

August 2011

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Recommended Citation

Rodden, Dan (2011) "The Theater in Philadelphia. It Always Plays at the Shubert," *Four Quarters*: Vol. 1 : No. 3 , Article 38.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/fourquarters/vol1/iss3/38>

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The Theater in Philadelphia

It Always Plays at the Shubert

• Dan Rodden

THE LITTLE MAN in the brown suit followed the large woman into the aisle seats directly in front of mine at the Shubert Theater, tugging off his topcoat as he came. He was speaking, but she was paying little attention to what he said.

"You heard him," he said. "They don't refund tickets this late. That's their policy, they don't refund tickets this late."

They settled into their seats. The little man made a tentative move to help the woman remove her coat (I think it was beaver), but she twitched her shoulders out of it without his assistance. She continued to twitch her left shoulder, the one nearest him, in a gesture of exasperation. Finally, she spoke. Her deep voice was an ironic imitation of his lighter one. "It *always* plays at the Shubert," she said.

"Well, it does," he said. "Every time we've seen it, it's been here. I was in a hurry, today at noon. I didn't notice. I just asked the man for two for this evening."

"Every time you've seen it, you mean. I've seen it at least *twice* at the Forrest. Matinees, with Helen. You weren't even there. The one time they had the little girl from Scranton—what was her name?—she was Kathie. And the other time they had the real beer in the steins, the paper said. But of course you know it all, Mister Doesn't-even-look-at-the-signs-to-see-what's-playing. It *always* plays at the Shubert."

They were silent for several minutes. A string ensemble filed into place, tuned up briefly with the piano, and began a medley of imitation English country airs. They were about sixteen bars into it when her elbow demanded his attention (he was absorbed in his program) and she shot him a glance. Her eyebrows were narrowed, and she vocalized a wordless, contemptuous sound. It was clear that she was comparing the string ensemble unfavorably with the probable twenty-piece pit band over at the Forrest, and the neo-Grainger-cum-Handel medley disastrously with the Romberg overture. "I've read about this fellow Fry," he said. "They gave him a real good write-up in *TIME*." She didn't reply, and this was his last effort at conciliation. Soon the curtain went up, and the play began.

Almost immediately, its rhetorical complications developed. At each involved metaphor, the large woman would turn her head swiftly and stare, purse-lipped, at the side of the little man's face. He concentrated his attention upon the stage; when the audience was moved to laughter by some metered aphorism or other, his laugh would ring loud and high above

all the rest, although apt to be a bit late in coming. As the act went on, he sank deeper into his seat. Upon its conclusion the woman turned to him, apparently ready to make some crushing comment—or perhaps she intended to continue her wordless attack upon him, upon Christopher Fry, and upon everything that they both stood for. But the little man was asleep. Infuriated, she dug her elbow into his ribs. He awakened immediately.

“Interesting, didn’t you think?” he said. “Let’s get a smoke.” Without looking at her, he pivoted and strode manfully up the aisle.

“Here,” she called after him. “Take your coat.” She carried it with her as she followed him.

They didn’t return after the intermission. I think it is extremely unlikely that they saw what was left of *The Student Prince*, that evening. I think it far more probable that the large woman attended the following Wednesday’s matinee. At the Forrest. With Helen.

VENUS OBSERVED. A Play by Christopher Fry, at the Shubert Theater.

Once again, Fry has demonstrated his remarkable poetic talents. This I firmly believe, despite the large woman at the Shubert and even weightier opinion to the contrary. *Venus Observed* is not, take it all-in-all, as good a play as *The Lady’s Not For Burning*. It is not, in the words of my unkeen observation of last issue, “somewhat better constructed.” What I mistook, in the reading, for better construction, was the fact that Fry has on this occasion written several more theatrical scenes than had been his wont; in *The Lady*, he habitually had his characters discussing something interesting that had happened off-stage—here he has them play it out, which I think is distinctly better. But what I should have seen, even in the reading, was that the constructive unity of the earlier play was in the constantly interesting character of Thomas Mendip, he of the fascinating, ironic death-wish. The Duke of Altair, principal character in *Venus Observed*, is not nearly so compelling a character as Thomas; Thomas changed, which is the essence of dramatic action—the Duke can only get tired.

For all that, the play is extremely interesting and occasionally—when the direction and the playing lets it be—delightful. Rex Harrison, as the autumnal Duke who would choose, out of a garden of dalliances, a flower for the button-hole of his declining years (see what this Fry does to you?), is splendid; his approach is much better suited to the cadences of the Fry verse than was that of John Gielgud as Thomas Mendip. Of Gielgud’s widely-praised performance, I thought it lacked only two more musketeers to complete the set.

About the other performances, I would be a bit more qualified. Lilli

Palmer, while as charming a lass as ever rejected the overtures of an autumnal Duke and went off a-Maying with his son, is a bit tentative as the principal lady involved; I think it is less her fault than Fry's. Of the others, John Williams, as the Duke's under-handed over-seer, comes off best; the rest have been directed (by Sir Laurence Olivier, he of Crispin's Day) into a kind of lethargy which is only at times indicated in the script. There have been complaints from certain quarters that the actors frequently trip over Fry's symbolism; I can only suggest that this is at least more active than anything Sir Laurence gave them to do. Only once, in the fire scene at the end of Act Two, do they stir their stumps—and here so loudly and violently that the whole point of the scene, and a very funny point it is, is quite obscured.

One other thing: Fry seems to me happier in writing of other lands, of other times; so, of course, was Shakespeare. So might be any poet—*The Cocktail Party* certainly hasn't made the opposite point to my satisfaction. In the present-day living room (or even, as here, "The Observatory Room at Stellmore Park, the Duke's mansion") there are simply too many chairs and things for the characters to sit down on. True, for part of the second act and all of the third, Fry transports his people to, of all places, "The Temple of the Ancient Virtues, Stellmore Park." But they have gotten to like sitting by this time, and they continue to sit. Unfortunately, whenever Fry's characters sit down, so do his words. And the words, in any play of Fry's sort (are there any other plays of his sort, of recent writing? Giraudoux was, I guess, a sort of French Fry), must never sit down. They may dance on their toes, they may fight duels with each other, they may tumble and juggle and climb balconies and vault high walls and swing out over the audience on arcing trapezes. But they must never sit down.

THE SHRIKE. A Play by Joseph Kramm, at the Walnut Street Theater.

In point of effectiveness (and what other point is there?) *The Shrike* is just about the best psychological melodrama I have ever seen. That the play is hardly a definitive sociological document upon institutional treatment of the mentally ill, that some of its legal technicalities would hardly bear inspection in the most cursory of courts, and that even its own audiences may be inspired to doubt fifteen minutes after the final curtain—these undoubted facts do not have real bearing. Beautifully under-written, brilliantly under-played in production, *The Shrike* moves audiences closer to the edge of their seats than any similar new play of recent years—which, I take it, is the special purpose of melodrama—and evokes an accumulating empathic terror which is positively shattering.

Jose Ferrer, much admired as Lord Fancourt Babberly, as Iago, as Cyrano, as Oliver Entwhistle, as the Dauphin (to give an indication of his

incredible versatility), gives his finest performance as the tortured, captive victim of a predatory wife. His direction and production are of a piece. *The Shrike* is no great shakes as literature. But it is certainly wonderful theater.

It rather amused me (I am a simple man and have been known to be amused for hours by the spectacle of a cat chasing its tail) that the same Philadelphia reviewers who professed to an entire understanding of the Fry play, revealed complete bafflement at Kramm's denouement. One, roughly employing Matthew Arnold's critical method, decided that the playwright had in mind some such tricky ending device as J. Frank Stockton employed in his *fin de siècle* short story, *The Lady or the Tiger?*, and made comparisons on this basis. Surely Doctor Tom's son intended a worthier "touchstone" than such as this? Anyway, Kramm's ending was pretty clear to me; but—again—I am a simple man.

YOU WON'T MIND if I give you a composite picture of other recent developments? I don't like to dwell upon most of them, and I didn't think you would. First off, among other dubious predictions I ventured to make last issue, I believe I said that *Seventeen*, soon to come in, was "reportedly a pleasant if non-historic musical." Since this is the only one of my prophecies which does me credit, I hasten to add that *Seventeen* was a most pleasant show, characterized by high spirits, a good performance, an adequate score, and—unfortunately for its chances of a tour (it opened and closed here after a six-months losing stay on Broadway)—an absolute Lack of Significance. I suppose that, in an age where some pomposity like *Paint Your Wagon* is critically praised, despite its inherent boresomeness, because it embodies a phony-folk-epic, wagons-westward, Americana-type theme, where a rousing good show like *South Pacific* is mostly commended because it deals, melodramatically and occasionally and not very universally, with the problem of race tolerance, it would be too much too expect any such commendation for *Seventeen*.

The three other plays I saw were comedies, it said on the program. Two of them were by established writers, and the other was by a new kid. *Jane*, S. N. Behrman's stretched-out version of a Maugham short story, was easily the best. Certain critics have indicated their opinion that Behrman's creative powers have greatly declined since the early Thirties. I didn't think this was so, and I went back and read *End of Summer* and *Brief Moment* and *Wine of Choice* and a couple of others, Behrman's hits of his hey-day. Plot-wise, they aren't as good as *Jane* (which has at least three plots that I counted, the most important being the Cinderella and Little Miss Fix-it ones), and Mr. Behrman is just as capable of turning a phrase today as he ever was.

The decline of George S. Kaufman—as a writer (his other powers are not only unimpaired but enhanced)—is not fit subject for levity here. Mr. Kaufman's newest bad play, *Fancy Meeting You Again*, written with his wife, Leueen MacGrath, makes (or rather, made: he was realist enough to close it forthwith) the mistake of assuming that the idea of reincarnation, the transmigration of souls, is automatically funny. It is not. I wouldn't for the world suggest any upheaval in Mr. Kaufman's domestic life. But I did like him better when he was married to Mr. Hart.

Dear Barbarians, a comedy by one Lexford Richards, was acclaimed by the local Archers as a fine, promising thing. I was most interested in a group of blue-coated musicians who inhabited the Stage Left box and played atonal entr'acte music. It didn't have any connection with the play; it turned out that Mr. Richards had himself written the music and had decided that, now that he had us there, we were going to witness everything he could do. I checked in the lobby going out, but there wasn't any exhibition of water colors. I guess Mr. Richards doesn't paint.

Oh, yes. *The Merry Widow* was here. It featured, as Danilo, one Marcel LeBon, whom the Shuberts introduced gravely as a *jeune chanteur francais*. It closed, after the first week. And Cornelia Otis Skinner was here, too. And, as I have implied, *The Student Prince* was here, in its Positively-Farewell-Engagement. Twice, within the month. Also, *A Month of Sundays* and *Curtain Going Up*. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*.

Remember, Man

● Joseph McLean

In hop-sotch time we met the morning sun,
 Like tiny specks of dust in a beam of light;
 And in our brilliance nothing seemed so right,
 Till evening came and ended our brief run.

We are at rest now, mingled with the dust
 That lies on floors, no more to play again;
 Unless—unless some uncalled breath shall flame,
 And we are kissed by its sweet light. It must . . .

It must.