

initiative? Or was it suggested to you by someone? Perhaps the director himself?

A.: I will not try to pass the blame. It was my own idea. Although I must say the director didn't object, and he must surely have recognized the tune. And certainly nobody did anything about it in the cutting room, either. I have to say that on many occasions during my fellow-traveling period I was encouraged and sometimes even prodded by fellow performers and directors. I was very gullible and most of them were just fools, too, I'm sure, but some of them seemed to know what they were doing.

Q.: Would you tell us who some of these people were?

A.: To show my sincerity in trying to make up for some small bit of the terrible damage I have inflicted upon the country that trusted and adored me, I have brought here with me a list of eighty-seven personal friends and professional associates whose loyalty I feel is definitely questionable.

Q.: You say you were gullible. Do you think you might still be gullible in certain ways?

A.: Sir, I have learned my lesson . . . I'm sorry, I have to borrow that handkerchief again. I know I'm behaving like a fool, but you don't realize what a burden is in my heart.

Q.: Please understand we are sympathetic.

A.: What can I say beyond admitting I was wrong, that I associated with friends I can no longer trust and slandered those who I now realize are my only friends? I humbly throw myself at the mercy of the nation I have wronged, knowing full well that I deserve no mercy from my compatriots or from this committee, which stands like a faithful watchdog guarding us from those who would destroy us.

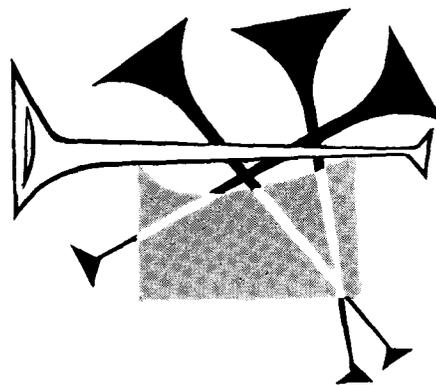
Q.: Well spoken. And now it may please you to learn that it is the decision of this committee, in view of your straightforward and co-operative testimony, that after a one-year reindoctrination course at Novsmograd you will be allowed once again to appear in motion pictures in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and in all its allied People's Democracies.

# Regina: Broadway In the Opera House

JAMES HINTON, JR.

DURING the theatrical season that has just shed its undercoat of near successes in preparation for the hot New York summer ahead, opera has furnished more than its usual share of controversy. Most of the issues were already well charred, but their rekindling resulted in an intellectual smog of sufficient density to make everybody rheumy and to obscure any light that might have been cast. It remained for the New York City Opera, with its revival of Marc Blitzstein's *Regina*, to make a really positive contribution.

*Regina* is an opera with a difference; it may also be an opera with a future—if not for itself, for its descendants. American opera audiences are used to associating with Greek gods and cloak-and-sword villains. Now they had before them a figure



considerably closer to their extra-operatic taste, for Mr. Blitzstein's title character is the same Regina Giddings made familiar by Tallulah Bankhead and Bette Davis in the play and movie of Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*. But her character, and the character of the husband she despises because he is not avaricious, are illuminated and reinforced by

music. They sing. Their music has Tin Pan Alley echoes. The language they sing is American.

THE BASIC problem of producing opera in America has always been to find an audience capable of supporting it. Opera on a reputable level is an expensive pastime, and Americans have never shown an overwhelming enthusiasm for footing the bill.

Neither fact should surprise anyone. Opera has never really paid its way anywhere, but in Europe government subventions have replaced the bounties of vanished Maecenas. Here the budgetary problem is more pressing. Rich men founded the Metropolitan, and rich men still sit on its board of directors, but more and more they depend for financial support on the corporeal and radio audiences. Each year there is a save-the-Metropolitan appeal, and each year enough impressionable people send in their dollars to ensure another losing season. A look at the Metropolitan's repertoire gives at least some indication why the struggle is so grim.

## 'La Traviata with Dogs'

The staple operas are the same as at La Scala in Milan. The Milanese audience gets more restaged productions and more new works, but the backbones of the repertoires are the same. The *La Bohèmes* and *La Traviatas* persist because they are good operas. They wear well, and they are exceedingly tough. As the late Giulio Gatti-Casazza, the only manager of the Metropolitan ever to show a profit at the end of a season, remarked, you could give *La Traviata* with dogs and it would

still succeed with the audience.

The difference is that to an Italian, *La Traviata* is a native dish, while to an American it is an acquired taste. The average American operagoer does not understand the words; at best, he knows the outline of the plot.

This is true of even the most devoted enthusiasts—the regular standees at the Metropolitan. A large percentage of them are vocal enthusiasts pure and simple. They disclaim quite frankly any concern for the words; they just like to listen to the singing. In the days before Rudolf Bing's icy gaze was on them, some singers traded on this pervasive ignorance and amused themselves by replacing the text with scatological observations of their own. Nobody complained.

**B**UT however loyal the support of these enthusiasts, there are not enough of them to satisfy the voracious demands of the budget, even when their contribution is augmented by the long-suffering executives whose wives drag them to the boxes in the Diamond Horseshoe as a means of ensuring social prestige.

On the other hand, the successive assaults of talking pictures, radio, and television have not destroyed the American taste for theater. Although a producer today thinks several more times than he once would have before sending a Broadway show on the road, a New York success—and especially a successful musical—can tour long and profitably. Thousands of people across the country have gone with smarting palms from a one-night stand of *Oklahoma!*, happily unaware that they have just been applauding something that is very close to being an opera.

The problem, of course, is how to lure a member of this musical-theater audience into the opera house. The solution is to persuade him that he will understand what he hears and sees without undue effort; when he leaves he must be convinced that he has been to a good show. Otherwise he will go away and warn others that they are better off outside—at the movies, or at home with the television set.

Attempts to bridge the gap between

the operatic and Broadway audiences have been various. Early this season there was *My Darlin' Aida*, for which the wily producer appropriated Verdi's music and the basic plot of *Aida* and transported them, not without damage in transit, from Memphis, Egypt, in the time of the Pharaohs to Memphis, Tennessee, in the time of Jefferson Davis. The formula, which had worked when Oscar Hammerstein II provided *Carmen* with a here-and-now plot and an English book, did not produce success, although not even the direst critical anathemas can obscure the fact that it might have succeeded under more talented ministrations.

Then the Metropolitan produced *La Bohème* in a slangy English version by the Broadway lyricist Howard Dietz, with polemical results that must have reached every reading citizen. In coldly practical terms, nobody liked it very much. Traditionalists and voice lovers went to the Italian performances instead, and there was no great rush of Broadway habitués longing to be initiated into the mysteries of Puccini.

The entry of *Regina* into the repertoire of an established opera company was a good deal closer to the point; some day it may be looked back on as a milestone. Here, for the first time, a musical show that had been a success, although a modest one, on Broadway crossed the line that separates "shows" from "operas."

**G**IAN-CARLO MENOTTI'S operas might be cited as earlier examples of a successful shift: as a matter of fact, so could *Cavalleria Rusticana*, which had its American première on Broadway in 1892. But the cases are not the same, for nobody ever had any doubt that *The Medium* and *The Consul* were operas—operas directly descended, in fact, from the veristic success of Mascagni himself, and not notably original in their contribution.

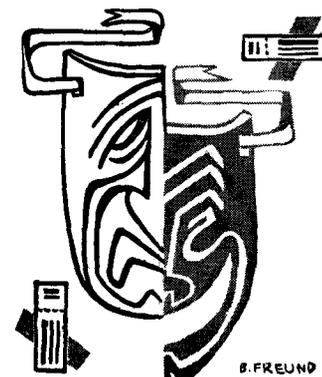
*Regina*, when it was first presented at the Forty-sixth Street Theatre in 1949, was carefully shielded from the possible ill effects of being labeled an opera. Nonetheless, it was no tuneful musical comedy complete

with ballet and happy ending, nor was it a serious but lugubrious montage of bad poetry with semi-serious music, like Maxwell Anderson's and Kurt Weill's *Lost in the Stars*. It was, and is, a tragic opera of uncompromising musical seriousness, an American tragic opera that is good theater no matter where it is presented.

### 'I Hope You Die'

This is not to claim that *Regina* is a perfect work. It has the ancient disease of opera-libretto trouble. Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* is too terse and hard-bitten a play to yield easily to musical elaboration. The difficulty is not, as has been said, that it is too good a play to be made into an opera; it is, however, the wrong play. Its climaxes are too swift and vicious to permit the music to elaborate them. While the rapacious Hubbard family is being introduced and characterized, everything goes well. But when Regina thrusts her sick husband from her with a blunt "I hope you die," the shock is complete and self-contained; music is neither necessary nor even desirable.

**T**HE FLAW is a central one, and because of it *Regina* is most accurately classified a near miss as an opera, in spite of its tremendous impact. Whatever the final verdict may be, though, Blitzstein's place in history is secure, for if America is ever to develop an indigenous form of serious musical theater such works as this will lead the way, break the old molds, and win audiences not because of their privileged status as masterpieces but because they are vital, effective theater in language as well as in music.



# Two American Writers

## I: Baldwin

GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN, by James Baldwin. Knopf, \$3.50.

THERE IS a woman in my home town who takes pride in befriending Negroes. She invites them right into her home. "I had the Johnsons over to dinner the other evening," she will say, and then, with a defiant matter-of-factness, she will add parenthetically, "They're Negroes, you know." After letting that sink in for a while, she will deliver an even sharper blow: "I declare, it would never occur to me that they're any different from you or I." It is pretty much like any other form of snobbery, and it does no great harm.

You will already have observed that I am prejudiced. It is better for me to admit it right at the beginning. My prejudice is against people who complacently assume that they're doing the Negro a great favor by reducing him to their own image and likeness: Such a definition takes something away from the Negro that he ought to keep, and no one really advances by denying his own individuality.

The Negro's political, economic, and social advance is, of course, in all ways good. But birthrights ought not to be sold, even for a good price. The melting-pot idea is a good one, but only up to a point: If the people who go into the melting pot lose not only their poverty, their illiteracy, and their stigma of servitude but also those special qualities which make them valuably different from the rest of us, we shall all be poorer. The Negro, who of all immigrants arrived with the least baggage, has built out of what he found here—even out of slavery—something that has beauty and dignity. Too many whites ignore it out of mistaken politeness, and too many Negroes ignore it out of mistaken shame.

THE NOVELS that have been written by and about Negroes—ranging from the high-minded sentimentality of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to the nearly

paranoid outpourings of several living Negro writers—have told us a lot about the injustices that have been done to Negroes, but not much about Negroes themselves. By and large, they have been tracts rather than works of art. Within a year, however, a great change has been worked, first by Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and now by James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

These two writers are explorers, searching for something that has been lost. It has been lost in their own pain and sorrow, and in the even worse pain and sorrow of their parents and grandparents. It takes a brave man to set out on such a journey, and one who understands, as Baldwin has written, "that the things which hurt him and the things which helped him cannot be divorced from each other; he could be helped in a certain way only because he was hurt in a certain way . . ."

In an autobiographical note that Baldwin prepared for his publisher, he has described the difficulties that beset a Negro's discovery of his own heritage: "I know, in any case, that the most crucial time in my own development came when I was forced to recognize that I was a kind of bastard of the West; when I followed the line of my past I did not find



myself in Europe but in Africa. And this meant that in some subtle way, in a really profound way, I brought to Shakespeare, Bach, and Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris, to the cathedral at Chartres, and to the Empire State Building, a special attitude. These were not really my creations, they did not contain my history, I might search in them in vain forever for any reflection of myself. I was an interloper, this was not my heritage. At the same time I had no other heritage which I could possibly hope to use—I had certainly been unfitted for the jungle or the tribe. I would have to appropriate these white centuries, I would have to make them mine—I would have to accept my special attitude, my special place in this scheme—otherwise I would have no place in any scheme."

The appropriated material from those white centuries which Baldwin has chosen to make the greatest use of in his first novel is religion—that apocalyptic vision of salvation in heaven which the white man was considerate enough to give the black man along with slavery on earth.

Three generations of sin and travail, from the slave cabins of the South to the tenements of Harlem, are brought to an ironic climax in the ecstatic writhings of an adolescent boy on the floor of a store-front revivalist church. To John Grimes, the boy, the fear and hatred and longing in the secret prayers of the older members of his family, which Baldwin reveals in flashbacks, are unknown. But he can feel their weight on him.

BALDWIN tells of the boy's conversion in chanting Old Testament rhetoric: "The silence in the church ended when Brother Elisha, kneeling near the piano, cried out and fell backward under the power of the Lord. Immediately, two or three others cried out also, and a wind, a foretaste of that great downpouring they awaited, swept the church. With this cry, and the echoing cries, the tarry service moved from its first stage of steady murmuring, broken by moans and now and again an isolated cry, into that stage of tears and groaning, of calling aloud and singing, which was like the labor of a