

THE
THEATRE
HANDBOOK
and Digest of Plays

Edited by
BERNARD SOBEL

Preface by George Freedley



CROWN PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK 1940

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THE THEATRE HANDBOOK

FOR

JEAN TENNYSON

BEAUTIFUL, WISE
AND EXACTING.

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P R E F A C E

This book is intended for the serious student of the theatre, and at the same time it is the intention of editor and publisher that no lover of the theatre escape. Theatre is several parts glamor, drama is several parts literature and the make up of the handbook must establish a nice balance between the two. A book filled with the fascinating apocrypha of the theatre would undoubtedly be attractive, at the same time that the more austere book of facts might be considered an unlikely candidate for the best seller list. It is our hope that we have combined the two to make this volume a book to keep on your desk against that emergency question we all know will come. At the same time Bernard Sobel and I trust that it is a volume that those lovers of the theatre in our country can read, quietly with pleasure and profit.

Despite the alphabetical arrangement of the text, a table of contents has been provided to indicate the most important articles for the seeker after information; many of the theatre experts of the country have assembled their knowledge in readable form for those who may have temporary need of it.

We have included a few topics that are unusual and are proud to point out that no more extensive grouping of plays by subject exists. We make haste to assure you that the list is incomplete, experimental, taken from a working list in an existing library and is not intended to be in any way exhaustive. If the list becomes useful, ways and means of extending it and amplifying the classifications will be found.

A special effort has been made to cover the Oriental Theatre because no easily accessible book deals briefly, yet authoritatively, with the subject. Certain volumes have been included in the bibliography and the compiler wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness for that section to the gracious and able Rosamond Gilder, who showed the way in *A Theatre Library*.

The cinema has been for the most part ignored (despite the fact that the film is a part of theatre in its broadest sense) because it is felt that many directories of motion pictures exist. Radio is not included

except for the drama which has been ably covered by Mr. Arch Oboler, and a play is always part of the theatre. Television terms *have* been included because many people feel that television will be an important factor in the future; in fact there are those who say it will be *the* Theatre of the future. We are not so lugubrious as that. We believe that so long as there are people in the world who can enjoy the emotional and intellectual contact with the voice of their poets and dramatists through the medium of fine actors in a building set aside for that purpose, that no mechanical medium can take the place of the stage.

GEORGE FREEDLEY

CURTAIN! CURTAIN!

Welcome to the Theatre Handbook, brightly expectant guest. You have arrived in good time. The show will start soon. The orchestra is already tuning up in the pit. The ushers are shouting "Curtain."

As you walk to your seat in the first row, center, First Nighters greet you on all sides. Beautiful ladies flash jewels and décolletage. Orchids intensify ermine white. The air crackles with opening-night excitement. Everyone, self-conscious yet curious, is busy seeing and being seen. Then suddenly in the midst of sibilant conversation, laughter and commotion, the curtain rises and the show is on.

The chorus surges forth in rainbow colors. The dancers make a trek across the boards, pass woodland back-drop and verdant wings, only to give way eventually for the laughing entrance of the comedian. He—the gay favorite—is all agog, with his large white goggles, toy baby cart and meandering geese. But he spots you speedily across the footlights and throws you a friendly smile of recognition so that all the audience feels that you're important.

And this impression is confirmed when, just before the final curtain, an usher hurries down the aisle and hands you a note. Eagerly, you open it to discover that the prima donna invites you to visit her in her dressing room. The usher points out the way; and you follow him, behind the parquet box seats to a concealed door which leads to the forbidden land—backstage.

To the right is the star's dressing-room and there you take in, at a glance, autographed pictures on the walls, pictures of Jane Cowl, Chester Morris, Cedric Hardwicke, Guthrie McClintic, Rosalind Russell. Congratulatory telegrams line the tall mirror. Cut flowers, perfumes and cosmetics decorate the dressing table.

The prima donna is now wearing a wondrous, flimsy negligée. She is in repose now and happy. As she talks with you, she removes her entire stage make-up; then paints and powders all over again, for the street. Meanwhile, the maid brings you a highball, and the author steps in long enough to tell you how he happened to write the big scene. Five minutes

later the newspapermen and photographers arrive for interviews. Friends crowd the room and corridor. It is time now to go. Reluctantly you leave by the stage door, pass the crowd of autograph hunters waiting in the rain, grab a taxicab, stop a moment at "21" and just as morning breaks, reach home.

Then, if you're like me, you'll drop off blissfully to sleep, dreaming of footlights, grease paint and the free masonry of backstage life. For the theatre to me has always been a land of enchantment. The more I see of it, the more I want to see. In my effort to learn the mystery of writing plays, producing, acting and direction, I talk to stars, ushers, doormen, managers, hangers-on and chorus girls. The stage is a great leveller. Everyone and everything has a contributory force from the director who governs the performance to the black cat which slinks across the stage and revives a superstition.

Above all, the audience exerts a reciprocal influence. It helps create the illusion, builds up or destroys. The dandies who sat on the Elizabethan stage sometimes spoiled a performance. The fanatics who caused the Astor Place riot of 1849, would have murdered the star had he not managed to escape, with the help of his friends. Soviet audiences, in contrast, were orderly participants in the action of post-war propaganda plays. Today, however, in picture houses, the jitterbugs who form the early morning audiences at New York stage shows, insure their disorganized part in the performance by dancing in the aisles. These examples are exceptional, but they are indicative of audience potentialities.

But the human element is only one of innumerable factors which go into the making of a play. Abstract theories have their direct effect, theories about architecture, history, stage history, criticism, mechanics, histrionics, dramaturgy, lighting, direction, temperament, production, advertising and costs.

Furthermore, from the first moment that the play is announced until the final first-night curtain, Chance becomes the co-producer. No matter who the star or the author, no matter how perfect the production, no prediction can be certain. The unexpected always happens. An unknown player makes a hit. A veteran goes up in his lines. A piece of scenery falls. The conductor forgets his cue. A new dancer stops the show. A critic gets the wrong seats. Heat stifles the audience.

And it must have been like this from the first days of the theatre. The weather must have played the dickens with outdoor performances of Euripides. Drunken carpenters' apprentices must have ruined many

a morality show. The mistress of an "angel" or a king has regularly given the drama a serious setback. Examples pyramid.

When Victor Herbert, after a quarrel with Emma Trentini, refused to write the score for *Naughty Marietta*, Arthur Hammerstein, producer, started search for another composer, and after listening to dozens of compositions, found him in a book of piano lessons for beginners, Rudolf Friml, then the obscure accompanist for Kubelik.

When Will Rogers came before the curtain to make his début in the second act of a musical at the George M. Cohan Theatre, he confronted an empty house, because the audience had discovered during the intermission that the *Titanic* had been sunk. More recently, Sidney Kingsley's highly realistic play, *Dead End*, almost died at the premiere because the villain broke the illusion by jumping up from his death scene just a second before the curtain fell.

The play, nevertheless, must go on, and has gone on thus, through the ages, a combination of genius, physical endowment and circumstance.

And this Handbook, I hope, opens a vicarious experience in the theatre, whereby the stage may exert its continuous influence. All matters great and small I have striven to touch upon, because they are one and inseparable; the historicity of Seneca; the mystery of Shakespeare's genius: was he great because he willed it, or because he couldn't help being so? The right make-up technique for an ingenue. The popularity of the pratt fall. The efficacy of the baby spotlight. The structure of the Center Theatre. The disappearance of the stage door Johnny.

In a minute the curtain will be going up and within me will be stirring all the apprehensions, doubts, fears, griefs, and hopes of a first night, the subjects neglected, the achievements forgotten; the names also of the people I left out: Jessie Royce Landis, Sir Louis Sterling, Sam Levene, Dorothy Hall, Richard Watts, Jr., Leonard Bergman, Natalie Schaeffer, Dr. A. S. W. Rosenbach, many others.

One time-old thought, above all things, I hope, to reaffirm: the theatre is the meeting place of the human heart, the heart which beats through the ages, through suspense, pain, joy and understanding, through progress and disintegration, through World War and threatening war. It is Humanity's escape from bitter experience. It is the land of appeased realization through recognition, and the perpetual domain of wish fulfillment. Here, surely, the arts unite for the enjoyment of the soul.

BERNARD SOBEL

KEY TO THE BOOK

The arrangement is alphabetical with a few exceptions, as: *acting*, *drama*, *staging*, *theatre* are subdivided nationally or by a well-defined section, before the organizations beginning with these words are listed. For example the magazine, *Theatre Arts*, is listed after *Theatre*, *Yugo-Slav* rather than after *Theatre*, *architecture*.

Plays for the university or little theatre arranged by subject matter appear under *Drama*, *Subjects*, as: plays concerned with agriculture and farmers are listed under *Drama*, *Subjects*, *Farm Life*.

Play synopses are intended merely to suggest the subject matter of the plays. Modern plays are given more fully than the classics.

Biographies are included for many people in the theatre; for a list of more than a thousand of those others whose contributions to the American Theatre have been important see "*Famous People In The American Theatre*," page 901.

If the information sought is not under the name of the person, or title of the play, consult the relating subject headings of *Drama*, *Staging*, etc. The table of contents includes many of the outstanding and lengthy articles.