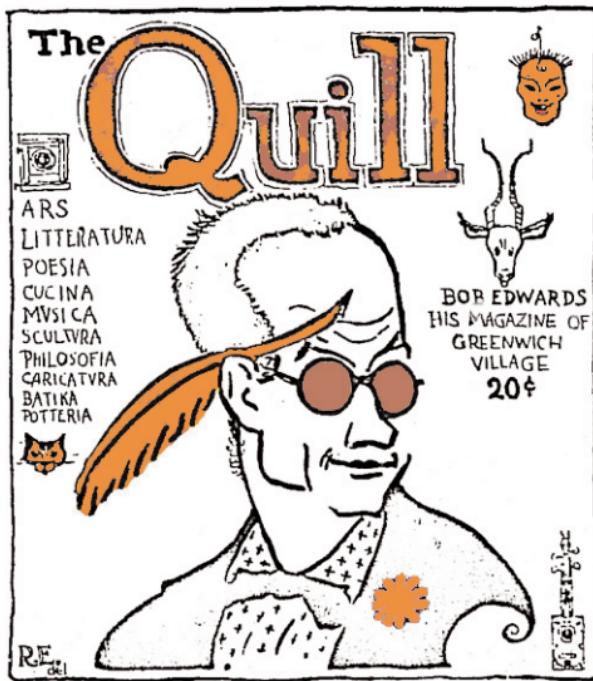


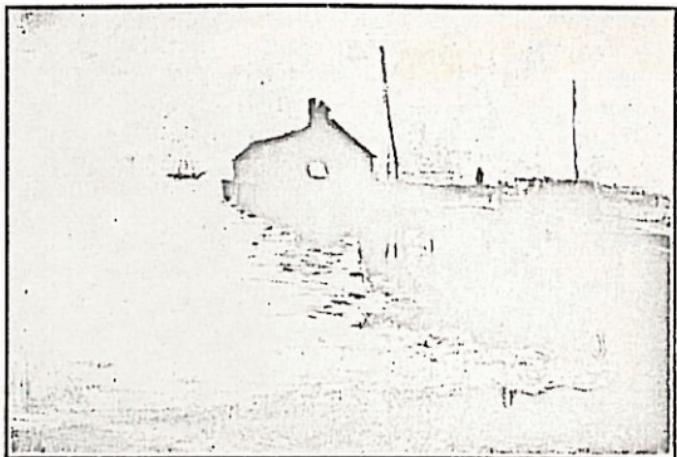
10
Penny
Players

THE QUILL
September, 1923



The STORY of GREENWICH VILLAGE
compiled from most original sources and
written comprehensible to both
morons & other artistic
folk.

By ROBERTVS EDOVARDVS B.P.L.

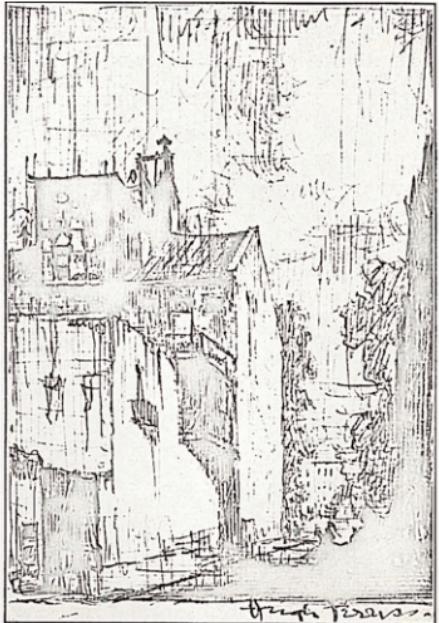


Original Provincetown Playhouse
*called the "Wharf" Theatre
from a painting by R. Edwards in 1883.*

PART VIII

The Greenwich Village Theatre

Now the Provincetown Theatre was not the only one in the Village to have its effect on the drama of the U.S. When Frank Conroy and Harold Meltzer got fed up on the peculiarities of the powers that controlled the Washington Square Players, they bolted. Meltzer being an energetic type—what is commonly known on Main Street as a “go getter”—discovered Mrs. Marguerite Barker, or



The old Quill Office
*(since remodeled by the Bros.
Strunsky) drawn by Hugh Ferris*

Washington Sq. P's, as they were guiltless of all stagecraft and had that great assurance that comes only from lack of sordid experience.

Sheridan Square, at the time the Greenwich Theatre opened its doors to the parboiled New York public, was a gay Volksfest of party-colored dens of mild diversion. Coffee and atmosphere were dis-

Mrs. Lewis, as she was then. With great enthusiasm, she offered to build a theatre. Meltzer immediately elected Conroy director and a company was collected. Conroy it seems had been a player in London, and unlike all little theatre people, knew the elements of acting. It should be obvious that such knowledge could be embarrassing to the direction of the

pensed by Don Dickerman in his original Pirates' Den. Romany Marie hosted her Roumanian Peasant Tavern in an old triangular building that has since fallen to pieces. The Aladdin Shop and Vermillion Hound and a quaint magazine called the *Ink Pot* flourished gaily therein. Across the Square the Treasure Box presented a gaily painted exterior. Altogether there seemed to be a distinct bid to welcome the visitor and spendthrift. So much so that some wag spoke of the Village as "the Coney Island of the Soul"!

Naturally the newspapers began to get gay at the expense of this outward, if not ostentatious, display of the signs of entertainment. The natives, the Celts or original Ninth Warders, and a band of outlaws known as the Hudson Dusters, were already at war with Don Dickerman, whose belligerent garb they took literally. The reformers were also rampant, and the police, seeing people spend 35 cents on a cup of coffee, scented cocaine, according to their peculiar heuristic theories. Trouble was brewing on all sides. But the erection of this magnificent new theatre with upholstered seats mollified to an extent the fumes of malice that were brewing among the traditional enemies of Bohemia. In fact, the chances are that the whole of Bohemian

Greenwich Village would have been burned, massacred, and pillaged in the name of law and order had not the unenlightened been placated by this obviously decent structure that in a way offsetted the affronts on respectability typified by the flamboyant signs of cake and coffee parlors, with their cigarettes, squeaky phonographs and Don's Jazz band.

Saving the Village was by no means the only good accomplished by the Greenwich Village Theatre. Frank Conroy being an actor, had a different slant on the Little Theatre Movement. As we have seen, the Provincetown Players were primarily playwrights. The Washington Square Players were a bit unsettled as to what they were. Perhaps they were businessmen. In some way the productions were much the same in all three theatres. According to great authorities like B. Gallant, the Greenwich Village Players practically made the Theatre Guild, but undoubtedly making due allowances for Mr. Gallant's eastern custom of figurative utterance, the organization under Mr. Conroy did give some of the qualities to the Theatre Guild that the Washington Square Players were entirely innocent of.

Not only in the drama proper did the Greenwich Village Theatre shine, but along comes one John Murray Anderson, a human dynamo, with

ideas about musical productions. Anderson first approached a certain vagrant ukulele minstrel who was wont to haunt the Village at that time and assured this Village Bard, as this person was called by S. Jay Kaufman and the press, that he, the bard, would be the central figure of his new Greenwich Village Revue. Likewise, Anderson collected many players, and how he persuaded them to rehearse, history is unable to ascertain. Still, by much hard work and enthusiasm, the untiring John Murray assembled a company that rehearsed and rehearsed until one farseeing restaurant magnate took pity upon the young man and saw fit to furnish the money for the long-deferred opening. Incidentally, he made a lot of money in his altruism.

Unfortunately, the bard was not the feature of the new revue. In fact, the production grew to be such a success that the bard was nearly crowded out by more usual and more acquisitive performers. This experiment, The Greenwich Village Follies, became an institution. The first production, though a professional performance, had just a slight tinge of amateurishness, or rather it showed a radical departure from the ready-made Broadway show. It played to crowded houses from the start. Soon it became the most popular show in town. The public

rejoiced in the unusual — besides there was an actor's strike on and no other theatres were open.

So we see that not only the legitimate drama has been vastly influenced by the Village, but the revue form of entertainment has been shaken up by the original Anderson. It is due to his untiring efforts that show girls are now six feet four; that pink, blue and green lights flicker synchromatically over Batikoid curtains; that no two show girls look alike, and tights disappeared entirely, making way for the nude and the crinoline of our modern Follies entertainment.

It is recorded among the ancients that the great period of the drama flourished before the advent of the soft seat. Aeschulus and Sophocles were presented to patrons perched upon hard wooden benches. Even so was Shakespeare. Likewise O'Neill's first plays moved the uncushioned mob to acclaim. So it happened in the Provincetown Theatre that the spitting, swearing sea and soil plays of the rugged O'Neill gave way to airy frivolities and préciosité when upholstery was installed. For no play that cannot withstand a hard seat is worth seeing.

The Provincetown Theatre is now in the hands of a competent group of people who are

doing things more from the producer's viewpoint than the playwright's. The Greenwich Village Theatre is still the home of experimental plays or rather plays that are for the limited, discerning public. And Marguerite Abbott Barker, who built this theatre, should always be remembered as the great benefactor of the Village, for as it is written among the Sumarians, nobody ever got rich educating the public above their usual banal or to speak ephemerally, bananal tastes.



Eugene O'Neill
linoleum cut by K. Billings

(To be continued)