

TO SEE OR NOT TO SEE

By Stephen Vincent Benét

PLAYS IN NEW YORK WORTH SEEING

1. **THE SHOW-OFF:** *Best American home comedy of seasons.*
2. **EXPRESSING WILLIE:** *Airy social comedy well played.*
3. **FATA MORGANA:** *Farcical tragedy of youth's pitfalls.*
4. **FASHION:** *Revival of 1845 comedy proves enchantingly comical.*
5. **SWEENEY TODD:** *A melodramatic revival only slightly less amusing than "Fashion". (Reviewed below.)*
6. **ALL GOD'S CHILLUN GOT WINGS:** *O'Neill fans will find this to their taste.*
7. **THE GRAND STREET FOLLIES:** *Really clever satirical revue.*
8. **KEEP KOOL, I'LL SAY SHE IS, KID BOOTS, CHARLOT'S REVUE, and GEORGE WHITE'S SCANDALS** *are smooth entertainment for the musical comedy seekers.*

THE theatre always seems a little embarrassed to us, in the summer, except for those giant dahlias, the summer revues — and revues, as a sex, are as difficult to embarrass as the Four Marx Brothers. Nor do we apply the adjective to those hardy perennials of theatredom that, having bloomed in the winter, linger in the lap of the ticket brokers still, to the pleasure and profit of everyone concerned. But the others — the wistful little plays that sidle inconspicuously into town during late July and August, when the white slip covers shroud the orchestra seats like the souls of departed authors still looking for their royalties, and the hum of the electric fan lulls the mind like the song of a drowsy giant mosquito — these have an air of mild apology about them that touches our heart. We see the golden haired little manuscript, saying its bedtime prayers at

Uncle Producer's knee — "Oh God, make me a good play and don't put me on in the summer" — we hear its reedy pipe — and then — ah well, it's a hard world.

We shall never forget one play of such a gender that we viewed upon a particularly torrid August night. It was one of those hispid dramas of the Great Northwest where men behave like police dogs and women talk French with a strong South Brooklyn accent. The blizzard raged off stage in a cloud of infuriated cornflakes — the wolves howled almost as dismally as second night critics — everything was getting along pretty well. But when at last the hero staggered in from the snow, blazing with obvious excitement and perspiration, announced that he thought his feet were frozen, and was forced to sink helplessly into a chair and fan himself for several minutes before he

could go on with his lines — the production then and there joined the ranks of the four out of five who wear those neat little white labels just over the oral cavity. Climate is very unfair, sometimes.

However — now the cool of the year has begun — we must be at our report anent the first of the new season's theatrical crop. Of the two most recent musical comedies — "Marjorie" and "No Other Girl" — both are slightly encumbered by definite plots that will get in the way of the dancing, and in neither is the music, while tuneful enough, anything to embarrass the song hits now current. To us "Marjorie" proved the more pleasing. Elizabeth Hines, the star, is as agreeable as ever; and the saturnine jocosities of Andrew Tombes, the pathetic worriment of Skeet Gallagher as a budding author whose great-great-great-great-grandmother was the girl who swam home from the "Mayflower", and the comely blond vivacity of Ethel Shutta — combined with the agilities of an excellently trained chorus — furnish a lively if unincisive evening's entertainment.

"No Other Girl" is another model of "The Gingham Girl" — and a pretty sirupy one. Helen Ford plays the Quaker Cinderella whose hair remains defiantly unbobbed, and Eddie Buzzell the wistful village good-for-nothing whose advertising genius transforms a sleepily picturesque community into a distressingly wide awake and pushing metropolis, adorned with tire signs and Rotarians and fully in accord with all the best ideals of "The Saturday Evening Post". Doris Eaton and William Sully assist the plot and there is a great deal of rather repetitious dancing and any number of tender ballads concerning little homes for two. But John Sheehan as a

hoarse and blustering detective is utterly admirable. If you want to take the kiddies to a musical comedy you might as well take them to this, for it certainly is aseptic.

Coming down to the more or less serious drama, the eternal problem of the younger generation and the older disports itself anew in "Dancing Mothers" — one of those conventionally unconventional plays that try so hard to be daring. Well cast and suavely directed, this very probable hit repeats the story of the mother who sits at home while husband and daughter frequent roof gardens, Philadelphia, and places even more sinister. The mother, according to schedule, decides to follow their example and thus reform them — but for once an alteration in the coiffure and the adoption of demonstrative earrings do not bring about a family reunion on the sofa before the gas log. Instead — and this is the one semi defiant twist — the mother decides, after ample consideration, that the primrose path may have something in it after all and departs for Europe under the escort of the very agreeable villain, leaving husband and offspring quite at a loss for words. The dialogue is often genuine. Mary Young as the mother gives a performance of great mechanical excellence, the rest of the cast — which includes Helen Hayes, Henry Stephenson, John Halliday, and Elsie Lawson — assist her nobly; but for all the air of sham reality which the play possesses it never goes deeper than the plaster.

Exit the present day and enter "Sweeney Todd", the Demon Barber of Fleet Street, a gorgeous hotchpotch of Victorian sentiment, blood and thunder, originally produced at the Britannia Theatre, London, in 1842, where it was seen and praised by

Charles Dickens, and later selected by Queen Victoria for her first "Command Performance". Of its principal character the "Newgate Calendar" cheerfully remarks, "In the annals of crime no blacker-hearted villain than Sweeney Todd ever existed", and we are more than ready to confirm its verdict. His specialty was entrapping his victims by means of a disappearing barber chair into the murderous depths of a darksome cellar, whence, later, they emerged as hot veal pies — and it was with deep regret that we beheld just vengeance overtake him in the final scene. Produced after the manner of "Fashion", with asides directed point blank at the audience and songs of the period interspersed between the scenes, "Sweeney Todd", in our opinion, runs a very fair second to that unique theatrical venture. No mem-

ber of the BOOKMAN audience should fail to see it — both for its historical interest, its shuddersome villainies, and the stressed unconscious humor of the admirable moral sentiments expressed by its nobler characters.

Among the obituaries — "Dr. David's Dad", a German second cousin of "Abie's Irish Rose", succumbed to *rigor mortis* after a four nights' run, demonstrating that successful bad taste is not always international. "Easy Street", a Chicago favorite, convulsed its first night audience when the suburban husband remarked in accents of solemn pathos to his wife who was about to depart for the movies, "I do not know that I entirely approve of these De Mille pictures", but otherwise seems to have little in its favor except a title that is easy to put up on an electric sign.

OUTSTANDING MOTION PICTURES

1. **THE COVERED WAGON:** *Still the most genuine of the hundred per cent American pictures, and now available in smaller theatres.*
2. **DOROTHY VERNON OF HADDON HALL:** *Miss Pickford's beauties adequately revealed in a charming if somewhat heavy setting.*
3. **MONSIEUR BEAUCAIRE:** *Formalism, great pictorial beauty, grace, make Mr. Valentino's return to the screen memorable. (Reviewed below.)*
4. **JANICE MEREDITH:** *The first half of this American history romance is excellent. The second not so good but yet interesting. (Reviewed below.)*
5. **THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE:** *The best of the "Chronicles of America" series; in fact, one of the best historical pictures yet made by any company. (Reviewed below.)*

FOR a time it seemed to me that there never would be another good picture. That may very probably have been explained by the fact that the producers were rendering summer months duller by keeping their jewels bagged until autumn. However, along

came "The Side Show of Life" and "Manhandled", both good entertainment. It is true that "Manhandled", in spite of its sensational title, has no story. It is an excellent example of what can be done in the motion pictures; for it is without doubt one of the

best pictures from a box office standpoint that has been released this year. Miss Swanson as a shopgirl, as a masquerading Russian countess, as Charlie Chaplin, as herself, does her best piece of characterization and proves a *comédienne* of protean capabilities. That Alan Dwan, the director, has made use of aged and occasionally vulgar comedy tricks may spoil the picture for you. For me, "Manhandled" proved an amusing evening, in spite of titles which, though widely praised elsewhere, seemed to me distressingly obvious.

The contrast between the titles of "Manhandled" and "Monsieur Beaucaire" is striking. The charm of the latter is partly attributable to Mr. Tarkington. I have heard much adverse criticism of the new Valentino film. Some say it is difficult to watch because of peculiar lighting. Others feel that the action, slowed to the pace of a formal age, drags. Still others criticize Mr. Valentino's acting, as well as that of his support of famous beauties. I find it difficult to discuss these criticisms, since I have a weakness for the period of Pompadour, and a certain respect for Valentino's indubitable magnetism. The picture seemed to me almost perfect. When action was lacking, superlative pictorial beauty and grace of movement atoned. To see "Monsieur Beaucaire" is like looking through a volume of old French prints, like wandering through an art gallery. Lowell Sherman's performance as Louis XV is calculated and more restrained than have been some of his stage impersonations. Lois Wilson as his consort has far too little to do and has never looked so beautiful. Valentino, himself, is alert, graceful, at ease. His screen rest has seen a vast improvement. If his embraces are a bit stressed, surely

the answer is that his public demands him to be a great lover.

Again the critics arise to malign what seems to me a fine picture. Why do they so often praise the mediocre attempt and despise the man who tries to shoot high? "Janice Meredith" was charming and exciting as a novel. It has the same characteristics as a motion picture. The first half of the story is better told by far than Griffith's "America", although it perhaps lacks moments of real genius. The picturization of Washington's crossing of the Delaware is splendidly made. The continuity writer and not the actor is responsible for "Janice Meredith's" falling short of being a great picture. It breaks woefully in the middle, and the second part is built upon a lover's quarrel that is hard to believe. I suspect that if I were the owner of "Janice Meredith" I should destroy the end, or most of the end of my picture, even though it contains some striking and beautiful scenes. Marion Davies wears the famous curl with abandon, and is more lovely to look upon than ever before. She is at her best in comedy scenes. May Vokes and W. C. Fields prove that stage comedy transferred to the screen is still stage comedy; but they are nevertheless entertaining.

In "The Declaration of Independence", one of the "Chronicles of America", the Yale University Press has at last given us a veritable masterpiece. Here is a film in which there was very little to tell, yet how adequately suspense has been supplied by characterization and by the use of social background. Ben Franklin, John Hancock—both are exquisitely played. Scenic effects, lighting, grouping—here seems to me to be a beautiful piece of motion picture chronicling.

—J. F.