

The Well-Made Play

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The Well-Made Play

JOHN ROSENFELD

ALMOST ANNUALLY, and with a moderate degree of seriousness, the musical comedy management of the State Fair Music Hall in Dallas has sought futilely the book and score of a vintage piece called *Monsieur Beaucaire*. It was reasonably prosperous operetta material back in 1919-20 when it achieved the triple crown of theatrical success, London and New York production, and a Paris presentation in translation.

Despite the French title and hero, the story was actually American in origin. Its inventor was a Hoosier named Booth Tarkington. *Monsieur Beaucaire* in 1900 was only the second publication of his voluminous proliferation. The story hardly deserves to be told, but we must tell it to make a point.

The Duc d'Orleans has reneged at a state marriage proposed by his uncle, the French king. To escape the monarch's wrath M. le Duc has fled to England. Among the water cures and gambling houses of Bath he sets up under the name of M. Beaucaire as valet to his own valet. Then he royally trounces the British nobles who come to play cards with him. In a pixie mood he forces the dark and evil Duke of Winterset to introduce him to Bath society, and especially to the Duke's own "intended." She is the ravishingly lovely, ethereally beautiful, becomingly haughty Lady Mary Carlisle.

Lady Mary is yielding to Beaucaire's honeyed

tongue when he is "unveiled" by Winterset as a base-born menial. Whereupon she indignantly glides out of Lady Rellerton's ballroom and goes home on the arm of the double-crossing and sinister British nobleman.

Winterset isn't through yet with the pestiferous Beaucaire. He connives at having him clobbered within an inch of his life, leaving him with at least a broken leg or arm. Beaucaire, a fine swordsman but no Superman or even a Musketeer, is saved from mayhem only by the arrival of the French ambassador, who discloses the real and right royal identity.

Beaucaire now will go home and marry the lovely French girl of whom the king approves and whom he rejected out of what we Texans call mere "contrariness." Lady Mary is, to say the least, mortified. Beaucaire, or rather His Serene Highness, laments that man cannot be loved for himself alone. Titles, rank, and fortune play some part in it. 'Twas ever thus, even in Highland Park, Dallas.

None of the banality of this synopsis can convey the narrative skill with which the late Mr. Tarkington, who never saw a seventeenth-century duke, sustains interest through a sizable novelette and, generally, makes the reader feel better—charmed and "escaped." The virtuosity of Tarkington's artificiality, while it has its crudities, is a literary vein that

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recordings of this important *C Minor Symphony*, bringing the long-play total of the Brahms *First* to no fewer than twenty. You can buy anybody at the helm from Toscanini to H. Arthur Brown (lately of Tulsa), with Bruno Walter in between. But none of the older disks plays as freshly and range-fully as do these.

One is by Josef Krips of the Buffalo Philharmonic, conducting, however, the Vienna Philharmonic (London LL 1608), and the other is by Charles Munch and his immaculate Boston Symphony (RCA-Victor LM 2097). While the Krips recording lacks "revelation," it is the better interpretation and more traditional.

VIOLIN CONCERTOS: The competitive recordings of the Bruch *G Minor Concerto* and the Mendelssohn *E Minor* (London LL 1684) are myriad. This new bracketing recommends itself again by the sheer brilliancy of its tone—a modern sound for any machine. The soloist is Ruggiero Ricci. He is a Californian for all his Italian name, and was a contemporary of Menuhin as a boy-prodigy. He plays with much sensuousness of tone and an infectious lyrical sweep. Ricci's technique is a bit rough, or, we should say, brusque, largely because he has been making part of his living as a hard-driving concertmaster. This disk, however, is highly desirable for vivid recording and interpretative message. Piero Gamba, conducting the London Symphony, makes an interesting collaborator.

FIGH

The Resident Arts

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he could have continued and improved profitably.

Just to show that we are not riding a hobby, let us report that *Monsieur Beaucaire*, historically, was a Tarkington springboard to fame. It so appealed to the tasteful actor-producer, Richard Mansfield, that he optioned the story the moment it appeared in *McClure's*. Mans-

field had *Beaucaire* dramatized around 1911, with Tarkington helping. This succeeded in bringing the author of the later *Clarence* and *Seventeen* into the theater.

We have read the Mansfield script and find it, on the whole, even daintier than the Tarkington story. It was to get further improvement later on. This was to come in 1919 at the hands of a strangely gifted English writer, Frederick Lonsdale, who converted the Tarkington novel and the Tarkington-Greenleaf play into one of the best musical comedy scripts we ever inspected. This opinion of 1920 was confirmed this year when we obtained, through the offices of Paul Beisman, manager of the St. Louis Municipal Opera, a dusty, but legible, prompt-book found in a corner of his Forest Park plant.

There is a published version of the *Monsieur Beaucaire* score which contains music of grace if no especial inventiveness. Two numbers could be hits if revised. It is one of the few works for the popular stage composed by André Messager of Paris, a serious musician and a great conductor of his time. The Southwest can remember him, if it will. He conducted the Paris Conservatory Orchestra on its 1919 good-will tour. Dallas, Houston, and neighboring localities heard him. The name of Messager returned to currency a few years ago when Mary Garden, great diva of the past, lectured in this vicinage and made a point of belaboring him with the vehemence of a woman scorned.

We saw this *Monsieur Beaucaire* in New York during 1919-20, and were captivated. It was stylistically so beguiling that it ruined us, at least, for the conventions of gypsies and hussars by whom the operetta stage thrived. Efforts to co-ordinate the *Monsieur Beaucaire* score and book, both in hand in Dallas, are still far short of coming up with the "material" required to produce such a show. It still would take a complete refabrication in the production mill of musical comedy. For what did the

actors wear? What were the dances? And is this the complete script—especially for the role of Beau Nash, arbiter of Bath's Pump Room, and played with immortal success by the late Lennox Pawle, a great British comedian? Or were there significant ad libs? So a revival of *Monsieur Beaucaire* in American musical comedy "stock" would take more time and effort than anybody as yet wants to give.

Both the Dallas and St. Louis civic musical comedy theaters are interested in repossessing *Monsieur Beaucaire*, and thought they had something more practical a few years ago. The author of the libretto and the lyrics was reported living at a New York address in 1954. But special-delivery inquiries dispatched to him were returned with the information that there was no Frederick Lonsdale at that brownstone front—and there was no forwarding address. Two months later one read of the death of the once-celebrated British playwright in Cannes.

We don't think Lonsdale would have been much help even if pinioned. While his vogue as a playwright had long since passed, his refusal to sit down and talk business was as capricious as ever. Not that the slim, frail Mr. Lonsdale was seclusive. He was usually visible at first nights, in clubs and bistros. He was available, if caught, for the press and press agents. He might remark that he found the plot for *Canaries Sometimes Sing* under a cabbage leaf, but he would "make copy," as the newspapers say.

Lonsdale gave the impression of a wasp-tongued snob, tolerable by middlin' manners and an instinct for gaiety and generosity. While he labored fitfully at his trade of playwright, he was no more reliable in personal dealings than an Italian grand opera diva. We doubt that he would have lent a hand to make *Monsieur Beaucaire* stage-worthy in either St. Louis or Dallas.

Others knew Lonsdale more favorably. He

had his coterie of adorers like Gerald Du Maurier, actor Cary Grant, and Frances Donaldson, eldest of his three daughters. Mrs. Donaldson, a talented writer with control and form, exposes the other side of the Lonsdale coin in a biography just published in America by Lippincott. The work was undertaken at the suggestion of her father.

She does not manufacture one's affection for Lonsdale, the man, but she does depict vividly his place in the theatrical limelight of the 1920's and 1930's. Unconsciously, she makes a good case for the "well-made play." For the "well-made play" or the perfect musical comedy libretto was Lonsdale's achievement.

Over a career span from 1908 to 1950, Lonsdale completed twenty-six works, eleven of which were for musical comedy. There were some remunerative Hollywood oddments in this total. He died solvent, with his more or less abandoned wife and daughters well taken care of. A sybarite himself, he had few financial resources to go on when he passed away at seventy-three. Mrs. Donaldson estimates that the "Reaper" beat the sheriff by about fifteen months.

But there was a time, starting with *The Maid of the Mountains* and *Monsieur Beaucaire*, and running through the period of "legit" supremacy that included *Aren't We All*, *Spring Cleaning*, *The Last of Mrs. Cheney*, *On Approval*, *The High Road*, and *Once Is Enough* (as late as 1938), when Lonsdale was the most successful writer in the chic theater of two metropolises, London and New York.

We know from restudy of the old American little theater repertories that the Lonsdale of this period was the playwright most likely to pay the mortgage on those bedeviled operations, if the amateurs could master a tolerable British accent.

Mrs. Donaldson herself is insufferably supercilious on the subjects of the British com-

moner, the superior qualities of the British peerage even when in its cups, and the irksome privileges arrogated by Lonsdale's genius. She calls him "Freddy," not Father, and *Freddy* is the American title of her book. His family name, incidentally, was Leonard not Lonsdale.

She raises the valid point, however, of the current disappearance of the "well-made play." She reminds one of how much the English-speaking theater needs it. For her Freddy was in direct descent from the "dandaical" masters who began their march in 1865 with T. W. Robertson's *Society*. As usual new trends in art are misread. It was nothing to the same period that critics heard their first Brahms and thought they found another Bach and not the earlier and better Tchaikovskian that he was. Similarly a play like *Society* was greeted as an antidote for the sterile romantic theater of Shakespeare to Lytton, and not as the promulgation of a new idiom of entertainment. Critics tacked on it the name "comedy of manners," as if this were something by Goldsmith or Sheridan.

The looming figure among the ideological playwrights is, of course, Ibsen. But to return to the Brahms allusion, it is doubtful that Ibsen has been assayed accurately until recently. The first English translation of his plays—which captured only a fraction of his quality—revealed the violent melodramatist and dour preacher, however profound his theses. More recent productions, without the heavy drapes and melancholy china stoves, have disclosed a more versatile entertainer who threaded pure comedy through even such a sad text as *Hedda Gabler*. Eva LeGallienne recently has delivered several other Ibsen plays with the playwright highlighted as an entertaining craftsman. Without detracting from his genius, one can still say that Ibsen was not the seminal playwright of his period and that Robertson was.

Ibsen picked up his approach from French, German, and Scandinavian precursors, as the

English-writing line derived itself from T. W. Robertson on through Jones, Pinero, Wilde, Shaw, Maugham, and Lonsdale. In the dramatic dark ages of the 1950's the impulse is almost spent, but not quite. The Terrence Rattigan of *Separate Tables*, *O Mistress Mine*, *The Deep Blue Sea*, and even *The Winslow Boy* thrives on two continents.

America's disciples of the Wilde-Shaw school are practically extinct, but there is fragrance to their memory. We would recall Vincent Lawrence, Philip Barry, S. N. Behrman (still living), and Robert Sherwood in certain moods. Otherwise the American trend in playwriting has veered sharply toward the Germans, an influence recognized as far back as Eugene O'Neill and still maintained by Tennessee Williams.

To some degree it points to the minimizing of the Anglo-Saxon influence and a magnification of the Continental in a sort of pulp-paper blood-guts-trauma formula. If it has strewn Broadway with used-up libidos, it also has cast its noxious shadow on the American movie screen. This, we maintain, is as chargeable for a fall-off in theatrical revenue as television and night horse racing.

The English-speaking stage of 1957 is, for the most part, an unsettled thing except for the trivialities of meaning and the monuments of style sustained by young Mr. Rattigan.

Otherwise it is a jejune theater, handicapped somewhat by the informal but none the less positive censorship of both British and American politics. It is a theater in which no potential Thurber or Nugent of today would dare write about the Sacco-Vanzetti case as in *The Male Animal*. If they might somehow avoid being hauled before a committee, they would have spun their wheels, nevertheless, for there wouldn't be a dime of backer-money in sight.

It is a speculative theater in which the best commercial bets are musical comedies geared not to a resident economy but to that most fantastic of contemporary phenomena, the

economy of the expense account. For who would buy *My Fair Lady* tickets at \$50.00 each except out of the parent company's pocket?

When the theater is not musical but merely literary, it becomes pornographic, as has literature. This has some slight philosophical justification via Strindberg, Wedekind, and Brecht, but what it really points up pathetically is a lack of ideas.

George Bernard Shaw contended that high cerebration, not uncontained sensuality, is the greatest ecstasy. He almost has proved it in the short time since his death. An enterprising Shavian revival on Broadway, like Laughton's *Major Barbara*, can make any tin roof less hot for a Williams cat, even if one uses nothing but the box-office tally as the criterion.

Before we can conclude our argument that all plays should be well-made, we must clear out academic underbrush. Robertson, we have tried to show, attempted in *Society*, *Caste*, *Play*, and *School* (he liked one-word titles) to convey his picture of society through focused satire.

Pinero and Jones came up with plots as complex as the innards of an adding machine, but resolved them through a modicum of humor, manners, and much skilled melodrama. Oscar Wilde, the most underestimated playwright of his period, delivered a wit and a style that are still effective. *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance* (a capital but ignored play), *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest* are all susceptible to revival sixty-five years after their creation.

Shaw probably saw himself as another Ibsen with an Irish racialism and a British habitat. He also would have been mortally offended if one had called him anything but a writer of comedies. For Shaw, when properly presented, is antic pulpsteering, offering the public an exhilaration of verbal and ideological coruscation. As Shaw slowed down, Somerset Maugham of *The Constant Wife* and *The Circle* entered the picture with "problem plays" written as

"comedies of manners." Maugham's celebrated *Rain*, it must be remembered, is a bit in the German manner; but its dramatization was never Maugham's own.

Combining the quick wit of Wilde with the ducal milieu of Maugham was Lonsdale. We won't venture to guess how *The Last of Mrs. Cheyney* would please tomorrow at, say, the New York City Center, but we can tell you how it played twenty years ago. It was easy claptrap, always a little wise, and, on the whole, informative about life and people—if not about things.

The strain that runs through drama in English from Robertson to Lonsdale is, of course, the compulsion to entertain before one can instruct. Lonsdale's daughter says of him that he had one active phobia, dulness. He disliked bores and was rude to them. If he managed to offer anything personally it was companionship, fresh, witty, and gay.

Lonsdale's dramatic milieu usually was a country castle owned by a recurrent Duke of Bristol and Duchess of So-and-So. How he knew about them remains a mystery. Lonsdale never traveled in such circles. He was the third son of a tobacconist at St. Helier on the Isle of Jersey. This was provincialism compounded. He married the daughter of an impoverished army officer who had retired to Jersey. Toward his wife and three daughters he exhibited a steady tenderness and solicitude for their well-being. For half his adult life, however, he lived outside their orbit. If Mrs. Lonsdale objected, the eldest daughter and biographer deposed not.

Lonsdale wrote his first play as if he had nothing else to do. It was for the equivalent of a St. Helier, Isle of Jersey, little theater. After that came a steadier output that soon brought wealth, recognition, and, we guess, a measure of historicalness. If Lonsdale's characters were not as rounded as Maugham's, they cracked better jokes—jokes almost as good as those Wilde's Algernons and Ernests offered.

In 1939 Lonsdale tried his only serious play, eventually named *Foreigners*, dealing with the impending second world war. It was his most conspicuous failure.

He was meant to preach but not to orate, to expound with a make-believe world but not to declaim. This is the story of the drama which the world sorely misses. Without it the theater is stifled when not destitute.

This is the well-made play, the turn of honest craftsmen in the theater. For the well-made play commands a public. And with the public commanded, it can be told anything. So Shaw discovered at the outset. So did Frederick Lonsdale, who had less to say but a more graceful way of saying it.

Reviews of Books

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have been sifted and embellished by time. Only the most spectacular moments have survived, and some of these have been preserved mainly in the minds of old-timers, where memory and imagination sometimes seem to have a way of mingling.

However, Tom Lea gives personal testimonials as personal testimonials and no more. All sober facts worthy of record at the time have been faithfully drawn from reliable sources, researched by Holland McCombs and documented by Francis L. Fugate. Lea gives them unity by grouping them around his single hero, Captain King. "He was a rough man," said one contemporary of King, "but he was a good man. I never knew a rougher man, nor a better one."

At the beginning of Volume II, the style drops to relatively drab prose. It could hardly be otherwise. Captain King is gone, and with him have gone the colorful and thrilling times. In his place is left his son-in-law, Robert Justus Kleberg—a good man, also, but a tame one. Kleberg had none of the roughness that made King such a fascinating character. He was a lawyer who liked to plow little fields and

build little towns. And he plowed some little fields, and he built a little town. The little town, appropriately named "Kingsville," subsequently got to be a bur in the ranch's bosom because of the high land taxes voted by its inhabitants.

Robert Kleberg had sons and daughters who led active lives and married and had more children who led active lives. All their activities and marriages were painstakingly recorded in the society columns of the Kingsville newspaper and had to be included, with eulogistic but varied opinions, by the faithful author of *The King Ranch*. Small wonder that Volume II grows painfully prosaic.

The style picks up considerably when Kleberg's youngest son, Robert Justus, Jr., generally known as Bob, begins taking over the management of the ranch. Along with the land, Bob inherited his German father's hard-headed business judgment and the romantic fire of his Irish grandfather, Captain King. He turned the plowed fields back into range land and, there being no more bandits to satisfy his fiery blood, went into the raising of race horses on a large scale. Since 1946, the total winnings of King Ranch race horses have averaged well over \$400,000 per year. King Ranch quarter horses, bred for work with cattle and general saddle purposes, are another important development, sparked largely by Bob.

So amidst a new kind of drama stemming chiefly from Bob's aggressiveness, originality, and keen eye for horse and cow flesh, author Lea's words begin to sparkle once more, and by the end of Volume II he is his old self again.

Of particular importance are the appendices. There are ten for Volume I. They are sample facsimiles of Captain King's contracts and a description, with maps, of early land grants out of which the estate was carved. The nine appendices of Volume II include technical articles by specialists in defense against brush encroachment, oil development on the ranch,