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THE HECK WITH BROADWAY!

(Continued from Page 23)

While cruder than most, the cat-in-the-kitchen scene from Aaron Slick represents a general type of comedy that convulses audiences at perhaps half the school plays. They are written specifically for schools, and are clean, wholesome and innocent. They have simple, often rhythmic, titles such as: Singin' Bill from Blue Ridge Hill, Sunbonnet Jane from Sycamore Lane, Mr. Simpkins of Simpkinsville, The Hick from Hickville, Beacon Hill Billy, Henpecked Henry, High-Pressure Homer, Young Mother Hubbard, Father Spills the Beans, Uncle Cy Hits a New High, Aunt Susie Shoots the Works, The Adventures of Grandpa, Good Gracious Grandma and The Sweetheart of U Baka Pin.

The permeating note in all these plays is innocence and wholesomeness. According to playwrights for the amateur stage, the most important of all tenets is "above all else, keep it clean." There should be no references to drinking, preferably none to smoking, and sex cannot even be recognized. Publishers have grown cagey about these things after receiving over the years a great many letters such as:

Gentlemen: I am returning the five copies of your play, The Old Block. I had never seen this play, but ordered it from the description in your catalogue. I was disappointed to find in it references to cigarette smoking and rum. It is, therefore, totally unsuited for use in our community.

Dear Sirs: Would it be against all the rules to change the title of your musical comedy, Sweetest Girl in Town, to something else? I like the music, but I'm afraid in this high school, I'd never get away with a title that daring.

"There are certain realities of life that cannot enter a play for high schools," Charles Kennedy, an editor for the Samuel French company of New York, was saying recently. "If a girl has to say a certain suggestive line in a school play, the neighbors will regard her with raised eyebrows and ask one another if that is the way she is allowed to talk at home. Her parents will wonder if that is the way they let the kids talk at school. When our children are concerned, we are all Puritans."

It was this country's Puritanical tradition, in fact, that held back amateur dramatics until this century. The first record of any dramatic performance in colonial America was at Accomack, Virginia, in 1665, when three students were arrested for attempting to stage a farce called Ye Bare And Ye Cub. Later on, some of the classics were performed in Greek at universities, although Timothy Dwight, an early president of Yale, once said, "to indulge in a taste for play-going means nothing more or less than loss of that most valuable possession, the immortal soul."

As it turned out, amateur dramatics began in this country in churches during the last century with weighty plays intended to teach a moral lesson. The Baker Company, probably the country's first play publishers, got its start printing church plays, principally those written by a member of the firm, George M. Baker, "the Shakespeare of the vestry." His most renowned work was a two-act drama written in 1870 and called Among the Breakers, which the Baker Company figures has been performed over the years about 120,000 times. Only two other American plays have had more performances—Uncle

Tom's Cabin, which had been done some 1,075,580 times at last count—and a polite drawing-room comedy called Mr. Bob, written in 1894 by Baker's daughter, Rachel E. Baker.

While play-giving began in a few high schools during the first decade of this century, it didn't become general until the first World War, when almost every group was giving plays to raise funds for worthy causes, and high schools did too. They have kept on ever since, raising funds for untold numbers of pianos, stage curtains, basketball jerseys, football pants, baseballs and even fuel, blackboards and chalk. High-school enrollments climbed meanwhile until now there are about 6,800,000 students and 320,000 teachers. When the 1920's arrived, practically every high school was giving plays either to raise money, or because some teacher loved the drama, or so that the principal could show the school board he was on the ball.

The only trouble with this, in the view of the play publishers, was that they hadn't enough suitable plays, particularly for small schools, unfitted either physically or aesthetically for sophisticated drama. So, French and Baker originated the "ready-made" type of play, written specifically for schools to fit almost any size cast, staging condition or cultural level. For years the publishers brought out hundreds of new plays each year, of which 30 per cent would be big successes, with several hundred or more performances a year; 40 per cent would be moderate successes, with a hundred or so performances a year; and 30 per cent would be flops that nobody would buy or try.

It gradually became apparent to the publishers that the biggest reason for a play's success or failure was its title. The title, they concluded, should bear directly on the plot and be simple, direct, striking, colorful and unsubtle. Aaron Slick From Punkin Crick has all these qualifications in large measure, plus the fact that the author deliberately gave it a title that could not be preceded in a play catalogue. The strategy behind this was that people who are searching a catalogue for a play to give generally get tired of reading titles, and are inclined to choose one early in the alphabetical listings.

One of the biggest current best-sellers among nonroyalty plays is named A Ready-Made Family, but it never sold well until the title was changed from Too Many Steps, which had referred to some stepchildren. The same thing happened when a flop called The Black Terror was changed to Oh Kay. Publisher Johnson got good results when he switched the name of The Green Bird, a flop in sales, to The Blue Bag, a big hit. Nobody knows why a blue bag is more appealing than a green bird, but it appears to be.

Wilbur Braun, of Brooklyn, one of the more prolific of all the amateur-field playwrights, reports that once early in his career he wrote a mystery play he wanted to call Wheels Within Wheels. The editors at the Samuel French company told him that was too subtle, which annoyed Braun, and he gave the play the worst, most obvious title he could think of—namely, Murdered Alive. To Braun's amazement, Murdered Alive became his biggest hit up to that time.

Braun's most popular play of all, Aunt Tillie Goes to Town, which has been performed almost everywhere, is another example of a fortunate title. He says he got the "going to town" part from a popular phrase of the

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