

ALAN PATON
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A LONDON CRITIC LOOKS AT THE NEW YORK STAGE

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IT is a generally accepted axiom that the chief artistic contribution now being made to the English-speaking theatre at its American end is a fresh and highly imaginative use of music. This axiom is confirmed in my mind by a visit to New York from which I recently returned.

Two of the most elaborate new shows produced during my stay were serious pieces which were dramatic in essence but relied on music for some of their most important effects. One of them was labelled "a musical tragedy" (a term new to me, towards which the American theatre has been moving for some time) and the other "a musical drama."

The first of the two, and easily the more impressive, is "Lost In The Stars," a dramatic version by Maxwell Anderson, with music by Kurt Weill, of Alan Paton's novel, "Cry, The Beloved Country."

This book has had so great a success both here and in America that I almost feel that I should ask pardon for reminding readers that its subject is the colour-problem in South Africa, or that its simple and deeply moving prose is the product of a poetic imagination. To capture the atmosphere of such a work, and to match it acceptably in another less flexible medium, is a task of the greatest difficulty; I did not believe it could be done.

A Beautiful Play

IT has been done. Not perfectly, of course—perfect translation from one artistic medium to another is as near impossible as from one language to another—but far beyond expectation.

The pilgrimage of the African pastor, Stephen Kumalo, from his remote village to Johannesburg, and his frantic search there for his son, have to be shown rather too jerkily in a series of short inset scenes. If I had not read the book I am not sure that I should have grasped all the implications of the scenes where young Kumalo, enticed by bad city-bred companions into an attempted burglary, loses his head and shoots Arthur Jarvis, a man whose life is devoted to friendship for the African races.

But the boy's trial and condemnation, and the friendship which grows up out of humiliation and enmity between Stephen Kumalo and John Jarvis, the fathers of killer and victim, is rendered with beautiful fidelity.

Music is used to set the atmosphere and advance the action, and hardly ever dwindles into mere decoration. A negro choir, grouped and regrouped with a sure touch by the director, Rouben Mamoulian, carries the play forward with chorus and song, or sometimes is set in symbolic opposition to white singers on the opposite side of the stage.

Drama or Opera

YET although "Lost In The Stars" would be nothing without its music, it remains in essence a dramatic piece. The chief part, Stephen Kumalo, is written for a Negro singer who can act, and is safe in the hands of Todd Duncan, but the part of John Jarvis is "straight," and is taken with impressive sincerity by Leslie Banks.

The second piece, the "musical drama," is also an adaptation. Its title is "Regina," and it is simply Lillian Hellman's "The Little Foxes," set so thoroughly to music

by Marc Blitzstein that it might be described as opera.

I am hampered here by the fact that Miss Hellman's play, which in America gave Tallulah Bankhead a hit on the grand scale, was a dead flop in London—owing, I must believe, to the miscasting of Fay Compton as a greedy egomaniac.

Not having seen the play to advantage, and writing for readers in the same situation, I cannot very well endorse the opinion of American colleagues that "Regina" is very well done but from the dramatic point of view not worth doing because it softens the impact of a very fine play. I must content myself with recording that opinion.

Two Familiar Friends

PERHAPS the most interesting first night during my stay marked the arrival of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne in the new comedy, "I Know My Love," which S. N. Bahram has confectioned for them out of Marcel Achard's "Auprès de ma Blonde"; but the interest centred in the Lunts rather than in the play. These admired players have been together now for 25 years, and, as the old song says, "it don't seem a day too much."

What did seem a great deal too much, however, was the effort required to hear the company—Mr. Lunt himself excepted, and perhaps Geoffrey Kerr, who has returned to the stage after a long interval—in the big Shubert

Theatre on the first night. Even Miss Fontanne, usually without reproach in this respect, failed to get the pitch of the house. This was the more unfortunate since the play needed all the help that it could get from the players.

In the first act the Lunts appeared as an old couple celebrating their golden wedding day and accepting the plaudits of the younger generations as models of married happiness. In the other acts they appeared as the same couple at various difficult points of their lives together, and showed how deceptive had been that first impression of unbroken harmony. The trouble was, however, that, lacking the crisp outline which clear speaking would have given it, the comedy seemed nothing better than a feeble exercise on a familiar formula.

After a few more performances I heard two contradictory reports, one that the company had now settled down and was clearly audible, the other that it was as bad as ever. Either way, nothing seemed to matter much, for the public was making a rush for seats.

What Impresses Most

NO doubt, then, this remarkable partnership is about to prove once again that so long as it has a well-upholstered vehicle for its own special charm, nobody cares much whether or not it has a good play.

After the opening night I asked one of the leading New York drama critics whether, from his exceptional point of vantage close to the stage, he had been able to hear all the dialogue. "Yes," he said, "every word of it—unfortunately."