

THEATER *in Wartime*



Joan McCracken—from smash hit "Oklahoma!"

By Sgt. GEORG N. MEYERS

YANK Staff Writer

SHOW people will never forget the year 1944. Thousands of men and women from the legitimate theater were overseas in uniform—actors and actresses, writers, scene designers, stage hands—and all looked back in wonderment at what war had done to their business. And well they might, because those remaining at work behind the footlights have hoisted stage plays to their greatest height of popularity since the movies started talking.

Letters and newspapers from home told the story. On Broadway even bad shows were packing 'em in. And on Main Streets from Butte, Mont., to Baton Rouge, La., war workers and farmers—the families of servicemen everywhere—were seeing their first stage shows in the old home town since the opry house was boarded up and bequeathed to the barn swallows.

Bob Francis, legit editor of the *Billboard*, got down to cases with a comparative study of two wartime years, 1918 and 1944, and discovered that times do not change. During the 1943-44 season on Broadway there were 41 comedies, 30 straight dramas, 25 musicals, four melodramas, one farce, three spectacles and two variety shows. Seventeen of the straight dramas and five of the musical shows had a war slant. Now check this line-up against that of 1918-19 when there were 41 comedies, 31 straight dramas, 26 musicals, 12 melodramas, five farces and four spectacles. Fifteen dramas and nine musicals had war plots.

Everybody expected the New York theater to pick up during the war, on the basis of what happened in 1917-18, but probably even the most optimistic producers didn't dare hope that in one year 90 road companies would be playing to standees in reconverted movie houses, Odd Fellows Halls, civic centers and high-school auditoriums from one end of the country to the other. During 1944 there was an average of 35 companies on the road every week, with everything from "Abie's Irish Rose" and "Tobacco Road" to "The Merry Widow" and Katherine Dunham's "Tropical Revue." The show that probably more towns saw than any other was the comedy "Kiss and Tell." At one time there were three "Kiss" companies on the road besides the one that has been in New York nearly two years.

Many shows played split weeks and one-night stands in such houses as the Coliseum in Sioux Falls, S. Dak.; the Convention Hall in Enid, Okla.; the Lyceum in Minneapolis, Minn.; the Orpheum in Sioux City, Iowa; the State in Winston-Salem, N. C.; the Union High School Auditorium in Salinas, Calif.; the Capitol in Yakima, Wash.; the Fargo in Fargo, N. Dak.; the Chief in Colorado Springs, Colo.; and the University of Wyoming Auditorium in Laramie, Wyo.

There are easier ways to make a living in these times than by going on tour. But travel troubles notwithstanding, Chicago had 32 shows in nine theaters in the 1943-44 season. Their combined runs totaled 280 weeks, a 10-year record for Chicago. Philadelphia had three houses running most of the year; they didn't even take a break during Lent. In Minneapolis, Lee Murray booked 11 touring shows into the Lyceum Theater in an eight-month season.

A typical touring troupe was the "Coast" company of "Kiss and Tell." The cast traveled 14,768 miles in 35 weeks and played an average of more than one performance per day. The trip covered

2 THEATER

20 states. Often the performers lost track of where they were. Actress Mary Jackson said she would wake up in the morning and pick up the telephone book in her hotel room to find out what town she was in.

Most of the time the company made out all right with hotel accommodations. In Minneapolis their hotel caught fire, but nobody got hurt. They spent some of their nights on sleepers and once, going from Fresno to Sacramento, Calif., they had to stand all night in the aisles of a coach. Sometimes they would get up in the morning after a night in a Pullman, play a matinee and night performance, then crawl back into the same Pullman bunks and ride all night again.

The company, including cast, understudies, stage hands and property people, totaled 27 persons and a dog. It wasn't always the same dog. Before curtain time every night the question would go around: "Have we got a dog yet?" Usually the assistant stage manager

would borrow a pup from a local kid. The role of Marchbanks was played by dachshunds, poodles, terriers and airedales, always unrehearsed.

In St. Paul, Minn., the actors competed for laughs with a sparrow that flew around over the stage and audience. In Milwaukee, Wis., the footlights awakened a resident bat that swooped down from the backstage rafters and stole the show.

The company missed only one scheduled performance: after riding through a flood all day on the way to Oklahoma City, they missed their matinee. Another time they arrived late at the Corn Palace in Mitchell, S. Dak. To keep the audience amused, they left the curtain up while the stage was being set. It took 90 minutes, and the audience made the stage hands take a curtain call before the first act started.

Dressing rooms ranged from a cubicle where your head was in the steam pipes to luxurious suites in the Kansas City Music Hall. At one theater the only way you could get from one side of the set to the other backstage was to go down in the basement to an outside door, run around the building and come in another door.

Although the "road" played to socko business, the "straw-hat" or summer-theater groups that blossom annually in the countrysides, especially in New England, were hard hit. Gas rationing and overcrowded trains and busses were responsible. About the only 1944 summer theaters that broke even were those that were close to big cities or that moved into the cities. The Bucks County Playhouse, for instance, nailed up its doors and moved into the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel ballroom in Philadelphia.

Nonprofessional "little theaters" from coast to coast have felt the pinch of war. Before the war, many towns depended on college or community little theaters for their only taste of flesh-and-blood drama. Well-established noncommercial groups like the Pasadena Community Playhouse in Pasadena, Calif., the University of Washington's Showboat and Penthouse Theaters in Seattle, and the College of the Pacific Little Theatre in Stockton, Calif., have held on in spite of the shortage of males for casting and the competition from commercial road companies.

THE manpower bugaboo put some crimps in the professional theater, too. The armed forces had more than 1,150 members from the New York roster of Actors' Equity alone. "We lived in a cross-fire between the draft board and Hollywood," says Broadway producer Brock Pemberton, speaking of his road company of "Janie," a play calling for several young men of military age. "Every time we'd get some man who was doing well in a part, the Army would grab him or Hollywood would like his looks and steal



Fredric March plays the lead role of Major Joppolo in "A Bell for Adano," the play about AMG in Sicily adapted from the novel.



Veteran Frank Fay wows Broadway in "Harvey," a play about an invisible rabbit.

THEATER

him." Hollywood has a manpower problem, too.

One young man "stolen" from Pemberton's "Janie," which is no longer touring, is a perfect example of a struggling player reaching stardom because of the manpower shortage. His name is Alfred Alderdice, but you may have seen him in the movies under the name of Tom Drake. There are many others getting breaks they might not have gotten otherwise because they're below physical induction standards.

On the other hand, the war-stimulated theater has been a boon to some old-timers who clung to show business through its lean years. The best example is Frank Fay, whose long career is almost a personification of the stage's history since the last war—more down than up. Fay is now at the peak of popularity in "Harvey," a comedy about a timid fellow who pals around with a rabbit that isn't there. (Harvey is the rabbit's name.) Fay's performance is ranked with those of Leo G. Carroll in "The Late George Apley" and Frédric March in "A Bell for Adano" as the best acting of the year.

Finding material worth producing has been as neat a trick as finding somebody to play in it, with men like WO Irwin Shaw and Pvt. William Saroyan overseas and several other top-drawer writers in the service. The lack of material was reflected during the 1943-44 season by the decision of the New York Drama Critics Circle that no play of American authorship was worthy of its annual award. For the same reason the Pulitzer Prize committee omitted its drama award and instead gave a special prize to Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein 2d for their musical show, "Oklahoma!"

"Oklahoma!" which has been a smash hit since it opened nearly two years ago, popularized the introduction of ballet in otherwise standard musical shows. Other musicals with ballet sequences playing on Broadway by the end of 1944 were "One Touch of Venus," "Carmen Jones," "Follow the Girls," "Bloomer Girl," "Sadie Thompson," "Seven Lively Arts" and "On the Town."

Only two serious war plays really caught the public's fancy—"The Eve of St. Mark," Maxwell Anderson's drama of two seasons ago about a doomed platoon in the Pacific, and Paul Osborn's recent dramatization of "A Bell for Adano," the novel by war correspondent John Hersey about the American Military Government in a Sicilian village. Other war plays came and faltered, partly because they were full of guff about the Army and Navy which audiences knew was phony. Notable exceptions were Moss Hart's "Winged Victory" and Irving Berlin's world-touring "This Is the Army," both with soldier casts for Army Emergency Relief.

The best comedy about a soldier is not really a war play. It is "The Voice of the Turtle," whose cast has just three presons—Betty Field (who replaced Margaret Sullivan), Elliott Nugent and Audrey Christie. It covers the adventures of a GI stood up by his date on a week-end pass.

In Boston, where the novels "Strange Fruit" and "Forever Amber" were banned, the censor previewed "Men to the Sea," a play about Navy wives in a Brooklyn rooming house. He called the story "unedifying and apart from the truth" and ordered 80 cuts in the dialogue or no show. The play then did sell-out business in Boston. But when it came to New York, even with all of its lines restored, it lasted only 24 performances.

Show people usually figure that if a play or musical sticks out 100 performances on Broadway, it is enough of a hit to make money. From May 1, 1943, to Apr. 30, 1944, New York had 64 new shows. Only 19 of these survived the 100-performance mark. They made money; 45 did not.

In spite of all the hazards, Broadway's biggest problem—finding an "angel" to back a play—has almost evaporated. It seemed as if everybody wanted to put some money into a Broadway show, and no wonder.

"Life With Father," now in its sixth year on Broadway, has grossed almost \$8 million from its New York and road companies. More than two million people have seen it in New York and another three million have seen the touring casts. When "Arsenic and Old Lace" closed last June after 1,440 Broadway performances, the books showed a take of about \$4 million from New York and road companies.

The musical "Bloomer Girl" played a three-week break-in run in Philadelphia and created

THEATER



Every musical seems to have a ballet number. In "Sadie Thompson," song-and-dance version of "Rain," Milada Mladova (center) gave out with ballet in a South Seas setting.

such a ticket scramble that there was a \$100,000 sale before opening night in New York, for which seats were priced at \$9. But this record did not last long. Billy Rose, who reclaimed the Ziegfeld Theater from the movies and used it to house his "Seven Lively Arts," reported an advance sale of \$500,000. Opening-night top price for this extravagant revue was \$24, which also entitled the customers to sip free champagne between the acts.

Rose also set some precedents with "Carmen Jones," his lavish modernized version of the opera "Carmen." This production long ago passed the Metropolitan's record of 219 performances of the original opera, and in 13 months in the largest legitimate house on Broadway it grossed more than \$1 million on a \$230,000 investment.

Sudden mass enthusiasm for the theater has brought big changes in the character of the audience. It's not the "carriage trade" any more. Women come in slacks, and men sometimes show up in shirt-sleeves or wind-breakers, right from their shift at some war plant. Many people are now seeing stage plays who never wanted to before or could not afford to. Some, who had never been to anything but movie houses, haven't liked the reserved-seat idea. They figure first come, first served, and if the SRO sign is out they want to know when the next show begins.

TODAY'S audiences also include thousands of servicemen. Every day the American Theater Wing gives away from 750 to 1,000 seats to New York's stage shows. This is the same organization that has set up seven Stage Door Canteens in the States and one in London. The ATW has also sponsored overseas productions like Katharine Cornell's "Barrets of Wimpole Street."

Other theatrical entertainment committees have sent professional players, usually girls, to overseas bases where they form the nucleus of casts for shows staged by soldiers. Italy and North Africa have had such a troupe, and GIs in the Aleutians have seen "The Doughgirls" and "Kiss and Tell."

Some actors in the service have been able to continue in the entertainment field on behalf of the troops. Maj. Maurice Evans, the outstanding Shakespearean actor in America, has trouped through Hawaiian bases with a Shakespearean repertoire. Once, after a performance of "Hamlet," a colonel who wanted to say something nice about the show, told Evans: "I certainly enjoyed your acting. What did you do in civilian life?"

Show people in the armed forces are hoping just as hard as those now working that the momentum built up by the legitimate theater during wartime will keep the industry rolling in high gear for a long time after the war. This is a tall order, because cut-backs in war industries have already begun to slow theater activities in a few isolated cases. Optimistic producers, however, believe the stage will continue to draw heavily for at least five to seven years after the war, but they say the shows will have to be topnotch.