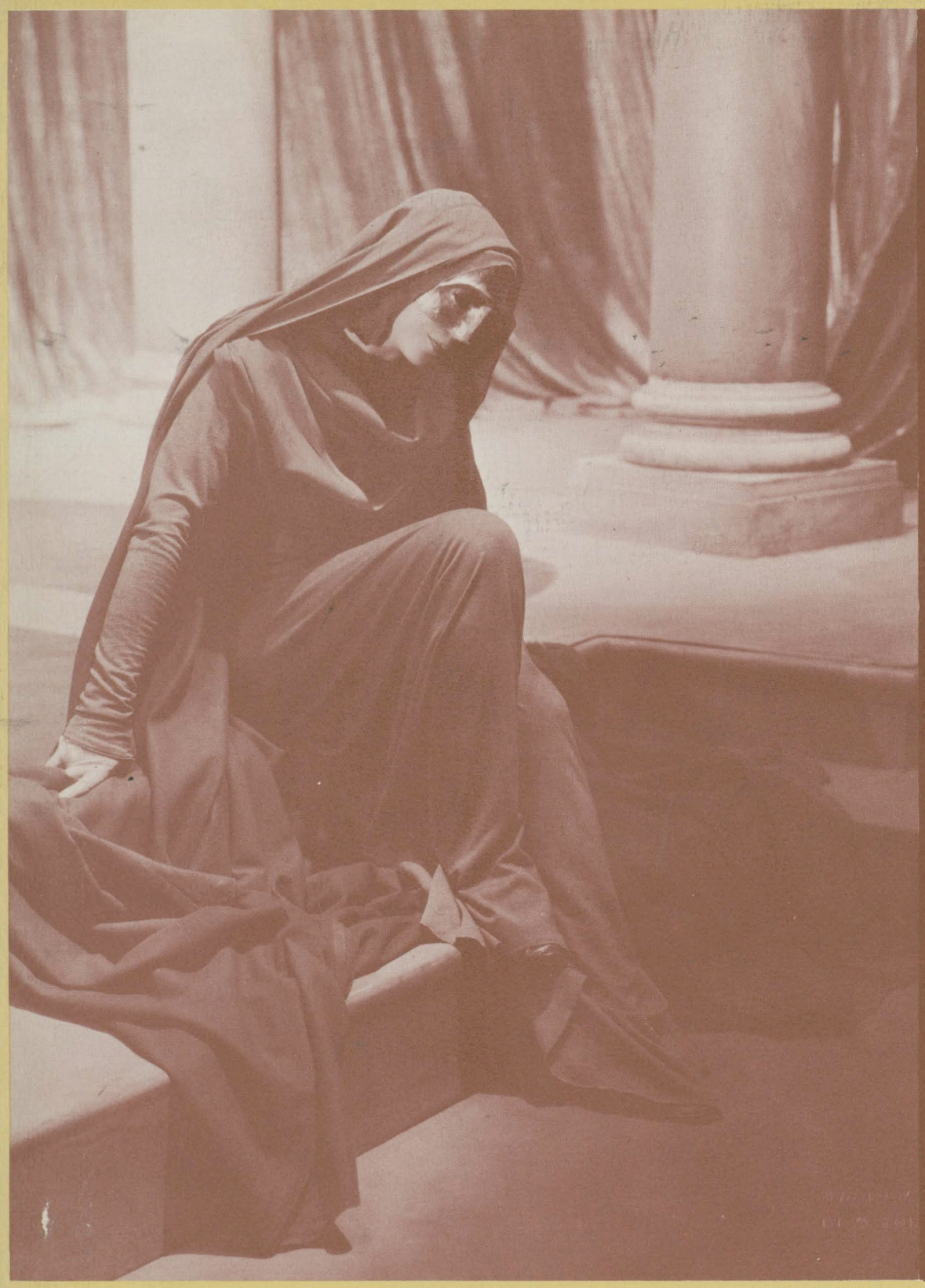

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Dear Audience

A guide to the enjoyment of theatre with scenes from great plays through the ages performed, and with commentary, by

Blanche Yurka

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Dear Audience

Blanche Yurka

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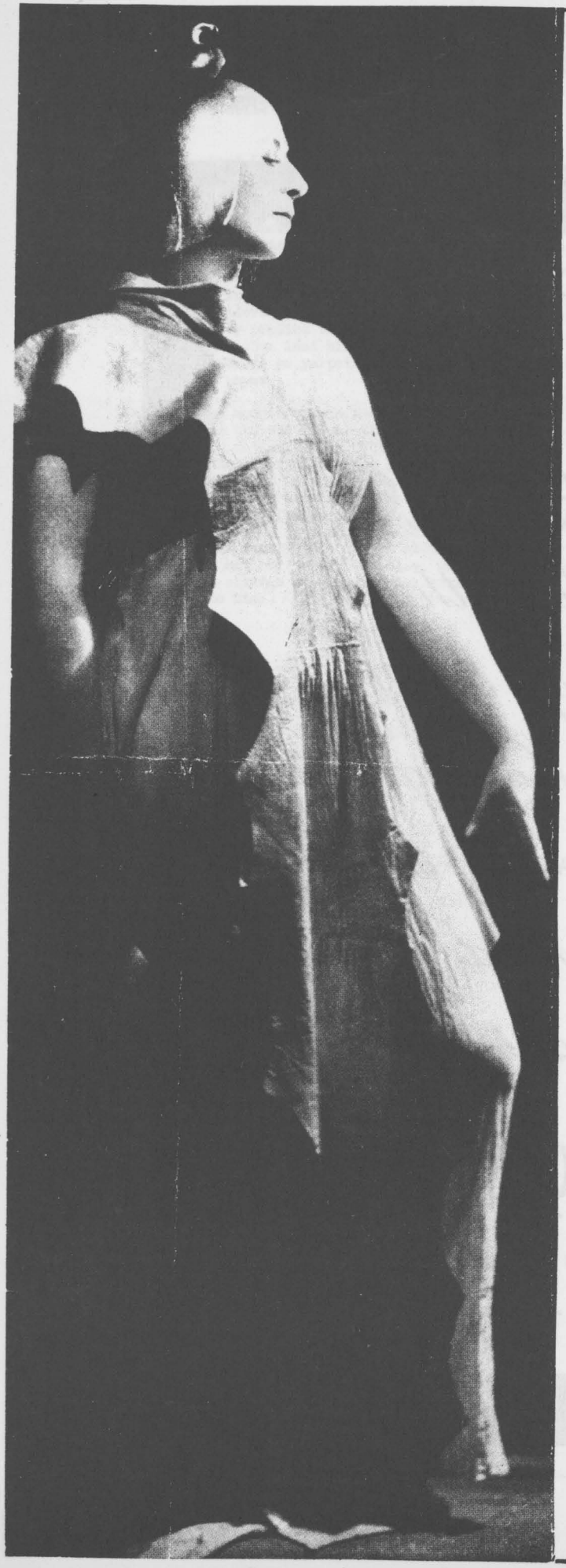

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"BLANCHE YURKA REMINDS US THAT GREAT ART IS A LASTING MIRACLE."
--John Hobart, San Francisco Chronicle

Few actresses in the American theatre have achieved so notable and distinguished a career as that of Blanche Yurka. Not only is she closely identified with many of the great plays of all time--the masterpieces of the ancient Greeks, of Ibsen, of Shakespeare--but she has played a wide variety of roles in contemporary comedies, tragedies, and even melodramas--on the stage, in motion pictures and on television as well. Critics and public alike have applauded her interpretations of such characters as Gina in Ibsen's The Wild Duck, and the inscrutable, unsympathetic Hedda of Hedda Gabler, and have been lavish in their praise of her brilliant re-creation of Sophocles' Electra--a part so difficult that only a few actresses in recent history have had the courage to undertake it! And who, among the millions who have seen Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities brought to life on the motion picture screen, has ever forgotten Blanche Yurka as Madame De Farge, that grim, tragic, powerful figure, a veritable symbol of the French Revolution?

Who can say from what reservoirs deep within a human being a great creative talent springs? Certainly Blanche Yurka's Czech parents and her four brothers and sisters growing up in the house in St. Paul, Minnesota where she was born, had no inkling of the heights the tow-headed youngster was to scale or the summit of success on which she would one day stand.

But Blanche Yurka's preoccupation with that magic world called "Theatre" seems, from no discernible source, to have "sprouted" at the remarkably early age of eight or nine years. She herself recalls sitting on the front-porch steps of the family home, lightly skipping through the pages of Munsey's magazine until she reached the theatre section. This she would devour word for word, revelling in the reports of the doings of her favorites, cutting out "for keeps" her special "pin-up girls" and handsome matinee idols. She also remembers her first theatrical appearance, a few years later, in a grammar-school production of a play called The Land of Nod in which she had been cast in the role of "The King." It was here that she tasted for the first time the elixir of applause--a heady drink for a long-legged youngster just beginning to know within herself that what she wanted most in life was "to act."

About this time the Fates themselves seemed to take a hand, for her father received an unexpected offer of a position in New York and the family left St. Paul, bag and baggage. For eleven-year-old Blanche Yurka the heavens themselves had opened; Destiny was pointing out the path which led straight to the magic world of which she now knew with certainty she wanted to be a part. But how did one actually enter this world? This seemed to be the only real problem.

Two or three impatient years were spent in high school, their boredom relieved by frequent visits to the theatres off Times Square where, from a seat high up in the gallery, the stage-struck youngster watched--and learned from--such stellar personalities as Ethel Barrymore, Maude Adams, Frances Starr, Mrs. Fiske, and many others.

By now, the world on the other side of the footlights definitely was her goal; everything else was relegated to second place. But getting the first toe-hold, forcing open the door even a small chink, was still the unsolved problem. Blanche Yurka had no previous acting experience, no influential acquaintances who could give her important "contacts." What she did have, however, was belief: a courageous conviction that entering the theatrical profession was possible. After all, the magic creatures she watched so carefully during those matinees on Saturday afternoons must have faced her very problem once-upon-a-time. What they could so she could do also!

So began the seemingly endless pilgrimage to the offices of the Broadway play producers, and the equally endless and futile attempts to get past a battery of stoney-faced secretaries and office boys. No results - none! Then one day she determined to write to the most successful theatrical producer of them all, David Belasco, requesting an interview. To her astonishment, Mr. Belasco replied, saying that he would receive her.

But the battle had not yet been won. More waiting must be endured, for again months went by before a definite appointment with the great man was made and kept. But the final result was surely worth all the agony of the past frustrating months, for Belasco gave Blanche Yurka a tiny "bit" part in one of his touring companies. Small as the part was, she was "on the stage" at last!

But even Blanche Yurka, in spite of the conviction in her young soul that success did lie ahead, could not visualize the heights to which her first stumbling footsteps would one day lead her. During those early years there was little to indicate the promise of the future. But always she had that driving, compelling impulse to "work at acting"--in good plays or bad; in stock companies where the arduous work schedules provided much needed training in a variety of parts. And inevitably, there were times when frustration and disappointment almost defeated her ambitious striving.

However, little by little the acting talent with which Blanche Yurka had been born was being moulded; voice and body began to respond to necessary disciplines. In one or two roles it was apparent that the early "growing pains" were beginning to produce results. A few theatre people began to remember her.

Presently there came a day when she was given the star part, the lead, in a play called Daybreak--and saw for the first time her name in lights on the marquee of a Broadway theatre.

The role of the Queen in John Barrymore's unforgettable production of Hamlet followed, then good parts in three productions by the Theatre Guild. Here, once again the Fates must have taken charge of things, for it was, in an almost negligible role in a great play that Blanche Yurka was to make her first enduring contribution to theatre history.

The Actors Theatre, an organization of which she was a member, had decided to produce Henrik Ibsen's The Wild Duck, and the directors assigned to her the role of Gina Ekdahl, the quiet, humble wife, once a servant in her husband's household. Blanche Yurka recalls that throughout the entire rehearsal period, she was not particularly "impressed with Gina as an acting opportunity"--she thought other characters in the play far more interesting. Yet when the play opened in New York, critics and public alike recognized at once the superb artistry with which she had brought to life the power, the humility, and the humanity of this simple woman. In her characterization of Gina Ekdahl, Blanche Yurka created an unforgettable stage portrait.

Other Ibsen plays--Hedda Gabler, The Lady from the Sea--brought stardom to Blanche Yurka. (It has been said that she has probably played Ibsen more often--and many critics think better--than anyone on the contemporary stage.) Beginning with her celebrated Gina, she helped to develop a popular audience for the works of the "giant" playwright from Norway. The true pattern of her career had begun to evolve--a career in which she has illumined with an incandescent light some of the greatest plays ever written.

She succeeded in getting the Greek comedy, Lysistrata, written by Aristophanes almost 2,000 years ago, produced on Broadway, playing in it with signal success--and thereby proving that the theme of the drama, the futility of war, and the humor in which the masterpiece abounds, are timeless.

Perhaps it is in The Electra of Sophocles that Blanche Yurka has risen to her fullest power as tragedienne. Few actresses in our time have received the critical laurels heaped upon her for that role alone.

Her identification with the Titan Greeks reached a climax in 1954 when she set sail for Athens, Greece, to make a guest appearance, under the auspices of the United States Department of State, in the play, Prometheus Bound. It was performed in the Herod Atticus Theatre, under the very shadow of the Parthenon. If the shades of Sophocles and Aristophanes happened to be abroad just then, surely they must have been glad to see her there!

Blanche Yurka's interpretation of Madame De Farge in the David O, Selznick motion picture production of A Tale of Two Cities is so well known that it needs little comment. What the general public probably did not know, however, was that her brilliant performance was her very first before the movie cameras. And certainly few of her fans could guess that she was chosen for the coveted role after sixty-four actresses of considerable stature had been tested for the part--and turned down!

Audiences (of varying age levels) from Maine to Hawaii who have seen Blanche Yurka in her own one-woman program, "Great Scenes from Great Plays," and who have been moved to laughter or to tears by a woman in modern evening dress standing alone on a bare stage, without props or costume changes, suddenly finding that the words of the Greeks or of Shakespeare, of Molière or of Shaw, were illumined and made meaningful, have come to know from personal experience that miracles do happen--when they are performed by an artist who is truly great.

Blanche Yurka in motion-picture "Lady for a Night"

RECORDING - DEAR AUDIENCE

by Blanche Yurka

SIDE I, Band 1:

At a surprisingly early age, I fell madly in love. Unlike some love affairs, mine has lasted a long, long time. It has brought me many radient hours. Like most love affairs, it has also brought its hours of unhappiness and tears. And what was the object of my love? The theatre.

My early taste for I knew no better at the time -- ran to pleasant plays, displaying glamorous people, plays which almost always ended happily. These did not make too heavy a demand upon my emotions or my imagination. There was little challenge to one's thinking in the type of dramatic fare I saw then. But as time went on, my horizons inevitably expanded; gradually my concepts changed. I came to see that theatre is not merely a diversion, entertainment for idle hours. It is a powerful instrument which can mould men's minds; it can show us life itself in all its aspects. It leads us to deeper understanding of our fellow man and his problems, to keener sympathy with the human race.

We hear from time to time that hhe theatre is dying, yet the "fabulous invalid", as someone has called it, keeps right on, vital, experimental--very much alive. The theatre will persist as long as there are people whose eyes can weep and whose funny-bones can be tickled.

Over the entrance to the Royal Danish Theatre in Copenhagen these words are inscribed:

NOT ONLY FOR AMUSEMENT

The theatre I am going to talk about carries out this concept. It embraces a range of subjects as varied as humanity itself, as complex as the human soul.

The theatre I am going to talk about includes many moods and styles: the theatre of the titan Greeks whose dramatic power has not been surpassed in 2,000 years; it includes Shakespeare's "infinite variety"; it includes the charm and cynicism of Moliere and Congreve, the witty word games of Wilde and Shaw; Ibsen's iconoclastic hammer blows at the social evils of his time; the charm and whimsey of Sir James Barrie; the social consciousness of Arthur Miller, of Tennessee Williams, of Lillian Hellman and Thornton Wilder. It includes the monumental theatre of Eugene O'Neill which is characterized by courageous, powerful thinking. All, all of these have contributed to the theatre which is your birthright. It is through the universality of this living, breathing art that minds and hearts of every race and creed can meet on common ground and come to understand each other.

I suppose I was a very lucky youngster because, being in love with the theatre, before I was out of my teens I went on the stage. Since that time I have acted in many different kinds of plays-- good plays and bad plays, great plays and awful plays, comedies and tragedies, classic plays and modern plays -- but in all these there has been the excitement of entering into new worlds of the imagination. What's more, many of those priceless hours have been spent, not on the stage but in front of the curtain, participating, as a member of the audience, in magic created by others. It is some of the secrets of this magic that I hope to share with you.

Tell me - have you ever experienced, in a darkened theatre, the excitement of that moment just before the play begins? The lights go down, the buzz of conversation dies away. It is a moment of expectancy. The curtain rises and the play begins. But have you any idea of the many steps which have led to this moment?

I am sure that it will be well worth your while to examine some of them, for no matter how many plays you have seen, you can have more fun, get more enjoyment out of seeing a play, if you have some idea of how it came into being. This is true, of course, of movies and television shows. The more knowledge you have, the more you will be able to evaluate the quality of both play and players. And through the magic of the fascinating world of make-believe, you can become one of those fortunate ones who can "send the mind to range in space to far horizons of time and place."

You will be taken beyond your own small needs, desires, frustrations and fulfillments. You will see that which was and that which is with keener insight and a more understanding heart.

But there is a role for you too to perform. As part of an audience you must make your contribution to this miracle of communication through which we, the actors, send out to your hearts (and to your minds and your funny-bones) ideas and emotions with which you can become identified.

And what do we mean by the term identification? Simply that you become a part of the play you are watching. This identification is essential if the play is to have reality for you. For the time being, you live in the heart and mind of that which is quite outside yourself. This is something of a miracle. But when this miracle fails to take place, when the circuit between actors and audience is not completed, then all our efforts have missed their goal. We have failed.

But the failure is not always our fault, nor even the fault of the playwright. As I have said, you, the audience, have a share in this responsibility. Ah! -- but when the circuit is closed, when the actors have taken over your mind, your heart and your imagination, when you have become one with us, there occurs that absorption, that intense silence which steals over an audience, a silence which, to the actor's ear, is pure joy. All rustling of programs, all coughing, all whispering ceases. It is then the actor knows that the miracle of communication has taken place.

SIDE I, Band 2:

Let us suppose you pick up your morning newspaper and read a review by your favorite critic of a play that opened last night. (Or a review of a new movie.) The review may be ecstatic. Wonderful phrases leap out at you from the printed page: "ENTRANCING." .. "ORIGINAL!" ... "SEASON'S BEST!" ... Now let us assume that you were part of the first-night audience. Ask yourself whether or not you agree with the critic. If you do, or if you don't, do you have valid reasons for your opinion? Why is the play good? You might try asking yourself a few questions.

What is the author trying to say?

How well has he told his story?

Does the subject matter seem worth while?

Have the actors successfully conveyed to you the author's intent?

Here's a simple test.

If, assuming that the author has something worth while to say, you can in a few sentences describe the content of the play, it is likely to be a good one. If, on the contrary, there is no over-all idea that stays with you, if you have to describe elaborately the ramifications of plot and of character, the chances are it is not good playwriting.

Take the time-honored story of Romeo and Juliet. Trim it right down to the basic plot. A boy and girl, born of feuding families, meet and fall in love. Because of the long-standing family hatreds, they cannot fulfill their secret marriage vows.

Through a series of tragic mishaps, Romeo finds his girl bride in a simulation of death, lying in the family burial vault. Believing her to be dead, he kills himself. When Juliet awakens from her drugged sleep, she finds his body lying beside her. Using his dagger, she stabs herself. Stripped down to its bare bones, this is the plot.

But even greater simplification is possible. If anyone were to ask you what Romeo and Juliet is about, you can either tell them the whole story or you can simply say, "The theme is that love is more important than race, creed, or family feuds."

This message, this theme, is timeless and universal. It was used in Shakespeare's 16th century and it is used today in the 20th. An example is West Side Story, one of the most successful musical plays of our time. In this modern version of Romeo and Juliet, the lovers are sacrificed to the violent hatred of two rival street gangs. Weaving through the superb dance patterns and the singing, the lovers are swept toward their tragic destiny -- an end which moves us the more, perhaps, because the circumstances of the plot are as familiar as headlines in the daily newspaper.

Actually, in all countries a few basic stories are rewritten to suit succeeding generations. Greek, Chinese, Indian, English--all have borrowed from each other. All the popular traditional stories seem to be related. And why? Because they all concern themselves with the same basic material--human nature. The trimmings are altered to fit the times, but the essential themes remain the same.

Now, granted that the author has an idea he obviously cannot just sit down at his typewriter and dash off a play. He must have a story to tell and the story must contain some struggle or conflict. It must have in it something you wish to see happen and something you don't. Because the playwright must make you care about the way things turn out. There must be "someone to root for," as a famous theatrical producer once put it. Whatever the plot, the characters must somehow be made believable.

What they say must ring true. The dialogue need not necessarily duplicate a conversation you might overhear on a street corner, but it must seem natural speech for the author's characters to be using.

Moreover, his play must be more than a mere series of incidents. If this were not true he could simply sit in a railway station, taking down what he sees and hears and--presto!-- he would have a play.

But he would not have a play. This is not to say that he could not find dramatic material in a railroad station. But the material alone would not be enough. The author must build a structure, introduce his characters, unfold his plot, provide suspense, reach a climax, and bring everything to a conclusion that you can accept as inevitable.

If the playwright has an important idea to present, or a significant comment to make--and has learned his craft--his play may stand a chance of becoming a "classic." (Between ourselves, a classic simply means that the play continues to interest audiences for a long, long time.) If the author has only told a well-built story of topical interest, his play may be a box-office success; and goodness' knows, no one objects to that. But it is not likely to make theatre history, it is not likely to live.

There have always been players who have enhanced the effectiveness of the author's concept. It is safe to assume that much of William Shakespeare's inspiration must have derived from the fact that in Richard Burbage, his leading player, he knew he had in his company an actor who was capable of reaching the tragic heights of an Othello, a Hamlet or a King Lear. It is obvious, too, that in Shakespeare's company there must have been brilliant comedians as well, since Shakespeare, as the company's official playwright, introduced so many fine comedy parts.

SIDE I, Band 3:

The release of laughter is a fundamental need of human nature. In Italy in the 16th century, and later in France, there came into being a style of presentation known as Commedia dell arte. It was essentially a form of humorous entertainment in which the players improvised their dialogue, using a story line upon which the players had previously agreed, and basing their comments on local gossip. Their method influenced comedy techniques for all time. The antics of the funny men of today--Danny Kaye, Sid Caesar, Bob Hope and, most notably, some years ago, Will Rogers, who in the true tradition of the Commedia artists, made ad lib comments on the contemporary scene. All these reflect the influence of these earlier Commedia clowns.

In France, at about this same time, Moliere, who learned much from the Commedia troupes in his stage-struck adolescence, later became an outstanding performer of his own brilliantly written comedies. None of his fellow players left names of any note but to this day Moliere remains the greatest name in the history of the French theatre.

In England one name stands as a milestone in the history of acting, that of David Garrick. How those 18th century English audiences loved him! He revolutionized the style of acting which had prevailed up to his time--rejecting the grandiloquent elocution used by the stage favorites of his day, substituting a simpler, more natural style which won him immediate and lasting popularity.

Garrick's greatest success as an actor was achieved in the plays of William Shakespeare. The same was true of our greatest American actor, Edwin Booth. In the late 19th century he towered above his contemporaries and his magnificent gifts found their fullest expression in the plays of the bard. This pattern seems to recur over and over again. Shakespeare's plays have a way of shedding an aura of lasting fame on the artist who successfully interprets them. There is the instance in our own time of John Barrymore and of Laurence Olivier. Each was a popular and accomplished performer of contemporary drama. But each reached his fullest power as an artist only when he decided to meet the challenge of Shakespeare.

SIDE I, Band 4:

In the Victorian age, particularly in England, plays were primarily written to exploit the familiar talents and the beloved personalities of the currently popular stars. In those days there was a genteel atmosphere pervading the theatre which precluded the presentation of controversial ideas. To be "well-bred above all, to be a "lady" or a "gentleman," was the primary requisite for a successful player.

Suddenly in the late 19th century all this changed. Into this overheated climate of the theatre there came, like a cold, cleansing wind, a genius whose courageous tackling of forbidden subjects altered the whole pattern of playwriting. There was no synthetic glamour in the plays of Henrik Ibsen. The mere prettiness, false sentimentality, melodramatic cliches so conspicuous in the popular plays of the day, were blown sky-high before the uncompromising honesty and the superb craftsmanship of Henrik Ibsen. Beginning as stage manager in an obscure provincial theatre in Norway, he wrote plays which were responsible for most of the vitality of our modern theatre. This little giant of the North opened up sealed closets, dragged out skeletons, and plunked them right into the laps of a horrified public.

In those days one simply did not discuss the subjects Ibsen presented: venereal disease (as in Ghosts), civic dishonesty in Enemy of the People.

And how could Victorian audiences be expected to accept as a heroine a caustic, disagreeable woman named Hedda Gabler? A ruthless woman who drives a lover to suicide and finally kills herself in sheer distaste for the life she has made for herself!

Yet it is Hedda who has survived all the sugary heroines of the popular plays of those days. In our time we have met her more than once: as Regina in Lillian Hellman's The Little Foxes, as Mrs. Craig in George Kelly's Craig's Wife, and in the ruthless heroine of Somerset Maugham's play and motion picture, The Letter.

Poor Hedda, who so loathed the idea of maternity, has spawned a whole theatreful of unpleasant heroines -- and given to ambitious actress some of the finest parts ever written.

Not only did these plays destroy conventional formulas of playwriting, but they challenged actors to evolve new, more realistic methods of acting.

SIDE I, Band 5:

Ibsen put new wine into old bottles.

Following him, another great playwright, the Russian Anton Chekov, went even further. He threw the bottles out of the window. In his own way, Chekov was as revolutionary as the great Norwegian. He did not attempt to make things happen. He was more interested in things that did not happen. It is a little as if he invited us to creep up to an open window to overhear bits of conversation as his characters carry on the business of their lives. But gradually you come to know more about his characters than you do about the people who surround you in your daily life. His compassionate understanding of his unheroic heroes and heroines make Chekov's plays what they are--masterpieces painted on a small canvas.

Ibsen is regarded as the father of modern theatre as we know it. So easily are changes of thought assimilated that some of the playwrights of this generation may not even realize that they are building upon the foundations laid by a little man in Norway who made a shambles of the conventions of his day. Ibsen opened the gate to a new concept of truth and through that gate have flooded new ideas, new understanding of life as it is lived--not as wishful thinkers would have us believe it is lived.

SIDE I, Band 6:

We have, in these United States, our own giants, who have made good use of the legacy from the past. At the same time, they have developed new patterns of their own. There are, when you come to count them, a surprising number of American playwrights whose plays have won international recognition. Arthur Miller's Death of A Salesman, and his searing exposure of the horrors of witch-hunting (The Crucible); Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie, and A Streetcar Named Desire; Lillian Hellman's The Little Foxes; the monumental plays of Eugene O'Neill, and the compassionate humanity of Thornton Wilder--all these stand out as examples of original creative talent.

O'Neill and Wilder liberated us from the photographic realism of Ibsen and were bold enough to experiment with a return to the basic simplicities of the earliest theatre history. O'Neill in The Great God Brown used masks, and in Strange Interlude used "asides" spoken directly to the audience -- even as did the ancient Greeks. Ancient Greece was echoed in O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra, even though the setting was New England in the nineteenth century.

Thornton Wilder, in Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth, employed non-realistic scenery --: In Our Town a few benches, a ladder and the frame of a door were nearly all he needed to make the audience believe they were watching life in a small New England village.

Thus these playwrights, and others in the theatre, have "come full circle," bringing us once again back to the simplicities employed in the plays of ancient times.

SIDE I, Band 7:

Ours is an era when, as Shakespeare put it, "The play's the thing." There are many fine actors, too numerous to mention here, who have achieved unusual distinction, even greatness; they have done so primarily by fitting their talents into the patterns created by the playwrights, rather than using plays as mere vehicles for their personalities. There are vast reservoirs of talent in the theatre world of the present--performers who, in a wide variety of roles, create the magic to which you respond.

What is the element of magic that makes a performance "great"? The creative process which goes into fine acting is so individual and so intangible that it seems almost impossible to define. The magic is made up of many ingredients. Basically, of course, there must be real talent--that intangible, indescribable ability through which the actor makes you believe in his make-believe. But the evolution of his natural talent into a power which can move an audience to laughter or to tears, or to a sense of horror, is the result of many unseen factors. Whatever else these may be, you may be sure that there are two fundamentals always present: the player's natural gift--something with which he was born--and hard work.

Of course Lady Luck plays her inevitable part in any actor's career. Sometimes real magic is made when a player is given the happy opportunity to reveal hitherto unexpected facets of his talent. A fine part can reveal a fine performer.

A famous teacher once said, "Identify yourself with greatness whenever you can; some of it is likely to come off on you."

But, over and above everything else, the most important gift of which an actor makes use is his imagination. Imagination enables him to penetrate behind the lines the playwright has written. The author's play, before it is brought to life on the stage, is to some degree like an architect's blue print: complete in its expression of his concept and intention, but lacking color. Color is the actor's contribution. There is a definitely creative element in the actor's work, stemming from his imagination. And on what does his imagination feed? On a thousand experiences in his daily life, on millions of seemingly slight impressions which he has unknowingly stored away in his mind. He draws upon vivid personal experience buried in his subconscious. Or he may draw his inspiration from the face of a passing stranger. I am not saying that the actor must have had the identical experience which the playwright uses. But from somewhere in his inner storehouse of impressions the actor draws upon some memory of an emotion which he transfers to his interpretation of the character he is portraying. This ability to utilize his imagination is an essential part of the actor's craft. He must be able to convey emotions which, in the normal course of behavior, he would not be likely to express. Few of us can imagine ourselves, for instance, as committing a murder. Yet surely even you have, with calculating fury, sat silent, tense, waiting for a maddeningly persistent mosquito to alight on your forearm so that you might blot out its life in one swift blow. Of course you have! Who hasn't? This is murder. In the theatre the actor must enlarge this instinctive impulse common to us all to the scale of a Macbeth or a gangster killer. To the world of tiny insects this act of violence may seem as ruthless as Macbeth's murder of the innocent Duncan, King of Scotland, in Shakespeare's towering tragedy.

There is no end to the things I'd like to say to you about the theatre. But theatre, like life, is

an inexhaustible subject. Ideally, it must be experienced instead of talked about. But there is one challenge I wish to lay at your door.

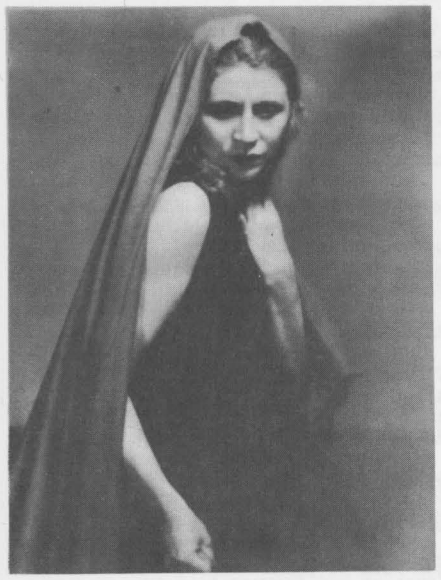
Most actors who are ambitious will take risks occasionally in their efforts to climb to new heights in their work. They will depart from the type of role in which they have formerly pleased you and adventure into other and more difficult fields. When they do this successfully, their importance as artists is immeasurably enhanced.

As a rule, you can trust an artist. If he has pleased you heretofore, give him your support when he does go adventuring now and then. There are a few artists who never let you down. Seek them out; follow them. Yours will be a loyalty which pays off. Only by your following them as they reach toward wider horizons can they continue to grow in artistic stature.

The integrity of an artist is his highest gift. But there must be the integrity of the audience as well. And what do I mean by the "integrity" of an audience? I mean that you, as well as the artist, must follow your highest ideals, constantly seeking to reject and repudiate the meretricious or the merely slick. You must prove to the artist that you are willing to follow him--and that you are counting on him to lead you to the high places reserved for the rare few who are both gifted and fearless.

To want the best--at every level of life--is your inalienable right. And theatre, in its highest meaning, is a rich heritage bequeathed to you by the ages. To bring to any aesthetic experience enough knowledge to be able to appreciate its finest values is to increase enjoyment a hundredfold.

Portions of the preceding text are from the book DEAR AUDIENCE by Blanche Yurka, © 1959 by Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J.



Blanche Yurka as "Electra"

Blanche Yurka in "The Merchant of Venice"

Blanche Yurka as the Queen in "Hamlet"

SIDE II

THE ELECTRA OF SOPHOCLES

Band 1: ELECTRA'S FIRST SPEECH

The world theatre as we know it begins with the early Greek theatre which reached its highest expression about 400 years before Christ. The genius of Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus, and Aristophanes created masterpieces which have come down to us through the ages. But each succeeding age had its masters--and from the flowering of their genius I shall now try to recreate for you some of my own favorite scenes.

In Sophocles' Electra, a deathless masterpiece which has remained undefeated by time, revenge for a father's murder is the theme.

Sophocles shows us Electra, daughter of the murdered King, Agamemnon, as she emerges from the palace to greet the dawn of another day of bitter waiting. Years before, her father, the King of Mycenae, had been brutally slain by his wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthos. Through succeeding years Electra waits with longing for the return of her brother, Orestes, who had been carried away to safety in his childhood. It is the decree of the Fates that he, as the King's son, must avenge his father's murder. But he had not returned during his early manhood, nor has any word come from him.

His unhappy sister emerges from the palace once more to bewail the hapless fate of her beloved father.

Oh holy light of heaven, and air,
Earth's equal partner, how many dirges of
My singing have ye heard!
How often have ye seen me when the dark night vanishes,
Beating my breast until the blood flowed!
And the nights that I have passed!
My loathed bed in this house of sorrow knows them --
Dirges wherein I wail my hapless sire.
Not taken by the cruel War God--he--
My mother--my own mother--with Aegisthes,
Her new mate, like woodcutters hacking an oak did
cleave his head!
And there is no sign of pity anywhere except from me,
oh, father,
For they most cruel, dishonorable death.
But I at least will never cease my dirge, my cries of
loathing,
Whilst I behold this daylight or the shimmering of
the stars.
Here at the door of my poor father's house will I
cry aloud
Where every man can hear.
Oh house of Hades and Perisphone! Oh Hermes, Lord
of the dead!
Oh spirit of the Curse! And you, ye Furies, haunting
the high heavens,
Who look on men who die unrighteously, their marriage
beds usurped
And defiled--Come ye and help. Avenge my father's
murder
And send my loved Orestes back to me,
For I no longer can this burden bear.
It is too great a load for me to bear alone.

SIDE II, Band 2: URN SPEECH

Oh sad memorial of a life I prized beyond all other lives! Oh loved Orestes, how much this coming home belies the hope with which I sent you forth, so young, so bright---Oh child, and now this nothing which I hold so lightly in my hands.

Would I had died before I sent you out to dwell far off with strangers.

Better you had died that day, and shared our father's
grave
Than perished thus, miserably, in homeless banishment,
Far from my care.
Alas! These hands of mine, which should have bathed
and dressed you lovingly,
Then from the hungry flames have gathered in grief's
precious load for burial--not
so!
Some stranger did my office--all I have is this:
A little dust, a paltry urn.
Alas, for all my care, my loving care,
Proved useless now! One day you died, unmourned,
Unwrapped in sepulchre, and in that one day,
gathered up
My life and like a whirlwind, left me utterly
forlorn!
Our father's dead, you are gone, our foes exult, and
she,
Our mother, most unmotherly, runs mad for joy.
The luckless fate that haunts us both has stolen hope
away, and left me, for that bright form
that trod
The sunlit heights, these ashes and a shade that
cannot help.
Ah me, alas! Oh pitiful and strange!
Alas! Alas! Oh dearest--by what terrible ways you've
Traveled, thus to join the sunless dead.
Come, welcome me to this same narrow room which
houses you,
My ashes mixed with yours. In life we shared and
shared alike
Now I would share your grave, and never part from
you again.
I see only the dead can feel no pain.

ROMEO AND JULIET
(William Shakespeare)

SIDE II, Band 3: Garden Scene

Swiftly we pass through the corridors of time and find ourselves in the world of William Shakespeare. It is a world populated by an "infinite variety" of characters: lovers speaking matchless poetry; wise and witty men and women; and tragic figures of power and pathos; all these appear in Shakespeare's gallery.

A lusty, earthy humor characterizes many of the portraits he draws. One of these is the old nurse in Romeo and Juliet. She is a spoiled and rheumatic old lady who has been a member of the household ever since Juliet was born. In this scene, in the sundrenched garden of the Capulets, Juliet is impatiently waiting for the return of the old nurse who is to bring her news of Romeo's arrangements for their secret marriage:

JULIET SPEAKS:

O God! -- She comes! O honey nurse, what news?
Hast thou met with him? Send thy man away.

NURSE

Peter, stay at the gate.

JULIET

Now, good sweet nurse!--O Lord! Why look'st
thou sad?
Though news be sad, yet tell them merrily;
If good, thou sham'st the music of sweet news
By playing it to me with so sour a face.

NURSE

I am aweary, give me leave awhile:--
Fie, how my bones ache! What a jaunt have I
had!

JULIET

I would thou hadst my bones and I thy news.
Nay, come, I pray thee, speak; --Good, good
nurse, speak.

JULIET

I would thou hadst my bones and I thy news.
Nay, come, I pray thee, speak; --Good, good
nurse, speak.

NURSE

Jesu, what haste? Can you not stay awhile?
Do you not see that I am out of breath?

JULIET

How art thou out of breath, when thou hast
breath
To say to me that thou art out of breath?
Is thy news good or bad? Answer to that;
Let me be satisfied, is't good for bad?

NURSE

Well, you have made a simple choice;
You know not how to choose a man: Romeo?
No, not he; though his face be better than
any man's,
Yet his leg excels all men's; and for a hand
and a foot, and a body,--
Though they be not to be talked on, yet they
are past compare.
He is not the flower of courtesy,--
But I'll warrant him as gentle as a lamb.
Go thy ways, wench; serve God.--
What! have you dined at home?

JULIET

No, no; But all this did I know before.
What says he of our marriage? What of that?

NURSE

Lord, how my head aches! What a head have I!
It beats as it would fall in twenty pieces.
My back; oh, t'other side,-- my back, my
back!
Beshrew your heart for sending me about
To catch my death with jaunting up and down.

JULIET

I' faith, I am sorry that thou art not well.
Sweet, sweet, sweet nurse, tell me, what says
my love?

NURSE

Your love says, like an honest gentleman,
And a courteous, and a kind, and a handsome,
And, I warrant, a virtuous,--Where is your
mother?

JULIET

Where is my mother! why,-she is within;
Where should she be? How oddly thou repliest!
"Your love says, like an honest gentleman,--
Where is your mother?"

NURSE

O God's lady dear!
Are you so hot? Is this the poultice for my
aching bones?
Hence forward do you messages yourself!

JULIET

Here's such a coil! Come, what says Romeo?

NURSE

Have you got leave to go to shrift today?
Then hie you hence to Friar Lawrence' cell.
There stays a husband to make you a wife.
Now comes the wanton blood up in your cheeks!
Hie you to church; I must another way,
To fetch a ladder, by the which your love
Must climb a bird's nest soon when it is dark.
I am the drudge, and toil in your delight,
But you shall bear the burden soon, at night.
Go; I'll to dinner; hie you to the cell.
(exits, limping.)

SIDE II, Band 4: ROMEO AND JULIET
(Keening Scene)

Toward the end of the play the Nurse enters weeping. She carries a rope ladder:

JULIET SPEAKS

Now Nurse, what news? What hast thou there?
The cords that Romeo bid thee fetch?

NURSE

Ay, ay, the cords.

JULIET

Ay, me! What news? Why dost thou wring thy hands?

NURSE

Ah, well-aday! He's dead, he's dead, he's dead.
We are undone, lady, we are undone! Alack the day,
he's gone, he's killed, he's dead. Who ever would
have thought it? Romeo!

JULIET

What devil art thou that dost torment me thus?
Hath Romeo slain himself? If he be slain, say aye
or if not--no. Brief sounds determine of my
weal or woe.

NURSE

I saw the wound, I saw it with mine eyes--God save
the mark--here on his manly breast; a piteous corse,
a bloody, piteous corse! Oh Tybalt, Tybalt!
Honest gentleman! That ever I should live to see
thee dead.

JULIET

What storm is this that blows so contrary? Is Romeo
slaughtered and is Tybalt dead?

NURSE

Tybalt is gone, and Romeo banished. Romeo that
killed him, he is banished.

JULIET

Oh God! Did Romeo's hand shed Tybalt's blood?

NURSE

It did, it did; alas the day, it did! There's no
trust, no faith, no honesty in men; these griefs,
these woes, these sorrows make me old. Shame
come to Romeo!

JULIET

Blistered by thy tongue for such a wish; he was not
born to shame: upon his brow shame is a shame to sit.

NURSE

Will you speak well of him that killed your cousin?

JULIET

Shall I speak ill of him that is my husband? My
husband lives, that Tybalt would have slain; and
Tybalt's dead, that would have slain my husband;
all this is comfort. Wherefore weep I then?
Some word there was, worser than Tybalt's death;
that 'banished,' that one word 'banished!' There's
no end, no limit, measure, bound, in that word's
death; poor ropes, you are beguiled, both you and
I; for Romeo is exiled.

NURSE

Hie to your chamber; I'll find Romeo to comfort you.
I wot well where he is. Hark ye, your Romeo will
be here at night; I'll to him. He is hid at
Laurence's cell.

SIDE II, Band 5: MACBETH
(Sleepwalking Scene)

In Macbeth, admittedly one of Shakespeare's most powerful plays, he shows us the tragedy of a ruthless ambition which destroys all who stand in its way. In the opening scene, three weird witches appear to Macbeth on "a blasted heath" as he is returning victorious from the Scottish wars. These creatures may be considered symbols of the evil forces in man's nature. They predict that Macbeth will be King of Scotland and thus lead him to commit the first of the bloody deeds he perpetrates on his fearful march to supreme power.

As the play mounts toward its climax, Macbeth and his lady become the victims of the evil forces which they have set in motion. Lady Macbeth is the first to succumb. Her distraught mind gropes through the mazes of fearful, haunting memories. Wandering in her sleep, as has become her custom, we see her, in her final scene of the play, descending the stairway, rubbing her hands continuously--her glazed eyes staring into emptiness. She is closely observed by her doctor and her lady-in-waiting, who has reported to him the strange behavior of her mistress. She whispers to him:

SCENE

(Lady-in-waiting - in a loud whisper:)

Lo you! here she comes--You see,

Her eyes are open. Look how she rubs

her hands--I have seen her continue in

this a quarter of an hour.

Hark--she speaks--

LADY MACBETH

(Two long, deep breaths are heard. She enters,
rubbing her hands.)

Yet here's a spot.

Out, damned spot--out, I say!

(Listening) One--two--

Why then 'tis time to do't.

(Rubs her forehead) Hell is murky.

(Turns to him) Fie, my Lord. Fie! a soldier,

and afeard? What need we fear who knows it,

when none can call our power to account?

Yet who would have thought the old man to

have had so much blood in him?

(Three long breathings)

The Thane of Fife had a wife--where is she now?

(Hand business)

What! will these hands ne'er be clean?

No more o' that, my lord, no more o' that!

You mar all with this starting.

(Hand business)

Here's the smell of the blood still:

all the perfumes of Arabia will not

sweeten this little hand! Oh--oh--oh!

Wash your hands, put on your nightgown;

look not so pale.

I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried;

he cannot come out on's grave.

To bed, to bed:

(Listening) There's knocking at the gate.

Come, come, come, come, give me your hand.

What's done cannot be undone.

To bed, to bed, to bed.