For vs. «Roadside»

Few dramas that close after a hectic week on Broadway achieve fame through the short run. Roadside by Lynn Riggs, ex '23, is an exception. It has the dramatic critics of New York up to their ears in controversy. Letters were written to the Times and other papers about Mr. Riggs.

Was he a rose bush pulled up by the roots from his native environment, Oklahoma? Was he a Dunsany trying to crash erass Broadway?

This and more is back of the controversy. Certainly, few dramatists of recent years have achieved such mention in the columns as Lynn Riggs over his play that ran for one short week on Broadway.

In the meantime, the Theater Guild continued with its preparation to present Green Grow the Lilacs, another Oklahoma play written when Mr. Riggs was in Italy on a Guggenheim fellowship.

Roadside opened Friday evening, September 26, 1930, at the Longacre theater. Mr. Arthur Hopkins was the producer. You had about every element that should give the play a good ride along the Broadway subway—an important author, a noted producer, a fine theater. And Oklahoma. For the locale was Oklahoma of Indian Territory days, in 1906, with Claremore, Verdigris, and other Rogerian territory for the setting.

The critics, as is their wont, descended en masse on the Longacre. The next day, they waved their stilettos. A week later, the box office girl locked up the receipts, the curtain dropped and Roadside was another play suffering from a Broadway side.

Samuel French, Mr. Riggs' publisher, produced the book. Mr. Hopkins wrote the preface. And the battle by the Roadside had just begun.

The caustic Percy Hammond of the New York Herald-Tribune, keying his typewriter to say these kind words: "Roadside is but an exercise in atmosphere, dialect and character, scarcely an anacolotye, and not at all, a play."

John Anderson of the New York Journal caught the folkloral significance of the play: "The play is flavorsome and full of gusto, and touches a fine fresh field of native material with both humor and poetry. It has quality and richness and the simplicity of the backwoods whose roots go deeper into Americana than the Broadway subway."

Mr. John Mason Brown in the said New York Evening Post was folicosme: "A very folksy and extremely garulous little comedy."

Laurence Stallings thought it a fine play. He told Mr. Gilbert W. Gabriel of the New York American so. "In front of the Longacre theater last night I met Laurence Stallings, who, with that fighting look in his eye which I've liked, told me I was going to see a fine play indoors—there a play with poetry in it, a beautiful play."

"And the sort of play you boys will burn up," he added grimly.

Robert Benchley in The New Yorker revealed the effects of brick canyons on one seeing life from real canyons: "Roadside was built around one of those highly literary characters who think, and recite words to the effect, that because they were born in Texas they belong to a race of men apart, a race whose chief prerogative is that of boring the living whatziz out of the rest of their fellow countrymen."

Mr. Lynn Riggs, who wrote Roadside, was under all kinds of illusions which he found practically impossible to communicate to the audience. Undoubtedly a sensitive young man and keenly alive to the wind on the heath, he evidently felt that he could send his hero on with his shirt open at the neck and a rolllicking line of shore-chanteys and folk-recitations to deliver with his thumbs stuck in his cartridge belt, and that the sheer beauty and lift of the thing would sweep an audience off its feet. And the funny part of it is that Mr. Arthur Hopkins evidently thought so, too, for he produced Roadside. Robert Edmond Jones, who did the scenery, seems to have been the only one connected with the enterprise who had any inkling of what he was dealing with, for he made the background of Indian Territory woods in Ritz-Carlton lavenders and pastel greens.

"We boys are the critics. And Mr. Stallings is probably right. I've never seen a play of which I could be surer that is going to be a disaster."

Mr. Hopkins, in the preface to the book, said that Mr. Riggs "brings an unfamiliar richness to the American theater." He has "caught our fading glory and left it for posterity. It is my belief that his play will reach posterity. It has the feel of survival."

Should Mr. Riggs have remained in the Southwest to do his writing? That seems to be the burden of a review of his book of poems, The Iron Dish, by a critic in The New Republic. This critic found the poems dealing with Mr. Riggs' own country the most delightful and bemoaned the fact that there were so few in the volume.

That was the theme of a letter Ruth Putnam Mason wrote the New York Times several days after the play Roadside opened: "This is a strange country. We are always complaining that we have so few native playwrights of distinction compared to the numbers of people who are writing plays. And yet when one springs up out of our own soil we do everything we can to kill the spark which, if nourished, might become a flame which would cast a little more glory onto our drab dramaturgical horizon."

I refer to Lynn Riggs, whose Roadside opened at the Longacre theater recently. Here is a first-rate poet highly regarded by Witter Bynner and other poets who have no other reason to laud him except on his actual merit. Here is a sensitive nature that can express beauty in its essence. He is a poet! Perhaps he is and perhaps he isn't a playwright. Judging by Roadside, we are quite certain that Mr. Riggs has not developed one iota in his technique since Big Lake, and we even have...
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Barrett H. Clark, who has been one of the most consistent friends of Mr Riggs, attributed part of the failure of the play on Broadway to amateurish acting: 'It was the most consistent friend of Mr Riggs, Yan. He said, lacked the rush Broadway expects. He said, however, that the play was an "honest attempt to write a poetic and fantastic play made up of elements both strange and familiar. Even the timidest reviewer might have praised the poetry of the lines if he had ears to hear it; might have perceived that the court scene, far from being a vaudeville burlesque, was something in the grand manner, but with a note of passion exceptionally rare in such grand fooling; might too, have noted with some satisfaction a glimmer of the ecstasy in the grand unfolding of the love of Hannie and Texas.'

Is Roadside then a perfect play? Are the critics muddle-headed? Are they prejudiced? No, to all three questions. Mr Riggs' play is an honest, forthright, footloose extravaganza, hilarious, lyric, farcical; original because of its treatment and subject matter; leisurely, consummately-exemplary—imperfect even in its original form, which was somewhat toned down and prettified for the production, washed and diluted; but its imperfections are immensely important; scenes not wholly realized, situations fatally rendered, but with a note of passion exceptionally rare in such grand fooling; might too, have noted with some satisfaction a glimmer of the ecstasy in the grand unfolding of the love of Hannie and Texas.'

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Prohibition is viewed favorably by Tully A. Nettleton, '22 jour., an editorial writer for the Christian Science Monitor, in a series of articles for his paper. Some pertinent observations on the question "What is wrong with prohibition" follow:

"Prohibition is demoralizing youth," asserts Mr. Nettleton. "Boys and girls are drinking more than ever before."

What is the answer?

First—High school officials, who are in a position to know, say the facts are the reverse. J. W. Crockett, superintendent of education in Houston, Texas, has made the following statement: 'If liquor, what is the remedy, more liquor or prohibition? What is it? Is it to fly, to talk across the ocean, transmit energy on a wire, travel a mile in 20 seconds, tunnel under a river, rear a building hundreds of feet high, or reclaim half a mile of the ocean?"

"What is wrong with prohibition" follows:

Second—Perhaps you have heard some parents who feel that Johnny mustn't do a thing; I want him to develop his personality. And after a while you hear "I can't do a thing with John any more. He simply won't listen to me. I guess I'll have to let him have his own way."

You have heard something like that? Well, a number of children have been brought up that way in the last few years, and prohibition is not responsible for it. Why should the United States let liquor get out of hand and have its own way because these few youngsters have done so? Would that method actually help their youngsters?

Third—If youths are drinking, what is it the wets are afraid will harm them? Do they mean that the present condition is injurious? But if that is not the case, why are the wets acting in one of the places where the wets try to make the misdeeds of liquor weigh against prohibition. What is it the youths supposedly have been drinking, prohibition or liquor? What is it? Is it to fly, to talk across the ocean, transmit energy on a wire, travel a mile in 20 seconds, tunnel under a river, rear a building hundreds of feet high, or reclaim half a mile of the ocean?"

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