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The Theater in Philadelphia

Modified Rapture

• Dan Rodden

YOU MAY CALL off the hounds, sheriff. All is not lost. Just when it seemed as if the Pulitzer Prize for this season would have to be awarded, by default, to *Top Banana*; just when we thought, from all September and October indications, that we were going to have to go through the whole developmental cycle of theater again, from the *jongleurs* through the Moralities to the Interludes, the pursuit of happiness, theatrical local, found itself a proper course. I am now able to announce that the Pulitzer Committee is off the hook, and that the *jongleurs* may continue to concentrate upon starting a cycle for television. Professionalism, properly decried recently in other outlets of expression, has again reared its happy head in the theater. And theater is no amateur sport. Professional theater, while it sometimes may seem to lack the persuasive spontaneity of off-Broadway productions given plays by Garcia Lorca and e. e. cummings, has its own reassurances to offer, as I hope I can show you in what follows.

First off, that Hollywood crowd headed back for where it came from, except for Gloria Swanson, who—she now admits—should have. Such exhibitions as *Love and Let Love* and *Faithfully Yours* are only untidy memories. If I suspect the entire group of being saboteurs engaged in stealthy support of the "Movies Are Better Than Ever" campaign, I haven't a shred of proof. Suffice it that they are gone, and that, in their places, have come such old professionals as Anita Loos, John van Druten, Tennessee Williams, and Paul Osborne. If only Williams came with a whole thing of his own—an idea he'd had and a play he'd written all by himself—and if this suggests he is a playwright standing bravely alone and free among collaborators and adaptors to every side, the suggestion is perhaps not far off the mark. There is still much to be said for the other men, and Miss Loos, who had the wit to see good theater potential in what someone else had written, in another form. Miss Loos chose the novel *Gigi*, by the celebrated, if until recently untranslated, Colette. Van Druten saw in Christopher Isherwood's 1930 Berlin stories, and particularly in his character Sally Bowles, that which he thought would make for excitement. Paul Osborne, infrequently but notably represented in our theater (*On Borrowed Time*, *The Vinegar Tree*), decided there was a play in J. P. Marquand's novel, *Point of No Return*. They were all of them, it turns out, mostly right. If I have certain reservations—which I have, as you will note if you read on—I feel almost ashamed to express them after what we all went through earlier in the season.

Of Samuel Taylor, who translated Andre Roussin's *Nina* for Gloria Swanson, no more should be said, under the circumstance that Miss Swanson herself spoke the acid definitive comment immediately after its November opening here. Whereupon hundreds of people, the writer included, turned back their tickets. The whole affair was particularly unfortunate for Miss Swanson, who had obviously not read the play until, at gun's-point, she was forced to star in it. Those who did see the play report that Alan Webb was heroic amid the shambles, which would come as no surprise to anyone who had seen him, several seasons back, lend importance to an over-rated item called *The Winslow Boy*. (*NINA. A Comedy by Samuel Taylor, translated from the French of Andre Roussin, at the Walnut Street Theater.*)

GIGI. A Comedy by Anita Loos, from the Novel by Colette, at the Walnut Street Theater.

Gigi, latest in the line of Loos women, is an adolescent Parisienne, hopefully reared by her grandmother and aunt toward a career of *amour impropre*, but who bursts the bounds of impropriety by up and marrying the very same thirtyish prospect with whom they had intended making for her an alliance. If this all sounds very naughty and Frenchified, I can only assure you that it is done in elaborately good taste, with never the snap of a garter. It did disconcert me when, at the climactic point in Act Three, Gigi rose to denounce the female members of her family in such sincere and accurate tones as to cast a pall over what we had been laughing at for a good two acts. The speech—which I have a feeling was cut or deintensified prior to the New York opening, because none of the reviewers made mention of it—was clearly intended to lend a final moral tone to the whole amoral proceedings. It had the opposite effect upon me. Amorality, in farce, should be made of much less stern stuff. We are to believe, or we are not to believe. If we are to believe, then such material as this is just not laughable. If we are willingly to suspend disbelief, then the puff-ball that is farcical amorality must suspend in middle-air, borne on the breath of laughter. Another thing bothered me a little: I am assured by a close personal friend, who spent several days in France, that the characterization of Gigi is authentic, and that a French girl of seventeen might well be so unsophisticated and middie-bloused as to have this Gigi's primary desires for licorice and for the playing of innocent card games. But the whole effect of her *naïvete*, for me, was to suggest that Congreve or Wycherley had somehow written a version of *Daddy Long-Legs*. It probably didn't bother anyone else.

Otherwise, I have no adverse comments. Audrey Hepburn, despite my misgivings as to her relative immaturity, is completely winning as Gigi, and will make a hundred-billion-trillion dollars in Hollywood. Cathleen Nesbit is admirable as her aunt, particularly in the best scene in the play, where she urges her pupil Gigi to a more rigid appreciation of the best

in rare gems. And Mr. Gilbert Miller, who produced, is clearly the best-fit man in all show business to exhibit taste in such matters as concern the customs of the continental theater, entr'acte and between-scene curtains, proper musical background, appropriate bric-a-brac, and the casting of bit-part servants. All in all, and admitting that this type of play is not my particular dish of cambric, it must still be said that, after such stupidities as *Love and Let Love*, one would be a churl not to breathe a grateful murmur of appreciation to Mr. Miller and Miss Loos and all concerned with *Gigi*.

I AM A CAMERA. A Play by John van Druten, from Stories by Christopher Isherwood, at the Forrest Theater.

Van Druten, ever since *Young Woodley* and *There's Always Juliet* and up through *Mama* and *Voice of the Turtle* and *Bell, Book and Candle* (soon to arrive here), has been one of our more literate and consistently enjoyable writers for the theater. In this, his most recent offering, he has interested himself in Christopher Isherwood's moody short stories, generally autobiographical, about Berlin in the early thirties. Mostly he was interested in Sally Bowles, a character around whom Isherwood built a certain tentative spell; around Sally Bowles, van Druten has written an arresting play. I am afraid that, for me, it was a case of arrest without conviction. I found the play intermittently absorbing, but finally defeating. I thought it achieved an invalid kind of suspense, in that it deliberately withheld its purpose until, by the final curtain, I found myself almost screaming: "But, why? Why did you write it? What's it about? What does it all mean?" Right up to curtain calls, I was sure van Druten would hook Sally's story into that larger frame of reference—Eliot's "objective correlative," if you like—that would make me know why I had been called upon to care about Sally Bowles. But he did not, and so the play defeated me. I have the same trouble with Chekhov.

I think a play roughly breaks down, in its three acts, which is the present convention—and in any case, if less conveniently—so as to answer three audience impulses: (Act I) "Why should I care?" (Act II) "Now I care!" (Act III) "Now I know why I cared!" It has been a conventional critical theory that Act II (the "Now I care!" act) is the crucial one; there was even a book, written for student playwrights of the thirties, called *How's Your Second Act?*; the implication being that if you had a good second act, you had a good play. I think this whole notion is completely invalid. "Why should I care?" involves exposition, and "Now I know why I cared!" involves resolution, and these are the playwright's toughest problems. Conflict, once we get into it, is of the essence of drama as it is of all narrative art, and it is possible to evoke momentary interest in conflict that has neither been fully explicated nor satisfactorily resolved. It is true about even the worst plays this season that the second act has invariably been the best. It is true about *I Am a Camera*. (As

supporting evidence, I once wrote a perfectly terrible play which has a splendid second act, surrounded on either side by expository windiness and final banality.)

Nothing of what I have said about *I Am a Camera* has anything to do with the performance of Julie Harris as Sally Bowles. I hope that is clear. She is—how shall I put it?—tremendous! She manages to combine the agreeable attributes of Miss Helen Hayes and Miss Tallulah Bankhead into her slim person, and the combination is irresistible. (Miss Hayes is a very fine actress who is not particularly an alluring woman, and Miss Bankhead is an alluring woman who is not much of an actress.) One of the pleasantest prospects for the American theater is that Miss Harris is so young that we can count upon seeing her for many years to come, in the varied roles her versatility promises us. In this connection, I might mention that there are other young ladies of similar promise. I think of Leora Dana, Barbara Bel Geddes, June Lockhart, and Maureen Stapleton immediately. But Uta Hagen, Jessica Tandy, Dorothy McGuire, and Celeste Holm are surely no oldsters? And Shirley Booth, who is maybe the best of the lot, is still short of forty-five. Add, so as to please everybody, the names of Cloris Leachman, Mary Welsh, Nancy Kelly, Lee Grant, and Beatrice Straight, and you must admit that things are looking up for those of us who go to the theater primarily to see girls.

To get back to *I Am a Camera*, I didn't particularly care for William Prince, who plays "I," otherwise Christopher Isherwood. Mr. Prince has a vocal device which is the natural opposite of that practice we discussed last issue—the imitation of Alfred Lunt—hereinafter known as "Lunting." If Lunting simulates a piccolo or flute in effect, Mr. Prince does something which is closer in tone to what is achieved by a French horn, or bass viol. He does this at moments when he is seeking to induce sympathy, and what he does I think we might call "Amecheing," since it is precisely the tone which Mr. Don Ameche used to adopt when telling Alice Faye that it was all right, and that she should go ahead and marry either John Payne or Tyrone Power, as the case might be. In future issues (unless a stop is put to it), look for discussions on Laughtoning, Cottoning, Garfielding, and Brandoning. Finally, in response to a question: "Does Clifton Webb Lunt?" I would say yes, he does; although I am aware that Mr. Webb would argue that it is Lunt who Webbs.

Briefly, to get back again to the play, it is a plotless sketch about a young author, Christopher Isherwood, who is living in a Berlin rooming-house about the time the Nazis showed their fists, and about Sally Bowles, a rootless English girl who lives across the hall. They share a brief, formless friendship, they drink too much when they can, they know people who are touched by racial prejudice (the sketchy sub-plot about a young Jew who would deny his heritage and a young Jewess who glories in hers is the closest the play comes to drama), and, finally, Sally goes off to Italy, unchanged and unchangeable. Chris—the passive, the camera—records the

life they have known, to be developed later. But the background—Berlin in 1930, God knows how horribly tense, and *we* know now—comes up fuzzy, and, were it not for Miss Harris' amazing vitality, even the character in the foreground would lack focus. Somehow, thanks to Julie Harris and to van Druten's occasionally wonderful dialogue, *I Am a Camera* seems better than it is, at least while you are looking at it.

One final note: as Sally is leaving Chris, van Druten has her say, "Someday, Chris, you'll write a book—a great book—one that'll sell a million copies!" This particular speech is in the great prognostic tradition of such lines as, "Someday, Franz Schubert, all Vienna will sing your music!" or, perhaps, "Just you wait, Robert Fulton! They'll see!" But under the circumstances, I found it a bit embarrassing. To Isherwood, not to me. Because I will personally eat, at high noon in Brentano's window, every copy over, say, twenty thousand that *Prater Violet*, his most successful work to date, has sold.

THE ROSE TATTOO. A Play by Tennessee Williams, at the Locust Street Theater.

There doesn't seem too much point in reminding you at this late date that Tennessee Williams is the most vigorous creative talent presently active in the American theater, nor in synopsisizing this season-old play. What does occur to me as singular is that Williams should here have written two-thirds of a better play than either *Streetcar* or *Glass Menagerie*, and then should have managed to botch the job with a third act that is unsatisfactory either from the standpoint of dramaturgy or taste. Given two lusty, driving acts that sometimes reach heights of folk comedy without recent parallel unless we mention names like Synge or O'Casey, and given performances by Eli Wallach and Maureen Stapleton, especially the former, that drive right alongside the writing, it is amazing that *The Rose Tattoo* is ultimately less than completely rewarding. By report, Williams has recognized this fact and has reworked the final act several times since the play opened. His resolution is still simultaneously grotesque and naive, and it is only because we are so grateful for his unmatched vigor that we forgive him trespasses we would consider unforgivable in any other writer active today. The man has an uncanny ear, and a deep insight; but he has a disturbed set of values that threatens to keep him from ever writing a great play.

POINT OF NO RETURN. A Play by Paul Osborne, Based on the Novel by John P. Marquand, at the Forrest Theater.

Paul Osborne's dramatization of John P. Marquand's *Point of No Return* is the first play of the Philadelphia season to deal with a significant and challenging problem of American life. It does so in a polished, convincing and frequently brilliant manner. The acting is singularly good, the direction and production faultless. In the face of all these blessings

it may be captious to point out that the show is still, somehow, less than completely satisfying. Yet one leaves the theater feeling that in some subtle way *Point of No Return* fails to live up to its own high promise.

This is the story of Charles Gray, a young banker in desperate competition with another executive for the vice-presidency of the bank. The tension under which Gray works is carried over to his home life, and as the play opens both he and his wife are on the verge of well-bred hysteria. This tension is increased by the hero's conviction that he doesn't really want the job anyhow. For Charley Gray has, as one character observed, a "tough mind" and his fiery individualism is only partially smothered beneath the ash-grey banker's suit. How then did he (and by extension, all of us) get trapped into the toadying position modern business competition demands? In a series of flashbacks, the author reveals to us, and to Charley, that his present dilemma springs from his desire to move from the "lower upper class," in which he was raised, to the "upper upper class." His fierce desire to shed one class for another is a symptom common to American life, and the playwright, using anthropological terms, comments on it shrewdly and wittily.

But, as it turns out, this is not the only reason for Charley's predicament. The more developed and seemingly more important reason lies in a youthful love affair which ended unhappily because Jessica Lovell, his upper upperclass sweetheart, suffered from a rather severe Electra complex. Charley's competitive urge perhaps has its foundation in an unconscious desire to identify himself with Mr. Lovell by achieving his sort of financial and social success. Further psychological complications result from Charley's relationship with his own father.

All this emotional turmoil is shown to us in a kind of play within the play. Like everything else in *Point of No Return*, it is beautifully done, without, however, seeming to have much connection with the main purpose. It is beside the very point it obscures.

Pat Freudian motivation is as common and artificial a convention in our theater as the visible prop man is in the Chinese. Both conventions have value. They are convenient, easily manipulated and occasionally have a certain charm. But both are trite and superficial answers to the playwright's problem.

If we believe our modern playwrights and the concocters of television whodunits, the Electra complex occurs with the same maddening frequency as the common cold. In *Point of No Return*, the use of this convention vitiates the value of the play by plumping a psychological melodrama in the middle of a social satire. It is easy to identify ourselves with a Charley Gray caught in the web of tribal custom. It is not as easy to sympathize with his rather special malady. A universal symptom, it seems to us, should result from a universal disease. The Electra complex is not as yet, thank God, all that common.

—Joseph P. Coogan

AFTER THANKING colleague Coogan for his penetrating report on the Osborne play, I'd like to close by mentioning briefly what is coming up. After a singularly dank early December, the Philadelphia theater promises much more for the winter season. By the time you read this piece, localities will have seen *Seventeen*, reportedly a pleasant if non-historic musical. Also *Bell, Book and Candle*, the van Druten play about witchcraft in modern Manhattan, will have held the stage, along with the always capable Kaufman's latest, *Fancy Meeting You Again*. Also promised is a musical version of Victor Wolfson's admired, but unsuccessful, *Excursion*; they've retitled it *A Month of Sundays*. For many of us, the most exciting news is that we are to get, along about February, Christopher Fry's *Venus Observed*, with Rex Harrison and Lilli Palmer playing the leads. *Venus Observed* is not, I think, as good a play as his *The Lady's Not for Burning*, in the reading. But it is somewhat better constructed, and should be a delight. Mr. Fry, for the information of shut-ins, is the Britisher currently engaged in irrigating the Waste Land.

The Room Across the Hall

● James F. Martin

The open door across the hall
 Bids black against the long white wall,
 But yet I know a boarder's there
 I've heard his footfall on the stair.

A time there was when I was ill
 And saw him on my window sill,
 And asked if I could visit in,
 But all he did was stare and grin.

A time there was when I was well
 And crossed the hall to ring the bell,
 Because I wanted much to see
 That misty face that looked at me.

The room may be a darkened tomb
 Or filled with life like nature's womb,
 What's in that room men may agree
 But I shall want to wait and see.