

# Best of Benchley On Broadway

## BENCHLEY AT THE THEATRE

By Robert Benchley

Ipswich Press, 60 Congress St., Boston, MA 02109; 240 pages; \$14.95

REVIEWED BY ROBERT LUHN

It was the Golden Age of Broadway. Sandwiched between the two wars that would end all war, the American theater briefly blossomed into a thousand different colors, giving the world such immortals as Eugene O'Neill, the Barrymores, Lillian Hellman, George S. Kaufman, Fred Astaire, Helen Hayes, George M. Cohan, the Gershwins, Orson Welles, the Marx Brothers and many more. Amid all this hubbub was Robert Benchley, famed humorist, actor and boulevardier.

Known mostly for his urbane and often puckish essays, Benchley was also an ardent observer of the stage, first for *Life* magazine and then for *The New Yorker*. He wrote nearly a thousand reviews during his 20-year tenure as one of Broadway's leading theater critics. Those culled by Ipswich Press for "Benchley at the Theatre" represent Benchley at his wittiest and most revealing.

This garland of hitherto uncollected pieces touches on the great, the near-great and some deservedly forgotten (but nonetheless intriguing) plays and actors of the '20s and '30s. For Benchley aficionados the book is a rare treat — the first new collection of the master's work in nearly 40 years. For both amateur and professional students of the theater, it's a chance to share an aisle seat with one of Broadway's most discerning critics. And if you are none of the above, no



*Benchley: Deflates some enduring and cherished myths*

matter. If you love informed, literate, brisk writing, "Benchley at the Theatre" will be a welcome respite from the Ebert and Siskel school of criticism.

A night at the theater with Benchley is never dull, chock-full as it is with pithy asides, New England common sense and occasional eruptions of pure dada. Benchley deflates some enduring and cherished myths: "(Katharine Hepburn) is not a great actress, but one with a certain

distinction which, with training, might possibly take the place of great acting in an emergency."

He reaffirms modern critical hindsight: "Orson Welles and his Mercury Theater Group . . . give ("Julius Caesar") a reality which I think might fool the Bard himself." He measures the erudition on his side of the proscenium: "It has been estimated that the average powers of discrimination in a matinee audience would not quite fill a demitasse." And he disabuses the reader who expects High Criticism ("Sometimes the symbolism was so strong that it didn't seem as if it could be borne any longer. In fact, several people had to leave early. Others covered their eyes with their hands and had to be roused when the thing was over.")

If you suffered through Shakespeare as a student, you have an ally in Benchley. The Great White Way of the '20s and '30s was paved with countless Shakespeare revivals, and Benchley, never a great fan of the Immortal Bard, took a dim view of the proceedings. Opined Benchley: "We remember seeing Booth at the age of four (when we were four; Booth was naturally older) and the memory of that performance has lingered with us ever since. After it we were taken to Maillard's and had our first chicken salad. Those were the days!"

Though Benchley bared his critical teeth when offenses on either side of the footlights were committed, he was quick to forgive and even quicker to reassess the professional cynicism that comes with the job of critic. On a jaunt to a P. T. Barnum circus with his son, Benchley notes that the "scales of sophistication are struck from your eyes," concluding that the experience, aided by the marveling of his five-year-old companion, helps "keep you in your place."

In short, "Benchley at the Theatre" is acute, devastating and entertaining criticism, a model that Brendan Gill, Robert Brustein and others would do well to emulate. ■

*Walnut Creek writer Robert Luhn has written on show business for Paper Cinema, American Film and Hudson Review.*