

## LE PETIT THEATRE DU VIEUX CARRE

By Lucile Rutland

*With a Wood-Block by Edward L. Tinker*

THE Little Theatre movement of today has its parallels in the very dawn of all dramatic history. It does not seem such a far cry, after all, to that first "Community Chorus" around the rustic altar on which a goat was sacrificed to Dionysos. Since the word "tragedy" comes from the *tragos ode* (goat song) sung at that religious — or, if you insist, irreligious — ceremonial, it appears, then, that a goat song became the matrix of all drama. Though perhaps we should date its inception even further back than the Dionysian period: to those first dramatic personæ, Adam and Eve, whose genius for tragedy (unsurpassed either before or after their time) contrived to make humanity the sacrificial "goat".

But the drama, like man himself, scorns mortal origin and claims its genesis in nothing less than the adventures of a god. So it remained for Dionysos, the personification of the creative element in life, its natural forces and passions, to inspire the common people to assume the first dramatic rôles. With a sacred altar for "down centre", transformed into Satyr or Pan or Silenus by the simple expedient of wearing goat skins, they sang or recited the exploits of their god. So came the Greek drama, from the heart of the people themselves. And so has come the Little Theatre movement; from the heart of that same humanity, groping through self-expression ever upward toward the source of life. Since the adventures of Dionysos are eternal, dramatizations of life's seedtime and harvest, ebb and flow, its potencies and passions, are the deathless goat song of humanity: the word made flesh.

It is a significant fact that the first Théâtre Libre of our day was organized in a wine cellar in Paris by one Monsieur Antoine, and held its rehearsals in an inspiring environment of wine casks. To this first Little Theatre, projected by the laity like the old Dionysia, the world owes its introduction to the plays of Brieux; to Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy as dramatic possibilities; and to the one act plays of Strindberg, Wedekind, and Schnitzler.

Since then, the Little Theatre movement has spread like a conflagration: from Paris to Petrograd, from Cracow to Chicago, from Dublin to Detroit, from Wisconsin to Washington Square; and, at last, to the Vieux Carré 'way down in old New Orleans.

About four years ago, Mrs. James Oscar Nixon, protagonist of visions for New Orleans, organized Le Petit



*The old St. Louis Cathedral seen from across Jackson Square,  
formerly called the Place d'Armes*

Théâtre du Vieux Carré. She had the enthusiastic support of other women and men who had always seen and read good plays, but who had never before tried to act them. In seeking for the right soil in which to plant this perennial flower of their dreams, they went instinctively to the Vieux Carré, sacred to Clio and Mnemosyne.

On one side of the Old Square flows the Mississippi river; on the opposite side stands the "Holy Cathedral" donated to the city more than a century ago by Don Andres Almonaster y Roxas, of "the Kingdom of Andalusia", Knight of the Royal Order of Charles III; and the two remaining sides of the Old Square are formed by the historic Pontalba Buildings, erected by that Baroness de Pontalba (daughter of the Knight from Andalusia) who lived there in oriental splendor long years ago. It was she who had the name of the Square changed from Place d'Armes to Jackson Square; and who witnessed, from the Moorish balcony of one of her series of mansions, the unveiling of Clark Mills's equestrian statue of Jackson that stands in the centre of the Square today.

So, Le Petit Théâtre du Vieux Carré found its habitation and its name in a corner mansion of this old row of Pontalba Buildings. With dramatic symbolism, the structure faces the sunrise. And it is the same mansion which the hospitable Baroness Pontalba once lent as hospice to Jenny Lind, when she visited New Orleans at the height of her fame. The originators of this Little Theatre scrubbed the floors themselves, washed the dust of ages from the windows, painted the walls and scenery, and built the stage. This work of love was done by society women, artists, musicians, journalists, interior decorators, lawyers, clergymen, university

professors, members of the Cotton Exchange, and even a day laborer who paid his membership fee and was, at last, discharged from the union for working overtime and without pay at the Little Theatre!

Then, when this new altar to an old god was ready for the first offering, the fairies themselves sent Lord Dunsany up the winding stairs to the "upper room furnished" where, unexpectedly, he officiated at the opening of Le Petit Théâtre du Vieux Carré. Because the room was so small and Lord Dunsany was so large, that first audience felt justified in hoping that he would never succeed in getting out and so, perforce, remain as a permanent attraction. They tell proudly how they have "broken through three walls" in the old mansion since that memorable première. Whether this had to be done for the liberation of the Irish Lord, or merely in a spirit of bravado, does not appear.

The membership soon grew to such proportions that the plays had to be given on three consecutive nights, to accommodate all who held membership tickets. Any other sort of ticket is unobtainable, even though one speak for it with the tongue of man and of angel. For commercialism would be a profanation in the Vieux Carré; the actors there are all amateurs (in experience, if not in performance) who would scorn to serve their god, as Tommy Tucker sang, for their suppers. At a performance of Dunsany's "A Night at an Inn", the hardened Toffy was splendidly enacted by a local clergyman. And in one of the comedies on that evening's program was a white haired Tulane University professor who had to wear a brown wig to give verisimilitude to the youthful character which he was portraying.

This is the only Little Theatre in

America that is bilingual. It has given almost as many plays in French as in English, among the French plays being Daudet's "L'Arlésienne". Of the plays given in English, "Riders to the Sea", Maeterlinck's "Interior", Murray's "Spring", and Dunsany's "A Night at an Inn" stand out as artistic triumphs. Besides, several fine things by local playwrights have been produced.

Le Petit Théâtre du Vieux Carré has become a literal playhouse for New Orleans artistic circles. Almost any day one may stroll in there and find women and men busy at the task of beautifying it, the women with work aprons on, the men in shirt sleeves; ev-

ery one of them eagerly striving to

Bring Beauty from its star  
To hide the blemish and the scar.

And when they grow tired, some "leading lady", with the dual soul of an artiste and a housewife, lights the little gas stove in the Green Room and makes Creole coffee. Then all the artists and the artizans gather on the iron grilled balcony overlooking the Vieux Carré and the old Cathedral to drink the cup that cheers but not inebriates — and talk and talk! Not of Mnemosyne nor of Clio, hovering in the background; but of art — that god whose adventures make the deathless goat song of humanity.