

The Best Plays of
1943-1944

BURNS MANTLE

THE BEST PLAYS OF 1943-44

AND THE
YEAR BOOK OF THE DRAMA
IN AMERICA

EDITED BY
BURNS MANTLE

With Illustrations



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INTRODUCTION

WHILE the theatre season of 1943-44, our third war year, may reasonably be listed with other war casualties, it had its points. Men must work and women must weep through such emergencies; inspirations falter and routines fail, but some good is bound to come out of the overall adventure.

The greatest disappointment strangely was in the quality of the war plays themselves. They were still full of bombs and heroics. None, save perhaps Howard Rigsby and Dorothy Heyward's "South Pacific," added much to the philosophical or psychological acceptance and understanding of war that could help a groping and confused people. "South Pacific" did pose the interesting problem of a Negro's reaction to the freedom for which a world is fighting, and also striving variously to commit every form of material and spiritual destruction made known to man through the centuries of his climb out of the primordial ooze.

The two war plays I have selected are Moss Hart's "Winged Victory" and Maxwell Anderson's "Storm Operation." These two, to me, have qualities of actuality and immediacy that lift them above the others.

"Winged Victory" was confessedly propaganda drama. It was deliberately conceived and written to do honor and credit to that blessed American Army Air Force for which millions of prayers have gone into the "wild blue yonder" about which they sing so lustily in their Army Air Corps song.

If you want to believe that the Hart story is told by idealized boys hand-picked from forty-eight states and put through certain glamorized war pictures, all right. But remember that not a day passes without one or another first page proudly blaring forth the news of just such boys completing gloriously just such missions. Take a moment out to be proud and grateful.

Anderson's "Storm Operation," like Anderson's "Candle in the Wind," mixed realistic war and theatrical romance unevenly and unimpressively, but it happens to have been the one play of the year that, in its better moments, did bring a particular phase of this war home to the American public, which needed to be told about it.

Lillian Hellman's "The Searching Wind" and Edward Chodorov's "Decision" are more impressive in character than they are convincing in story, but each was honestly written and with a purpose. Miss Hellman was, of course, advantaged by that factor of hindsight which is not only common to all humanity but of quite universal application. But it also should be strongly stressed that for years, antedating the so-called Spanish Civil War and the dealings of both appeasers and sympathizers with the Franco Government, this author was of the one mind that sweeps through "The Searching Wind."

Mr. Chodorov's "Decision" may overstress, through a prejudiced conviction, both racial injustice and the viciousness of high-standing politicians, but there is enough sound and moving drama in his exaggerations and enough truth in his better character studies, to give the play a good deal of force.

Rose Franken, it seems to me, overgenerously rather than exaggeratedly, peopled her stage with a household of unhappy and slightly abnormal humans in "Outrageous Fortune." She thereby weakened the general appeal of her play by limiting it to the more intelligently analytical type of playgoer. Elsa Shelley (or her directors) similarly overstressed the sordidness and misery that lead to social disease and human catastrophe in "Pick-up Girl." But as this over-emphasis does not defeat either the timeliness or sociological importance of the "Pick-up Girl" exposures, neither does it obscure completely the truth and honesty of Miss Franken's characters and their respective reactions in "Outrageous Fortune."

Let us be grateful for the lighter plays. There have not been many of them, but they literally have saved the season by proving that the art of writing sane and stimulating human comedy has not been lost.

John Van Druten's "The Voice of the Turtle" is an extraordinarily human story of sinning with the sophisticates. It was made acceptable and appealing by the wisdom of its casting and the basic decencies that shone through the performances of its original players—Margaret Sullavan, Elliott Nugent and Audrey Christie.

Miss Gordon's "Over 21" was plainly written in the hope that it would amuse the Ruth Gordon following, which is large, and add a public represented by her soldier husband, Garson Kanin, whose adventures as a service man it doubtless reflects. It turned out to be a sample of keenly observant playwrighting

and character creation, and this augurs well for the comedienne's writing future.

The Theatre Guild, properly puffed with pride because of its success with "Oklahoma!" and the Paul Robeson "Othello," made two happy comedy selections with the Behrman-Werfel "Jacobowsky and the Colonel" and the Osborn-Hughes "The Innocent Voyage," but only the first of them paid a profit.

"Jacobowsky," a good character comedy, makes a strong war-time racial and refugee appeal, and is smartly played. "The Innocent Voyage" seemed to fall between two publics—the one that had read the Richard Hughes novel, "A High Wind in Jamaica," and liked the book better than the play, and the typical Broadway public that is never very deeply interested in plays touching upon the fantastic and calling for the support of finer imaginations.

A casualty list these 1943-44 best plays may be, but it is a list that fits consistently into the theatre record of a nation at war. Historians of the future, contrasting it with earlier war-time seasons, and linking it to those that are to follow, will, I hope, be able to extract from it significant trends and interesting analogies.

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THE BEST PLAYS OF 1943-44

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THE SEASON IN NEW YORK

FROM the showman's point of view, which is naturally that of the box office, this third war season in the theatre will doubtless be counted one of the best. More poor plays sold for more good money than were ever before recorded. Many merely good plays were fairly consistent box office successes and, of course, the legitimately successful plays were sensational money makers.

However, the generally current impression that there were practically no box office failures was not borne out by the facts. That commercially biased, but generally honest compiler of theatre statistics, *Variety*, counted only fourteen real hits and six moderate hits against fifty failures. As all *Variety* statisticians know but one yard stick—the money in the till—this estimate added up to a quite average season, so far as the new offerings were concerned.

To be entirely fair such holdover successes as "Oklahoma!," "Arsenic and Old Lace," "The Doughgirls," "Life with Father," "Angel Street," "Kiss and Tell," "Three's a Family," "Tomorrow the World" and "Ziegfeld Follies" should be listed as legitimately successful shows. And certainly two outstanding revivals, the Paul Robeson "Othello" and the Kiepusa-Eggerth "Merry Widow," should be included. Both proved happy surprises to their producers, their stars and their new-found publics.

In years to come the season of 1943-44 will be listed as one more slightly abnormal play-producing period when neither the New York Drama Critics' Circle nor the Pulitzer Prize Committee could agree upon a single play of American authorship worthy of their respective accolades. The critics recorded six of thirteen votes for Lillian Hellman's "The Searching Wind," but the Pulitzers came no closer to a selection than to vote a special citation of excellence and \$500 to the long-running and still popular "Oklahoma!"

There was during the Winter quite a rush of Hollywood writers back to Broadway with such scripts as they couldn't sell in story conferences out West. Few of them won more than a

patronizing nod from either reviewers or audiences, but several of them did do well in that successful box office group before mentioned.

It was a wonderful season for angels. There was probably more "outside" money invested in show business in 1943-44 than in any previous theatre season on record. Much of it came in small lots from friends and relatives of playwrights and play producers. Groups of backers ranging in number from ten to thirty were common. There were, by report, twenty-three backers of "Arsenic and Old Lace" and each of them according to the *Times*, realized something like a \$7,400 return on every \$583.34 invested for a $\frac{5}{6}$ th of 1 per cent interest.

There was not even a mythical dividing line between theatre seasons the Summer of 1943. Taking June 15 as an arbitrary closing date for the purpose of keeping the record straight we ended the last issue of "Best Plays" with the production of a soldier show—"The Army Play-by-Play"—which John Golden and Lt.-Col. William R. Bolton of the Second Service Command jointly sponsored on June 14, 1943. And we started the new season with a wartime love romance called "Those Endearing Young Charms" two evenings later. Edward Chodorov was the author, Max Gordon the producer. Mr. Gordon selected the players carefully, giving the ingénue lead to pretty Virginia Gilmore of the movies and adding the capable Zachary Scott, Dean Harens and Blanche Sweet to make up a four-character cast. The play was politely, though not enthusiastically received, and was reluctantly withdrawn by Mr. Gordon after 61 performances.

The following night Richard Kollmar, taking a flier in play production with a rowdy musical, "Early to Bed," and singing the baritone lead himself, struck the season's first jackpot. The popular colored composer, Thomas ("Fats") Waller, who died last Winter, had written the score for this one, and George Marion, Jr., the book. "Early to Bed" kept service men and vacation visitors to Broadway excited the Summer through and made a subway circuit tour after that. According to the Broadway gossips, Producer Kollmar was generously backed by a group of successful night club proprietors.

July was barren of Summer productions, but early August found the producers active. Because of the one-night success of "The Army Play-by-Play," that soldier show was brought back and continued for a run of 40 performances, after which it went touring and added goodly sums to the Army Relief chari-

ties. Elizabeth Bergner, a popular continental comedienne and a popular Berlin favorite before the war, was started on a starring engagement in a slightly shivery melodrama called "The Two Mrs. Carrolls." The author, programmed as Martin Vale, turned out to be the widow of the late Bayard Veiller. The producer was Miss Bergner's husband, Paul Czinner, working in association with Robert Reud. The result was a popular success, traceable quite obviously to the personal charms of Miss Bergner, a pert and pleasing ingénue with definite dramatic gifts.

Two Summer revivals were "The Vagabond King," which did not do so well, and "The Merry Widow," which did much better than expected. In "The Vagabond King" the François Villon role, with which Dennis King had earned a great personal success in 1925, was sung by John Brownlee of the Metropolitan. In "The Merry Widow" two former Continental favorites, Jan Kiepura and Marta Eggerth, sang the roles of Sonia and Prince Danilo. Backed by a handsome production, they brought the old-time favorite to life again, and kept it in favor for many months.

Because the Negro play, "Run Little Chillun," had proved much more popular west of New York than it had in New York, even though it did run for 126 performances in 1933, Lew Cooper, Meyer Davis and George Jessel decided to revive it in August. However, though the reviews were favorable, and even a little exciting, the weather was neither and 16 performances were all that were given.

A revival of the Russian "Chauve Souris," which had been a sensation when Morris Gest brought it to America from Paris just after the First World War, suffered a similar public reaction. Revived competently, with a new group of Russian specialists assembled by Leon Greanin, by an arrangement with Mme. Nikita Balieff, widow of the original leader and popular conferencier, its petered out in two weeks.

A group of experienced theatre folk, including Bretaigne Windust, the director, thought to try for a Summer run with a murder mystery called "Murder Without Crime." Young Mr. Windust played a harassed hero who was about to lose his mind. He was made to believe he had murdered the woman with whom he had been having an affair. Again the reviewers were not unfriendly, but the public was. Thirty-seven performances and "Murder Without Crime" became a failure without dishonor.

By September it had become increasingly apparent that New York was to be crowded with vacationers and war workers, prob-

ably for the duration of the war. Broadway blossomed with play producers who were burdened with boom-time ambitions. Jack Kirkland revived his fabulous "Tobacco Road," to give it a new boost toward an eighth year on the road. The Shuberts brought "Blossom Time" back with Alexander Gray and Barbara Scully singing the leads. Noel Coward's highly successful "Blithe Spirit," which had been withdrawn for the summer to give the cast a rest, was resumed, preliminary to taking to the road. A vaudeville combination headed by Ethel Waters, Frank Fay and Bert Wheeler, quickly found a public and ran on for 126 performances. "Porgy and Bess," also headed for the touring country, was given a three-week start in 44th Street.

A new revue, Irving Caesar's "My Dear Public," which had been threatened with production for months, was finally exhibited. It proved to be still a threat rather than an achievement. Another, "Bright Lights of 1944," with Smith and Dale, Jim Barton and Frances Williams, among many others, lasted no more than 4 performances.

The first serious drama of the season was Elmer Rice's "A New Life," with the author's gifted wife, Betty Field, playing the heroine. Some little stir, and a slight embarrassment, was caused when the reviewers discovered that Mr. Rice had staged one scene in the delivery room of a maternity hospital at the climax of the heroine's accouchement. Following this scene the protagonists of "A New Life" argued earnestly for and against the American way of living and thinking. The heroine (a radio actress) contended that she had every right to direct the upbringing of her own offspring. Her husband's capitalistically-conscious family insisted that the child should be turned over to those who could give it proper social and financial advantages. The heroine won, but the play had a struggle. It quit after 69 performances.

A second serious September effort was "Land of Fame," which in a way repeated the story of the little people's part in the war that Dan James had told in "Winter Soldiers." Albert and Mary Bein wrote it, and there was support from a small but loyal public. However, the bankroll was weak and the play closed at the end of its first week.

"All for All," a fairly crude revival of the older "Give and Take," with comedians Harry Green and Jack Pearl playing the Potash-Perlmutter leads, hung around for eleven weeks, a little to its backers' surprise. Something called "Hairpin Harmony," with a score, book and bankroll by Harold Orlob, was

out in two performances, following a terrible drubbing by the press.

Mary Martin, who had made a reputation singing "My Heart Belongs to Daddy" in "Leave It to Me," helped a lot in carrying "One Touch of Venus" through a season's run. Frederick Lonsdale's "Another Love Story" also surprised those reviewers who did not care for it by playing 103 performances, when they had figured that it would be all through in a week or two. The popularity of Roland Young and Margaret Lindsay, he a popular comedian, she a picture favorite, was credited with the run.

The Theatre Guild's revival of "Othello," which had been waiting a year to permit Paul Robeson to clear his concert engagements, was a mid-October event of first importance. The colored actor's reception created an enthusiasm verging on the rapturous. His personal success mounted as the engagement continued and his reading and performance gained in resonance and poise. José Ferrer was the Iago and Uta Hagan (Mrs. Ferrer) the Desdemona.

Eddie Dowling found a part in a play Roy Walling had written and called "Manhattan Nocturne" that pleased him. It was that of a novelist who, during a temporary frustration, agrees to divorce his disappointed wife. To provide the necessary legal evidence he visits a call house and engages a companion with whom to be surprised by the wife and her lawyer. Later, becoming interested in the case of the girl who has helped him, the novelist defends her in court and helps her gain her release from the panderers who had been holding her captive. Three uncertain weeks was as long as "Manhattan Nocturne" could last, although many thought it deserved better than that.

A farce comedy, "Victory Belles," written by Alice Gerstenberg, brought Barbara Bennett on from Hollywood. The critics thought it was pretty poor entertainment, but audiences laughed and the engagement was extended several times. Mary Elizabeth Sherwood, a theatre-conscious Californian, decided that New York was ready for a popular-priced stock company, and engaged the roof theatre atop the New Amsterdam for purposes of experiment. Her first week she revived Robert Sherwood's "The Petrified Forest." The second week she revived the Allan Scott-George Haight "Good-by Again." The third week she flirted with the idea of trying an original play, "Crosstown Bus." The fourth week she called it a season and quit. A courageous venture, but New York just doesn't like popular-

priced stock companies. It will pay outrageous prices for new hits, but old hits, even of better plays, leave it cold.

The most controversial, and the most intelligently written, of the early season plays, was Rose Franken's "Outrageous Fortune." The play was brought to production by its author and her husband, William Brown Meloney, after having been tried out with Gilbert Miller as a co-producer. Mr. Miller withdrew when the Meloneys objected to taking the play off the stage while Miss Franken rewrote it in part. The press reception of "Outrageous Fortune" was surprisingly friendly. Even those reviewers who could not generously approve of it admitted its interest-exciting qualities and the excellence of the performance given it. The company was headed by Elsie Ferguson, returned to the stage after a thirteen year retirement, and included Mme. Ouspenskaya, Margalo Gillmore and Frederic Tozere. For ten weeks arguments for and against the drama's statements and conclusions were freely spoken. When by that time a paying response on the part of the public had not developed, "Outrageous Fortune" was withdrawn.

An October item was a farce called "Naked Genius." Gypsy Rose Lee, famed as a stripteuse, wrote it; George Kaufman staged it; Michael Todd produced it and Joan Blondell came on from Hollywood to play its leading character. This heroine was a strip-tease girl with social and literary ambitions who sold tickets to her own wedding and gave a floor show for the guests. The reports from out of town were that Miss Lee and Mr. Kaufman both begged Mr. Todd not to risk "Naked Genius" in New York, but Mr. Todd would not listen. The box office reception on Broadway was lively, but after the film rights had been made secure Todd voluntarily withdrew the play.

"I'll Take the High Road" proved a weak comedy, interesting principally because it introduced Jimmy Cagney's younger sister, Jeanne, as its heroine. "What's Up" turned out to be a musical comedy of slight appeal, though it had Jimmy Savo as its star and a troupe of promising youngsters in its cast.

The Theatre Guild tried Paul Osborn's dramatization of a Richard Hughes novel, "The Innocent Voyage"—an amusing story of a group of English children who find themselves on a pirate ship in 1860 and proceed to reorganize temporarily the pirates' routine, as more fully appears in later pages.

Richard Rodgers, looking for work to employ his idle hands and active inspirations, following the success of "Oklahoma!", for which he wrote the score, decided to revive his own and