

The Funniest Things in the Current Plays

Lines to be Heard Just Now in New York's Theatres Which Have Succeeded in Getting Heartiest Laughs from Audiences

THE best of the golden laugh has been the favorite indoor sport of both playgoers and producers this season. Never in the history of the local stage has the bromide that people go to the theatre to be amused, not preached to, been so true, and never has the public been so lavish in its patronage of the theatre.

Unquestionably the war is responsible for both phenomena. The prosperity of at least a certain portion of the public has given the New York theatres their most lucrative year, and the contemplation of the European débâcle has created an abnormal demand for the humorous on the stage. There is a surfeit of tragedy on the first page of the daily paper, and while as yet only the echoes of the guns have reached these shores the average theatregoer has appropriated the slogan of the Tired Business Man: "Make Me Laugh." The theatrical manager has accepted the challenge, and all season his stages have been occupied by comedies with or without music, farces, burlesques, satires, or plays combining the ingredients of these.

Some of the speeches that have been filling New York theatres with laughter this Winter are illuminating as to what an audience considers funny, and likewise they are an interesting commentary on the task of the producer, who must know a laugh when he sees one in manuscript, since all authors are not Shaws.

It is recorded that Winchell Smith and Jack Hazzard, the one a veteran dramatist, the other an expert comedian, were surprised at the uproarious reception accorded their farce, "Turn to the Right," when it was first acted at the Gaiety. They had builded better than they knew, because much of the humor in the play was inherent in the characters and the success of their portrayal and in the situations. The speech that invariably causes the greatest paroxysm of laughter looks innocent enough on paper. Two crooks just out of Sing Sing have come to the home of a third and are giving him some uneasy moments because his mother is ignorant of his sin and their characters. The visitors learn that their pal is in dire need of \$125 to save the old home from the clutches of the village skinflint.

"And if you can't give him that hundred and twenty-five bucks your mother will get wise that you're four-flushing, won't she?"

"That's what I'm afraid of."

And then the third member of the trio, a safe blower from Manhattan, with the fine scorn of the city crook for the narrow aspects of village life, breaks in with "Is there anybody in this town got a hundred and twenty-five?"

A moment later the pickpocket boasts he could take the money out of the village miser's shoe and he'd never feel it, which calls forth the observation from his pal that "them rubes don't never carry a roll, they bury it."

A variant of the alcoholic jest is the exclamation of one of the visitors when Mrs. Bascom offers him a glass of milk, a beverage he confesses he "ain't never used much." "Gee, that's bully! Ain't there nothin' in it but milk?"

The obsolete aside has been revived and cleverly used by the author of "Pals First" at the Fulton. The expedient of having a masquerading vagabond converse with a very deaf old lady, shouting

perfectly proper answers to her questions and then adding an impertinent speech in an undertone, is used to excellent effect. The fact that the unctuous Tom Wise plays the rôle of the impostor heightens its comic aspect. The conversation begins:

"I am sometimes a little hard of hearing and must ask you to speak distinctly."

(Aside) "Sometimes! I would like to have a dollar for every word you have muffed in the last ten years."

"An open door is often most dangerous."

"Extremely. (Aside) And often mighty convenient, too."

"My brother told me of your sad affliction."

"Did he? (Aside) Well, he must have yelled his head off, then."

On another occasion, discoursing on women, this more or less beloved vagabond says: "I know 'em. They are all alike, from virgins to vampires."

The effeminate man, a type that has been the leit motif of stage entertain-

ment circuit after a long engagement at the Thirty-ninth Street Theatre, a old women and men whose lives cent in an old ladies' home. To this retire Abe, a retired sea Captain, goes with his wife, Angie, and during the course of their stay much lonely philosophy is expounded.

"One man to thirty women is a mighty poor arrangement," Abe is led to conclude after a brief stay at the home during which he is the particular pet of the other thirty inmates. Again he discovers that "it is an awfully dangerous thing to be a hero, because nine times out of ten they fall down and never get up again."

"You can't never tell what stepchildren will do," says one of the matrimonial experts. "That's why I was always agin marryin' a widower." "I would like to know where you'd find a decent behaved man if not in an old ladies' home?" asks another, while a third serves after the contest for Abe's favor, has ruffled the serene surface of the home, "Women can be the wisest at

Profit is the only thing in business, and profit is imagination, and imagination is seldom truth. It's what you hope for. The world doesn't believe the truth. It didn't believe there was an America for Columbus to discover. They didn't believe Alexander Bell had a telephone any more than they thought Cyrus Field could lay the Atlantic cable and those fellows were telling the truth all the time and were considered crazy. I tell you there are certain necessary business lies."

And again: "We're brought up that way. Parents tell their children that Santa Claus comes down the chimney—in a steam-heated flat. Little Mary is told that the stork is going to bring her a baby brother and she sits for hours at the window watching for it to come, and they tell her the stork came in the door while she was asleep. You meet Smith on the street. You say, 'I hope you slept well.' That's a lie. You don't care a damn if he never sleeps."

When the wager is finally on and all of the man's friends consciously or unconsciously are co-operating to make him tell an untruth, his sweetheart embarrasses him by asking him if he ever loved another woman. After a momentary hesitation he confesses his guilt, and when the inevitable "Who?" comes, he unfalteringly replies, "Maude Adams!" The answer has not invariably been that. Mr. Collier is famous for his ability to suit the word to the occasion, and Lillian Russell or some other actress who has chanced to be identified in the audience by the farceur has heard her name substituted.

Guy Bolton and P. G. Wodehouse have done more than any other librettists of the season to fill in the spoken interludes of musical comedies with quips and jokes, both because they have written more and also better libretti than any other authors. "Miss Springtime," "Have a Heart," and "Oh, Boy!" are from their freely flowing fountain pens, and while the Gilbertian laurels are not in danger the humor found in the three pieces is above the average. Here are some samples from "Have a Heart," which recently vacated the Liberty for engagements in Chicago and Philadelphia:

Henry, (Billy B. Van.) a smart elevator boy in a department store, suggests to a shopper in search of her husband that a check-room for husbands might not be a bad idea. And then he has an afterthought. "Ah, but tell me this: What are we to do with old husbands left over thirty days?"

"Where are the demonstrations?" asks the shopper.

"No demonstrations on Thursdays."

"Not even a special sale?"

"Special sale of bathtubs, but no demonstration."

Henry's suggestion to the henpecked husband, who appears shortly, that his wife must be "some social butterfly," meets with the reply that, the way she goes through his clothes, "moth would be a better name." A minute later Henry expresses the wish that "that fool Adam had died with all his ribs intact."

Henry invites his Queen of the Movies to go to a "soup dansant" with him, an event he considers of enough importance to cause him to don his "social gangster and a twice-over shave." In view of his dancing ability he could not do less. "I am taking a correspondence course in the one-step," he tells Dolly Brabazon. "I'm not quite perfect yet. My last lesson went astray in the mail."

The humor of "Oh, Boy!" is less innocent, less subtle, and, unfortunately, more effective, if laughter is the criterion. A young woman who has sought refuge in a young man's apartment protests that she doesn't like the way he hid her in his room.

"But, Pettie," he pleads, "it was the only thing to do."

"But you did it so naturally, as if you'd had lots of practice."

"What has the police force against you?" he asks in an effort to learn her

story, and another version of the village constabulary or Haitian army joke is the reply. "I hit him in the eye," she answers. When the Constable arrives and complains to the young man that some one kicked him, the suggestion is made that the offense is lèse-majesté. "Yes, that's just where it was," the victim answers—a new word in a Paleozoic jest.

"Oh! of course," exclaims Mr. Knaus in "Miss Springtime" to the stranger he has just impressed with the fact that the "k" is silent, "you're Michael Robinson-vitch."

"Robin—Robin—the 'ovitch' is silent. In New York we never pronounce our 'ovitches.'"

"Did your grandfather (the old watchmaker of the village) leave you his property?"

"He did. But unfortunately all he had was a case of dollar watches. After I'd wound up his estate I had to go away for a complete rest."

One of the outstanding features of the current season has been the introduction of Clare Kummer, an American playwright, who has shown in her first plays an unusual facility in writing smart dialogue. Better than any other native author, she can reproduce the repartee of the drawing room, and can spin gossamers of humorous small-talk. Keen observation and a fine sense of nonsense are reflected in the conversation Miss Kummer places in the mouths of her characters.

Annabelle sitting in the lobby of a Manhattan hotel, overwhelmed by her recent efforts to find some one to pay for her luncheon and by her general feeling of helplessness, sighs that she is "alone, penniless, and a co-respondent." Then there is the maid, not too bountifully endowed above the eyes, who answers the detective, who is examining her by the Freudian method, and has ordered her to look into his eyes and report her observations, by saying that "one of them is a little higher than the other." "Non compos mentis," says the intellectual detective, shaking his head sadly. "The poor nut," murmurs the maid in reciprocal sympathy.

"A Successful Calamity," the season's most popular high comedy, is brimming with dialogue such as might come to pass whenever two or three well-bred persons are gathered together. The young man engaged to Mr. Wilton's daughter is suggesting to him that a tightening of the paternal hand might not be a bad thing.

"She plays cards for money—do you know that?"

"Yes, I know that."

"I may be a bit old-fashioned, but I don't think winning money at cards is wholesome for a young girl."

"I don't think her health has been seriously undermined by winning any, do you?" asks the father, who pays and pays.

Mr. Wilton has invented the tale of being ruined in order to have a quiet evening at home with his family, and they all surprise him by offering to help. "Isn't it a good thing we bought the new car, for now we can sell it and get almost as much as we paid for it?" is one of the suggestions of the impractical wife, who also thinks an abandoned farm would be just the thing for the family. With which Mr. Wilton concurs, provided it is "sufficiently abandoned."

Connors, the faithful butler, offers his master all of his savings.

"Three thousand dollars—why, that's very good, Connors. You must have been very careful to have saved that much."

"Well, you see, Sir, I've no one really dependent on me now, Sir. My sister's husband died and she doesn't need any more help. And my father and mother are gone, Sir; so I've really no one to look out for."

The daughter says she would like to marry very young so that if it's a mistake she can do something about it and still have her life before her.

"Your habit of listening at doors is not a desirable one," Mr. Wilton tells the maid, who has eavesdropped the



Cinderella (Maude Adams) Gives Mr. Bodie (Morton Seltzer) Her Own Opinion of the Venus de Milo in "A Kiss for Cinderella," at the Empire.

story and demanded her money. "I knew of a man who tripped over a girl listening at a door once and hurt himself quite badly."

As fragile and potent, yet altogether different, is the humor of Barrie, disclosed in "A Kiss for Cinderella," in which Maude Adams as delighting her followers at the Empire.

Our Policeman, in describing to Mr. Bodie the "infallible" test adopted by Scotland Yard to determine whether a woman is a lady or common clay, declares, "What with drink and such-like misfortunes, a lady may forget all her other refinements, but she never forgets that." (The habit of tucking her valuables in her bodice.) "Strange," muses Mr. Bodie. "I wonder who was the first woman to do it. It couldn't have been Eve this time, Officer!"

When Our Policeman asks Cinderella what she would use in polishing the belt buckle, for whose condition she has upbraided him, her laconic response is "Spit."

"What is it about the woman?" demands Cinderella, gazing enviously at the statue of the Venus de Milo over which the artist is rhapsodizing. "She's the glory of glories!" asserts Mr. Bodie. "She's thick!" is the critical rejoinder. But Mr. Bodie defends: "All women long to be like her; none ever can be." To which Cinderella replies snappily: "I suppose that's why she has that snigger on her face."

In the ballroom scene of Cinderella's imagination her beautiful pale-blue Prince, who bears a strange resemblance to Our Policeman, thus defends his indifference to womankind: "My liege King and Queen Mother, you can bring out the competitors and I will take a look at them. But I have no 'ope. My curse is this, that I am a pessimist about females. I can dally with them for an idle hour and then cast them from me

Gaze on that picture and on this, the pointed discourse of the characters in W. Somerset Maugham's blistering satire on American expatriates in London, entitled "Our Betters."

"Bessie has a charming nature," observes the American woman who has married a lord to her title-hunting sister. "She really thinks friendship puts one under an obligation."

"Some of these American women are strangely sexless," one expatriate remarks, which brings the rejoinder from a loyal American that he has an idea some of them are even virtuous.

"It takes all sorts to make a world," the most unmoral of the lot concludes.

The woman who married an English lord and the one who became a French Duchesse are comparing their courtships. This is Lady Pearl's story: "For heaven's sake don't expect too much romance. Englishmen aren't romantic. It makes them feel absurd. George proposed to me when he was in New York for the Horse Show. I wasn't very well that day and I was lying down. I was looking a perfect fright. He told me about a mare he had and he told me all about her father and her mother and her uncles and her aunts, and then he said, 'Look here, you'd better marry me.'" The Duchesse speaks: "The French are the only nation who know how to make love. When Gaston proposed to me he went down on his knees and he took my hand and he said he couldn't live without me. Of course I knew that, because he hadn't a cent, but still it thrilled me. He said I was his guiding star and his guardian angel. Oh, I don't know what. It was beautiful. I knew he'd been haggling with papa for a fortnight about having his debts paid; but it was beautiful."

If Mr. Maugham is merciless in dealing with our climbers abroad he likewise does not spare his own countrymen. "You don't think the English want us here?" the leader of the set asks. "You don't think they like us marrying their men? We have to force ourselves upon them. They come to me because I amuse them. Very early in my career I discovered that the English can never resist getting something for nothing."

The Duchesse asks this lady of influence about the job in the educational office she has procured for her very young man. "What do they do there?" "Nothing. But it will keep him busy from 10 till 4."