

# Mantle Reviews Nathan on 'The Theater of the Moment'

## Finds Bitter Stage Critic Is Mellowing

Literary Piece Reveals That George Jean Is All for Cornell—Almost.

By Burns Mantle.

NEW YORK.—[Special.]—The season dawdles toward an opening. It is lucky for the producers that it does. The weather turned midsummerish again this week, and if there had been the usual supply of Labor day openings there would have been little trade to support them. As it happens the second week of September promises to provide the real opening of the new theater year. Five plays and a revival are scheduled.

Meantime the theater-minded public, or that portion of it that reads literature on the theater, has been going back through last season with George Jean Nathan in a collection of critical observations entitled "The Theater of the Moment," just published by Knopf, and a second collection of amusing observations by Cornelia Otis Skinner, called "Excuse It, Please," issued this week by Dodd, Mead & Co.

Nathan grows mellow as he grows older. There are a fairish number of things nowadays of which he approves—usually with an apology, always with an explanation that, to him, still leaves the Nathan ego rampant if not dominant. But this new graceful acceptance is one that a younger Nathan pooh-poohed and pish-tushed as infantile and weak. He even has become a defender of the legitimate theater as it is, not as he would remodel it.

Likes the Theater Better

than Any Number of Things.

"When all is said and done, there is something about the theater that all the moving pictures, radios, phonographs, automobiles, restaurants—with-entertainment, dance halls, free band concerts, and seasonal art fresco amorous impulses in the world cannot kill," writes George in a foreword glowing with optimism.

"It is the gilded, and sometimes golden, toy of the arts, and it has been that for centuries on end. It has behind it tradition . . . and each year, whether it is healthy or whether it is ailing, it manages to recapture and to offer at least a snatch of its old glory."

Nathan finds evidence that the literary drama is returning and, as others have done before him, thanks the movies for that. "The motion picture, by ridding the theater of its demi-emotional and demi-intelligent audiences, has created a residual audience that, both emotionally and intellectually, is more or less a unit and that, unlike the former miscellaneous audience, may be approached by a producer upon recognizable and at least partly anticipated and understood terms. This is his explanation.

O'Neill and Cornell Are

Among Few He Recognizes.

He named Eugene O'Neill, Maxwell Anderson, and S. N. Behrman as the three American dramatists at present leading the procession. He selects Katharine Cornell, Helen Hayes, Lynn Fontanne, and Ina Claire as the leading American actresses. If he were forced to name one of the four as the first lady of the theater he would, a little reluctantly, accept Miss Cornell, thus:

"Miss Cornell has a sweep and inner something . . . for which Miss Hayes seems at times to have to struggle. Miss Hayes, on the other hand, has a vocal trickery, most cajoling, for which Miss Cornell in turn, on the other hand, often has to struggle. Miss Hayes seldom has given a distinctly inferior performance; Miss Cornell on occasion has. Miss Cornell has a natural stage presence that Miss Hayes must create by artifice. That Miss Hayes is able to create it is doubtless further to her acting credit. . . . However, taking our arbitrary and questionable premise as we find it, it remains a toss-up between Miss Cornell and Miss Hayes, with the favor, at the moment, just a shade Miss Cornell's."



DANCE TEAM IN WALNUT ROOM

Shalita and Carlton, team of ballroom dancers now in the Bismarck hotel, have had an international career. They came to Chicago after a tour of the orient.

(Maurice Seymour Photo.)

ment, just a shade Miss Cornell's."

This because of the greater variety of Miss Cornell's roles. . . .

There are touches of the old Nathan that are more stimulating. He gives you a view of the current Broadway, for example, that is devastating. A worm's eye view it is, and exaggerated, but vastly illuminating. "Fiction and legend, working their wicked will upon those innocents, listing in the farther reaches of the land," writes George. "Have converted what is one of the ugliest, cheapest, and most thoroughly unromantic streets in the whole world into a de luxe avenue of fairyland."

Proves Times Square Isn't What It Is Played Up To Be.

He then proceeds to take his reader by the hand and escort him on a tour of Times square, shop by shop, window by window, past all the cheap, grimy, second-rate exhibits that make up the market place that is the famed "crossroads of the world," and reveals it for what it has become.

He could do the same, if he were so moved, for the boulevards of Paris, or the Main streets of any sizable city in the world. And when he speaks of the old Broadway as a sweeter and better place to stroll in than this new collection of flashy shops and honky-tonks, he is forgetting just how messy the old Broadway was. Even without the huckster pushcart, and Coney Island barker atmosphere southern European Americans brought to it, it was

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a messy, overpraised, exaggerated, small town affair. But the Nathan account is eloquent in its expression of disgust.

It is in this same chapter, too, that he pays his respects to the first night portion of that superior audience when he says the legitimate theater is building for itself. "The present Broadway first night audiences continue to resemble in the aggregate nothing quite so much as a zoo, minus only the penitents and a small measure of the smell," asserts George. "These audiences do not go to determine what effect a play has on them, but to determine what effect they have on the play, and to demonstrate it in such a loud, vulgar, and generally offensive manner that the more sensitive and intelligent ushers promptly consider throwing up their ignominious jobs and entering the somewhat more delicate and less self-insulting profession of sewer repairing."

rest a little more contentedly in your homes after reading that. But if you are still intrigued by the thought of sitting with these gatherings (and they really are worse through the early season), consider Mr. Nathan's further estimate of such an audience. "Its taste is the taste of half-wits, its manners are the manners of bounders, its intelligence is the intelligence of shoe clerks, and its smell, despite all its expensive perfumes of Arabia, is the smell of dead and dying brains."

The old Nathan as you may see is still on call.

I would commend also to any reader's attention a subdivision of the chapter on "Playwrights," which Mr. Nathan devotes to the young propagandists, the youthful radicals who seek to overthrow the Anglicized theater of the capitalists, and to substitute a theater of life and of living problems.

"Little Red Writing Hoods," George calls them. "They seem at the moment unable to make up their minds whether it is better for them to go to Moscow, serve Stalin, make \$15 a week and freeze to death, or go to Hollywood, serve

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Metro, make \$500 a week and back in the warm sun."

Finds Reds Gnaw Greedily on White Bread of Capitalists.

He finds such eloquent Marxians as John Howard Lawson, Paul Sutton, Samuel Ornitz, John Wesley, Albert Bein, Albert Maltz, and the Messrs. Silar and Peters, who have written most of the propaganda dramas tinged with red for various radical producing groups, sold to Hollywood, or accepting help from the capitalistic Guggenheim Foundation. He catches the socialistic Elmer Rice being called to account by the government for a short payment on an income of \$157,000 a year. His exposures are ruthless and revealing.

George Jean Nathan is a brilliant analyst of the theater. For thirty years or more he has sat, a vigilant if embittered watchman, in his own Gotham tower observing the life and people of New York, theatrical New York in particular, and hating most of what he has observed. He believes thoroughly in the efficacy of so-called destructive criticism. It is, he reasons, the only criticism that makes its targets mad enough to stir them to reformative action.

He is not always fair, nor inclined to be. I never have caught him in a deliberately dishonest statement, but I often have caught him indulging his prerogative of personal conviction, to me a dishonest gesture. He can be cruelly unfair to an actor or actress to whom he has taken a dislike. Many of them he has read out of the theater. But curiously they continue to return and not infrequently to live and prosper to the confusion of the Nathan judgment. . . .

Book of Unacted Monologs

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The Cornelia Otis Skinner book, "Excuse It, Please," is made up of a variety of what might be described as unacted monologs. Miss Skinner, a credit to the stage family lineage she represents, has a gift for writing as well as characterization. Having made a success of those mono-dramas with which she has toured the country, she finds time hanging a bit heavily on her hands during the tours her success has dictated. Therefore she fills in the extra time writing new monologs. Those that please her particularly she adds to her spoken repertory. Those that do not fit the demands of the stage quite so completely she allows to collect in her desk. I assume, until she has enough to make a book.

"Excuse It, Please," is such a collection. Between these covers you will find Miss Skinner's original and amusing reactions to various adventures, including dancing and teatime, horseback riding and telephoning. They provide good light reading, particularly for the Cornelia Otis Skinner public, which is growing apace, or, perhaps, even faster.

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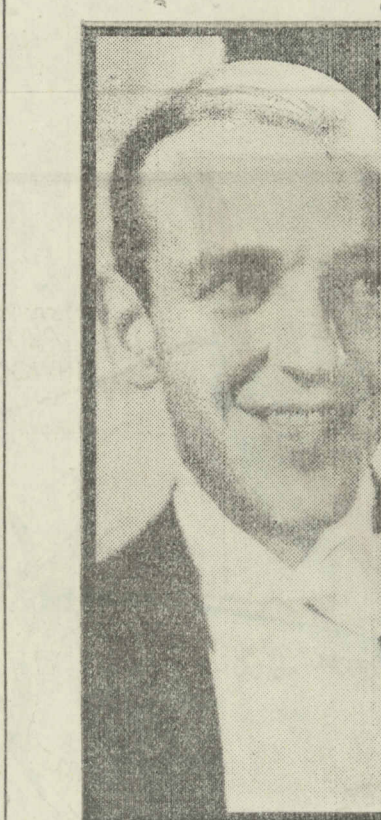
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COMES UP SMILING

One thing about Fred Astaire—he always comes up smiling. Maybe it's because he usually draws Ginger Rogers for a screen partner. As you know, probably, the two are now appearing in "Swing Time," which is in its third week at the Palace.

## Chicago Playbills