

# FIRST NIGHT REPORT

## WALTER KERR

### 'Love Me Little'

**HELEN HAYES THEATER**

A new comedy in two acts by John G. Fuller, adapted from the novel by Amanda Vail, staged by Alfred Drake, settings by Ralph Alswang, clothes by Motley, presented by Alexander H. Cohen with the following cast:

Emily Whittaker .....	Susan Kohner
Amy .....	Joan Hovis
Jean .....	Sarah Hardy
Nancy .....	Lin Pierson
Sally .....	Marlene Cameron
Sue Fosburgh .....	Avra Petrides
Father .....	Donald Cook
Mother .....	Joan Bennett
Laurie Trumbull .....	Meg Mundy
Lester .....	Robert Dowdell
Stanley .....	Hal England
William .....	Nicholas Pryor
Greg .....	Dana White

JUST a couple of weeks ago, in "Back to Methuselah," Bernard Shaw was to be heard campaigning for a glorious time when we should dismiss sex altogether, and be the happier for it. I didn't know what he was talking about.

Now I know. In a single blow—well, it's more like a thousand small needles—the authors of a ruthless little comedy called "Love Me Little" have done what Shaw could never do: convinced us that the relationship between male and female is essentially unappetizing, that the boys and girls who take an interest in it are tiresome, tiresome, tiresome, and that the amoeba should never have split in the first place.

The amoeba does turn up, as a point of reference, in the course of the very arch catalogue of salty references being steadily exhaled at the Helen Hayes. In fact, everything that can be said on the subject turns up sooner or later. Best-selling author Donald Cook is doomed to lead the self-conscious, and forlornly smirking, parade: he must announce, through a twinkling grin, that his newest book is "bound to corrupt generations of pubescent girls."

Susan Kohner, as his own daughter (pubescent), is now confronted with the fact that she has lost every possible honor at her girls' school to a lass who, smoking a cigarette and chewing a caramel simultaneously, confesses that she has had a real "experience" with a fellow from Andover. Since the summer is upon us—and even Life Guards are available—Miss Kohner has approximately six weeks in which to arrange for her swift seduction.

This, it turns out, is not so easy to accomplish as you might imagine. Daddy isn't much help, even though he is bursting with information (asked to define the difference between love and lust, he announced that "if the man is over forty, it's love" just as though he had got off a good one). The boys aren't much help, because they are all full of hi-fi, Dylan Thomas, and noble ideals. ("You're very provocative, Emily," says one terrified crew-cut as he squirms out of the wench's reach. "you don't know what's happening to me right now").

Anyway, there's a lot of talk about haystacks and "basic drives," and Emily crawls all over the resisting fellow who's been fool enough to get near a sofa, and daddy begins to worry about those "lusty young colts prancing around" his daughter at the beach. "They're at the peak," he explains, frowning and fidgeting slightly.

I do suppose there have been perfectly successful comedies built around a single libidinous joke, but I imagine that in most such cases it was a funny libidinous joke. This one gasps for air from the beginning, strains nervously after each new desperate wink, and ends in what one of the characters unwittingly calls "a cathedral hush."

It's too bad, because some pleasant people are involved. Mr. Cook's excellent assortment of slurred growls, comfortable purrs, and dismayed looks is rushed into every breach. Joan Bennett, most fetching with a

calculated sprinkle of grey in her hair, folds her arms, looks wise, and does nicely by anything workable that is thrown her way. Robert Dowdell does a passable imitation of Orson Bean's best vocal effects, Meg Mundy is up to some mystifying tricks as a passionate neighbor with a lemony pronunciation, and director Alfred Drake has devised various bits of adolescent posturing to see if these might help (they don't).

Only Ralph Alswang's cheerfully painted, inventively lighted screen—dormitories, boat-houses, rocky beaches—relieve the pressures of a wearing evening.