

# TO SEE OR NOT TO SEE

By David Carb

## PLAYS IN NEW YORK WORTH SEEING

1. **CYRANO DE BERGERAC:** *Brian Hooker's exquisite translation of Rostand's masterpiece gives Walter Hampden the chance to prove himself a superb actor.*
2. **THE MIRACLE:** *Spectacular pageantry in its most elaborate form.*
3. **SAINT JOAN:** *One of Shaw's best plays, beautifully presented.*
4. **THE SWAN:** *Rapid fire historical comedy, acted with intelligence and grace.*
5. **THE MERRY WIVES OF GOTHAM:** *A costume comedy melodrama of Irish persuasion in which Grace George and Laura Hope Crews are charming. FASHION, a revival of Mrs. Mowatt's play, is severely of the nineteenth century and one of the treats of the season. (Reviewed below.)*
6. **THE SHOW-OFF:** *A deft comedy expressing the American point of view. (Reviewed below.)*
7. **RAIN:** *This mixture of sex and religion still holds sway, with TARNISH, WHITE CARGO, and the fine HELL-BENT FER HEAVEN following suit.*
8. **BEGGAR ON HORSEBACK:** *Excellent fantastic comedy aided by exquisite pantomime and music. (Reviewed below.)*
9. **THE NERVOUS WRECK:** *If you enjoy farce — here is a first class one.*
10. **KID BOOTS** and **ANDRE CHARLOT'S REVUE** as musical entertainment cannot be matched. **POPPY, LOLLIPOP,** and **MR. BATTLING BUTLER** are also vastly amusing, while **STEPPING STONES** and **THE MUSIC BOX REVUE** are spectacular and pleasing.

MARC CONNELLY is reputed to have advised an aspiring dramatist: "If you have written a good first act and a bad last act, go back and rewrite your first act." Mr. Connelly, like so many sages, has neglected to practise what he has preached. In the second of the two acts of "Beggar on Horseback", the current play which he wrote with George S. Kaufman, a pantomime is interpolated which in conception, acting direction, and music is so exquisite that it makes the play seem

somewhat flat — or at least unimportant. What, up to the time of the pantomime, had been a gay, resourceful, and brisk fantasy becomes a rather dim background for the scenario and music of Deems Taylor and the delicate expressive Watteau grace of Grethe Ruzt-Nissen.

But disregarding the extraneous and too beautiful pantomime, "Beggar on Horseback" is one of the most diverting plays of the season. As a dream play it lacks the insequence of dreams; as a satire it is perhaps a

little inclined to the Sinclair Lewis or sledge hammer method, but as an entertainment it is unsurpassed in the New York theatre. Roland Young plays the hero, Neil McRae, with ease and grace. The scene in which he enters the gorgeous mansion of the Cræsus whose daughter he dreams he has married, and finds himself completely surrounded by butlers even more automatic than real butlers, is hilarious.

The second act of "The Chiffon Girl" opens with a dozen or so maid-servants dusting the furniture. But the librettist uses the multiplicity of servants without humor; indeed, there is not a comic line or situation in the entire "book". There is one laugh—when the chorus men suddenly sang "*Chiffon, chiffon*", the audience could not restrain its mirth. Eleanor Painter has a pleasing voice and no control over her hands, her arms, or her body.

Kenneth Macgowan, Robert Edmond Jones, and Eugene O'Neill have revived, at the Provincetown Playhouse, a success of 1845 by Anna Cora Mowatt, America's first woman playwright, with songs of the period. The footlights, hidden behind tin reflectors, are lighted, the two piece orchestra plays "I Dreamt that I Dwelt in Marble Halls", the enlarged sentimental valentine curtain rolls up, and Mary Blair as a frisky French maid dusts the chairs painted on the "flats", the while she tells the negro manservant all we need to know about the Tiffany family. Then the plot is allowed to enter.

It is rather startling to encounter so many of the ingredients of contemporary drama in this eighty year old play: the lady who must be elegant on the Paris model even though it ruins her husband, the young hero-

ine who is always as virtuous as Kiki is in a single line of Mr. Belasco's version of the French play, the hero of the Great Open Spaces (in this case, the frontier), the wicked foreigner, the unscrupulous city chap, and the incorruptible, wise and benevolent man from the country (grandfather of so many of Winchell Smith's characters); the ballroom scene, the bedroom scene (only in the more refined days of 1845 a sewing machine stood where Mr. Woods would place the bed and the Perilous Chamber was delicately referred to as "The Dark Room"); and a halfwit of the St. John Ervine sort who listens to what is said on the stage and reveals what is happening offstage. There is even something suggestive of "The Swan" and various other contemporary plays in Mrs. Tiffany's efforts to marry her daughter to a title.

The piece is directed with care and feeling and, on the whole, well cast. Clare Eames as Mrs. Tiffany, Mary Blair as Millinette, Helen Freeman as Seraphina, and Stanley Howlett as Count Jolimaitre are a little too conscious that the play is comedy, and somewhat fearful that the people out front won't realize it; Romeyn Benjamin as Mr. Tiffany and Ruza Wenclawska as Prudence are very bad indeed; but Allen W. Nagle as Snobson, Charles Ellis as the drawing room poet, Perry Ivins as Adam Trueman (the man from the country with a heart of gold), Mary Morris as the virtuous Gertrude, and Walter Abel as the impeccable Colonel Howard, play most convincingly. Miss Morris and Mr. Abel are excellent—only they in the cast seem to know that comedy, as well as tragedy, requires great seriousness; that the more the man who is kicked appears to suffer the funnier he becomes.

It is doubtful if audiences have ever enjoyed a performance more. They hiss the villains, cheer the virtuous, leave the theatre singing "Call me pet names, dear, call me a bird", and come in numbers to the little hall in Macdougall Street. A good time is had by all, just as a good time was had by all the few who ventured down to Sheridan Square a couple of years ago to see "The Beggar's Opera".

"The Goose Hangs High" is a defense of the much deplored younger generation. Lewis Beach, the author, maintains that the youngsters of the present time are not unlike the youngsters of other times—more thoughtless, perhaps, more assertive, but when the need comes they rise to responsibility as their parents did in their youthtime. And they respond to it with gusto and initiative and generosity; they "shoot the works", "go the whole hog"—or whatever the current phrase for the good gambler and good sport may be. Furthermore, they are not merely sympathetic; they do things.

For two acts "The Goose Hangs High" is vigorous and effective comedy. The careless selfishness of the children is portrayed with sympathetic understanding, the scene in which they return from college for the Christmas holiday has a touch of Barrie in it. The third act is disappointing. We are shown at the second curtain how the children react to their father's failure and the sacrifices it imposes on them. After that there is nothing more to tell.

Norman Trevor, departing from his usual rôle of suave, polished, mundane middle age, gives a sincere impersonation of Bernard Ingals, the father; Katherine Grey, as his wife, is tender and not too sweet. Miriam Doyle is the most convincing flapper of the

## THE DRAMA SHELF

*"Three Plays of A. V. Lunacharski" translated by L. A. Magnus and K. Walter (Dutton). Rather involved dramas published here as a part of the excellent "Broadway Translations" series.*

*"Indiana Prize Plays" (Bobbs-Merrill). A group of fairly actable one act plays as presented by the Little Theatre Society of Indiana.*

*"In the Grip of Life" by Knut Hamsun (Knopf). A powerful but extremely unpleasant story of an aging neurotic woman.*

*"Max Reinhardt and His Theatre" edited by Oliver M. Sayler (Brentano). A richly illustrated tribute to the great Austrian producer, with informative and appreciative articles containing much data concerning the theatre.*

*"Via Vitae" by A Sister of Charity (London: Humphrey Milford). A reverent little fantasy in conventional verse.*

*"The Lady of Belmont" by St. John G. Ervine (Macmillan). A humorous sequel to "The Merchant of Venice" which might have been very funny.*

*"The Way Things Happen" by Clemence Dane (Macmillan). A rather conventional play by the gifted author of "A Bill of Divorcement".*

*"Husbands and Lovers" by Frans Molnar (Boni, Liveright). Light dialogues and sketches of Viennese life by this deft craftsman.*

*"The Wander Weed" by Elia W. Peattie (Sergel). Eight dialogue plays written with honesty and some force.*

season, and Eric Dressler is a manly and forceful juvenile. Mrs. Thomas Whiffen plays the grandmother with her usual skill and grace.

When Jane Cowl appeared as Juliet last season it became "the thing" to speak of her as our foremost actress. For a while, after her ill fated per-

formance of *Mélibande*, it seemed as though her pedestal had crumbled; but, if we are to believe some of the critics of the daily papers, she had merely stepped down for a time, like a goddess making an excursion to the foot of Olympus, has now remounted, and her *Cleopatra* is "one of the notable performances of the year". An evening at "*Antony and Cleopatra*" is not satisfactory, but Rollo Peters and William Shakespeare are blamed for that. Peters, we are told, is not a good Antony, and Shakespeare, although he has written some fine plays, did not succeed with "*As You Like It*" and "*Antony and Cleopatra*". To all of which we agree. The latter play, especially the version which Miss Cowl has chosen, is scattered and lacking in tragic cumulativeness. But we do not attribute all the blame to the dramatist. Part of the fault lies in the method of production — constantly shifting scenery and long waits between shifts will prevent nearly any play from "building". Had Peters, in his capacity of scene designer, contrived a set that could by slight rearrangements indicate different places — such a set, for example, as Robert Edmond Jones made for Barrymore's "*Richard the Third*", the action of the tragedy would undoubtedly have been more consecutive and climactic, as it is when read. And had the Antony and the Cleopatra of this production been able to convince us that theirs was a passion which could not be denied even though it splintered the world, we should have felt the pity and the terror of great tragedy. But we never felt those emotions. Peters, an admirable Romeo, was an acting Antony, and Miss Cowl's Queen of Egypt was not always regal nor was she often the siren which the text calls her. There

was no big gesture, and the rôle is of heroic dimensions. One could comprehend this Cleopatra's power over men, for her beauty would conquer a Cæsar or an Antony of any time, but it was difficult to detect the passion which ruined an empire. More than difficult — impossible. Therein lies the shortcoming of a notable production.

The New York theatre is probably the most alive, alert, experimental, and varied in the world. Even in so brief a review as this, covering a few of the plays of the past month, the range is remarkable. A dream fantasy, a drama three generations old, a tragedy three centuries old, a comedy of the youth of our own time and middle west, and finally a study of certain American traits and propensities in a lower middle class milieu. And they are all successful! There is a large audience in New York for every kind of play, so long as it is interesting and well done. That cannot be said of any other capital. Our audiences are quite as experimental as our managers and dramatists. They are now making "*The Show-Off*" a great popular success.

Yet "*The Show-Off*" violates some of the first rules of the game. There is no character development! The protagonist remains at the end what he was in the beginning, and must always be. It required courage and deep conviction on the part of George Kelly, the author, not to have him "grow", "develop", "awake". That, heretofore, has been a dogma of the theatre. But Aubrey Piper is merely revealed to us — a man with all the tendencies, mannerisms, and preoccupations of the booster and go-getter without the push. Aubrey Piper is the success hero of "*The American Magazine*" with the last few paragraphs omitted.

A comedy which delineated only Aubrey Piper would be valuable, especially as played by Louis John Bartels whose laugh made him famous before he appeared on the stage. But "The Show-Off" contributes far more than that to indigenous American drama. There are nine characters, all but two clearly defined. The mother, excellently played by Helen Lowell, is just as true, if not so novel, as Aubrey Piper — the aging woman disillusioned by hardship, sharp yet tender in an unsentimental way, who says, "Every sweater I

start I swear it'll be the last." And you know that although she would assert "If they want sweaters let 'em knit them", she will go on knitting sweaters to the end. The minor characters are no less real.

But Mr. Kelly has done more than reveal a group of vital characters; he has made those characters part of the tapestry which we recognize at once as the background of our life. "The First Year", of the same genre, expressed the American sense of humor; "The Show-Off" expresses as nearly as may be the American point of view.

### OUTSTANDING MOTION PICTURES

1. THE COVERED WAGON: *This picturization of Emerson Hough's novel is filled with majesty of scenery and real drama.*
2. WILD ORANGES: *Joseph Hergesheimer's story presented with something like perfection. (To be reviewed next month.)*
3. A WOMAN OF PARIS: *Charles Chaplin's direction of this film still remains the most subtle piece of motion picture craftsmanship of the year.*
4. THE MARRIAGE CIRCLE: *A continental tone in a picture which is distinguished and well rounded and of the same genre as "A Woman of Paris".*
5. AMERICA: SERIES ONE — THE SACRIFICE: *D. W. Griffith's thrilling Revolutionary spectacle which has moments of great theatrical power. (Reviewed below.)*

IN "AMERICA", D. W. Griffith's picture of Revolutionary days, there is much that is beautiful, much that is impressive, much that is thrilling, and much that is annoying. You can scarcely afford to miss this picture, with its magnificent midnight ride of Paul Revere, its pictures of George Washington, its engaging hero, and its rather terrifying villain. Mr. Griffith has made a picture which is exceedingly uneven, which is jerky, perhaps because it covers so great a period, and which, in its final scenes, gargantuan in proportions, somehow misses for me the necessary,

or at least intended, gargantuan thrill. However, there is much to recommend it, and with the exception of several overdrawn scenes of torture it is in extraordinarily good taste.

Richard Barthelmess has never been more thoroughly charming than he appears in "Twenty-One", a very inconsequential story of a rich boy who falls in love with a poor girl, leaves his family, becomes a taxi driver, and marries the girl. I am inclined to think that metropolitan critics should be taken to task for their annoyance at this film. While it may not have much appeal to the

sophisticated, to all those to whom young love is both appealing and amusing this picture should prove more than usually delightful.

Marion Davies in "Yolanda" does the best acting of her screen career, to no avail. The scenery and costumes are superb; the direction is not greatly at fault; but there is no story; therefore, the picture is a dull one.

To several shorter films, I urge you: i. e., a series called "Secrets of Life", in which various insects perform under the microscope in a most engaging manner; to Billy Sullivan in the new "Leather Pushers" series; and to "Wilderness Tales", directed by Robert Bruce, character sketches with backgrounds of beautiful scenery.

—J. F.