment, is applied: we are told it has all been a scenario writer's dream.

However, in the light of the theme we have chosen for the afternoon's experience meeting, this play is important. It shows what can be accomplished by a wilful man who is unabashed by the stage's Ten Commandments. Cohan towers above his theatre. He sees his stage in miniature; his actors as little tin puppets,

his audience as children. He throws his tiny stage into blackness or brilliance; swishes his little curtain up or down; shunts his puppets here and there, with the freedom of a spoiled boy playing with his toys. That is the impression given by a "Cohanized" play. There is nothing exact or rigid about the drama for Cohan; his proscenium is made of the most elastic rubber; he would probably undertake to put "The Origin of Species" on the stage and make them like it.

We hope that the editor of "The American Magazine", Bruce Barton, the board of directors of the Ad. Club, and every after dinner speaker we have listened to since the dry era set in, may see "To the Ladies!" Indeed



Louis Wolheim

The young lady who sat behind us at "The Hatry Ape" said that Mr. Wolheim had been caught and tamed in the wilds of Pago-Pago, Samoa, and imported especially to play his part. We go further than that, he was created to play it.

we should like to see it printed and placed in the schools as a textbook which the oncoming generation of hustlers and live wires would be forced to study. This, not because it is a good play—it is not a model of play writing by any means—but be-

cause it comprises one of the best antitoxins for 100% Americanism we have yet sampled. It is a funny play; but it is also a big play in that it applies the bright edge of satire to a few of the most popular idiocies which all good citizens are expected to exalt. It was written by George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly, and is quite as funny as their "Dulcy".

We went to Eugene O'Neill's "The Hairy Ape" with the highest hopes. Those who had read the manuscript declared that it was the promise fulfilled. We gathered that it was the dramatization of a state of mind. The eight scenes sought merely to visualize for the spectator the blurred mental pictures received by an illiterate stoker in conflict with vague social forces which he could not comprehend.

Splendid. No doubt (we thought) we should find in this play the ultimate example of the infinite adaptability of the drama as a medium of artistic expression. We saw the play; and in the din of hoarse shouts which accompanied each curtain fall, we felt very small and alone. We have never seen such a play on the stage, but have heard many of them read. Every unsung Percy MacKaye south of Fourteenth Street has a hairy ape play down in the bottom of the old trunk. If it had been called "Your First Play" and presented as burlesque at the annual outing of Professor Baker's Boys it would have been, as they themselves might say, a riot.

Even so it just misses being something very fine. O'Neill did have something pretty big to say. In conception it is a splendid adventure into the uncharted. In execution it is so bad that the net impression is that of a badly written editorial in the

"Call". The dialog is clumsy, redundant, and painfully rhetorical. Each of the eight scenes has a single point to make. The point is usually made in the opening speech and the remainder of the scene, in each case, merely paraphrases and restates it. Whatever O'Neill may be trying to say, that is the most primitive, the most ineffective kind of play writing. Any play is bad which so patently fails to accomplish what it sets out to accomplish. The scenes, purposely vague and shadowy, do not convey the impression which O'Neill thought they might. They fall so far short of doing so that you can read anything you like into the play (in itself a proof of bad dramatizing); and we cannot escape the feeling that those who have so loyally acclaimed it as a masterpiece have put much more into it than O'Neill did. If you sit long enough before any cubistic decoration in a Greenwich Village coffee hell, you can easily convince yourself that it is an immortal work, far over the heads of the uptowners at the surrounding tables.

The best thing that can be said for "The Hairy Ape" is that it is apparently to become a "must" play for the culture groups, thereby giving the Provincetown Players a much deserved and long overdue success.

"The First Man", another O'Neill play, produced unobtrusively at the Neighborhood Playhouse, revives one's shaken faith in the author. In some ways it is as good as anything he has done. It is a powerful, well rounded story he tells here of a man who hacks his way through the thousand bonds which a small town and a large family seek to impose, and emerges strong and unshaken in his iconoclasm.

SPRING ELECTIONS ON MOUNT OLYMPUS

Compiled by Nine American Critics and Edited by

Edward E. Paramore, Jr.

IN the April issue of "Vanity Fair", under the title "The New Order of Critical Values", there appears a kind of intellectual logarithm table in which some two hundred great figures of history in the fields of art, politics, philosophy, literature, science, and statesmanship, together with numerous representatives of purely American contemporary life, are subjected to critical evaluation by ten of our younger critics. The purpose of this chart, according to the editors, is "to orient the American public among the newer critical standards" espoused by the progressive wing of native criticism. The marking system, borrowed from the French Dadaists, who in turn borrowed it from the biometricians of modern biology and criminology, consists in assigning an absolute value to each name, ranging from +25, to indicate the highest praise, to -25, to indicate the most withering condemnation. A zero mark is understood to denote complete indifference. The list, drawn up alphabetically but carefully salted with names intended to be touchstones of critical judgment, has been cunningly devised by the editors (one of whom had the advantage of being one of the critics as well) to discover the opinions of the younger authorities on certain capital questions of historical and topical importance, which may be roughly classified as follows:

1. Classic art and philosophy.
2. The Middle Ages.
3. The Renaissance.

4. The nineteenth century.
5. Contemporary politics, national and international.
6. Labor and radicalism.
7. The war.
8. Modern movements in painting, music, and sculpture.
9. The new movement in American poetry and fiction.
10. American quackery and morality mongering: the "boob bumpers".
11. Popular recreation in America, as exemplified by the movies, baseball, prize-fighting, jazz, and the comic strip.

The results of this fantastic statistical inquiry, when averaged together, constitute an astonishing revelation of the advanced critical mind. Consider, for example, unconventional judgments such as these:

That Cézanne, Picasso, and Matisse are greater painters than Raphael, Giorgione, and Ingres.

That General Ludendorff is a greater man than Marshal Foch.

That Henry Ford is a more estimable person than Judge Gary.

That Woodrow Wilson is by 25% the superior of Theodore Roosevelt, but that both should be ranked on the minus side of the scale.

That Lenin is the world's greatest living statesman.

That Irving Berlin ranks above John Alden Carpenter, Arnold Schoenberg, and Edward MacDowell as a composer.

That Henry Cabot Lodge cuts a worse figure as a politician than William Jennings Bryan.

That Nietzsche is the greatest philosopher of all time.

That William Z. Foster is an abler