THE BEST PLAYS OF 1946-47

AND THE
YEAR BOOK OF THE DRAMA
IN AMERICA

EDITED BY
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With Illustrations

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INTRODUCTION

THE theatre staggered a little this last season. It was recovering slowly from a post-war hangover that made its advancing steps uncertain—a hangover the likes of which it had not known since the boom days of the nineteen-twenties, just before the crash. Remember?

The theatre's mental processes, too, were a bit on the foggy side. Its established dramatists, as well as those in search of a hearing, were still reeling slightly from their impact with a wartime conditioning, or reconditioning, that included the hysterical struggle of a dazed and unhappy world trying to right itself with the help of an untried United Nations gyroscope.

Small wonder the theatre proceeded unsteadily from start to finish the season of 1946-47. Great wonder that it did so well. Admittedly it wasn't easy to find ten worthily representative scripts for this annual record. But those we did find, all written by American dramatists, do their writers and sponsors full credit.

It was a season of revivals, as its reviewers are quick to protest. But they were fine revivals, and they stood up amazingly, despite their age and previous degrees of service and local fame.

As worthily representative plays I have taken, first, the professional critics' choice, Arthur Miller's "All My Sons." A year or two belated as an exposure and criticism of wartime cheaters and cheating, you may say, but I doubt if it could have been written or produced sooner than it was. I like it, both because it is a thoughtful work and because its acceptance does credit to the talent of a new writer who was a little unkindly treated when his "The Man Who Had All the Luck" was lightly brushed off the season before.

Eugene O'Neill's delayed return to a theatre he long had honored was an event of outstanding importance. His "The Iceman Cometh" is strong meat and not suited to sensitive stomachs—or to sensitive souls, especially those sensitive souls who, quite honestly, have no use for the theatre except as a home of cheerful entertainment. But the season would have been notably weakened in output and quality if we had not had a chance to see and to weigh this work of America's first dramatist.

It is possible to argue that Maxwell Anderson's "Joan of Lorraine" would not have been the magnificent success it proved if

it had been denied the performance of the radiant Ingrid Bergman. I take polite issue with that belief. Miss Bergman did add greatly to the impressiveness of "Joan," but if you will keep close watch of future theatre records you will, I'm sure, read of a succession of other notable and highly successful performances of this heroine's role. No one is likely to top the Bergman achievement, but a score or more are quite likely to approach it closely and with equal felicity.

By similar reasoning it can be rightfully claimed that no dramatist of major standing could possibly retell the story of Joan the Maid without producing impressively holding drama—just as the story of Jesus Christ, in any intelligent and honest retelling, will inevitably inspire both awe and reverence. A moving dramatic power is inherent in each. But Maxwell Anderson did evolve a new and fascinating dramatic pattern for his "Joan" by relating the story as the adventure of an essentially commonplace theatrical stock company, a treatment for which he deserves full credit and wide reading.

In Lillian Hellman's "Another Part of the Forest" you will also find a gifted dramatist's skill impressively employed. In going back to the people with whom she lived so long, respected so little and yet recognized as being so honestly average in the writing of "The Little Foxes," I have a feeling Miss Hellman has set a precedent a host of her fellow writers may be quick to follow, though, we can hope, not to imitate.

Ruth Gordon's "Years Ago" is a simple domestic comedy made important, to this season at least, by the understanding and technically skillful performances of Fredric March and Florence Eldridge. With these two serving as a personal and professional anchor, young Patricia Kirkland added another promising ingénue to that class of ambitious youngsters from which the acting profession largely grows.

There wasn't much fun in this season's dramas. It was good, therefore, that Norman Krasna came along with "John Loves Mary." He gave this editor a grand opportunity to leaven the Best Plays list with a little fun. This is a comedy even more trivial, it may be, than was the same author's "Dear Ruth." And yet, accepting its premise, the playgoer is pretty sure to find himself having a fine time in the theatre. "John Loves Mary" is one of those farcical comedies that depends quite frankly on extravagant situations rather than recognizable characters. The "could happen" type. Could, but probably wouldn't.

George Kelly swings lightly, and with the left hand, at the di-

vorce problem in "The Fatal Weakness." His greater contribution to the season, however, was in providing a heroine with a sense of proportion as well as one of humor that suited Ina Claire so well it lured her from a temporary retirement. This romance-ruled lady is able to cover her acquirement of marital freedom with a conventional claim of injured pride, but she still retains sufficient curiosity to take her to her philandering partner's second marriage—a new idea for divorcees.

"The Story of Mary Surratt" was one of the season's earlier failures. This may have been because Broadway playgoers and their visiting cousins, and the newspaper reviewers before them, did not enjoy being reminded of one of the less convincing episodes in American history. It may be because we were too close to the last war to care for another story based on wartime miseries. But "Mary Surratt" is well written by John Patrick and represents a vast and careful research. It was well acted, particularly by Dorothy Gish and Kent Smith. By the time my choice was narrowed to "Mary Surratt," or the Mabley-Mins "Temper the Wind," or Jean-Paul Sartre's "No Exit," I was considerably puzzled. I finally decided on "Surratt," because I think it was one of the better plays of the year, and a little because of its complete American background. This, after all, is an American year book. If you harbor an urge to make something of that, go ahead.

Moss Hart's "Christopher Blake" is, admittedly, one of his lesser achievements representing one of his better ideas. In a country in which the divorce record is the greatest in the world and in history, what more pathetically worthy of serious discussion than the fate of the divorce orphan, especially from the viewpoint of an imaginative victim? The defense rests.

Now another question arose that we had to thresh out. It happens that for the first time in we don't know when this season saw the play with music come into a new prominence, as is more fully indicated in the chapter devoted to The Season in New York. Fantasy was underscored. I felt that some notice should be taken of this trend. Therefore I decided to try the experiment of making the libretto of a music play stand on its own feet, without, as is customary, depending on the usual supports, the musical score and the dance arrangements. The result is not too happy, but there it is. Of the two novelties, I voted with the Critics' Circle for the Lerner-Loewe "Brigadoon" as the best musical play of the season.

John Chapman has again served me as a representative at the front, keeping an eye on Broadway if I happened to be away. Mr.

Chapman also wrote the digests of three of the plays included in this volume—those of "The Iceman Cometh," "Years Ago" and "The Fatal Weakness." His is a valued assistance.

This volume of the "Best Plays" is the thirtieth of the series, including the two Mantle-Sherwood volumes covering the double decade between 1899 and 1919. These were added after the Mantle volumes were begun the season of 1919-20.

For the thirtieth time, then, the editor's most appreciative thanks to you, his consistently faithful and most loyal public of Best Play supporters.

B. M.

Forest Hills, L. I., 1947

THE BEST PLAYS OF 1946-47

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THE SEASON IN NEW YORK

THIS has been a year of revivals, but not one of revival, in the theatre. Of eighty-seven major productions, old and new, I count nineteen that were brought back from other years. The fact that six of them can be numbered with the major successes of the season is fairly remarkable. It is a testimony, not only to the quality of dramatic writing in other years, but also to the acting ability of those present-day players who were able to bring again to life characters associated in the main with other personalities frequently of greater theatre fame.

The poised and handsome Cornelia Otis Skinner elected to play the effective role of Mrs. Erlynne to the Mrs. Windermere of Penelope Ward, one of London's favored beauties. These two, properly, even handsomely supported, sartorially and scenically, carried Oscar Wilde's "Lady Windermere's Fan" through a total of 228 performances.

José Ferrer, an actor of versatile talent and a gift for characterization, offered a youngish Cyrano de Bergerac in contrast to those of Richard Mansfield and Walter Hampden of earlier theatre periods. He repeated the Rostand classic 192 times.

John Gielgud, a leader of the London theatre, brought to Broadway a perfectly staged and cast revival of the aforementioned Mr. Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest." Booked for a limited run, Mr. Gielgud was induced to extend this for additional weeks before he turned to a second classical resurrection, that of Congreve's "Love for Love."

Theatre Inc. followed its successful revival of Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion" (with Gertrude Lawrence) of last season with Synge's "The Playboy of the Western World" this season. Again pains were taken by Richard Aldrich and his associates to stage a revival worthy of the Abbey Theatre and the Irish Players, who first brought the "Playboy" to America. Burgess Meredith came on from Hollywood to play the boastful Christopher Mahon and Eithne Dunne came from Dublin to play the heroine. A ten-week run was the reward.

Judith Evelyn, who had scored a personal success of proportions in the melodrama "Angel Street" two years before, agreed to play the heroine in a revival of that former Pulitzer prize winner, George Kelly's "Craig's Wife." This, too, was a performance critically and popularly well received. It helped to keep Mrs. Craig active for an additional nine weeks.

Bert Lahr, who once knew the old-time "Burlesque Wheel" as well as he did his own home, and maybe better, was happily chosen for a revival of the Arthur Hopkins-George Watters "Burlesque," which Hal Skelly and Barbara Stanwyck played for the better part of a year back in 1927-28. Lahr's revival of his old-time burlesque routine, plus definitely helpful support from Jean Parker of the cinema, kept "Burlesque" playing from the holidays through the remainder of the season.

Others ranged from a quick failure for an all-Negro experiment with "Lysistrata" to a friendly success for Eva Le Gallienne and Florida Friebus' "Alice in Wonderland." "Alice" helped to save the day for the American Repertory's season, as later more fully reported.

The Hecht-MacArthur "The Front Page" did reasonably well for ten weeks but the American Repertory sponsors were disappointed by a lack of playgoer interest in Barrie's "What Every Woman Knows" and Sidney Howard's "Yellow Jack." Good old "Chocolate Soldier" was brought back in March and hung on till May, with a couple of talented young people, Keith Andes and Frances McCann, in the Bummerli and Nadina roles.

The American Repertory Company started its season with high hopes and a great confidence crowding each other in the hearts of Margaret Webster, Cheryl Crawford and Eva Le Gallienne. They had subscriptions in bank for $300,000 and a company of established players in rehearsal. They were to offer a revival of "Henry VIII," with Walter Hampden playing Wolsey; Barrie's "What Every Woman Knows," with June Duprez in the role that Maude Adams and Helen Hayes had made memorable, and Ibsen's "John Gabriel Borkman," which can always be depended upon to draw forth the considerable Eva Le Gallienne following.

Reviewers were kind to all three of the opening week's offerings, and quite enthusiastic about "Androcles and the Lion," which was later added to the repertory. Ernest Truex played the name part originally done by O. P. Heggie. But it was soon apparent that the repertory idea as such had not stimulated the interest of the company's well-wishers as much as hoped for. It was decided in the circumstances to put aside temporarily the ordered change of

bill, and concentrate on developing a run for "Androcles." When this interest began to slip, a further compromise was made. The version of "Alice in Wonderland" which had been prepared by Miss Le Gallienne and Florida Friebus for production at the Civic Repertory Theatre fifteen years ago was put in rehearsal in association wth Rita Hassan, who had had the foresight to acquire a proprietary interest in the script. Again public response was friendly and immediate and "Alice," running into the late Spring, did much to revive the spirits of all those who had had anything to do with the repertory enterprise.

The revival of "Alice" served to top a series of fantasies that notably punctuated this unusual season. First had come "Finian's Rainbow," the fantastic story of a leprechaun who came from Ireland to bury a pot of gold in America's Fort Knox territory in the confident expectation that its contents would increase and multiply. E. Y. Harburg and Fred Saidy were responsible for this story, and Burton Lane wrote an attractive score to go with it, the popular "How Are Things in Glocca Morra?" being the production hit.

Later came the "Brigadoon" that has been included in this record to represent the musical novelties of the year. Alan Jay Lerner wrote the story of "Brigadoon" and Frederick Loewe composed the score. Both were in the nature of superlative jobs. "Brigadoon" did as much for the stimulation of interest in the music drama as any of the plays had done for the spoken drama. The Messrs. Lerner and Loewe had made their debut with "The Day Before Spring" the season of 1945-46.

Finally there were two short operas, written and composed by Gian-Carlo Menotti, one called "The Telephone" and the other "The Medium," the first short and humorous, the second longer and with thrills added. Produced in the late Spring, these added another novelty to the list. It was Mr. Menotti's request that his little works of art should be judged by the drama reporters rather than the music critics. The editorial bosses agreed, and the drama men proved beautifully responsive.

This was also the season that Maurice Chevalier came back to entertain and to explain a little unpleasantness stemming from the charge that he really didn't have to be quite as friendly as he seemed to be with the enemy Nazis the time they were occupying Paris in the war years. Maurice explained by declaring the report untrue. That a lot of people over here believed him, or didn't care too much, was indicated by the fact that he began his season of intimate song recitals to a pack-jammed theatre ($9.60 a seat

being the cost of an orchestra stall opening night), and continued it thereafter for six weeks (the top prices dropping to $4.80 for mid-week places and $6 for week-ends). The generally accepted verdict was that the engaging Frenchman had not changed much, if any, in the 15 years since he was here before.

Our English-speaking allies were neither as generous nor as successful visitors to our theatre this year as they were last year. Laurence Olivier, leader of the Old Vic troupe and voted the best actor in Wendell Willkie's one world in 1945, was represented only by the picture "Henry V," in which he played Henry and which he directed. Garlands of superlatives were again festooned about the Olivier neck by the reviewers.

John Gielgud, a stage graduate of the same group that has brought us Maurice Evans, Olivier and Ralph Richardson, scored both a personal and directorial success with his productions of Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest" and Congreve's "Love for Love," as previously noted.

But Donald Wolfit, a minor actor-manager who has built up a considerable provincial following in England by touring a repertory of Shakespearean drama, had an unhappy time on his first visit to America. Unwisely, it seems to this reporter, he selected "King Lear" as an opening bill. A difficult and none too popular tragedy, even when included in the repertory of an established and popular Shakespearean star, "Lear" offers additional handicaps for a stranger. Wolfit took a beating from the critics with good grace and went on to "As You Like It," in which Iden Payne's daughter Rosalind played her namesake; "The Merchant of Venice," in which Wolfit proved an acceptable Shylock; "Volpone," a revival of the bawdy Ben Jonson farce that caught the fancy of a goodly crowd, and "Hamlet," in which the star again gave a conventional but honest account of himself and his art.

It is possible, even probable, that theatre historians of other years will refer to this season as that in which a number of well-intentioned experimental theatre enterprises were launched in New York. In addition to the American Repertory above referred to, the Equity-Library Theatre, which had its first good start the season of 1945-46, made definite strides. John Golden increased his sponsor interest and Sam Jaffee his most active interest in organization, as more fully appears in George Freedley's chapter devoted to these experimental enterprises elsewhere in these pages. Mr. Freedley likewise reports on the first year of an Experimental Theatre proper, which had the endorsement of a still abortive but entirely earnest and hopeful National Theatre movement, blessed

by Congress and helped on at least one occasion by the American Theatre Wing, that noble war-time emergency organization that did so much for our own and visiting service men during the war years.

It was to the work of the Theatre Wing, incidentally, that the late Antoinette Perry devoted practically all her time during the war, and it was in memory of this splendid service that the Wing established the annual Antoinette Perry Awards, which it is expected will eventually take their place in importance with those of the Motion Picture Academy Awards of Hollywood. In Hollywood the awards are called "Oscars." On Broadway the Perry awards are known as "Tonys."

The fanciest of the experimental theatre schemes was that thought up by a gentleman named H. G. Lengsfelder. He organized one known as "Your Theatre, Incorporated." All those who bought seats for a Your Theatre, Inc., production prior to production became automatically shareholders in the company. No one was permitted to buy more than twenty-four shares, or tickets, however, and that not only discouraged speculators but also encouraged the democratic way of life. Your Theatre, Inc., collected something like 3,000 subscribers for its first production, that of a farce comedy called "Heads or Tails." The income served to finance the production of the play, which was blasted by the reviewers as impossible, but Your Theatre, Inc., was not too discouraged. It proceeded to organize its own staff of critics, who wrote a series of favorable reviews, and these were printed as advertisements.

The Summer months were, as usual, dull stretches in the New York theatre, for all there were five productions made in June and July. The first of these was a Shakespeare comedy to which Ruth Chatterton had taken a fancy. "Second Best Bed" was the title, and Ruth played the role of the heroine, Anne Hathaway Shakespeare. Having been practically deserted by her Will, who was in London carving out a success as playwright and producer, Anne had about made up her mind to divorce Will and marry a Stratford-on-Avon native named Poggs. About this time Will arrives from London for a visit and, such is still his charm, Anne has soon forgotten Poggs. N. Richard Nash was the author.

The second June entry was one called "The Dancer," written by Milton Lewis and Julian Funt. This had to do with alleged episodes from the life of a famed ballet dancer whose mind gave way. Living under the protection of a wealthy dilettante, the dancer devotes his off time to murdering village prostitutes, puz-

zling the local gendarmerie greatly. Pursued also by his wife, who wants his supposedly hidden fortune, and his daughter, who would like to be sure that his madness is not hereditary, the dancer's life is not a happy one. The law finally catches up with him.

Sonja Henie, star skater and shrewd producer of skating extravaganza, with her partner, Arthur M. Wirtz, brought "Icetime" to the Center Theatre, with Freddie Trenkler, Joan Hyldoft, the Brandt Sisters, Fritz Dietl and the Bruises featured. The reception was, as usual, highly popular.

The farcical "Maid in the Ozarks," which had run for weeks and weeks in Chicago and was frankly advertised as "the worst play in the world," was forced through a ten-week run on Broadway, still advertised as "the worst." There was neither gain nor gaiety in the adventure.

September struggled to take its traditionally rightful place as the opening month of a new theatre season, but the struggle was in vain. There was a revival of the Hecht-MacArthur "The Front Page" which did pretty well for ten weeks, and Ben Hecht obliged with a propaganda spectacle drama for the Palestinian Jews called "A Flag Is Born." This worthy effort started with Paul Muni as a kind of guest star and acquired Luther Adler when Muni was forced to return to other chores. A tour followed 120 Broadway performances.

Richard Tauber, a popular Continental tenor who had been singing Lehar's "Yours Is My Heart Alone" for an uncounted number of years, finally got to New York with that musical comedy, now pretty well dated. There was some enthusiasm for a few weeks, but when the Tauber larynx gave out, after 36 performances, the engagement was ended.

Henry Myers tried to assemble a new opera out of a combination of Victor Herbert's "The Fortune Teller" and "The Serenade," but as "Gypsy Lady" it could get no more than 80 performances. Even an Agatha Christie mystery, "Hidden Horizon," was through in two weeks.

As frequently happens, there were a number of little stinkers produced the next several weeks, but also a few of the season's better things also made an appearance. Eugene O'Neill's "The Iceman Cometh," for one. Long awaited, this four-hour drama, starting originally in the late afternoon, calling time for dinner at 7 o'clock and then continuing from 8:15 to 11, was an immediate critical and box-office sensation.

As noted, José Ferrer came close to his heart's desire with a revival of "Cyrano de Bergerac" and Cornelia Otis Skinner had a