

Bloomgarden Wins A Critics Double

By JUDITH CRIST

Kermit Bloomgarden made theatrical history last week as winner of the New York Drama Critics Circle awards for his productions of "Look Homeward, Angel" and "The Music Man," adjudged, respectively, the best American play and musical of the 1957-'58 season.

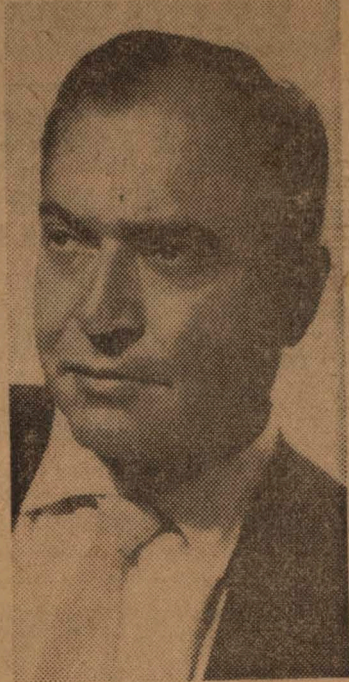
As the first producer to have won top honors in both fields in one year, Mr. Bloomgarden might be prompted to pundit on the problem of picking potential hits. His "Death of a Salesman," "Diary of Anne Frank" and "The Most Happy Fella" also won the Critics' award in their time; the first two won Pulitzer Prizes as well, and the last two are still being presented on tour. But as a man who has spent just about half his fifty-three years in the theater, he is not prone to play pundit on the subject.

"I don't know what the ingredients of a success would be," he said. "All I know is what I like in a play or a musical. If I like it, it's the kind of thing I feel I want to do and get the most pleasure out of doing. I've done only one play because I thought it would make money, and that was a miserable failure."

Love, Not Money

This play, he said, was "The Man," a melodrama starring Dorothy Gish that appeared briefly early in 1949. But Mr. Bloomgarden does not shy away from the fact that some plays he has produced for love rather than money have had equally dismal careers, including his first production attempt in 1940, "Heavenly Express" with John Garfield, Harry Carey and Aline MacMahon; the Spewacks' "Woman Bites Dog" that had five performances in 1946, and, more recently, "Night of the Auk" that lasted eight performances, and "Maiden Voyage" that collapsed out of town a year ago.

But balance these failures off against such successes as his first independent venture, when he devoted himself in 1945, to "Deep Are the Roots,"



Kermit Bloomgarden, producer of prizewinners "Look Homeward, Angel" and "The Music Man."

followed by "Another Part of the Forest," "Command Decision" and a number of others, including "The Lark" and "A View from the Bridge," which he produced in the same 1955 season as "Diary of Anne Frank."

"I believe the quality of the work, the writing, the richness of the characters and the kind of story are the things that make me and most producers want to produce," Mr. Bloomgarden said. "You don't think in money-making terms. If it's good, it will have a good chance. It's a matter of not looking down to the audience. It's doing something you feel has merit."

Batting Over .500

"Over the years it's proven itself. My record is a little over fifty-fifty—that's a good commercial record. I've done plays, I admit, that didn't go—plays I produced well, that I admired as plays and that were not successful. And I've done plays under the same circumstances that were hits. That's the kind of work producing is."

Producing is nice work if you can get it, but there is no set
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A Double Winner; Week's Highlights

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pattern for arriving at such a career. Mr. Bloomgarden, a native New Yorker, took a business course at New York University and became a certified public accountant after graduation. His first theatrical tie was as an accountant, starting in 1932 for Arthur Beckhardt. Three years later he became general manager for producer-director Herman Shumlin, serving also during the '30s as business manager for the Group Theater. He made a brief producing venture, as noted, in 1940, but it was not until 1945 that he left Mr. Shumlin and entered production on his own.

During the war Mr. Bloomgarden managed the Stage Door Canteen. As president of the League of New York Theaters he pioneered the 70-cent-ticket-for-high-school-students plan and, unlike most producers who went along with it, provided such tickets for his shows even when they were in the sold-out-hit category.

'Lark' and 'Decision'

As a holdover from his accountancy days, his office at 1545 Broadway is run on a business-like, no-nonsense basis, but Mr. Bloomgarden himself is not one to avoid a gamble.

He undertook "The Lark," for example, in 1955 in spite of the fact that Anouilh plays at that time were anathema on Broadway and a Christopher Fry version of the play had collapsed in London. He produced "Command Decision" in 1947 despite the then-popular notion that theatergoers were not ready for World War II dramas and the all-time notions that plays with all-male casts and plays that sympathized with the brass rather than the enlisted man just can't succeed.

Plays come to producers in various ways. Mr. Bloomgarden recalled that Mildred Dunnock brought him the Ketti Frings "Look Homeward, Angel" script. "I was very fortunate to read it first, because it had been brought to two other producers at the same time. I wasn't a Thomas Wolfe fan, and I hadn't read much of his work. But I read the play and felt it had to be done. At the time I decided that was the important thing, not how to close the script was to the Wolfe book. My question was: was it a play? Only afterwards people remarked on how much of Wolfe Ketti Frings had captured."

As to "The Music Man," he said that two years ago his play-reader noticed that Feuer and Martin had dropped their plans to produce it. An attempt at that time to "get together" with Meredith Willson, whom Mr. Bloomgarden "didn't know from

a hole in the ground," failed. But "almost a year to the day before we opened in New York" Mr. Willson reported to him that he had finished the show and came East for an audition, and the deal was set.

How are stars picked? For "Music Man," the selection of Robert Preston, who had never before sung or danced, for the singing and dancing lead, was regarded as a major gamble. "I had thought of Preston and so had Morton Da Costa, who did a simply beautiful job of directing the show. Da Costa had Preston come down—and that was it." As to "Look Homeward," Mrs. Frings, he said thought of Tony Perkins as the star "and the rest of the casting was a joint idea."

As to financing shows, Mr. Bloomgarden is a firm believer in having a lot of small investors involved rather than large-sum angels who might want to tell him how to run his affairs. For "Death of a Salesman," for example, which brought in more than \$1,000,000, he had eighty-two investors who had put from \$250 to \$4,000 into the show and, of course, got a rather succulent return on their money.

But Mr. Bloomgarden is quick to resent any suggestion or even implication that producers are primarily the money-men.

He Takes the Risk

"The producer has a terribly important function in the theater, one that is completely underestimated by everybody, critics, authors, directors and actors alike. I believe the producer takes more risk and is willing to gamble on more difficult things than any of the so-called artists in the field. He can't turn over his birthright to any of the artists. Production is a collaboration, and his function is to see it goes as smoothly as possible without giving up his own rights as an individual. If he does, it goes out of his hands, and all kinds of trouble sets in.

"He has to have the respect and cooperation of the people he's working with. But he gets fed up from time to time listening to artists talk about high prices in the theater and then refusing to take anything less than the highest percentage of the gross and the highest salary they can get. It goes right down the line.

"Producers play a very creative part in the producing of a play. I wouldn't underestimate for a minute the job they do."

Movie Revivals Around Town

Films of D. W. Griffith, among them "The House with Closed Shutters," "The Revenue Men and the Girl" and "Mender of Nets," will be shown at the second lecture-screening