THE THEATRE IN REVIEW

By C. COURTENAY SAVAGE

In Defence of the Producers

THERE has always been considerable conversation from certain critics of the drama on the theme of the degeneracy of the modern theatrical producers. Time after time the leader of the Little Theatre movement in Hometown reads a paper which decries the fact that the drama is cheapened by foolish farces, bare-legged chorus girls, and by melodramas that thrill, but not necessarily elevate either the mind or the soul.

I heard such a discussion the other evening. The cry was for the poetic in drama,—poetic, in this case, being a presentation of several one-act plays that had no acting plot, and were filled with many so-called beautiful lines,—over which only the few could refrain from sleep.

Looking back over the plays of the season it would seem that even the most fastidious highbrow of the drama should have found several entertainments worthy of an evening at the theatre. A really capable company offered Oscar Wilde's "An Ideal Husband"—and the most difficult critic could not discover a more finished production, judged from any standpoint, than Arthur Hopkins offered in "Redemption." Then, too, the season has offered "Tea for Three," "Be Calm, Camilla," which was not as great a public success as it should have been; also, "The Betrothal" (which was elaborately staged and had flashes of Maeterlinck at his best). Barrie's "Dear Brutus" is dramatic excellence, while Stuart Walker opened a season of short plays that had every merit the most critical student of the highbrow theatre could ask for. Then, at the very end of the season comes "The Jest" and "Shakuntala," the latter a translation from the ancient drama of the Orient.

Such a list is picked for the fastidious in direct challenge to those who could cry of the shame of the theatre. Add numerous entertaining plays for humans,—for the people who are frank enough to say that they go to the theatre to be amused, and the season has been very much worth while.

After all, the majority of people will never feel mentally fresh enough to enjoy the type of theatrical entertainment that demands constant attention, that fills the brain with anything but relaxation from the cares of the every-day world. And what the people demand, the producers supply.

However, it is foolish to say that the producers are not constantly placing before the public plays of literary quality. Yet every season proves that such plays are not in demand. The big money-making productions are not listed above. The drama leagues sent out frantic appeals for members to sustain Walter Hampden's remarkable performance of "Hamlet" and all the public wanted was afternoon and morning performances,—largely attended by the students of the community as part of their English course. When the public shows itself ready to support the very finest quality of drama,—then the producers will be able to give us plays of serious import. Until then—they must stand the unfair criticism of those who choose to stand in judgment.

Two Plays of "Literary" Quality

ALL this is apropos of the fact that Maeterlinck's "The Burgomaster of Belgium" was removed from the theatre after four weeks. Of course, the fact that it was a war-tragedy helped with the removal. But it was a war-play that was needed. The events of the drama required but a day for their unfolding, the action taking place in one room. The story is a grim one, unfolding a picture of Prussianism that was more terrible because the audience realized it was absolutely true. It was a splendid bit of realism, written with a master pen. Then, too, the play was well cast, and well produced, with Lyell Swete giving a vivid characterization of the Burgomaster. The man in back of me felt that the play ought to be subsidized and sent throughout the country as

part of a " Lest we forget " program. I am inclined to agree with him. Yet it has gone for lack of appreciation. Some day, five years from now, it will probably be brought back as an historical drama. By then the poetically inclined people will all have read the book of the play and it will prove to be a financial success.

One recent play of true artistic literary quality is " The Jest," and apparently it is to meet with popular favor, partly because John and Lionel Barrymore, two of the best American actors, are in the cast. The play is an American adaptation, rather than a translation from the Italian of Sam Benelli, the greatest Italian dramatist of the day. It is a struggle between the brutal and the aesthetic, depicting once again the victory of the weak. The plot is somewhat involved, but briefly it concerns a brute *Neri,* whose pastime is the tormenting of *Giannetto,* a young artist of marked physical weakness. Plagued to the point of madness the artist's revolt and plan of vengeance is to drive *Neri* mad. He does so,—by the subtle methods that brute mind cannot conceive. Any reader familiar with the work of the Barrymores can imagine the characterizations they give, Lionel as *Neri,* the brute, John, giving a performance of the mild painter, whose love is of the Madonnas he paints. The American stage has never witnessed finer acting. Arthur Hopkins has produced the play in a typical Hopkins manner, with a well-balanced cast and setting, the whole combining to form the most notable dramatic production of the season.

More " Popular " Themes

" A GOOD Bad Woman " comes under the head of a dramatic preachment, and had it been disclosed at the time when " Damaged Goods " was crowding the theatres it might have been a great success. It may still be a success, for even though the theatre does not seem to be quite the place for the discussion of the subject of the play, which is a vital problem in modern life, the play has dramatic value, and is well acted. Briefly, the story tells of a woman who fears motherhood, and, on the advice of her most worldly woman friend,

seeks a physician for an illegal operation. The husband learns of the operation and determines to kill the doctor in the case. For the sake of a happy ending it is disclosed that the operation was never performed, and the play ends with a familiar harangue regarding children and marriage. The play is well acted, superiorly acted, in fact. Margaret Illington plays the wife, handling the emotions of the rôle with great expression. Robert Edeson is the husband, while Wilton Lackaye is the doctor. The rest of the short cast is of the all-star variety. "The Good Bad Woman" may not have a popular theatrical theme, and for that reason may not be a success, but the play is well constructed and well acted.

Rachel Crothers will probably go down in theatrical annals as the most skillful creator of everyday American characters for stage purposes. Twice this season she has collected a group of easily recognizable types and, with very little plot, managed to give an evening's entertainment of rare enjoyment. The second play from her pen is called "39 East," that being the address of a boarding house, quite typical of many boarding-houses throughout the land. The slight plot discloses the old, but ever new story of the young-girl-come-to-New-York. There are the subsequent temptations and struggles for success. The fight leads the girl to the chorus, though there is no stage picture. Instead, she and the honest young man who loves her picnic in Central Park, and she dances to the music of a passing hurdy-gurdy. The young man is 100% American, of clean mind and body, and filled with the first love that can be so admirably presented on the stage. In fact, they are by far the most charming pair of lovers the season has offered. And, of course, the girl is saved from all temptation, and marries the young man. With the amusing boarding-house people as a background, *Napoleon Gibbs* and *Penelope Penn* are highly entertaining acquaintances of an evening. The play is produced under the guidance of Miss Crothers. It is presumed that she chose the players, and, if she did, her judgment was excellent, for Henry Hull, best remembered for his work in "The Man Who Came Back," and Constance Binny, fresh from the

movies and the Midnight Frolic, fill the youthful requirements of their rôles.

Musical Plays

THE Easter season has been rich in musical comedy, largely because spring flowers mean summer productions to the theatrical managers, and they are anxious to find light entertainment that will keep their theatres open through the hot weather.

At least two of these new musical comedies seem destined to success. "Take It From Me" has all the elements of popularity, and should grow more entertaining as the days grow warmer, and tired New Yorkers or visitors to the city, grow more prone to relax in their seats and be forced into a chuckle. "Take It From Me" is rich in comedy of the low variety. There are three young men, one very fat, one very lean, who attempt to wreck the finances of a department store which has been left to one of the trio;—a typical grouch who will inherit the store under the terms of an odd will, if the young man does not succeed;—a beautiful girl who is "true blue," saves the store of the hero, and, of course, marries him at the final curtain;—a comedy stenographer; a vampire with a prima-donna voice; a dancing team of unusual grace; and an old floor-walker who, for the sake of efficiency, is put on roller skates. Then, too, there is scenery, some chorus girls, and music. These serve as background. It is the comedy that carries the piece to immediate success. The cast, with one or two exceptions, is practically unknown to Broadway, having been recruited from vaudeville, and proving once again that vaudeville training is of benefit to the young player. Take it from me, this musical comedy will last more than one season on its comedy merits.

"Tumble Inn," which is the musical-comedy name for Mary Roberts Rinehart's "Seven Days," is also funny. It is the third musical production from the office of Arthur Hammerstein to find success this season. The story is familiar:—a quarantine order shutting in a number of people, including a burglar, a divorced couple, a pair of young lovers, etc.,

allowing for numerous comical situations. To this Rudolf Friml has added a number of tunes that are a decided addition to the laughter. The company has a number of gifted people, including a quartette of well-known players who can be depended on to entertain. They are Herbert Corthell, Edna Hibbard, Peggy O'Neil and Charles Ruggles. With their help "Tumble Inn" is an invitation not to be refused.

The third, and least successful of the new musical trio is "Come Along." It has a war background, which is unfortunate, and, what is much worse, it has little action, and is lacking in distinctive music and costumes. Even a war-play should have some excuse for the chorus girls to appear in many and brilliant clothes. There are several capable players in the cast, but they can do nothing with the material. Harry Tighe managed to be funny on occasion, and Jessica Brown, a young dancer who is not seen often enough in New York City, was such a tremendous relief after some of the material that had been offered previously, that she, in theatrical parlance, "stopped the show." "Come Along" will beckon to a very few before it leaves for the storehouse.