

# Drama

## *On a Certain Condescension Towards Musical Comedies*

**"GOOD MORNING DEARIE."** By Anne Caldwell. Globe Theatre.

**MARJOLAINE.** By Catherine Chisholm Cushing; lyrics by Brian Hooker. Broadhurst Theatre.

**THE ROSE OF STAMBOUL.** By Harold Atteridge. Century Theatre.

**THE HOTEL MOUSE.** By Guy Bolton; adapted from a comedy by Gerbido and Armont. Shubert Theatre.

**COSI FAN TUTTE.** Text by Lorenzo da Ponte. Metropolitan Opera House.

**T**HERE is no legitimate reason why musical comedies should be exempt from critical consideration. They fill our theatres night after night, month after month; there is no questioning their sweeping popularity; they are discussed and recommended by intelligent folk. But lovers of this type of entertainment seldom possess the courage of their convictions. Therefore they submit to that general and implied condescension towards musical comedy which is expressed by those who champion nothing less important than solemn and serious attempts to elevate the American stage. This fear of being frivolous leads people to exclaim of such offerings as Shaw's "Back to Methusaleh": "I thought it was perfectly wonderful—but it tired me out completely." And, on the other hand, only in secret can they be induced to confess that they have truly enjoyed "Sally" or "Good Morning Dearie." Such an attitude exposes a contradictory conception of the function of the theatre. If an entertainment acts as a tonic, buoys up our spirits, makes us forget the passing of time and banishes fatigue, must we look upon it with contempt? Because it is immensely popular must we necessarily condemn it? And, on the other hand, if the most ambitious and most desperately serious of legitimate drama lowers our vitality, acts as a depressant, increases our fatigue, and "leaves a bad taste in the mouth," must we therefore join in the critical chorus which acclaims it, at least for the current week, as immortal drama?

The danger of any critical scrutiny of current musical comedies perhaps lies in the possibility that we may make the unwelcome discovery that on the whole they are more intelligently and efficiently assembled than the average type of "legitimate" play. This, however, need not indicate a supreme order of excellence. The trouble seems to be that the demand for musical comedy "books" far exceeds the supply of talent available to write them. While our young playwrights are turning their attention to the production of dramas solemn and somniferous, purveyors of musical comedy are rushed or driven to the unfortunate expedient of rewriting and rehashing mediocre French farces, or digging in the graveyard of the dear dead drama

of yesteryear for "books" that may be galvanized into some semblance of life. No field in the American theatre offers greater possibilities for originality and new ideas. The American theatre could well dispense with the new crop of little Strindbergs and Ibsens; but it is crying aloud for a William Schwenk Gilbert.

At present the chief danger is standardization. We are suffering from an epidemic of jazzy, shimmying Cinderellas—working girls who emerge from department stores or ateliers and find themselves in the last act in aristocratic ballroom or syncopating cabaret, with the Fairy Prince carrying, instead of a glass slipper, a handsome flask. These Irenes, these Sallies, these Letties, these Rose Maries deviate but slightly from this formula. Yet in some strange fashion, despite the banalities of plot and characterization, the entertainments exhibit a spontaneous verve and aplomb.

By far the most effective of the recent exhibitions is "Good Morning Dearie." Jerome Kern's sophisticated music is more important than Miss Caldwell's book; but the latter reveals a certain fresh audacity. It possesses a certain truculent and racy wit. Blithely defying probability, it has the courage to be picturesquely absurd and inconsistent. The result justifies this defiance. With good-natured familiarity, jailbirds and safe-crackers mingle with the pompous proprietress of a Fifth Avenue establishment. We are transported gaily from those distinguished purlieus to a dancehall in Chinatown; thence back to the showroom of that "Toddle Shop" to view exquisitely costumed *mannequins*; and finally to a "black-and-white" ball at an aristocratic country home. There is action, movement, an *élan vital* that sweeps us recklessly along. The one element missing is listlessness. The performers, from every outward evidence, enjoy themselves no less than the audience. There is generous topical satire in the song of the "crooks" which expressed satisfaction with "working conditions" in New York City. And in Harland Dixon we find a dancer who seems to be a truly contributive and creative artist; a comedian who uses his head no less than his feet. It seems to me that American dramatists have a good deal to learn from such an entertainment.

There is something more perfunctory, more routine, less inspired in "Marjolaine," which is a musical version of Louis N. Parker's once popular "Pomander Walk." There is a quaint charm in the setting—those five little houses on the Thames "out Chiswick way." The young ladies of the chorus are in Kate Greenaway costumes; and the current devotion to St. Vitus has been completely suppressed. But in all this obvious effort at refinement, there is a suggestion of vacuity, even a lack of vitality. The dull moments are, however, banished by such artists as Misses Peggy Wood and Mary Hay. The latter, an ingenue of originality

and charm, succeeds in winning her audiences as few young ladies do outside the pages of irresponsible fiction.

"The Rose of Stamboul" is typical Viennese operetta, depending more upon the waltzes of Leo Fall and spectacular effects in scenery and costume than upon plot or dialogue, to fill the vast auditorium of the Century Theatre. The current myth of poor acoustics at the Century is dispelled by the barbarous diction and enunciation of some of the lesser performers in this production. We heard them, heard them only too clearly, so that we could imagine ourselves in Tenth Avenue instead of Central Park West. As a reward, however, we were permitted to listen to the exquisitely pure English spoken and sung by Marion Green, one of the finest artists of the lyric stage.

"The Hotel Mouse" is one of those French farces that become musical comedies on Broadway. It is of no special significance except that it affords Miss Frances White an opportunity to appear again in "rompers" and to sing another of those sophisticatedly childish ditties—the present only dealing with "Ohio" instead of the celebrated "Mississippi." Entertainment of this type should be classified as vaudeville instead of musical comedy, since it throws overboard all of the rich possibilities inherent in this form.

To realize these latent treasures we should not look to the future but turn our attention to the production of Mozart's musical comedy "Cosi Fan Tutte," which is a veritable triumph at the Metropolitan. I hope that one playgoer may be permitted here to speak a word in defence of that much-abused and generally condemned libretto of Lorenzo Da Ponte. To me it is not "one of the worst *libretti*" ever written for an opera; but in a certain sense one of the best. Artificial, absurd, improbable, and implausible it certainly is. Yet to criticize it as a poor piece of playwriting is tantamount to condemning "Pinafore" as being inferior to the novels of Joseph Conrad as pictures of sea-faring life. It lifts us into the realm of ideas. Like the works of Gilbert and Sullivan, "Cosi Fan Tutte" is no nearsighted, realistic transcription of "life," but a decorative and expressive pattern woven out of an amusingly malicious and illuminating idea. Is it not a worthy achievement to sustain our interest in this gossamer theme, to caress and cherish this gaiety so that no element of bitterness, or of sogginess, is permitted to destroy that divine effervescence of Mozart?

Before condemning contemporary efforts, let us remember that the frivolous "Cosi Fan Tutte" lives today, while the tragedies of 1790 are buried in dust. Let us not forget that the works of Gilbert and Sullivan are among the most popular dramas in the English language, though they were composed as topical musical comedies. Let us, especially, remember that solemnity in the theatre is not necessarily a symptom of dramatic importance.

ROBERT ALLERTON PARKER