

# The Theatre

By **WARD MOREHOUSE**

**W**hatever the changes wrought by the war, the nation's theatrical capital is still doing business at the same old stand—Broadway. The New York play factory, a concentration of showshops, still flourishes over a chunk of midtown Manhattan; that area bounded on the south by the Empire theatre, the north by Columbus Circle, the west by Eighth Avenue, and the east by the Center Theatre and the Ziegfeld. Or by Billy Rose himself.

Let's now have a post-war look at the frenzied play district which operates under the all-inclusive trade name of "Broadway" and which is populated by humanity in great variety—actors, authors, producers, agents, bus barkers, hucksters, shills, hawkers, hecklers, pickpockets, plainclothesmen, ticket brokers, autograph hoodlums, first-nighters, peddlers, beggars and millionaires. The Great White Way's electric displays are again up to their old-time gymnastics. In the brazen daylight Broadway may present a quite bedraggled appearance but after nightfall it is again the country's dazzling midway, sputtering with all the brilliance of pre-war evenings.

There are now, as of this post-war moment, 30-odd theatres available for legitimate productions, as against 60-odd some 20 to 25 years ago. Many newcomers have appeared in the ranks of the producers in recent seasons but Lee Shubert, past 70 and still as spry as a tap dancer, is still the emperor of show business; he doesn't do the most plays but he controls the most theatres.



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The Theatre Guild remains vigorous and prosperous after 26 years of activity. Such veteran showmen as John Golden, Brock Pemberton, Max Gordon and Arthur Hopkins still ply their trade. Fritz Meyer, sage of Shubert Alley, remains on the door of the Shubert Theatre as philosopher and ticket-taker. The Empire goes along as the town's oldest and most distinguished playhouse. And an enormous parking lot serves as a reminder of just how big a place the famous old Hippodrome used to be.

The Broadway of bygone years, as we have been told, was one of Rector's, Shanley's, Churchill's, and Reisenweber's. And also Jack's, to which the stay-ups swarmed in after-theatre hours for eggs and Irish bacon. But now the New Yorkers, along with out-of-towners who know their way about, are flocking, in this fall of '46, to such well-known places as Sardi's and Twenty-One, Toots Shor's and Dinty Moore's, the Algonquin and Gallagher's, the Blue Ribbon and the grill of the Lambs (when invited by members). Those who stray beyond the precise boundaries of the theatre district soon find their way, of course, into such fancy establishments as the Stork, the Barberry Room, the Versailles and El Morocco.

The people who make up the weird world of midtown Manhattan—scenic designers, hotel-room playwrights, hallroom composers, night-shift house dicks, harassed room clerks, snarling cab drivers, tired old stage doormen—include, of course,



young and earnest beginners from all parts of the United States, struggling to make names for themselves. The Forties and Fifties are again aswamp this fall with young girls from the midlands who are seeking stage careers, eating at the Automat and Ralph's and Walgreen's, comparing casting notes at the Penn-Astor drug store, living in two-by-fours at the Royalton and at the Barbizon and at the Rehearsal Club, and belonging to the strife and strain and tumult of every-day New York. Not necessarily liking it, frequently loathing it, but determined to stick it out. "Do you really enjoy living in New York?" a New Yorker of 25-years-standing was asked recently. "Well," he said, "I'm damned if I know. I don't think I do. I'm probably sure I don't. But I've been too busy for all these years to try to find out."

Now, going into the matter of Broadway's plays, new and old, let it be recorded that the theatrical season of 1946-47 began after Labor Day, the play-parade gained momentum in early October, and there are indications that November will bring forth a fairly heavy production schedule. This was to have been the season of the classics—Shaw, Shakespeare, Ibsen, Rostand, Synge—and I fear that things are going to become a little classically top-heavy before New Year's Day rolls around.

The current season, with hold-over hits refusing to budge, will develop another theatre shortage. Old hits still with us, and likely to hold their stages indefinitely, include *Harvey*, *The Voice of the Turtle*, *Born Yesterday*, *State of the Union*, *Oklahoma!*, *Show Boat*, *Anna Lucasta*, *Carousel*, *Three To Make Ready*, and *Call Me Mister*. And, to be sure, the booming *Annie Get Your Gun*. With such a crop heartily and tenaciously around, it again becomes apparent that that branch of the amusement business known as the legitimate theatre could well make use of some playhouses that have been sold

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A word as to the summer of '46: It brought along a few odds and ends to mid-Manhattan, including *Maid in the Ozarks* (very, very odd) and the new ice revue at the Center, this one called *Icetime*, worth seeing. And those who were around the sweltering Forties during the hot weather had the pleasure of coming upon two excellent performances—that of Bert Wheeler, substituting for Frank Fay as Elwood P. Dowd in *Harvey* at the 48th, and that of Beatrice Pearson in *The Voice of the Turtle*.

Miss Pearson is a young Texas-born actress on her way to doing fine things in the theatre. She revealed her abundant talent with fine performances in *Over Twenty-One* and *The Mermaids Singing*, and her sense of the rightness of a part by withdrawing from *He Who Gets Slapped* before it came to New York. She is serious about the theatre and has no surging curiosity about Hollywood. She wants to act! And she is doing it right now as John Van Druten's charming heroine, Sally Middleton.

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