

# Playwright's Destiny: Another Dandy Show

By WALTER KERR

I am trying to do a little home-made psychoanalysis on Richard Bissell, who has just collaborated with his wife, Marian Bissell, and director Abe Burrows on a comedy with music called "Say, Darling." A few years ago Mr. Bissell wrote a successful novel, "7½ Cents," which, being about life among Mid-Western factory workers, didn't seem exactly the right whipped-cream formula for musical comedy. When a couple of unperceptive and foolhardy people went ahead and made it into a musical comedy called "The Pajama Game," Mr. Bissell was undoubtedly badly shaken: his nerves were probably set for a nice, fat failure.

Now, the expectation of failure isn't something you can get rid of overnight: it hangs around festering, unfulfilled, clamoring to be realized. Filled with feelings of guilt, and of moral obligations unsatisfied, Mr. Bissell did what he could by way of expiation: he wrote another novel, "Say, Darling," which (a) penitentially went over the whole course of his experience with "7½ Cents" and "Pajama Game," and (b) was clearly meant to be the failure that "Pajama Game" wasn't. No luck. The book sold.

## He Didn't Make It

Desperate, and knowing that the gods must sooner or later be appeased, Mr. Bissell rolled back his sleeves, tore loose his tie, mussed his hair, and plunged himself—body, soul, and bankroll—into one last compulsive try: the dramatization of "Say, Darling," or Mr. Bissell's fourth attempt to lay the same egg. Maybe *this* would be it.

The poor fellow just can't do it. "Say, Darling" is dandy, too. The authors, working as a team to ease the Bissell conscience, try and try to indicate that there are hazards in show business, that all is not sweetness and light and capital gains behind that gaudy proscenium, that doom is the nor-



Robert Morse: "Hilariously funny" as the young producer in "Say, Darling."

mal order of the theatrical day. They trot out a young producer (Robert Morse, and hilariously funny) who likes to shave in the office, use his hands as though he were toying with a beach-ball, and offer, under flickering eyelids, the kind of knowing advice that would ruin anybody's show.

They hand us a jukebox song-writer (Johnny Desmond, white teeth shining as he lovingly ladles out his own tunes) who sports a pink shirt, a checkered vest, a touch of white in his carefully-groomed hair, and a high-minded contempt for the likes of Cole Porter. "I've ad-libbed in a little rough dialogue here," says Mr. Desmond as he cheerfully rewrites every one's work so that his latest, and most terrifying, melody will have a suitably grinding introduction. The songs that Jule Styne has written to prove just how monstrous a really towering egomaniac can be are splendid, splendid.

And, as additional evidence, they give us: Jerome Cowan, an Abbott-type director snap-

sharply reminding hero David Wayne that he *hasn't* written the Dead Sea Scrolls; Vivian Blainè, a star with no future in Hollywood and no inhibitions in New York, rasping scornfully at her ex-husband, "Yeah, we had laughs"; Walter Klavun, a backer who is in "merchandising," ordering vodka and cranberry juice at the opening-night post mortem; Horace McMahon, an illiterate press-agent, heartily applauding a song that is sure to be thrown out of the show; Matt Mattox, a spidery choreographer, trying desperately to accommodate the contradictory whims of his employers; and Constance Ford, an author's wife condemned to Connecticut, taking off her party dress, removing her makeup, and hating the whole wide world.

Around and around in this murderous revolving-door wanders David Wayne, shrinking from the embrace of a noisy actress, getting adjusted to the habit of "two little double Martinis," rebelling at the notion of having to sign things in fourplicate, unable to keep his mind on a phone call to his wife for all the chorus girls that are stomping by, and breaking out into a few bars of "Toyland" or a nice little hymn now and then.

## ... And Wonderful

What all of this means to say, of course, is that the professional theater is incompetent, irrelevant, and immaterial. What it does say is that the professional theater is incompetent, irrelevant, immaterial, and absolutely wonderful. An uncontrollable sentiment, a positive affection for frauds, fools (and show-business geniuses), has somehow crept in.

Perhaps that short, mellow hymn—begun during an audition by David Wayne and picked up by the tough-minded Mr. Cowan from the front of the house—is the tipoff. Whatever these clowns may be up to, and whatever trouble they may be cooking up for themselves, they are alarmingly decent inside: they put Christmas trees on

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their mantels just like other people, they tuck drunks safely away in deep couches, they are brutally courteous to untalented brunettes ("if you are interrupted in your audition, remember that no offense or criticism is intended"), they are kind to tap-dancers who haven't worked since the time of De Mille, and they are only happy—as Mr. Cowan remarks—when they are standing around a chilly backstage drinking coffee out of paper cups.

It should be obvious that a good bit of "Say, Darling" is inside stuff (one of the biggest laughs comes when Mr. Wayne takes it upon himself to order rehearsal sandwiches), and it should be made clear that the shape of the evening is almost as ramshackle as the institution it salutes. This warning duly sounded, let us go on to add that Mr. Burrows has devised such images as three helpless professionals trying vainly to flag down a determined singer with a fine, ferocious extravagance, that Oliver Smith's many settings are sleek and colorful, that the pianos (manned by Colin Romoff and Peter Howard) stir things up frequently, and that—the fun being almost uninterrupted—Mr. Bissell has another success.

I worry for that man.