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## The Theater in Philadelphia

# Is There a Doctor in the House?

By Dan Rodden

THE PLAYWRIGHT had long been considered the primary artist of the theater; this notion has apparently been supplanted. The play-doctor is now your man. Or rather the play-specialist; certainly the playwright is still a doctor, as in the sense of constant revision he always has been, but he is a general practitioner. In emergencies—and in an age where plays cost a minimum of forty thousand dollars to produce, every snuffle is an emergency—he calls in the specialist. Or if he does not see the need, and prefers to depend upon his own back-country skills to see the patient through out-of-town ailments to the crisis of a Broadway opening, members of the immediate family—the producer and possibly the important backers—are apt to go over his head and call in specialized assistance.

The idea is not really new. In years past, such a specialist as Dr. George S. Kaufman was frequently consulted in doubtful cases; his repute was such that the G.P. was inclined to welcome his professional assistance. Drs. Lindsay and Crouse once ministered to a play diseased, called *Bodies in the Cellar*; it recovered and lived a full span as *Arsenic and Old Lace*. (Dr. Kesselring, the G.P. on that case, retired for a number of years thereafter; he had diagnosed his patient as melodramatic, whereas specialists Lindsay and Crouse had more correctly seen symptoms of comedy, and had so treated. Kesselring achieved a certain reputation, however, which persisted until he was so unwise as to enter into general practice again last season with *Four Times Twelve Is 48*, whereupon his license was revoked.) Earliest of all still practicing, Dr. George Abbott is a specialist noted for dramatic recoveries. There have been others.

But this is the Age of Specialization, and the past few seasons have seen a logical idea carried to illogical lengths. Which has been well demonstrated by the current try-out season in Philadelphia, especially by its first play.

BACK IN THE MID-THIRTIES, a relative halcyon period when we knew the empty feeling at the pit of our stomach was only hunger, a limber, bird-headed man and a sprightly, red-headed girl danced their way into the heart of America as had no such pair since Vernon Castle crashed his plane, and Irene married a McLaughlin and took up anti-vivisectionism. Not to make a rebus of it, the two in question were Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

Early in September, Miss Rogers returned to the stage for the first time in twenty-one years, or since she sang "Embraceable You" in *Girl Crazy*. Her vehicle, to pervert meanings, was Louis Verneuil's *Love and*

*Let Love*, and opened the new season at the Forrest Theater. The opening was eagerly awaited. M. Verneuil had had considerable luck the season before with *Affairs of State*, and those who assumed it was nothing more than a personal triumph for Miss Celeste Holm were confounded by its continued success after she relinquished her role to Miss June Havoc, who is no place like Holm. The combination of circumstances seemed to augur well for a good night of comedy, and the advance sale bespoke confidence in this prediction. It was the chagrin of the opening night audience to discover that both their past pets had let them down badly. Verneuil had created, or more likely dusted off, an obvious and humorless piece, and Miss Rogers, though heaven knows no jury would ever convict her, was playing quite as obviously and humorlessly.

I have a great deal of admiration for the charms of Mr. Alfred Lunt, and his phonetic acrobatics have always seemed to me quite effective and amusing. But this sort of play (I refer here to the suave, unfunny comedy of the sexes: cf. anything recent by Noel Coward excepting possibly *Blithe Spirit*) always seems to tempt the leading male actors into a vocal impersonation of Mr. Lunt, and Miss Rogers' associates, the Messrs. Paul McGrath and Tom Helmore, were not proof against this temptation. In view of the lines they were called upon to speak, you couldn't blame either of them for deciding to waive a legitimate characterization in favor of the Lunt technique. But I did feel it was going a little too far when Miss Rogers impersonated him, too.

The Philadelphia reviewers were kindly disposed towards the venture, hence avoided discussion of the play and Miss Rogers' performance, rather concentrating upon how handsomely her dress designer had turned her out. However, this did not quite satisfy the producers, perhaps influenced to doubt by the fact that large audiences, trapped into this prior commitment, were not amused. General practitioner Verneuil, professing not to be disturbed about the condition, issued an encouraging bulletin and several Gallic shrugs, and took off for Florida, thus displaying an attitude which, whether we continue the medical analogy or revert to theater practice, was rather unprofessional. And left the immediate family group to frantic thumbing of *What To Do Till the Doctor Comes*.

Fortunately, or so it may have seemed at the time, help was at hand; the American Medical Association was having its annual convention at Atlantic City, and it was but an hour's fast drive to the bedside. Recognizable in the second-night crowd by their lapel insignia, a caduceus flanked by the masques of comedy and tragedy, the play-physicians were most notably represented by Drs. John van Druten and Abe Burrows. That Dr. van Druten is the eminent heart specialist, ex-Harley Street, whereas Dr. Burrows is the famed Brooklyn belly man, would seem clear indication that the patient was unable to say where it hurt. The two learned gentlemen made a cursory investigation, shook their heads gravely,

and fled the case, suggesting only that the New England climate might help, but holding out no hopes for an eventual cure.

Daunted, which is the infrequently-used opposite of nothing daunted, the producers arranged for a postponement of the New York crisis, and a short sojourn in Boston. During the initial period in the Athens of the West when no specialist would take the case, the patient tried home remedies: it was reported in *Variety*, a medical journal, that Miss Rogers and her cohorts were making up their own lines onstage, as a *commedia* gesture in the direction of doing something. This theatrical equivalent of Hadacol proving ineffective, the producers were finally able to prevail upon Dr. Sally Benson, noted specialist in the diseases of adolescence, to take over. Despite re-staging assistance from Dr. Bretaigne Windust, the two weeks in Boston seem to have had little result; when the patient reached Manhattan, the Philadelphia prognosis was justified.

**PAINT YOUR WAGON.** *A Musical Play by Frederick Loewe and Alan Jay Lerner, at the Shubert Theater.*

The first musical this fall, *Paint Your Wagon*, held promise because it was the collaborative effort of the team which had provided the felicitous *Brigadoon*. In this instance, Loewe has given us music of some character, but Lerner's book—which, as a guess, has been cut from a hundred pages to something like forty—is sentimental, poorly motivated, and simple-minded. (Simple-mindedness is not necessarily a vice in a musical play; here it is, because the trappings are epic.) The performers are mostly up to the demands of the script but—unless you are a James Barton man, which I am not—they never rise above it. One of the songs, "I Dream of Elisa," has a chance to become what is known as a standard, unless it is defeated by Lerner's obvious and saccharine final rime. Incidentally, the entire company was thrown into an absolute panic opening night by the presence in the audience of the aforementioned Dr. Burrows; it turned out he was there purely in a lay capacity, but it was several days before order was restored. Again, comforting Philadelphia reviews failed to reassure the producers, and again they scheduled further out-of-town treatment in Boston. (A buxom lady was heard to say, in the Shubert lobby after the show, "I liked it *much* better than *Oklahoma!*" I think, and I hope, that she is the same lady whom I overheard make the same remark last Spring, about *Flahooley*.)

**FAITHFULLY YOURS.** *A Comedy by L. Bush-Fekete and Mary Helen Fay, based on a play by Jean Bernard Luc, at the Forrest Theater.*

A tiresome and trivial item about a wife who attends a performance of Eliot's *Cocktail Party* and thereupon suspects her husband of psychosis because he is too faithful, this is a play where the initial premise is so ridiculously unacceptable that you resent it every time you laugh thereafter. Such a motivation might possibly tee-off a domestic-type radio half-hour, or a fairly amusing eight-minute revue skit, but here attenuation

proves disastrous. No doctoring was even attempted, the producer apparently being aware that he had caught something like the common cold, which would last about two weeks whether or not treated. Again, as with *Love and Let Love*, you had to restrain your impulse to burst into the theater manager's office and declaim, loudly, "This is the Forrest's prime evil!"

*THE NUMBER. A Play by Arthur Carter, at the Walnut Street Theater.*

This melodrama was well-received by the Philadelphia critics, who pronounced it well-made, and praised the playing. What doctoring was necessary was accomplished by its director, George Abbott, M.D., who removed an appendix (the leading lady!) and ventured other mild therapy. I didn't get to see it. For some unfair reason, I don't think it will run very long.

*TOP BANANA. A Musical Comedy by Hy Craft and Johnny Mercer, at the Shubert Theater.*

I have been laughing at this material ever since I can remember, and I certainly don't intend to stop now. *Top Banana* has a poor score and an unreasonable plot, which turns out not to matter in the least. What does matter is that Phil Silvers gives one of the best-sustained comic performances of recent memory and that the play incorporates every successfully rowdy bit of low comedy business since the first Aristophanic prat-fall. The only doctors in sight were the Messrs. Kronkhite and Quackenbush, who slapped the patient in the puss with a custard pie and beat about his head with an inflated bladder, whereupon the three went skipping merrily off to New York. I have no respect for this play whatsoever, and I certainly wish I had money in it.

*BAREFOOT IN ATHENS. A Play by Maxwell Anderson, at the Locust Street Theater.*

But for the resourceful and accomplished performance of Barry Jones as Socrates, Maxwell Anderson's most recent testimonial to democracy would be a piece uncomfortably mixed in tone. As it is, Mr. Jones makes the play succeed as comedy; it fails as the drama of ideas Anderson says he intended it to be. The comedy points are made because Jones is just the Socrates our meagre acquaintance imagines: constantly questioning, ever-seeking, humorous when serious and serious when humorous. The ideas fail because Anderson again belabors an already-convinced audience with the already accepted symbol, Democracy. Shaw's ideas, or Ibsen's, have controversial spark enough to lend an extra-theatrical excitement; Anderson's are platitudes. (That is, they are unless you remember Act II, Scene 1 of *Joan of Lorraine*, where he unwisely conceptualized and defined his notion of democracy, and disqualified himself as a thinker.) Obviously, no play-doctor would be called up by Anderson; his plays die, when they die, unattended and in the odor of sanctity.