

The Prohibition of Laughter

By JAMES C. YOUNG

THE "Midnight Frolic" closed in the small hours of a certain day, and one of the best-known names of Broadway was deleted from its language. This last frolic might have been called a requiem for gaiety on a street rapidly becoming sad. Theatregoers are forgetting how to laugh and the nation's funmakers shake grave heads. They say that a frolic without the spirit which used to cheer is like a dance without music.

A surprising number of plays have failed on Broadway this season because spectators failed to laugh. The toll among traveling companies has been even higher. Returning players gather in little knots on the Rialto and repeat the same theme—people decline to laugh any more. Victor Herbert was one of the first men to isolate the germ of the new ailment, and even he could not prescribe a remedy. Apparently, people no longer visit the theatre to be amused, but, like the famous Louis of France, they want to be miserable together.

In the old times the typical Broadway theatre crowd came from home or restaurant dinner in a mellow mood, glad to escape the day's trials and ready to join in the fun on the stage. But nowadays they are grim and glum. Their troubles come with them and they sit in critical state on the comedians' efforts.

No one in the world understands the psychology of a crowd better than the player who looks out at a theatre from the peephole in the curtain. The hasty view with one eye from that peculiar point of vantage gives the entertainer a better psychological understanding of his crowd than could be compressed into a dozen volumes. In other days, when he found little groups smiling and friendly, with a ripple of anticipation running through the spectators, he could be assured of a warm greeting. What does he see now?

"I have quit looking at the crowds," said an actor who has made the nation laugh. "I go on the stage trying not to see their faces. They are cold and bored. I have a feeling that every one in the house is trying to find fault with me. I used to have a trick of raising the first laugh. That means everything to a play. A man's chuckle or a woman's sudden trill would start others to laughing, and everybody began enjoying themselves, myself more than any of the others. But they don't laugh, they have forgotten how. Everybody is under a strain. Nothing warms their souls any more. They just sit in bored silence and watch a comedian do his worst. This reacts on the player, of course. I don't believe any of us are half so good as we used to be. We start our act afraid that the people won't laugh, and, when that becomes a certainty, we lose our courage. No comedian can work unless he makes people see the funny side, and there

isn't any funny side now. The best that we can get is a dry grin."

Producing managers, dramatists and all who follow the stage are deeply concerned over the prohibition of laughter. One vaudeville performer had a whimsical story to tell.

"I was out on a thirty-two weeks' tour," he said, "and the only time that a crowd really laughed was in Kansas City when an acrobat fell and broke two ribs. They were glad to see somebody more miserable than themselves."

At least one well-known firm of theatrical producers has appointed a special reader of new plays who searches only for possible smiles in the dramatists' lines. The problem has become so acute that writers, actors and managers are growing haggard over the attempt to make others smile. A chuckle is something to be greeted as an accomplishment worthy of high reward, and a genuine laugh an achievement to cause ecstasies.

struggling to their utmost, but the majority of them are ready to call the mission futile.

For a dozen years Broadway's plays have been written for the tired business man. That broadly represents every man who goes to the theatre, for almost every New Yorker works, and business is the vocation of the multitude. Those who entertain the business man had studied him well and knew his moods.

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Only one kind of pun seems to amuse theatregoers, and that must have a dry point. Then they laugh. Almost any reference to home brew, shellac as a beverage, or something of the sort, will draw a laugh. A really funny story of the kind is met with enthusiasm. Even cheers have been heard in some theatres.

But it is manifest that all plays and all comedians cannot depend on a little thin humor of the one-half of 1 per cent. variety. Producing managers are insisting more strongly every day that musical comedy books and dramatic pieces must have comic lines. Actors and dramatists are

the way one author of a half dozen comic successes summed up the question. "The business man used to forget his cares at a pleasant dinner party, and come to the theatre not only willing, but anxious, to be amused. Now he arrives in a sour humor, with P. X. & T. and 6 per cent. debentures running through his mind. He has had no opportunity to forget them, nothing to ease the killing pace of the day. So he sits and looks at the stage and keeps thinking about the ticker. Half of the time he doesn't see what is going on, and follows the dialogue in such a loose way that he misses most of

the points. If any one laughs, it merely annoys him, and he looks around with a scowl, because his mental arithmetic has been upset.

Theatre crowds always laughed better after the first act. What happens today? Instead of the men going out for a bit of refreshment during intermission, they sit stolidly in their seats. The wait between curtains increases their nervousness, and makes them more petulant by the time that we are ready to go on. Formerly they came back happy and well pleased with the world. Now they are grouchy and begin to yawn. Just as a laugh is catching, a yawn is more so. I stood in the wings of a theatre the other night, and watched a man yawn in the first row. My heart sank. I knew what would happen. In a minute or two his neighbor followed suit, and it seemed that almost every person in the house was yawning by common consent. Can you conceive of a player doing his best when he looks out at a crowd of gaping mouths?"

The dry play may be the next development. More than one complaint has reached theatre managers from reform sources, protesting against a reflection on the stage of a happier period. It would be interesting to see some of the old favorites made over on this basis. An example might be "The Merry Widow," to be revived next Fall. Those who saw it ten years ago will remember the first scene, where the young blade was introduced lying on a couch suffering from a bad attack of the morning after. The ensuing dialogue with his valet and a résumé of the places he had visited the night before was one of the most amusing episodes. Just conceive of "The Merry Widow" with the merriment left out! Or we may have a Falstaff without his pot.

The dramatist of the future will be hard pressed for the solution to his plots if the dry era falls upon the stage. He has been able to explain almost anything by a party at the club when the hero forgot to go home. But that ruse will be denied him when there is no reason why the hero should wish to linger. This is a serious question to the men who write plays. Wives no longer can wait up, armed with rolling pin, for recalcitrant husbands; villains cannot mix their potions in the glass of wine for the heroine; mortgages cannot be foreclosed on the farm while the owner is seduced with a jug of cider,

and trains cannot be wrecked because the telegraph operator slept at the switchboard.

Should the drought definitely settle on the stage we may expect plays of cryptic logic, thoroughly matter of fact and essentially sober. It may mean drama without background, like a painting without perspective, all the red current of life, the struggle and vividness eliminated.

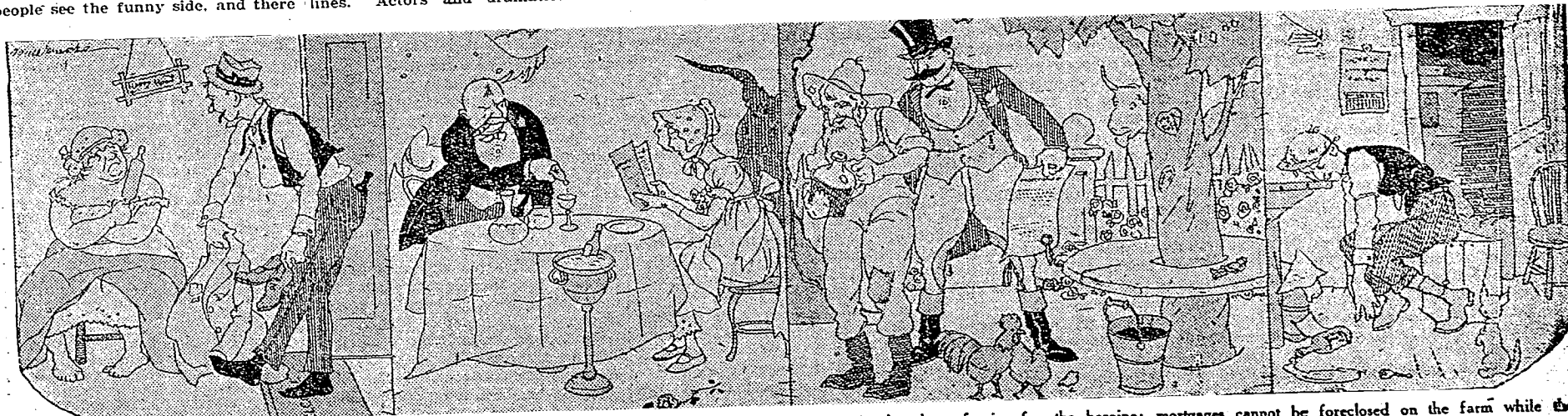
It may be assumed that a gay comedy in which every one was enjoying himself would please the theatregoer simply because of the contrast with his own position. But producers have found the reverse to be true, for the happiness depicted upon the stage seems to react on the minds of the spectators, perhaps by envy. That is a principle known both to science and psychology.

It is certain that a supreme effort will be made to inject humor into the plays of next Fall. But there are only a limited number of situations which offer the possibility of humor, and the one best understood by the playgoer has been the happiness of people like himself, met together for a pleasant time. What would the "bedroom farce"—recently so popular—be like without the gay party which always starts such a play and usually keeps up to the end? And if the public mind refuses to respond, either because of envy or general boredom, what will become of these farces? Perhaps the kind of an entertainment needed to bring a laugh would be something just as dour and glum as the playgoer's mind. That, also, is a contrast known to science and psychology.

This thought opens up interesting possibilities. The theatre producers, always shrewd to read the public consciousness, have noted of late that gruesome plays were finding favor. Perhaps we are to have a renaissance of Ibsen and other plays of a less lofty but equally gloomy character. And these may bring in their wake a return to the tearful times of "East Lynne." If the public won't laugh, maybe it will cry, is the logic of the theatre.

Plays must be either one of two things—gay and colorful or tragic. The half-way state, which so exactly represents the majority of lives, has no dramatic interest unless the new condition of the public mind should develop a taste heretofore unknown. It seems logical that the sorrowful

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play will rule favorite, because the step from everyday struggle to the tragic is much easier than to the twilight world of happiness and mirth. In the rural sections and small towns the tearful plays always have been more successful than the farce or satire. People who live close to the hard realities of life find it more natural to visualize themselves in the man about to lose his farm to the city villain than to see themselves in the rôle of persons enjoying life as a thing lightly held and to be enjoyed.

Broadway may adopt this rural viewpoint, because its gayety is fast dying—if not already dead. The natural dullness of life seems likely to be relieved by tragedy growing out of that dullness, just as Ibsen and many other Scandinavian and Russian dramatists have employed the commonplace situations to upbuild plays reeking of the sorrow of all things.

Certainly this would be a new phase for Broadway, where the jester's cap and bells have provided merriment since there was a Broadway. Its theatres have reflected the exact status of the public mind. The observer need look back no further than the war period to recall the time when throbbing patriotism was the theme of all its biggest successes. Following the war the city turned hungrily to laughter and the simulation of happiness on the stage as a means of forgetting the struggle and finding a new reason to hope. But something was missing from the ensemble, like the first violin of a concert. The city which had repressed its laughter in serious times—if there were any who felt like mirth—found that merriment had flown.

For a good many years the **Midnight Frolic** was the centre of Broad-

way's gayety. It set the mark to which other attractions aspired. Its comedians made good-natured fun of its city, its weaknesses and its foibles. Everybody who went there laughed and came away happy. The man who had been to the Frolic was a person of importance in the remote community. But the Frolic has closed. Its epitaph might well be paraphrased from that written by Plautus, the great Roman comic dramatist:

"After the Frolic closed Comedy mourns, the stage is deserted, then Laughter, Mirth and Jest and his numberless numbers all wept in concert."