

favorite son thumbing his nose at humanity in general is understandable enough; but from the standpoint of unregenerate America, this is ample demonstration of the power of the grotesque in music.

IN THE THEATRE

By JOHN GUTMAN

THIS, as everyone has been advised by the papers, is the season of Musical Comedy. Just now the accent is all on smooth, domesticated ditties, and one begins to yearn for something a little more crazy, say like Berlin's *Walking Stick*.

Meanwhile, at the Federal Theatre, they swing *The Mikado*. But this so-called swing version which the Chicago WPA group is offering to thousands of New Yorkers has one definite handicap—it isn't a swing version at all. The idea was good, and where it has been realized, the results are satisfactory, but the adapters could certainly have dared a lot more. Nothing about this version will bring letters to editors. And anyway there's a growing conviction anyway that swinging a Bach toccata is a good deal less sacrilegious than adorning the same piece with the sugary mantle of the Strauss orchestra. The Chicago people, once they had decided not to throw the whole score into the pot, worked out another little scheme; they first do straight all those songs and ensembles which they have picked out for swing. The effect is irresistible: *The Wandering Minstrel*, the *Three Little Maids*, and the *Flowers That Bloom* become little masterpieces of verve, rhythm and humor. The whole performance, with its splendid Negro cast, is a vortex of continuous movement even when it tries to be Victorian.

Noel Coward's *Set to Music* should be nailed down as the season's most unexpected disappointment, and its most inexplicable success. Admittedly it's a revue; it doesn't even pretend to have any plot, and that would be all to the good, provided the single scenes had a spark of their own, some novelty or, lacking this, at least some good old-fashioned charm. But if any evidences of Coward's so-called genius were present, they just passed

us by. As for the music the worst fault is in the scoring. A tendency to drown the light material of songs that are sentimental and satirical in the waves of a luscious and highly unsuitable orchestra, has been observed too often to be accidental. There can be no method here, only madness. The composer's ideas, whatever they may be, are sunk in the orchestrator's standard sauce. Anyway why don't composers of "light" music study music? And if they know their stuff why don't they condescend to do their own scoring—a practice never heard of in Manhattan (nor, for that matter, in London, Paris or Vienna). Of course no one expects Mr. Coward to go to that much trouble, since he composes only in his spare time. But it is precisely his type of intimate song which has the most to lose by these orchestral atrocities. Mr. Coward, like Richard Wagner, combines the activities of text writer, musician and director; but that's no excuse for having the interludes in *Set to Music* sound like the *Tristan* prelude.

The real trouble with this show is that it's all patched-up, gathered together mainly from bygone vintages. Its mainstay is old songs which have been sung before with more love and greater talent. The *Stately Homes of England*, most effective of the newer ones but poorly done, was taken from last year's *Operetta*. Coward is lucky to have such a grand reputation, and Beatrice Lillie.

The music to which Richard Rodgers (on Lorenz Hart's lyrics) has set the *Boys from Syracuse*, is infinitely better than this cowardly hybrid. But these two gentlemen, who surely belong in the front line of Broadway's song suppliers, have in their recent ventures only reached the half-way mark. Last season in *I Married An Angel*, they had a rather original story and left it in the lurch, musically. This time they have written a score which not only has quite a number of fine songs but also that rare quality, variety; and now they have a sadly inept plot in which Mr. Abbott, teaming up with Shakespeare, exploits ad nauseam the surprising fact that twins look alike. The result is weak and crude despite the contribution of Messrs. Hart and Rodgers. The melancholy sweetness of the waltz, *Falling In Love with Love*, the pleasantly risqué *Ladies of the Evening*, the freshness of *Sing for Your Supper*, are up to their standard and *This*

Can't Be Love, is perhaps a notch or two above even that. What these gentlemen need is a book with lots more comedy and fewer errors.

As for "serious" music there seems at the moment to be little room for it in the theatre. There has been the Maurice Evans' *Henry IV*. In productions like these one hardly ever pays much attention to the incidental music, and in this special case, it's a lot more rewarding to listen to Mr. Addy's glorious Hotspur, and to Evans who has very fittingly adopted the voice of W. C. Fields for his Falstaff. The music, chiefly short interludes, was contributed by Rupert Graves. His interpolations are modest and unobtrusive which is as it should be; but they have a slight cinematic tinge, and they occasionally make the mistake of encroaching upon the end of a scene. The text transitions are in themselves an emotional device; and to stress them with music is no improvement.

But the real problem in composing for the present-day legitimate stage is, it seems to me, the now inevitable organ. With all its boasted range, I find it more monotonous every time I hear it. The union rule that a minimum number of musicians must be engaged for any show with music is supposed to account for its presence. But how about writing a score for just that small number of players? In Paris the stage composers are getting along with few (to avoid the use of records) and the results are creditable. Milhaud has cut down expenses to one saxophone. Maybe *Macbeth* wouldn't do with just one trumpet but four solo instruments could certainly go places. I'd rather listen to any well selected combination than to all the organs in the world.

WITH THE DANCERS

EDWIN DENBY

WHEN I saw Agnes de Mille's dancers standing in profile making an arm gesture, it looked so natural it looked just like Margie, Amy and Sue lifting their arms. It looked concrete, as though there was nothing else to it but what you saw; as in a morris dance, they were doing what they were doing and