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THE THEATRICAL CAREER OF JED HARRIS IN NEW YORK, 1925-1956.

THE LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY AND AGRICULTURAL AND MECHANICAL COL., PH.D., 1978

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THE THEATRICAL CAREER OF JED HARRIS
IN NEW YORK, 1925-1956

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in
The Department of Speech

by
Patricia Lynn Burroughs
B.A., Ouachita University
M.A., Louisiana State University
August, 1978
DEDICATION

To my mother, Lute Reeves Burroughs, who spent her life teaching children in school; and who somehow found the time in the midst of her professional work and household duties to teach me a great deal, sometimes by means of lessons, but always by example.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author sincerely appreciates the patient guidance and encouragement given by Dr. Bill J. Harbin in the writing of this dissertation.

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ABSTRACT

Between 1925 and 1956 Jed Harris (1900– ) produced and/or directed thirty Broadway productions. With his first big hit, Broadway (1926), at the age of twenty-six, Harris achieved instant fame and was hailed as the "Wonder Boy" of the American theatre. During his first five years in the theatre he produced four exceptional and three moderate successes. Having had no previous experience or training in the theatre prior to his first production, Harris explains his sudden rise to fame as the result of being born with an almost perfect dramatic sense. Few would dispute that claim. Harris became a legend, both for his ability to produce one success after another and because of his unique uncompromising personality. Referred to as Broadway's most successful eccentric, Harris never attended the opening nights nor read reviews of his plays, generally disliked actors, playwrights, and critics and rarely appeared at any type of social gathering. His interests and talents extended far beyond the theatre into music, art, sports, literature, vaudeville, writing, yachting, animals and cooking.

Since rewriting the script constituted the initial step in the process of each Jed Harris production, Harris' insistence upon his own ideas frequently led to clashes
with authors, such as George Abbott, George Kaufman and Thornton Wilder. Nevertheless, as a director, Harris earned the sincere respect and love of nearly all his actors, many of whom reappeared in numerous Harris shows. Among those players whose career and talents were directly affected by Harris are Helen Hayes, Laurence Olivier, Osgood Perkins, Charles Laughton, Basil Rathbone, Wendy Hiller and Charles Boyer.

This study examines the theatrical career of Jed Harris in New York as a producer and/or director. The data for the study have been drawn primarily from newspapers, periodicals, memoirs, biographers, and personal interviews with Jed Harris. The scope of the work of Harris ranges from popular melodrama and comedy, as in Broadway (1926), The Royal Family (1927) and The Front Page (1928), to serious drama such as A Doll's House (1938), Uncle Vanya (1930) and Our Town (1938). Primarily known as a man of high artistic standards and a genius in theatrical casting and directing, Harris' reputation for innovative productions and risk-taking ventures further enhanced his status as the Broadway Napoleon. For example, Harris often created a hit from a script which had been rejected by numerous other producers. And with his production of The Heiress (1948), he transformed a play which had failed eight months earlier into a resounding success.

Of the thirty Broadway productions he introduced,
eleven were extremely successful. In all but three of the remainder Harris' work was soundly praised. His influence encompasses actors, playwrights, producers, directors, press agents and stage managers. Books and plays have been written about him. He is considered one of the greatest American director-producers during the first half of the twentieth century.
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to investigate the theatrical career of Jed Harris as a director and producer in New York between 1925 and 1956. During these years, Harris was responsible for a total of thirty Broadway shows. In each of these his influence was visible, since even as only producer he cast and managed the entire production. Indeed, Harris' autocratic methods made him the object of both fear and respect among his contemporaries.

The scope of the work of Jed Harris ranges from popular melodrama and comedy, as in Broadway (1926), The Royal Family (1927) and The Front Page (1928), to serious drama, such as Ibsen's A Doll's House (1938), Chekhov's Uncle Vanya (1930) and Wilder's Our Town (1938). Primarily known as a man of high artistic standards, Harris' innovative spirit led him to introduce the first picture of organized crime on the American stage (Broadway), the first big hit centering around actors (The Royal Family) and the experimental production of Our Town. Though frequently these gambles resulted in a hit, Harris was never one who consciously sought to please the public. He knew only what he liked, and therefore attempted to please only himself. In doing this, Harris often found himself at odds with others, particularly authors.
Harris' career involves twenty theatrical seasons over a period of thirty-two years. Between 1925 and 1929 he produced eight plays on Broadway. At the end of 1929 he officially retired from the theatre. Late in 1930, however, he returned to New York and over the next nine years produced twelve plays. In 1938, after his production of *Our Town*, Harris retired again from the theatre. This time he moved to California, where he remained for four years. In 1943 he introduced the successful production of *Dark Eyes* and from then until 1956 he presented ten new shows on Broadway.

Because of the sporadic nature of his career, and his periodic retirement from the stage, the chapters dealing with Harris' work in the theatre fell naturally into three periods. An overview of Harris' approach to his profession and general biographical data are covered in two beginning chapters. Thereafter, chapter three covers the early years, 1925-1929, chapter four, the middle years, 1930-1939, and chapter five, the final years, 1940-1956. A concluding chapter reviews Harris' major areas of theatrical activity, indicates how his attitude and personality influenced his work in the theatre, and evaluates the contributions he made to the theatre in the United States.

In the summer of 1975, having selected Jed Harris as the subject of my dissertation, I immediately began to collect data from the usual available sources: twentieth-century newspapers, periodicals, memoirs, biographies,
letters, and playbills. At the same time I began what would become a year-and-a-half effort to meet Mr. Harris. From writing to Variety, I learned that he received his mail at a lawyer's office in New York. Letter after letter was sent, with no response. With the help of my advisor, Dr. Bill Harbin, phone calls were made to the lawyer's office, with the response that Mr. Harris would be informed of the calls and would be asked to return them. No answer.

In the fall of 1976, after a year of fruitless attempts, I met Mr. Clive Barnes, then the drama critic for the New York Times, while he was lecturing at Louisiana State University. I told him of my situation. "Mr. Harris receives his mail at Arnold Weissberger's office. Do you have any way of helping me reach him?" I asked. Barnes smiled and said, "Arnold is a dear friend of mine. Write to him, and tell him I told you to write, and put another letter in for Jed Harris." I immediately carried out his instructions. This all took place late in September. October passed, November passed. Still no word. I made plans to complete my research at the Lincoln Center Theatre Library in New York during my Christmas break.

One Saturday morning early in December I returned to my apartment after spending several hours in the library. In my mailbox I found the following mailgram from New York: "I will be in New York City from December 15 to December 18th. Would be glad to talk to you. Please acknowledge by December
His phone number was included and he gave me 48 hours to respond. When I reached him, Harris was full of questions. Finally he said, "Well, it's so cold here, I may be gone when you arrive." After a year-and-a-half, I thought, could I be this close and not meet him?

I moved up my flight plans and arrived in New York the following Tuesday. Phoning Harris from the Penn Central Station, I agreed to meet him for lunch at a small cafe on East 54th Street. Trying to determine how he would recognize me, Harris asked, "Are you tall?" "Yes," I said, "And I have long hair." "Well," he continued, "Just hold a piece of asparagus high in your hand." He hung up.

I arrived at the restaurant in the pouring rain thirty minutes early. The proprietor informed me they were not yet open, but I was welcome to wait on a small bench near the front door. Just at noon the door opened and in stepped a man in a black overcoat and a black beret. I stood up as he walked slowly toward me. As he came closer a gentle smile spread across his face. Though I was quite in a state of nerves, Harris immediately made me feel at ease and freely began talking. Some six hours later we rose to go. I felt as if I'd been there only a few minutes.

The week I was in New York, I generally did research at Lincoln Center during the day, and met Mr. Harris from 4:00 to 6:30 each afternoon. In late January he lectured at LSU and subsequently he found a house in Mandeville, Louisiana, where he continued his writing. Since his eyesight
is poor, I found that I could be of help in reading and typing for him. Over the next six months I continued to work with Mr. Harris. I found him completely open and free in talking about any part of his career. Occasionally he invited guests to dinner and entertained them with anecdotes and opinions of his experiences. I was able to preserve many of these conversations on tape. And when no recorder was available, I would transcribe what he said on paper. In all the time I have known him, never has he asked to see what I have written, nor has he suggested that I include one thing he said and omit something else.

My first impression of Mr. Harris has been my lasting impression. Though an extremely complex and contradictory individual, Harris has, from my observation, three primary qualities which dominate his personality—energy, curiosity and generosity. As this study will show, Harris has always been a man of boundless energy. I found this to be true in his everyday life as well as his professional activities. When he is not physically involved in writing, reading, cooking or some other activity, his mind is always at work. Even driving along the highway, he frequently launches into an idea for a short story or a new scene for a play or book he is writing.

And to watch Jed Harris talk is to see kinetic energy in motion. His face is a kaleidoscope of overflowing mood. No doubt this mobility of facial expression accounts for the fact that "There is . . . no adequate photograph of Mr.
Harris extant. The best likenesses are all caricatures.\(^1\) His dark piercing eyes, large nose, quick grin and heavy eyebrows seem to rearrange themselves so rapidly that to pin Harris down to merely one expression is to betray the quicksilver character of this multifaceted man.

Harris' curiosity is as overwhelming as his energy. When I met him I had read that he often asks interviewers more questions than he allows them to ask him. But no amount of preparation could have armed me for such an encounter. What did I plan to do with my degree, how did I get the money to come to New York, where were my parents from—all these things and more seemed as important to him as any other possible reason for our interview.

With almost anyone he meets, Harris' queries range from ancestry to automobiles. And to visit a store with him is to meet the proprietor, learn the cost, quality and materials of limitless items on display, and to interview at least two or three fellow customers. He peers into shopping carts to see what someone else is buying, and if he spots an unfamiliar item, he asks, "Why did you buy this?" "Do you like it?" "What about your husband (or wife)?"

A typical example of Harris exploratory nature occurred when he was in Baton Rouge. One afternoon I let him out in front of a meat market while I went to park the

\(^1\)Lucius Beebe, "Jed Harris Back on Broadway With Not One But Three Plays," Newspaper clipping, Lincoln Center.
car. By the time I came into the store, I couldn't find him anywhere. I went up and down the aisles time and again. Making a third trip back to the largest meat counter, I caught a glimpse of him through a small door leading into the back room. Huge pieces of meat hung suspended from the ceiling over his head. In the midst of this environment, Harris was directing the head butcher as he took down one of those sides of beef. He showed him exactly where he wanted his steaks cut, and stood next to him as he cut it and carefully trimmed off the fat. On leaving the store Harris told me that the butcher was a World War II veteran, who was to attend a reunion of his army group in Los Angeles the following month. A few days later, he had me drive him back to the market in order to give the butcher a copy of Yankee Magazine. It seems that only the week before, Harris had read an article in Yankee vividly recreating an incident in the South Pacific during World War II, in the same area in which the butcher had served. Harris thought he might enjoy it. The man was delighted.

Such displays of curiosity followed by a generous gesture on Harris' part are everyday occurrences. He is always open to the possibility of helping or surprising someone with a generous show of kindness. While in Mandeville, for example, the ten-year-old son of Harris' neighbor was stricken with an acute case of appendicitis. The child's mother took him to the hospital in the later afternoon and at 10 P.M. he was being operated on. Harris had me call the
hospital every thirty minutes to check on his progress. The boy's appendix burst during the operation and for more than an hour the situation became increasingly tense. At one o'clock, however, his mother reported that her son was out of danger and being taken to his room. Harris suddenly realized that the mother had been at the hospital most of the afternoon and evening and needed something to eat. He boiled some eggs, heated a can of soup and carefully poured it into a thermos, collected various fruits and crackers and at two A.M. delivered the goods to his neighbor at the hospital. She was overcome with surprise and gratitude. By the time he returned home it was almost 3:30. The following morning Harris had to be up at six o'clock to catch a plane going to North Carolina where he was to give a lecture at a university. He got no sleep, but never complained about it.

Although these three traits of Jed Harris are among many which have been observed and written about over the years, they seem to me to dominate his personality. He is a man who is child-like, in the sense that he is open and curious about everything he encounters. Nothing is accepted at face value. He must know the where, when, why or how. Once he gets his information, he is quick to share a story or two relating to the subject. But first, he must have his questions answered. Ultimately, however, it is almost impossible to describe Jed Harris. As one writer said, There is no "translating him from reality into printer's copy and back into reality through the medium of words."
Perhaps, like Boston, Mr. Harris is only a state of mind, a very compelling one. . . ."²

Research for studies of this sort usually depend upon access to memoirs, letters, journals, newspapers, and most of all an intuitive grasp of the relationship of the subject to the history of his times and collation of all known facts and opinions. Rarely is one afforded access to the subject himself and an opportunity to question him in depth about matters pertaining to his career, his method of work and his own private views of what is often unclear, if not distorted in the media. Fortunately, this opportunity has been afforded me. I have therefore been able to see many private records of Mr. Harris, as well as his own memoirs, portions of which have appeared in periodicals over the past five years, and which will soon be published under the title A Dance on the High Wire.

Perhaps some may believe that my association with Jed Harris will result in personal bias and possibly undermine the thoroughness and detachment required in a work of this kind. The overwhelming amount of evidence on the subject actually makes such a theoretical bias extremely unlikely, while the value of contact with the subject of this study will, I hope, not only give a truer perspective on his career, but also add, if I am fortunate enough to convey it, an element of reality rarely to be found in the

²Ibid.
observations of associates, reporters, and critics.

I discovered, for example, that while Mr. Harris has what might be termed an enormous ego, he is almost without any vanity about anything he did in the theatre. The expression of his ego comes in the form of viewing everything in relation to himself. He knows what he wants, what he likes and pursues only a course of action which suits himself. On the other hand, he is not one who thrives on his accomplishments. Indeed, he was rarely satisfied with his productions, regardless of their critical acclaim. He was infinitely more critical of his work than those who were paid to review it, as will be revealed in his memoirs. While Harris readily admits to a real passion for the theatre, he loathes "show business," with its stars, unions, press releases and interviews.

No studies on Jed Harris exist, although his theatrical activity in New York covered three decades and thirty productions and was recognized as qualitatively among the highest on Broadway. This study will investigate the directing and producing career of Jed Harris from 1925 to 1956, in an attempt to evaluate his contributions to the theatre in New York and, therefore, to the development of the theatre in the United States.
CHAPTER I

Jed Harris, who produced and/or directed thirty Broadway shows, has frequently been referred to as a genius; he is also a man whom his associates respect, fear and sometimes hate. Rarely has anyone associated with him come away feeling neutral. During his long career, he either attracted or repelled: "one of the effects Jed Harris had on people, or some people anyway, or so they said, was sheer terror. Another was that he could be . . . the most charming man on the face of the earth. And whether terrified or charmed, or both, almost everybody from the twenties to the fifties agreed that Jed Harris was the genius of the American theatre."1 Critic John Mason Brown stated that "Jed Harris was deservedly known as the American theatre's Napoleon."2 And New York Times reviewer Brooks Atkinson described Harris' work as "Centrifugal;" he added that "The solemn rubric in the program, 'A Jed Harris Production' . . . is the hall-mark of one of the most clairvoyant minds in the theatre."3 Behind a


Harris production, another critic noted, stands "a man of consistent ideals and acutely creative intelligence."\(^4\)

Two descriptions repeatedly followed Harris. The first was the title "Wonder Boy," a tribute assigned him at the age of twenty-six, after he produced the smash hit Broadway in 1926. Subsequent successes earned him the reputation of a legend. "When he was only twenty-eight, Harris had seven productions running at once, and his income was over 8,000 pounds (£40,000\(^5\)) a week. He made more money than any other manager in New York... Other men have made a million out of the theatre, but nobody in so short a time. His secret was that he loved the theatre and did not try to make money out of it, but just could not help producing."\(^5\) How did Jed Harris envision himself as a famous theatrical figure? "Of all forms of fame, the theatrical kind is the most fleeting... At least I have found it so..."\(^6\) Later, he said, "I was always... just a fellow trying to learn how to function in the theatre, trying to master my craft. Whatever anyone ever called me or said about me I never gave a hoot. I was never disturbed or exhilarated by a review. I've always tried to tell young actors and playwrights of promise not to read


\(^5\)\textit{Literary Digest}, 23 Nov. 1929, p. 21.

reviews." My own observation corroborates this view as I witnessed Harris' reaction to the research that I undertook in preparation for this study. Time and again he leafed curiously through items, chose one, and after several moments of silence, emerged with the comment, "Well, you see, I never read any of the reviews. After a show opened, I'd just call up my manager, ask him how the reviews were, and he'd usually say, 'Well, just great,' and that's all there was to it. I had not the slightest interest in the reviews. I've never seen any of these articles."

In an article entitled "The Jed Harris Legend," the writer states, "Everyone you meet will venture a story about him. . . . Each narrator has another point to prove and another intention behind his little story, but they all add up to a single point and a single impression: that of no compromise." He goes on to venture a conjecture regarding the development of this legend. "In the world of pretension which is the theatre, the insistence on rich and thorough execution of original and unyielding
conception is in itself the basis for a full differentia-
tion from all the others who keep in nervous circulation
there and the basis for a full-fledged myth."¹⁰

Since Harris often initiated actions which placed
him against the rituals of theatrical protocol, occa-
sionally he became the target of hostile words or acts.
After his first big hit, Broadway (1926), catapulted him
to the top of his profession, he was unexpectedly sued for
fifty per cent of the profits of this play. Leonard Blum-
berg, who filed the suit, claimed that he had offered to
put up the capital to produce Broadway, that Harris had
agreed, yet had not taken his money. The suit, eventually
thrown out, cost Harris several thousand dollars in lawyer
fees.¹¹ But it provided a learning experience for the
youthful producer, arming him against future business
transactions, for which he subsequently wrote all his own
contracts.

Harris' determination to maintain his autonomy en-
compassed far more than mere contractual and policy dis-
putes. Personal encounters contributed to his legendary
capacity to shock if not to anger. During his career,
Harris had repeated clashes with various show business
figures. Consequently, some hated him, and a barrage of

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Jed Harris, A Dance on the High Wire (unpublished
manuscript). Quoted by permission of the author.
anecdotes and one-liners emerged depicting the reverberations of his so-called eccentric personality. A mutual acquaintance of Harris and George Kaufman once said to Kaufman, "'Jed is his own worst enemy.' . . . 'Not while I'm alive,' Kaufman said."\(^{12}\) Kaufman, George Abbott and Thornton Wilder are among the cast of Harris feuds. Some of these individuals have told their own story of their relationship with Harris, and in his memoirs, Harris recounts his dealings with these and others. Such narratives will be detailed within later pages of this work, as they pertain to a particular production.

The greatest professional dilemma Jed Harris faced, and one which he was never able to overcome, was the difficulty in casting, finding precisely the right actor for the right part. Although no doubt exaggerating, Harris revealed his own deep feelings of frustration and disappointment in casting when he said recently "There were just no good actors in America. The situation is even worse today. There are more good actors playing in a small theatre in Birmingham, England, than in the whole of the United States. When I was casting, I would find it impossible even to find a young man to play the part of the gentleman. It took me a year to cast *The Royal Family* (1927) and eight months to

When Harris first reads a script, he casts it mentally, and frequently pencils in the name of the actor he believes would be best for a particular part. Many times his decision to do a play rested with the availability of a certain actor. In his production of *The Heiress* (1947), for instance, he was determined to obtain Wendy Hiller for the role of Catherine Sloper. At the time he was casting, he said: "she's the only person I know who can create the part. Others may follow her, and even give more finished performances, but they could not possibly do what I feel she can do. Every word she says on stage sounds as if it were torn out of her. She can be absolutely marvelous and heartbreaking." He was certain that if Helen Hayes had not played Norma Besant in *Coquette*, "it could never in a million years have been the success it was."15

After deciding to produce *The Green Bay Tree*, Harris sketched in the name of John Drew beside the part of Mr. Dulcimer. A friend, shocked by this notation, said, "But, Jed, John Drew is dead." "I know," he replied, "but I'd rather have John Drew dead than the actor I've got, alive. This is the ideal I will reach for."16

13 Interview with Jed Harris.
14 Harris, *Watchman*, p. 43.
15 Ibid.
16 Interview with Jed Harris.
What transpired between the time the paragon was penciled into the script and the living actor appeared on the stage was a mushrooming campaign against time, energy and frustration. Harris almost never secured an actor through the process of formal tryouts, but spent many days personally interviewing hundreds of actors in his office. His most common method of casting was to respond to the news that a promising performer was now playing in a small part in such and such a theatre. To visit five theatres in one evening was not unusual for him. He simply arranged to arrive at the theatre five or ten minutes prior to an actor’s scene, view the scene, then run off to another show.17 Always on the lookout for promising talent, his summers took him out of New York into the summer stock companies of New York and New England.

Knowing that he did not hold formal tryouts, I asked Harris if his method of choosing performers was characteristic of other Broadway producers during his years in the theatre. He listened to the question, leaned back in his seat, paused, then quickly remarked, "I have no idea what anyone else was doing."18

Insight into precisely what Harris saw during one of those few moments of viewing an actor for the first time

17Ibid.
18Ibid.
is revealed in a tribute he wrote when his friend, actor Osgood Perkins, died in 1937:

I first saw him on the stage of the Broadhurst Theatre in *Beggar on Horseback*. It was a grand show, with lots of good actors, but for me the best thing in it was the moment when Osgood Perkins pointed his finger at another character in the play. I have never forgotten that gesture. It was malign, sardonic, contemptuous, weird and altogether funny. His forefinger seemed at least a foot long and I had the uncomfortable feeling that it was being poked into me. I looked up his name in the program and later discovered that it was his first part on the professional stage.19

Later in the piece he tells how "Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur brought me the manuscript of *The Front Page*. I read it on a train going up to Boston. When I came to, the first thing I remembered was that long finger poking into me at the Broadhurst Theatre and the role of Walter Burns was cast."20

While visiting in London in 1932, Harris commented to those associated with the London production of *The Green Bay Tree* (1932) that he had just witnessed a performance by "the greatest actor on the English stage," a young man who appeared in a brief scene in the play *The Rats of Norway*. The actor's name was Laurence Olivier. One producer shouted from his office to an associate in the next room, "I say,


20Ibid.
did you hear what Jed just said? He said Olivier was the best actor on the English stage." After a long pause, came the distinctly British reply, "Really?" Harris vividly describes the scene in which Olivier played the role of a distraught husband, painfully uncomfortable in the presence of his wife. "He leaned forward in his chair, gripping his knees, his arms close to his body, which was almost rigid," Harris recalls. "I felt that if he let go of his knees, his body and the whole theatre would fly apart." Shortly thereafter, Harris introduced young Olivier to American audiences in the leading role of Julian Dulcimer in his production of *The Green Bay Tree* (1933).

What influence, what model, whose ideas did Jed Harris follow in the choice of plays, the casting of players and in the methods of rehearsal? "Nothing. Nobody. If I had to say who influenced me the most in the theatre I would say the Impressionist painters. There was a day when Pissarro said to a young stock broker who was a Sunday painter on the side, as he watched him paint a scene in the woods, 'Oh no, Gauguin, you must not paint from nature. Merely make a pencil sketch and paint in the studio. A painting is not life, it is a picture.'" Harris added, "And that's what the theatre is—not life, but a projection, larger than life, more compelling, more intense, far better formed and

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21Interview with Jed Harris.
disciplined than life. That is precisely why people go to the theatre, to get away from life, to a more rewarding world.\(^\text{22}\) He attributes much of his passion for the theatre also to the novels of Stendhal, whom he describes as the most graphic novelist in the history of literature, a man who might have been a very great dramatist.\(^\text{23}\)

To please the public was never a primary concern for Harris. He says, "I never had any feeling or identity with an audience."\(^\text{24}\) In his memoirs, he describes a conversation with Crosby Gaige, one of his financial partners, who was concerned about how the public would regard *Coquette* (1927), then in rehearsal. Harris responded, "To tell the truth I don't know much about the public, and what little I do know isn't flattering." Gaige reminded him that the public was Harris' bread and butter. Harris continued, "I don't give a hoot in hell about the public. Any more than the public does about me. I know what interests me. So I really produce for an audience of one—myself. And all I can do is hope that a few shleppers will somehow tag along with me."\(^\text{25}\) Harris now admits that when he rehearsed a production he became completely isolated from the world. The only reality was the world on the stage. He never

\(^{22}\)Ibid.

\(^{23}\)Ibid.

\(^{24}\)Ibid.

\(^{25}\)Harris, *Dance*, p. 161.
thought of an audience. "The only audience I was interested in was myself. And frankly I regarded that audience with far more respect than the paying audience."\(^{26}\) When I asked him what held him in the theatre, his eyes lit up, "Ah, the rehearsal of a play! That was a true emotional experience. The first run-through without a stop—many times I would have to hold back the tears."\(^{27}\)

Rehearsals for a Jed Harris production were closed to outsiders. But those connected with the plays have written of their experiences. Herman Shapiro, for many years Harris' chief stage manager, wrote that when rehearsals for The Heiress (1947) began, Harris "asked the members of the company to promise him not to start memorizing their lines."\(^{28}\) Shapiro noted Basil Rathbone's surprise, "'If we don't commit our lines to memory, how will we ever learn them?' . . . 'By their signs and portents,' said Jed blithely."\(^{29}\) His favorite aphorism is "'Learn the part, not the lines.' If you learn the part, the lines will adhere to your mind like steel filings to a magnet."\(^{30}\)

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\(^{26}\) Interview with Jed Harris.

\(^{27}\) Ibid.

\(^{28}\) Harris, Watchman, p. 150.

\(^{29}\) Ibid.

\(^{30}\) Interview with Jed Harris.
invited audience, Rathbone was almost hysterical with excitement. His elation came not merely from the response of the audience, but the realization that he had not forgotten a single line, something which he had never accomplished before. He wanted to open the production immediately. He asked Harris, "Why can't we open tomorrow night? What will we be doing the next eight days?" Harris replied, "We will be doing those things to our performance that are perhaps too subtle and too brilliant for most of the louts that make up an audience. But here and there will be an individual with a keen appreciation of acting and it's for those few that we will hone up this performance and give them an evening of rare delight."  

Reporter Sidney B. Whipple, given the opportunity to attend a rehearsal of Our Town (1938), contrasted Jed Harris' style of directing with that of other directors. "There was nothing frantic about it. He never raised his voice, never interrupted a scene, never stopped an actor in the middle of a line." He concluded, "There are two outstanding qualities in his direction—patience and persistence." The persistence appears as he repeats a scene five, ten, twenty times, never resting until it is perfect. "His patience is demonstrated in his manner of working with

31Ibid.

32"Harris Seeks Perfection," Newspaper clipping, Lincoln Center.
his puppets. He seldom shows any annoyance or irritation. He never uses sarcasm or invective." 

The stage manager for *Our Town*, Edward Goodnow, wrote, "Legends and reputations are queer things. I had never worked for Jed before and so I took it for granted that Harris would be all temperament and that Wilder would be meek and gentle in the theatre. Both assumptions turned out to be ludicrous. Jed was all coolness and efficiency. . . ." Goodnow reports that Harris staged the two crowd scenes of *Our Town*, the wedding and the funeral, in less than three hours. "He did this so that the extras and small-part people wouldn't have to hang around, but they all continued to sit in the auditorium long after their rehearsal was over. They were just too fascinated to leave." Goodnow provides a vivid example of Jed Harris as a director. On the tenth day of rehearsal, when the cast of *Our Town* gave its first run-through, a most remarkable thing happened. The performance "went off like clockwork. Everything worked beautifully and I was so excited by the beauty of the play and the production," he wrote, "that the minute it was over I practically jumped off the stage into the auditorium to tell Jed and Thornton Wilder how thrilled

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\(^{33}\text{Ibid.}\)

\(^{34}\text{Harris, *Watchman*, p. 149.}\)

\(^{35}\text{Ibid., p. 146.}\)
I was." To his amazement, Wilder complained bitterly that Frank Craven's performance as the Stage Manager was too sentimental, too Irish, too artificial. "As Wilder went on and on with increasing petulance, Jed just stared at him. To me it was a scene almost beyond belief." When Wilder finally ran down, Harris said quietly that what Wilder had seen was not a performance, but an actor with a very difficult part trying to work out the mechanics of his entrances and exits during a run-through. He explained in detail some of the problems Craven faced. Then Goodnow accompanied Harris on stage, where Harris addressed the performers. "Jed simply beamed at the company and said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, I am proud to be associated with you. And in exactly five minutes we will do the whole thing over again. Thank you very much.'"

Goodnow reminds the reader that in the theatre a second run-through often develops problems, as actors experience a letdown after the excitement of the first performance. "But not this time," he said. Things went even more perfectly than the first time. "When I came down into the auditorium," he continues, "Wilder seemed almost beside himself. But this time he was running in the other direction. This time he was raving about Craven!" He couldn't understand how Craven could have "changed his performance so quickly into something so rare and dry and fine." He turned to Harris and said, "Jed, you whispered
something in Frank's ear didn't you? Was it anything to
do with his performance?' 'Yes,' said Jed, 'it was.'
Wilder was on tenterhooks with excitement and curiosity."
He reminded Harris that he couldn't have spent more than
five seconds with him. "'What could you have told him in
a matter of a few seconds that could possibly make such a
change in his performance?' 'I didn't actually tell him
anything,' said Jed. 'All I said was, Frank, I think this
time you might put away your cello.'"36

During rehearsals of The Heiress Herman Shapiro
recalls specific incidents in which Harris gave directions
to an actor. During the first scene in the play the
utterly shy, insecure heroine, "encouraged by her aunt,
tries to repeat a mildly comic anecdote to her formidable
father. Rathbone's response was at first rather harsh and
obviously impatient."37 A few days later, Harris said some­
thing to Rathbone about the unbearable cruelty of kindness
from those who don't love us. The actor then "began play­
ing the scene with almost studied patience and considerate­
ness." The total effect of the scene changed. "There was
a painfulness and a depth that had not been there before."38

In a scene in the second act of The Heiress the father

36 Ibid., pp. 147-49.
37 Ibid., p. 144.
38 Ibid.
tells his daughter he is dying. Shapiro believed the scene as it stood was powerful. But "one day Jed said to Miss Hiller, 'Isn't something rather ludicrous about this man who had deprived and crippled his daughter, expecting some show of human sympathy?'" In the next repetition of the scene, Miss Hiller suddenly laughed at her father. Shapiro says, "Even now the memory of that laugh sends a cold chill up my spine." Wendy Hiller recently wrote, "Jed Harris did what every competent actress wants—to tell one what not to do—not—what to do."

One reporter commented that "although some actors have become antagonized by Jed Harris' severity at rehearsals, others, like the late Walter Huston and Basil Rathbone, have found him gentle and understanding and sympathetic." He says that Rathbone almost worshipped him. Patricia Collinge, who played in The Heiress said, "Any good director is helpful to an actor—but Jed Harris is inspiring."

Perhaps the main reason Harris is a good director is because he is an excellent actor. Two performers in The Heiress commented on Harris' ability to act. Patricia Collinge said, "None of us in The Heiress ever did anything..."
as well as Jed did it when he showed it to us at rehearsals."\textsuperscript{42} "'I'll tell you why he acted our parts better
than we did ourselves,' said Rathbone. 'He understood
them better.'\textsuperscript{43} Paul Lukas, who appeared in Harris' pro-
duction of \textit{A Doll's House} (1938), once said, "I think Jed
is the greatest director I have worked for---and for eight
lines he is the greatest actor as well."\textsuperscript{44} Although not
all actors and actresses found Jed Harris equally persua-
sive or charming, the same performers often reappeared on
the cast lists of his productions. "There was a sort of
Jed Harris stock company," he once said.\textsuperscript{45}

During our first interview, Harris confirmed what
I knew to be his reputation for a candid and unique view
of the theatre. I initially asked, "What was the differ-
ence between producing, directing or staging, and which
plays did you perform one or both of these functions?"
He smiled and said, "Oh, I always directed and produced,
even though I never wanted to direct. You see, my problem
was, I never could stand talking to actors. I always
thought they were stupid. So I engaged someone else to
talk to them. He was billed as the director. I would sit
in the audience and say to the director, 'Tell actor so and

\textsuperscript{42}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 246.
\textsuperscript{43}\textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{44}\textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{45}Interview with Jed Harris.
so to do this." After his experience with his production of *Coquette* (when he took over the entire production for George Abbott) he decided it would be simpler to do the directing himself. Besides, he found himself growing fonder of actors than he ever thought he would be. "I suppose," he said, "it's because I myself am a born actor."46

As we talked, he occasionally revealed how he came to choose a particular play to produce. More often than not, it stemmed from the arrival in his office of a certain actor friend, out of work and needing employment. As Harris reveals in his memoirs, in the spring of 1930, when he was considering doing a production of *The Cherry Orchard*, Osgood Perkins arrived at his office one day:

"People tell me that you are a genius of the theatre," he said. His tone was deadly, like a challenge to a duel.

"No argument here."

"The genius of the theatre."

"Well we needn't haggle."

He whipped out a hard-used silver cigarette case, lit up and blew an immense cloud of smoke in my direction.

"Then why the hell can't you find a nice little comedy with a decent part for me?"

The conversation continued, with Perkins assuring Harris

that although he was not broke at the moment, he soon would be if the genius did not come up with something. In the midst of this discussion the phone rang, announcing the arrival of Walter Connolly. As the two actors embraced, Harris found himself studying the face of Connolly, "as if I had never seen him before. I thought that age and suffering, perhaps, had given a nobler cast to his features. On the other hand, it might have been a run of bad luck at the race tract." He suggested that the two "spend an evening of self-improvement by reading Uncle Vanya."

Before the afternoon was over, Harris had contacted Lillian Gish, Jo Mielziner, costume designer Fania Mindell and Rose Caylor (Mrs. Ben Hecht), whom he wished to make a new translation of the play. Three weeks later the play went into rehearsal.47

Further evidence of Jed Harris' unique view of the theatre in general and his productions in particular may be seen in his reluctance "to attend opening nights, least of all my own."

He said recently, "By the time a play opens, I've lived with it for six to eight months. I know how it's going to go, and there's nothing left for me to do. Someone once asked me, 'Are you nervous? Is that why you don't attend your opening nights?' Christ, no! I just

47Harris, Dance, pp. 223-26.

48Interview with Jed Harris.
have no more interest in it." Consequently, when *Coquette* opened at the Maxine Elliott Theatre in 1927, Harris was in Atlantic City attending a performance of Fred and Adele Astaire in *Funny Face*. He spent half the night with Alex Aarons and Vinton Freedley, the producers of the show, trying to convince them that they had a hit. Having had a bad opening in Philadelphia, they were disconsolate, as was Bob Benchley, who had written the libretto and who kept asking Harris for suggestions to improve it. According to Harris, he told Benchley, "You know Bob, I never thought about the libretto as I watched the show. Who the hell cares about the libretto when they can watch Fred and Adele Astaire dance?" At one o'clock in the morning they were sitting in a restaurant, when Aarons suddenly looked up and said, "Jed, didn't you have an opening tonight in New York?" "Yes," said Harris. "What are you doing down here?" Aarons asked. Harris said that he came down to Atlantic City to get a little rest and recreation. "But, my God, have you called New York to see how the show went?" Harris then explained to Aarons that he had been with the show for an awfully long time. He was with it in Atlantic City and "rehearsed the hell out of them" for two days before the opening in Philadelphia. "The last count I had was that they had taken

49Ibid.
twenty-four curtain calls after the performance in Philadelphia, the greatest demonstration I've ever seen by an audience. I hope you'll understand, Alex, when I tell you from that moment my interest in Coquette reached a vanishing point. I suppose all this will be clearer to you if I tell you we sold out completely in Philadelphia and again in Newark." He then added that the ticket brokers had already bought all the tickets in the orchestra for the rest of the season. 50

Usually, on the opening nights of his plays, Harris was fast asleep. He customarily ran an almost non-stop rehearsal schedule, and spent at least the final twenty-four hours in the theatre prior to the opening, checking all lights, props, sets and costumes. For the production of Our Town, "he sat in the theatre in Princeton for thirty-six consecutive hours, nibbling on Benzedrine tablets, as he lit the show. Crews of electricians came and went three times while he stayed right on... . ."51

In his memoirs, Harris recalls another opening night. He had gone to bed at seven-thirty on a cool September evening in 1926, exactly one hour before the curtain would rise on the first night's performance of Broadway. He writes, "My absence from the Broadhurst Theatre on that reputedly momentous occasion would soon

50 Ibid.
51 Harris, Watchman, p. 149.
provide the first frail underpinnings of my 'legendary' reputation."\(^{52}\) Within a few hours a columnist called to confirm the rumor that he was indeed at home asleep. "'With so much at stake, how could you possibly have done a thing like that'? ... 'It was really quite simple.' I replied. 'I took off my clothes, got into bed and closed my eyes.' He subsequently described me as enigmatic."\(^{53}\) Harris, having been obsessed day and night for six months with this production, was finished with it on the last night of its out-of-town run. "I thought it was the most perfect show I had ever seen and I was dead certain that it would be an enormous success." To his surprise, at that moment he discovered he had no desire to see it ever again.\(^{54}\)

It is true that Harris rarely attended opening night, his or anyone's. By the time he was through rehearsing the play and had done all he could for it, he said he was thoroughly sick of it. He further claimed he never wanted to see it or hear of it again, except a good box office statement. Although he repeated these claims throughout his career, I gradually discovered that he actually never stopped working on his plays, not only after they opened, but even long after they closed. He

\(^{52}\)Harris, Dance, p. 126.

\(^{53}\)Ibid.

\(^{54}\)Ibid., p. 127.
admitted that he often grieved for opportunities he had missed in staging a scene, and he often felt how much better his work might be if he were doing it now, instead of when he did it. He described a night when he was dining alone at a sea-side restaurant under a brilliant moon, enjoying the picture-postcard setting of the Bay of Naples. He was feeling a little sad because the last touring company of *The Front Page* had given its final performance in San Francisco that very evening. As he sat there musing on the transiency of things in the theatre, he suddenly felt a terrible "seizure." As those who know the play might remember, Walter Burns, the managing editor, arrives in the press room just as Molly Molloy, the prostitute, jumps out of the window. In his mind's eye Harris saw Walter Burns wearing a gardenia in his lapel, and thought how wonderful it would have been if, just as the girl jumped, Burns were busy burying his nose into the depths of the gardenia, sniffing deeply, like a drug fiend. He told me how he regretted deeply that he'd never had the opportunity to make use of that piece of business.55 The truth is that Harris was an obsessive worker in the theatre and would pick up a manuscript of a play he had done ten years earlier, reflecting on how much better he could do that same play if he had it to do over.

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55 Interview with Jed Harris.
again. For him, the process of producing and directing is endless.

Viewing the list of plays Harris staged, one is struck by the fact that the vast majority of these were premier productions, written by living playwrights. An interesting footnote to this, however, is that he never accepts the first draft presented to him by any author. He insists upon a revision, a process in which he himself participates. "With nearly every play he has staged, Harris has taken an actively creative part in the re-writing."\(^{56}\) Infinitely patient, he thinks nothing of spending eight or ten months going over a play with an author.\(^{57}\) For example, when Hecht and MacArthur first brought Harris the script to *The Front Page* (1928), he informed them that it would be a great play if they cut out the last two acts and began from the end of act one. At this point in the discussion, Harris describes how Ben Hecht got up, looked at MacArthur, then at Harris and said, "'Give me that goddam script... I heard you were a son-of-a-bitch. Now I know it,'" and stormed out of the room.\(^{58}\) MacArthur went after him. A few minutes later they returned, MacArthur half-dragging and half-

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carrying Hecht back into Harris' presence, saying, "At least let's hear what the son-of-a-bitch has got to say."\(^{59}\) And so began a long and profitable relationship. Hecht writes that while watching rehearsals of The Front Page, Charles said, "I give in. The son-of-a-bitch is a genius."\(^{60}\) He himself admitted, "Though I quarreled with Jed, I nevertheless found writing for the theatre easier in his presence, and I even wrote better. . . ."\(^{61}\)

With his production of The Heiress, Harris agreed to do a play which had flopped in Boston only eight months before. Ruth and Augustus Goetz, whose play was an adaptation of Henry James' novel Washington Square, wrote a lengthy article in the New York Times about the renaissance of their work, calling Jed Harris' direction "one more miracle." "To watch him bring a play to life, to hear him interpret, explain, dissect human motivations is an experience every playwright should have before he dies. Of course he may die as he listens to Harris' cuts, addenda and comment on his play. . . ."\(^{62}\)

Elena Miramova, the co-author of Dark Eyes (1943),

\(^{59}\)Ibid., p. 211.


another Harris hit, revealed that "the buying of the play was just the signal for the beginning of really hard work. With Eugenie Leontovich and Jed Harris . . . at her side, 'I rewrote and rewrote and rewrote until I was blue in my face!'" Variety acknowledged that Nunnally Johnson and Harris aided the authors of Dark Eyes in "touching up the script," a fact which Harris substantiates. Time after time Harris helped "tighten the script." As he says, "Writing was one thing I was a demon on. It wasn't a matter of elegance, but aptness."  

Hundreds of articles have attempted to capture the vitality and style of a Jed Harris production. As writers tried to define exactly what elements this director brought to his theatrical efforts, certain phrases reappear—"amazing speed, fast pace, machine-gun tempo, realism, subtlety, nuance, action." One critic, elaborating upon Brooks Atkinson's description of Harris' work as centrifugal, states that this word, better than any other, describes its true processes:  

It encompasses the energy and intuition, and thoughtful penetration with which he approaches any production. . . . It encompasses his feeling for living dialogue, his conscious manipulation of his players across the stage, and the injection  

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64Variety, 20 Jan. 1943, p. 52.  
65Interview with Jed Harris.
of subtleties which apparently mean nothing, but which take on, in his general scheme, the strength and body of large design.66

As Harris himself has said, "Action is everything. Everything must be shown to an audience."67 An acute visual sense of how the play should look and move seems a particular gift of Jed Harris. In order to translate his vision, he did not as a rule dictate action, but rather gave suggestions which were then interpreted by the actor himself. Harris' productions were always full of moments, unforgettable to those who saw them. One reviewer recalls that marvelous pause in Coquette where he held the stage empty until an old, fat negro mammy could lumber up the stairs, but as she heaved her bulk up, to a vague humming of her own, her solemn movement changed the accent of that play from comedy to tragedy. It was an inflection which let the play tip-toe from one mood to the other simply through the slowing influence of her walk, a transition superbly contrived and profoundly effective.68

This critic's view of this scene and similar analyses by other critics of other scenes in Jed Harris' productions were sometimes very different from what Harris himself intended. He told me that there are times when a


67Interview with Jed Harris.

director is given credit for a "creative effect" when something on the stage so captivates the audience's fancy that it becomes a legendary moment in the theatre. Such an effect turned up on the opening night in New York of Uncle Vanya. Miss Gish's first entrance in the play was with three or four other characters, coming into the garden from a walk in the woods. Chekhov has given her one line, as she crosses the stage: "How do you do, Doctor?" Harris said, "I suggested to Miss Gish, looking beautiful beyond words, carrying her garden hat by a ribbon, that she smile and bow, not say a word, but continue on into the house." This caused a sensation in the audience. The response to this entrance was something Harris had not anticipated. Miss Gish was a silent film star and everyone in the audience was curious about what her voice was like. So when she crossed the stage, "with that vague Gish smile, and continued to move out of the scene, the audience immediately assumed that I, clever fellow, knowing that they would want to hear her voice, had contrived to keep them on tenterhooks, and not let them hear Miss Gish speak. I had no such intention." Actually the stage was shallow, and Harris was trying to contrive the scene so that the flow of action would continue.69

Perhaps five minutes later in the production, the

69Interview with Jed Harris.
late afternoon sun shining as twilight appeared, Miss Gish returned from the house with a reticule, carrying her embroidery. When she entered, silence fell on the audience. All one could hear was the chirping of crickets. And with the light suggesting the afterglow of a long summer day, Miss Gish came into the scene without speaking, took out her embroidery, set her needles to work and then said, "It's hot today, isn't it?" "The audience burst into wild applause," Harris says, "'She speaks!" some were heard to say." In the lobby after the act people commented, "'Isn't it wonderful what Jed Harris did? He kept us on the hook, waiting to hear Miss Gish's voice.' Of course," Harris adds, "such an idea had never occurred to me. I suppose I ought to admit I simply wasn't that clever."70

As it happened, Harris was credited with the brilliance of this particular moment by one who attended the opening night of Uncle Vanya. Giving a slightly different interpretation than the one Harris described, he wrote that Harris contrived Lillian Gish's entrance, where she merely fluttered across the stage, without speaking to anyone, and vanished. The writer observes, "Probably not everyone in the audience caught the quiet comment of that capricious movement, but in itself it told the whole story of Tchekov's play, as a sort of thematic announcement of

70Ibid.
The lists of Broadway hits by Jed Harris is impressive to any student of the theatre. His successes become even more phenomenal in that they were all achieved despite his handicap of deafness. Although not totally deaf, Harris, since the age of twenty, has had little hearing in either ear. While still at Yale he contracted influenza and the infection settled in his ears. In order to release the pressure and even save his life, the doctors punctured both ear drums. His health was restored, but his hearing was not. Over the years his loss of hearing grew worse, and at that time, no hearing aids existed to help alleviate his handicap. While producing and directing, he chose certain sound effects which he wished to use, listened to them amplified in a sound booth, then relied on his stage manager and others to indicate whether or not they could be heard in the theatre. In 1945 he underwent the new and somewhat dangerous fenestration operation at the hands of its inventor, Dr. Alexander Lempert. Although his balance was for a time affected, Harris could now hear with relative ease. The success of the operation however did not alter Harris' inability to hear aural details in the theatre. Consequently, the


carriage wheels and other sound effects in *The Heiress*, his first play following the operation, still remained for him an experience in the south booth. Jean Dalrymple, who has known Jed Harris for over thirty years and who produced *Red Gloves* (1948) which Harris directed, writes, "His extreme deafness has been an enormous cross to bear during his entire career, and is undoubtedly one of the reasons he is famous for his outbursts of temper. Usually he is mild-mannered, warmhearted and very kind."  

Jed Harris, a man whose life in the theatre overshadowed most of his contemporaries, has been described as "Broadway's most meteoric of producers, whose career reads like a market graph after a fireside chat."  

During his first seven years in the theatre (1925-31) Harris produced thirteen Broadway plays. But fifteen years passed before the completion of his next thirteen shows. In his last nine years in the theatre (1948-56) he introduced only four productions. Time and again he retired from the theatre, only to return. The chronology of events leading to his intermittent decisions to leave the theatre will be detailed in later chapters of this work. Harris said once, "I leave the theatre all the time. I guess I leave it in my mind more than anybody ever has."

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... But I suppose I could never leave it, really." 75

Nearly twenty-five years after Harris' first production, one reporter summed up his observations on this figure as both a force upon and a participant in the theatrical activities in New York. He wrote: "Curiously, Broadway, which is inhabited by a most jealous and backbiting set of venomous gossips, is inclined to go more than halfway with Jed Harris and agree that he is the most creative and kinetic force on the glittering street today." 76

If one is fully to understand the actions of this significant producer-director, a glimpse into the experiences and influences which guided him as a young man is essential. Therefore, before an examination of individual productions are detailed, various childhood interests and events which molded the character of Jed Harris will be introduced. Having learned what motivated him as a child, the reader will no doubt conclude that it was inevitable that he should be drawn to a career in the theatre.


76Maurice Zolotow, "Broadway's Most Successful Eccentric," p. 106.
CHAPTER II

Although his Austrian emigrant parents had lived in America prior to his birth, Jed Harris was born Jacob Horowitz in Austria on February 25, 1900. "I came into the world with the century, when faith in the perfectability of man was not a dream, but a reality," he says. He was brought to this country as an infant and lived most of his childhood in New York City and in Newark, New Jersey, graduating from Barranger High School in Newark at the age of sixteen.¹

His family lived in an apartment building occupied by one other tenant, a Hungarian family. The one toilet in the building, located in the hall, was immaculate, Harris recalls, as was his home. One month's rent totaled eight dollars, yet Harris comments, "Was it like a slum? I never thought so at all. I never thought of us as being poor." They were what he describes as lower middle-class, hard-working people, and his playmates were very proper emigrant children.

The oldest of five children, Harris was totally alienated from his family from his youngest days. The

¹All of the information on pp. 43-45 pertaining to Harris' family and early life was given in an interview.
cause of this alienation rested in the fact that he seemed completely different from everyone around him. "My people were peasants," he says. They grew up in rural Austria as members of a farm family. Though educated in a Hebrew school where he became quite learned in the Bible, Harris' father came to this country as a day laborer, and eventually worked his way up in the wholesale grocery business. Harris says, "My father's idea of having a son was that he would grow up, be a clerk in his store, and eventually become a partner in his business."

His mother, whom he describes as "an ignorant woman who didn't know anything about anything," learned to read and write after she came to America.

"I was probably the most innocent child that ever lived," Harris states. "I would do anything anyone told me to do." Then, with objective detachment, he added that the most frequently repeated phrases which confronted him while growing up were, "Why do you have to think differently from everybody else? Why do you have to do everything differently from everybody else? The thing that is the matter with him is, he's crazy!" He was constantly downgraded and ridiculed for his lack of conformity in an age when the norm demanded that children remain quiet and speak only when spoken to.

Like any sensitive child desperate for affection, Harris admits, he lived in a world of fantasy, imagining
that he was an orphan, stolen, or like Little Lord Fauntleroy, somehow placed in a family which was not really his own. To avoid the ridicule of his parents and their lack of affection, Harris turned outside his family for acceptance. He recalls with tenderness each of his teachers, not only by name, but also by particular deeds of kindness or understanding. For him, they represented the care and love he was unable to secure at home.

Sports, particularly baseball and boxing, provided Harris with another means of avoiding unpleasantness at home. As both a participant and a fan, he cultivated an interest in these activities which remains today. One writer claimed that Jed Harris knows them "as well as most sports writers; on baseball, his information going back to about 1910, is, I am told by reliable sources, equal to that of only a handful of professional experts." He reels off complete team rosters for any number of clubs during successive seasons, and can describe not only plays during a particular game, but the stance of a player, or the contrasting styles of two pitchers.

Someone once asked Harris if he recalled the moment in his life when he realized he was a celebrity. His reply had nothing to do with Broadway, the theatre or his own success as a producer or director. He recalled a

night in Billy La Hiff's restaurant in New York City early in the thirties, when Dollie Stark pointed a finger dramatically in his direction and said, "Let Jed Harris decide this." The other guests at the table were Harry Danning, star catcher, and Mel Ott, superstar outfielder, for the New York Giants. "I kept myself under severe self control, for it was a great moment in my life to be picked out to decide what was obviously going to be a baseball matter, by the one whom many regarded as the most brilliant umpire in baseball. What is the question, gentlemen, I asked gravely." Stark, whom Harris describes as a rather neurotic Jew who had resigned his position as a National League umpire because the job severely limited his social relations with ball players, said "'This is for a bottle of champagne, Jed. Now here is the question. Who does Bill Clem hate most in the world?'" Bill Clem, the subject of many legends in baseball, was considered the dean of umpires and spoke in private life in the announcer's voice he used on the baseball field. Employing his characteristic stentorian tone, Clem once described Stark as "thee greatest uumpiire that eever liived."

"'The answer is simple,' I replied, 'The object of Clem's most violent passions was Frank Frish.' 'Of course,' said Stark. 'Everybody knows that. The real question is, why did Bill Clem hate him?' 'It so happens,' I replied, 'that I've devoted a great deal of time
in scholarly research to that subject.'" Harris then explained that the original explanation of Clem's feelings was based on the belief that Frish had once called Clem "catfish" on the baseball field. It was of course well known, he added, that you could call Bill Clem anything and get away with it. Anything but catfish. "My researchers, however, have convinced me that this story is entirely apocryphal." He then detailed the true story, which happened on a hot, humid afternoon in St. Louis, when Clem was umpiring at first base. The St. Louis batter hit an easy grounder to the short stop of the visiting team and was thrown out by a good three feet. Frish, the manager of the St. Louis team, thereupon emerged from the Cards dugout and walked briskly in the direction of an astonished Bill Clem. There may have been as few as five thousand people in the grandstand, all of them in a state of lethargy, Harris continued. But when they saw Frish advancing on Clem, obviously bent on protesting the decision, they came to life and began to jeer Clem and even threw a few unfriendly Coke bottles in the direction of the umpire. "'Bill,' said Frish, 'How is your wife?' Clem was outraged. He drew a line with his foot in the dirt. 'Frish,' he said, 'you cross this line and you're out of baseball. 'Look here, Bill, all I asked you about was your wife's health. There are people here who can testify on my behalf.'" At this point,
Harris indicated that Clem, ducking all kinds of debris being thrown on him from the fans, threw Frish out of the game. Thus the incident started one of the great hate stories of baseball.

"'A bottle of champagne for Mr. Harris!' Stark announced. He turned to the two ball players at his table and said, 'See? You have just heard the true story from one of the greatest scholars in baseball history.'" Harris paused impressively. "That was the night," he said, "that I realized I was a real celebrity."\(^3\)

Harris' factual knowledge of boxing is equaled by his ability to verbalize the essence and significance of this sport. He fervently articulated his feelings one evening.

Tell me anybody who loves sports that doesn't like boxing. Boxing is the ultimate thing—the guys are there, naked except for the pair of gloves and the trunks that they wear, and they have to go in and, and—do it. And the great thing about boxing is what it does for the viewer. Because he sees a man go down time after time and get up—and then he wins! And they say, I can do it too! It's a fortifying moral element in people's feelings.\(^4\)

Although sports provided hours of pleasure, reading was Harris' most significant means of escaping the real world. As a child he frequently read until dawn. When he

\(^3\)This entire incident was recounted by Jed Harris in an interview.

\(^4\)Interview with Jed Harris.
had difficulty responding to his father's call to get up in the mornings, his father called him a lazy bum and assured him that he would never amount to anything. Harris tells of the bafflement his father experienced when his son became such a success on Broadway. He had to remind his father of his repeated warnings of the evil fate to those who sleep late. The theatre, Harris assured his pop, was the ideal place for such "bums."  

Reading became a salvation for Jed Harris. Until the age of eleven he had no real reason to doubt his father's evaluation, and believed that he was, if not crazy, at least not totally sane. At this time he read Shaw's The Revolutionist's Handbook, a source of total solace, in which he found a kindred spirit. "Now, I knew it was not I, but all those other people who were crazy," he asserted. 

In his memoirs Harris says, "I recently encountered a startling portrait of myself during that early period. It was in a passage, the work of an unnamed Jewish writer, quoted in an article by Alfred Kazin, in which the author describes a boy studying the Torah." The description, too long to quote in its entirety, begins, "He has roamed

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Harris, Dance, p. 13.
as far and as wide as an ancient who has outlived the
years of Methuselah!" And it concludes:

Only with Jewish children does it transpire that they sit day and night rooted to one spot, not knowing what is happening round abouts. . . . All thoughts are in another world, in other epochs; they are oblivious to the world right under their noses and devote themselves entirely to that which transpired long ago, for which eyes and other crude human senses are not so much needed as an acute imaginative faculty—a stark naked soul—devoid of a body, almost devoid of life itself . . . he is not exactly a native, but resides somewhere over there. . . . His times are beforetimes, his world is another. . . .

By the time Harris enrolled in Yale, he discovered he was better read than most of his professors. Thus, he spent the majority of his three years in New Haven not attending classes, but reading loads of books transported to his dormitory room from the Lionian Library. He recalls that on one occasion he carried forty-four books in a wheelbarrow back to his room where he spent days and nights in a familiar window seat, interrupted only by an occasional sandwich provided by his roommate. The works of Strindberg, Bergson, Plato and Goldoni would be lifted, read and dropped to the floor in a rising pile next to the window seat.9

Literacy is part of the Jed Harris legend. As one

8 Ibid., pp. 13-14.
9 Interview with Jed Harris.
article stated, "Harris, who probably reads more play-scripts than any other producer for the simple reason that he is more literary than most of his colleagues, estimates that he reads 360 scripts for every play he eventually brings to life."¹⁰ Not only does he read, but he absorbs what he reads. "What I read becomes a part of me," he says. The effects of his reading can frequently be seen in his professional activities. Stage manager Goodnow describes how, during various rehearsals of Our Town, Harris talked about the style of acting in Goeth's Weimar theatre, quoted some of Dante's Inferno in Italian, discussed the construction of a Mozart symphony and Daumier's painting of the stage, "Le Drame," invariably using each of these examples to advantage in the stage direction of the play.¹¹ Harris was known as one of the world's great story-tellers; and these multifaceted sessions during rehearsals were referred to by the late Evelyn Varden as "Inspirational Breaks."¹²

Part of Harris' literary knowledge rests in the fact that he is conversant in at least six languages and fluent in four. He spoke German before he spoke English and, having had seven years of Latin, at one time thought he would teach it. He has read most of the great literary


¹¹Harris, Watchman, p. 146.

¹²Ibid., p. 147.
works in this ancient language, including all of the plays of Plautus and Terence, and frequently interjects phrases from Latin, German and other languages into his rapid conversation.

If reading proved to be Jed Harris' usual form of escape, the theatre was his ultimate flight into another world, a world which he himself could create. His introduction to the stage was an occasion which began in confusion and ended in horror. As he says, "My ambivalence toward the theatre began the first time I ever set foot in a playhouse." At the age of four he accompanied his parents to the Columbia Theatre in Newark, where they were subscribers to a series of shows performed by touring groups in German and Yiddish. He was somehow unaware that the people on the stage were actors and had no idea that what he was seeing was a play. "To me they were real people in a real world which, by some mysterious arrangement, we were permitted to see." He absorbed little if any of the dialogue until Medea said, "'Dann werde ich meine kinder ermorden.' ('Then I will murder my children.') This I understood only too well and I let out a scream which all but destroyed the performance." Audience members objected, and the massive hand of his father was clamped

13 Harris, Dance, p. 8.
14 Ibid., p. 9.
over the child's mouth. Harris says, "And his hand pressed harder as I moaned 'No! No!'"15 After the performance he was taken home and beaten severely and never told why. "I had only cried out against the murder of two beautiful little children and all those well dressed people had never protested at all. Was that what was going to happen to me? And to my baby sister?"16 "So," he said, "for me in the beginning the theatre was a place where mothers slaughtered their children."17

By the time Harris was a boy of eight or nine, he already had personal ambitions as a future vaudeville monologist, and gained early experience in the basement of friends' houses. A favorite act of his was a parody of "The Face on the Ballroom Floor," which he frequently performed with a thick German accent, and which he can still recite today. The price of admission to these entertaining sessions was two straight pins, carefully collected at the basement door.

Vaudeville deeply affected young Harris, and became his prime source of entertainment while growing up. Week after week he religiously attended all the great acts performing on the circuit—such as Smith and Dale, Burns and

15 ibid., p. 10.
16 ibid., p. 11.
17 ibid.
Fabrito, Louis and Dody, Willie Howard and the Avon Comedy Four. Entire vaudeville routines from those early days come to life today as Harris performs not only the lines, but the bits of business which accompanies them.

One of his favorites is a Smith and Dale act. Smith, a rather large, straightforward man, has come to see the doctor. Dale, as the doctor, lightfooted and cheerful, almost dances into the office. With a large handkerchief tied to the tail of his top coat, eyebrows raised and smiling, he dances around Smith while inquiring in a high pitched voice, "What may I do for you?" Smith, obviously disturbed by the sight in front of him, gruffly demands, "Are you the doctor?" Dale nods his head, while still moving about the room. Smith retorts, "I'm dubious!" "Please to meet you, Mr. Dubious," comes the reply.18

Producer Jean Dalrymple, who was a vaudeville performer early in her career, writes that Harris knows "more about vaudeville and remembers more 'routines' than anyone I ever met. As a matter of fact," she adds, "he can remember Just a Pal [in which Miss Dalrymple appeared] better than I can! He even reminded me recently of our opening music---'I'm Just Wild About Harry'---when I myself

18Interview with Jed Harris.
had completely forgotten it." 19

One shares the anticipation with which audiences greeted the vaudeville stars as Harris describes how, prior to a show, he and his friends repeated lines that they knew would be forthcoming from performers giving their established acts that afternoon. Later, the members of the audience would sit on the edge of their seats and mouth the punch lines with the performers before bursting into laughter and applause.

These early treats from talented vaudevillians seem to have been responsible for what Harris describes as his own low taste in theatre. Although he produced and directed some plays which were considered rather high brow, he says, "I was heard to say once that I wouldn't pay good money to see one of these, no matter how successful they appeared to be.... I like low comedy and the best times I ever had in the theatre were watching a good bill at the Palace." 20 He admits that he enjoys doing plays that he would not enjoy as a member of the audience.

He compares his standards as a theatre goer to those of a rather stodgy English Duke, "who attends a musical show and goes to the box office between acts and says to the box office treasurer, 'Would it be possible


20 Interview with Jed Harris.
for me to have these same seats every Thursday night
during the rest of the engagement?" The treasurer
agrees and now "the Duke knows that every Thursday night
for perhaps the next four years he's going to be in that
theatre in those same seats watching the show that he
really enjoys and he's happy in the prospect. And so
would I be too."21

His taste as a theatre goer may be judged in part
from the fact that he saw Anything Goes (1934) seventeen
times, My Fair Lady (1956) eleven times, the original
production of No, No, Nannette (1935) twenty-three
times, Lady Be Good (1924) fifteen times and Hellzapoppin
(1938) at least sixty times.22

In addition to his youthful preoccupation with
vaudeville, Harris and most of his young Jewish friends
were greatly impressed by the popular song writers of
the day, especially Irving Berlin. They marveled at such
lyrics of his as "rag-a-dy, mel-o-dy, full of o-ri-gi-
nal-i-ty." He says, "We used to sit around and ask our-
selves, 'How could anyone think of such things?'" It was
a preoccupation which eventually led Harris to attempt
his own hand at song writing. Playing both the piano and
the violin, Harris, from at least age ten, fancied himself
a composer. By the age of twenty-one he had written dozens

21Ibid.
22Ibid.
of songs, some of which he can still sing, yet none of which were ever published.

His skill on the violin gave him one of his first jobs. Coming in off the street one day, thirteen-year-old Harris introduced himself to Bob Fitzsimmons, ex-heavyweight champion of the world, and owner of an elegant cafe in Newark. He suggested to Mr. Fitzsimmons that he have music in his establishment, in what was called a "gentleman's bar." "Play something for me," came the reply. Harris and his two companions proceeded to play the overture from Carmen, an audition which led to steady employment. This young trio entertained patrons every Saturday night for the next three years.\(^ {23}\)

Although Harris' skill in playing the violin was not carried far into adulthood, his love and knowledge of music was. When he first produced Broadway he was asked who in the theatre he would like to meet. "Nobody, I replied, except the song writers. I've always been a frustrated song-writer myself and that was the only group of people I had any interest in meeting."\(^ {24}\) Meet them he did--George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, Rogers and Hammerstein, and others. With a knowledge of music which encompasses classical as well

\(^ {23}\)Ibid.

\(^ {24}\)Ibid.
as popular, and sometimes a blending of the two, he once told Jerome Kern that his song, "Once In a Blue Moon," from a show called The Bunch and Judy (1916), was lifted from one of Brahms' hymns, specifically Number Three of "Vier Ernste Lieder." "So how many people know that?" Kern replied merrily. Harris further chided him for using a line from one of his pieces as a melody in another. "Can't I even steal from myself?" Kern asked.

In contrast to his consuming interests in music and vaudeville, young Harris occasionally ventured into what is considered the more practical realm of business, and demonstrated a potential for making money, one of his trademarks in the theatre. At age fourteen, for example, he negotiated a deal with a business partner of his father's, who was recuperating from a respiratory ailment in Florida. He wrote and asked that a carload of oranges be shipped to him C.O.D. By the time it arrived, Harris had arranged to sell the entire shipment to the largest distributor in Elizabeth, N.J., for $2.50 a crate, ten cents under the lowest available rate. The distributor believed he had made a contract with Harris' father, who was a wholesale grocer. Within a matter of days Harris had made a clear profit of $500, a phenomenal amount of money then, especially for the son of a man who earned only $45.00 a week. Harris' father, after learning of the

25 Ibid.
transaction, was shocked and jealous of his son's achievement. "What made you think of such a thing?" he demanded, with no word of congratulations or approval. 26

As an adult, although he made millions out of the theatre, Harris never cultivated a need for acquiring possessions and continued to live modestly. The most extravagant use he made of his earnings was to purchase boats. From the first big money he made in the theatre, earned by the production of Love 'Em and Leave 'Em (1926), he bought his first yacht. But since he didn't have the capital to buy fuel, his prize lay in the shipyard for weeks before he was able to sail it. Over the years, as a fully licensed pilot, he has helped steer vessels from Nova Scotia to Venezuela. Harris admits that sailing was one way he could escape the pressures of the real world. And so, as an adult, he continued to exhibit the need for flight. "I have a biological need for the sea," he says, and confesses that sailing is the only passion which may surpass his strong feeling for the theatre. 27

Harris' adventures as a navigator unexpectedly revealed a heretofore undiscovered talent, that of being a chef. Whenever he planned a cruise, he always hired someone to do the cooking. "Within a period of three

26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
weeks I was forced to employ four different cooks," he said, each one the victim of drink. Out of desperation he decided to cook for himself, a decision which since that time has been a source of pride to him and a delight to his guests. Now a master chef, Harris claims six or seven dishes as his specialties: steak, marinated in soy sauce and honey, corn beef and cabbage, and quadratini, his adaptation of a dish on the menu of San Marino's restaurant in New York, are among his favorites. Within a week after arriving in south Louisiana in the winter of 1976, he had developed his own style of Gumbo, a well-known Cajun specialty. Beginning with a stock brewed from fish heads and backs, cooked three hours and seasoned with a variety of vegetables, herbs and spices, Harris managed to capture the essence of this regional dish, according to even the most discriminating natives.

Whether absorbed in cooking, yachting, literature or the theatre, Harris throughout his life, fled from the world, and most especially from his fellow man. Someone once asked, "'What about the people in your plays? Don't you love them?' 'Oh, the people in my plays. Yes,' I said, 'I could weep over a character in my plays, where I couldn't weep over a human being outside

28 Ibid.
the theatre." Thus the theatre was the place he turned to find people he could love. Harris has spent the majority of his life living alone, either on his yachts or in rented cottages near a seacoast. A line which he frequently quotes is, "Where every prospect pleases and only man is vile." Describing himself as a totally non-social person, Harris rarely attended theatre parties or any similar social gathering. Though he admits to having no pride of authorship, he says that if he had to pick out one example of his writing with any truth and significance, it would be the longest poem he ever wrote:

I do not love the human race
I do not love its form or face. 29

Harris' love of animals, a little known, yet dominant element in his character, further demonstrates his desire to avoid man.

His rapport with his creatures is almost awesome. To entertain Sam, his Weimaraner, Harris would turn out all but one dim light in his home, and invite Sam in for a ghost-story telling session. Sam would rest his jaw on Harris' knee as his master began to tell a preposterous, melodramatic story, in a low, quiet voice: "It was a dark night," he whispered. Sam would give a low growl. "The wind began to blow." Another growl. "The handle of the door slowly began to turn. It slowly, slowly crept

29 Ibid.
open." Louder growls. "Then, suddenly, bang! It opened!"
"Arf! Arf!"  

He has raised dozens of dogs and cats, and recounts similar stories about such companions of his as Chatsie Katz, Miss Ruby May the Cocker Spaniel, Albert Scott the Scotch Terrier and Bridget Goldstein the Dalmation. In describing these friends, Harris always attributes human qualities to their behavior. For example, in characterizing Benjie and Leroi, two half-breed Pit Bulls he obtained at the same time, he says, "These two were perfectly named. Benjie was stable, every bit the banker, a solid citizen. Leroi, on the other hand never ceased to be neurotic, always hypochondriacally complaining."
If Harris said, "Hi, Leroi, how are you boy?" Leroi would lower his head, roll back his eyes and give a high, mournful groan. Harris spent an entire year living alone with seven dogs, all of whom frequently accompanied him in the back of his station wagon on various shopping trips.  

Domestic animals were not the only acquaintances of Jed Harris. During one long winter his companions were a vixen and two fox cubs. Another season he served as host to a family of racoons. He has cared for muskrats, countless deer and thousands of birds. Never has he feared

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30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
a wild creature and often he became warm friends with them.

Perhaps the favorite from his menagerie was a calico kitten named Elfie. She not only ate with her paws while sitting in a chair at the dinner table, but had various other talents, such as catching playing cards which Harris would throw out one at a time. To give others some of the joy of Elfie's ways, he has written a book about her soon to be published, entitled *The Rise of Elfie Katz*. He records the early life of this calico kitten as she is brought up under the care of an old vaudevillian, and traces her later career as a show business personality.

By the time Jed Harris was seventeen he had saved enough money to enroll in Yale. Within the next year, however, he would have the singular distinction of serving in both the United States Army and the United States Navy. The country was already involved in the war, but no call for young college students had been issued. Harris, like many of his fellow students, joined the Yale Naval Training Unit, an organization in which the recruits received basic training, but no pay. His real hope was to become a part of the Naval Aviation team, not so much for patriotic reasons, but for what Harris admired in their pea-green uniforms. In the spring of 1918 he enlisted in the aviation unit, but was
rejected because he was too slight.

Following this rejection, yet wishing to serve in the war should he be needed, Harris turned to the Army and joined the field artillery. He was again stationed at Yale, which had ceased to be a university to become barracks for the armed forces. He admits to developing an expertise with the French 75 rifle, and remembers one of his instructors as a Canadian only three years older than himself. This was Captain Raymond Massey, who later worked for Harris as an actor. After mastering the French 75, he found the training monotonous and subsequently reported to sick call every day. During his supposedly recuperative absences from his military duties, he read countless Russian and English novels. The war ended in November of 1918, and troops stationed at Yale were demobilized some five or six weeks later. Reflecting upon his career in the Army, Harris said, "Outside of the fact that it gave me the opportunity to read Turgenev and Tolstoy, I don't think it mattered one way or the other."\(^{32}\)

Following his dismissal from the service, Harris re-enrolled in Yale, and continued to attend this university for the next two years. Several years after he left, however, he made a deal with officers of Yale

\(^{32}\text{Ibid.}\)
to eliminate his name from all records, completely eradicating any official documentation of his presence at this esteemed institution. As a youngster between the ages of ten and twelve, Harris says he loved Yale. He admits, however, that the place he loved "was another Yale, a boy's paradise, invented by a marvelously fertile hack-writer named Burt L. Standish, Jr., who turned out the Merriwell stories." He had gone to New Haven hopeful of adventures and altogether optimistic about what lay ahead. "The real Yale, as even a retarded worldling like myself was aware, was bound to be different. But I found that difference too chilling to face." The repeated encounters with anti-Semitic words and actions, springing from classmates and reinforced by faculty sanction and university policy almost obliterated Harris' faith in mankind and in institutions.

He was forced to attend daily chapel services, carefully planned occasions for Christian indoctrination. As a result of his numerous cuts from chapel, he was first put on probation and later expelled. He disregarded this final notice, however, for at least a year while he continued to live on campus and to read omnivorously. "It was not difficult for me to stay on," he said, "because Yale is a corporation. And all corporations are so highly

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33 Harris, Dance, p. 12.
34 Ibid., p. 13.
organized that it was very easy for an adventurous soul like myself to move about without anyone ever detecting my presence." When asked if he were a Yale man, Harris says, "No. I simply went there. Actually I loathed Yale and loved Harvard, where I spent as many weekends as I could possibly afford."

His departure from Yale, early in 1920, was precipitated by one of his few positive encounters with one of the Yale faculty. He had written a paper in a philosophy course taught by the head of the department, Charles Allen Bennett. The paper came back marked A++. A note had been added: "For maturity of thought and terseness of style, the best paper I have ever had from an undergraduate. C.A.B." In a state of excitement, Harris ran to Professor Bennett's office to express appreciation for his kind words. He describes the ensuing conversation.

"They weren't written as a favor," he said drily.

"Well, I can't begin to tell you how much they mean to me. I would like to ask your advice, sir."

"No advice is worth the breath it takes to give it," he said. "Hadn't you better sit down?" . . . He smiled and said, "What have you been reading?"

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35 Interview with Jed Harris.
36 Ibid.
37 Harris, Dance, p. 26.
"Oh, just about everything but the Bible and the Constitution of the United States..." I said. "All the dramatists, classical and modern. All the novelists—all the philosophers from Plato, through the French philosophes and the German bores, right down to Croce, Bergson, Russell and even Harold Laski's 'Theory of Sovereignty.' With the result that I feel more ignorant than ever. I'm neither rich enough, nor dull-witted enough to endure this awful place and I feel that I ought to get the hell out of here."

The smile on his face had grown broader as I spoke. "Why not go?" he said.

For a moment I sat there, almost stunned by the simplicity of his remark. I rose from my chair. "Thank you, sir." I said. "You must surely know how grateful I am." I gave him my hand. "Thank you and good-bye, sir."

"If I were the sort to offer advice," he said, "I would say—never have a master." 38

Recently Harris reflected on this brief counsel offered by Professor Bennett. "I think that is the only advice I ever got that I really took," he said. 39

Two weeks later, this university dropout arrived in Paris, in route to deliver money to the residents of the newly formed countries of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania and Latvia. He and a fellow undergraduate had read of the plight of these people, and placed an advertisement in the New York Times, offering to deliver

38 Ibid., pp. 27-28.
39 Interview with Jed Harris.
by hand any money contributed, with a fifty percent fee for delivery. Harris recalls, "The response was immediate and almost overwhelming." He felt sure they could have raised a great deal more money had they delayed their trip. But, when enough cash had been collected to assure passage to Europe and back, the two self-appointed emissaries left New York. By the time they arrived in France, their travel funds had been drained and the young men decided that only one of them could continue the original mission to deliver the promised money; one would have to stay behind. A coin was tossed and Harris lost, meaning that he was the one to remain in Paris. For the next several weeks he lived what turned out to be the "high life" in the French capital. From there he travelled to London, where his fortunes turned and his closest companions were pickpockets, prostitutes, and pimps. It was, he says, "a lovely sample of low life which I thoroughly enjoyed. These people made up the vaudeville of life." Eventually, he returned to New York as a stowaway on a steamer.

"I had come to New York, confident in my future as a song writer. I lived in a furnished room on West 113th Street and two or three times a week I walked down to

40 Harris, Dance, p. 133.

41 Interview with Jed Harris.
Times Square with the lead sheet of a song in my pocket. All my musical works were turned down in what was then called Tin Pan Alley." Writing unsuccessful songs could have continued for the rest of his life, Harris says, were it not for the economic pressures imposed by hunger and the need for shelter. These burdens forced him to seek employment and he soon landed a job as a reporter on the oldest theatrical weekly in America, the Clipper, by fabricating a resume that included vast newspaper experience stretching from Boston to Baltimore. His employers had little reason to doubt his veracity, especially since on the first day at work he managed to interview Harry Houdini, who promptly invited young Harris to spend an evening with him. 43

During his eight months with the Clipper, Harris immersed himself in show business, meeting press agents, managers and publishers, while attending opening nights and interviewing stars. As a result of his work, Harris developed a life-long immunity to both Broadway opening nights and to theatre reviews. It was at this time Harris began to sense the poor quality of Broadway productions. Although he had never directed or produced a single show, he somehow knew he could do better. One day

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
he came into the office as usual and a young colleague announced that he was going to get married and move to a suburb in Queens. Both reporters were then earning $25.00 a week. Harris thought, "This could happen to me!" His fear of being tied down, coupled with ambivalent feelings toward the business trappings of the theatre brought him to the conclusion that he must leave New York. He states, "I found the Broadway theatre and indeed show business in general so trivial and boring that I quit my job and went off, like Chicken Little, to see the world. I was gone for almost two years." 

With $3.10 and a safety razor in his pocket, hobo Jed Harris departed New York on a cold February 29, 1921. He hitchhiked his way down the eastern shore of Maryland, into Virginia. Arrested and fined $2.00 as a possible deserter from the Navy, he decided to keep on the northern route, and thus detoured through western Pennsylvania on his way to Ohio, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska and finally Colorado. His adventures included being "the pampered guest ... of the fire department in Greensburg, Pa., briefly as a Latin tutor for a feeble-minded youth in Peru, Indiana, and spending a week on an Indian reservation in Nebraska where he..."

44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
acquired a life-long hostility to the government of the United States. . . ."46 Working at odd jobs, making an occasional bet, and sometimes talking his way into an advantageous position, he managed to survive, while experiencing countless episodes of intrigue and humor, several of which he includes in his memoirs. He was jailed at least nine times for vagrancy and occasionally surrendered himself to the local authorities in order to have a sheltered night's rest.

His method of transportation ranged from walking and hitchhiking to the preferred mode of resting in "the narrow threshold of the 'blind' front door of the baggage car"47 or atop the tinder of a train, although this latter form frequently delivered him to his destination on the verge of frostbite. Often he went a day and a half, and sometimes two days, without food, a habit which left him forever with a bird's capacity for eating. Many writers have recorded his scant meals of toast and tea while in production for a Broadway play. He usually managed to save at least a quarter, adequate funds for a hot meal at fifteen cents and a ten cent pack of cigarettes. These experiences, particularly those out West, instilled in Harris a deep appreciation for his country and those

46Harris, Dance, p. 40.
straight-forward, obliging folk whom he had never before encountered. No doubt, too, his experiences furnished him with a broad range of characters and situations to which he could artistically return during his years in the theatre.

One night early in June, 1924, while boarding in McCook, Nebraska, Harris was confronted by an event of far-reaching significance. For almost a year and a half he had lived a carefree life, away from the bright lights and hurried activities of Broadway. On this particular night he went to bed as usual, preoccupied with the casual events of the day. In his dreams, however, he suddenly faced a reality which was so powerful that he was unable to remain asleep:

I was awakened by a shout of laughter. That the laughter was my own did not altogether surprise me. I had just sat through a dress rehearsal of my production of Wycherly's The Country Wife and I had been laughing all through the performance. I had been so deeply immersed in the dream that for a moment I could not identify my surroundings.

Shaken by this unexpected confrontation with his deep-seated feelings, and unable to go back to sleep, Harris got up. Shortly thereafter he reflected upon the effect which the dream had had.

48 Interview with Jed Harris.
49 Harris, Dance, pp. 56-57.
As I lay soaking in a hot bath, I marvelled that my passion for the theatre, like the long-suppressed memory of some shattered love affair, had again taken possession of me. After all, I had only run away from the trivialities of show business, not from the theatre. . . . my tramping days were over. Indeed, the vividness of that dream gave me something I had never experienced before—absolute confidence in my feeling for the theatre. 50

Within a week after this event he moved to Denver, Colorado, and took a job as editor of the Community Herald, a weekly magazine devoted to the arts. For the first time in two years Harris now had a steady, respectable job, making $50.00 a week. In August, 1924, after some three months in Denver, he headed east to face what he hoped would be the beginning of a successful career in the theatre. 51

His experience on the Clipper may have served him well, for when he arrived in New York he soon found employment as a press agent for the Shubert organization. Not losing sight of his original plan to become a producer, Harris set up a business address while living in what he describes as a flea bag in Times Square. His name and address were available to playwrights, who frequently mailed him their new manuscripts. Thus he worked as a press agent during the day and as a play-reading producer at night. In the course of his routine activities, he

50 Ibid., pp. 57-58.

51 Interview with Jed Harris.
met many show business figures. Late in 1924, a well known newspaper reporter, Laurence Stallings, gave Harris the script to a play about the war which he and another reporter, Maxwell Anderson, had just finished, entitled What Price Glory? The opportunity Harris had been waiting for had now arrived.\(^{52}\) He agreed to produce it and promised Stallings $500 as an option. In the meantime, Anderson asked Critic Alexander Woollcott as to the merits of producer Harris. 'I never heard of the man,' replied Woollcott. 'Send the play to Arthur Hopkins.'\(^{53}\) Though Harris had already cast six people for his production, he had not delivered the option money to Stallings, and therefore the authors were within their rights to follow Woollcott's advice. Thus, Hopkins acquired one of his biggest hits while Harris lost his first real chance on Broadway.

These events devastated Harris and postponed his entry into the field of producing for nearly two more years. Knowing that it would be too painful for him to be in New York when the play opened, he got a job on the road, traveling as a press agent to Pittsburg, Philadelphia, Chicago and other midwestern cities. While working with the play Applesauce (1925) in Chicago,

\(^{52}\)Ibid.

\(^{53}\)Zolotow, No People, p. 239.
Harris committed his employers to $2,000 worth of advertisements, the major portion going to a comprehensive campaign to cover every billboard within a radius of one hundred miles of the city. The signs read simply, "On Every Tongue---Applesauce." According to Harris, the management had hoped for at least a fortnight's engagement, but it turned into a run of over thirty weeks. His victory was that he became solvent enough to return to New York. Having saved almost $3,000, Harris believed that he now had enough money to launch his first production.54

In retrospect, one can discover a pattern in the life of Jed Harris---that of escape from the world as he knew it. It resulted in flights into literature, into travel, into sailing, and, ultimately, into the artifice of the theatre. Whenever he found himself in a position to lead what most people would consider a normal life, he changed directions, such as hoboing, resigning from the theatre, or sailing his yacht for weeks at a time. He once said, "One of the most influential ideas ever to hit my mind came to me when I was a freshman at Yale and read William James' Principles of Elementary Psychology. James wrote that 'Habit is the flywheel of life. Habit is what keeps the rich rich, and the poor poor.' I avoid habits..."

54 Interview with Jed Harris.
like the plaque. . . . "55

Whether consciously or not, Harris has lived the life of an adventurer, never logically evaluating the reasonableness or even the possibility of completing his ventures. He once told me, "The possible is easy to achieve. It's the improbable that you have to worry about." 56 Although he often accomplished what many others told him was impossible, he estimates his own efforts at about 33% successful. Two thirds of his dreams remained just that—dreams. Harris believes that critics unjustly praised some of his productions and occasionally created a success out of what he believed to be a work of doubtful, or even unsatisfactory achievement. 57 Succeeding chapters of this study will examine those plays, playwrights and productions which were to make up the legendary career of the "enigmatic" Jed Harris.

55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
CHAPTER III

Between 1925 and 1929 Jed Harris produced eight Broadway plays, four of which were colossal hits and none of which were failures. As his fame spread around the world, his personal and professional status turned completely around. This chapter presents an examination of each of Harris' plays, accompanied by critical reviews, observations by playwrights, press agents, actors and the personal reactions of the producer. Since the story behind a hit often reveals a great deal about Harris' methods and ideals, the history of the productions is included when such facts are available. How someone who had neither produced nor directed could enter the profession so confident of the success which he was to achieve is the narrative of Jed Harris.

The first two plays Jed Harris introduced, though not great hits, helped to set the stage for his future attainments in the field of producing. Weak Sisters, a comedy by Lynn Starling, opened at the Booth Theatre on October 13, 1925. Although the script was weak, the play lasted about six weeks, and drew favorable comments from the critics. The reviewer for the New York Sun stated that the first two acts of the play were among "the most adroitly amusing things which the theatre has seen in
recent days. . . ."1 The Daily Mirror reported "that last evening's audience laughed uproariously."2 The writer for the New York Herald Tribune believed the play was solely designed to get laughs; and he admitted, it achieved its goal.3

Performances by Spring Byington and Osgood Perkins received special praise in several of the reviews, but most critics believed that the play was too thin to last. Gilbert Seldes writing for Dial magazine, stated that he and George Jean Nathan were the only critics who, after attending Weak Sisters, recognized Jed Harris' potential as a producer. Some months later, they were patting themselves on the back for their astute insight.4

Following his production of Weak Sisters, Jed Harris gave out one of the few interviews of his entire career. He began, "Interviewing me is a lot of bunk, you know. . . . I wouldn't stand for it at all if I didn't think it might help my show a little."5 The writer, trying to enlighten the uninformed reader on some of the biographical details of the twenty-five year old

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4Gilbert Seldes, Dial, Jan., 1927, p. 77.
5Newspaper clipping, 18 Oct. 1925, Lincoln Center.
producer, could not escape Harris' blunt and articulate tongue. Although at this time Harris had never before produced, he displayed a self confidence characteristic of a veteran theatrical figure. His unwillingness to cater to anyone, save himself, becomes evident. "I didn't produce Weak Sisters for you or for any reviewer or critic, but because I thought it was a play that people would pay money to see. . . . I enjoy putting a play together, working with the author, picking the cast, the scenery, the lighting, the costumes, pointing the scenes, trying the play with one scene out, risking it with a bad scene in just because it has some quirk or line I like."6

He also displayed his talents for bursting the balloon of those who believe the theatre is a place of glamour. "There's no art in the theatre, never was. It's a business," he said, "like selling butter and eggs. Everybody's an 'artist' in the theatre nowadays, Joe Cook, Fannie Brice, George Kelly, all of them. So-called critics and reporters go to a show, and if they like it they say it's 'artistic.' If they think an actor or a producer or a comedian or a dancer is clever they call him an artist. What does it mean? Nothing!"7

Though Harris' first play could not be considered

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
a hit, his second play was, and its success began to focus more attention on the young producer. Entitled Love 'Em and Leave 'Em (1926), this comedy centered on the lives of some department store clerks and included a lively crap shooting game which Harris acknowledges as his first venture into directing. He had engaged George Abbott as the director, but when the crap-shooting scene went into rehearsal, it became obvious that it lacked vitality. Harris mentioned this to Abbott, who agreed and seemed pleased when the producer offered to fix it. Harris went on stage and addressed the actors, "Gentlemen," he said, "whatever your sins, it is clear that not one of you can be accused of being a crap shooter. Yet it is your highest professional duty to persuade the audience that you are indeed crap shooters. You must not read lines like 'Fighter from Decatur' or 'Come on, little Joe' as if they were dry statements—they are prayers! And not genteel, polite, Episcopalian prayers but passionate, fervent prayers like those of the more fanatical Mohammedans beseeching Allah to smite their enemies. Life and death ride on every roll of the dice.\(^8\) Harris recalls the embarrassment he felt in having to talk directly to actors, a group whom he ordinarily considered unworthy of his time. He admits, however, that the scene came to

\(^8\)Jed Harris, Dance, p. 167.
life immediately, and as he left the stage, Donald Meek, one of the players, grabbed him by the arm and said, "'Young man, you are one hell of a director.' 'Oh no,'" Harris protested. "It was not until I was half-way down the steps into the auditorium," Harris says, "that I remembered to say thank you to the baffled comedian. How could he be expected to understand that I just did not want to be a director?" 

The reviews generally lauded the production. One critic wrote, "Few of the myriad plays which have come to town since the first curtain rose last August have seemed so freshly, so honestly, so successfully entertaining as the unpretentious comedy which came through the snow last evening. . . . It is well written, well cast, well played." Another reviewer stated, "the play is perhaps better cast than any other in New York." American reviewer Alan Dale further commented that "The comedy held the interest without a single sag." Brooks Atkinson wrote, "In the dialogue, characterization, and in the bizarre succession of unrelated episodes Love

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9Ibid., p. 168.


'Em and Leave 'Em reproduces the ebullient qualities that have come to be known as America." He credits the strength of the production to the excellent cast, in which even the minor roles are all well played.\textsuperscript{13} Robert Benchley agreed with Atkinson on the quality of the cast, and termed the production "a modest gem."\textsuperscript{14}

The acquisition and history of this production proved to be the first of the many gambles for which Jed Harris became famous. Originally by a poem by John V.A. Weaver, it was later expanded into a play by its author, and produced out of New York where it was said to be "terrible." George Abbott heard of the play, and, fascinated by the title, talked Weaver into rewriting the entire script, with himself as co-author. Abbott had been acting in a play some seasons before called \textit{Hell Bent for Heaven}, for which Jed Harris was the press agent. In Abbott's autobiography he says that Harris "had only qualified enthusiasm" for Weaver's play at first, but extremely anxious to produce something, he therefore urged Abbott to send him the script. Harris, like Abbott, found the title fascinating, and agreed to produce the


final product. When Harris at last read the manuscript, however, he realized the play needed revision. A reporter who had talked to the authors, wrote, "no less than seven times was the script rewritten..." On February 3, 1926, Love 'Em and Leave 'Em opened at the Sam H. Harris Theatre in New York. The article which recounts the tale of this production concludes, "Now see how a play that had been rejected by partially every producer on Broadway triumphed over this consensus of professional opinion against it and developed into a million-dollar hit."17

At this time Abbott had nothing but the greatest admiration for Harris. He writes, "I had never known anyone who talked so brilliantly about the theatre and the people in it. His ruthless criticism of everyone, including me, was stimulating and exciting." Recalling their relationship while working on Love 'Em and Leave 'Em, Abbott said, "I admired Harris' keen and flexible mind more than ever, and we spent hours together every day." Although he says that his wife Ednah "was never

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17Ibid., p. 62.

18Abbott, Mr. Abbott, p. 106.

19Ibid., p. 115.
jealous of any woman so far as I know, she was jealous of Jed. She sensed how happy and excited I was to be with him, how absorbed I was in our plans, and she felt like an outsider." Abbott says he felt the first hints of the breakdown in his friendship with Harris during rehearsals of the play. He was always optimistic, Harris, pessimistic. When the tryouts opened in Atlantic City, Abbott says Harris wanted him to replace one of the actors in the cast, a request which Abbott refused, and the resulting arguments left him listless and unable to sleep. When the play opened successfully in New York, Abbott explained, "All harsh words were forgotten, and again we became enthusiastic co-plotters for the conquest of the American theatre." 

During the run of this play S. N. Behrman was hired by Harris to be his play reader and press agent. In his autobiography, Behrman says that although Love 'Em and Leave 'Em itself was not particularly demanding, having a big hit was. He explains how Harris would call him up at two or three in the morning to complain over something he had done badly or had failed to do at all. "It was at that time," he writes, "that my telephone phobia began. I have never since been able to dissociate the ring of the telephone from the imminence of

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20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., pp. 116-17.
danger."  

Love 'Em and Leave 'Em became Jed Harris' first big success. Some seven months later, however, it seemed only a faint glimmer against the blinding light of his new venture, a play entitled Broadway.

"I cannot for the life of me think of the man or woman who would not be absorbed and deeply amused by the piece called Broadway, which cast and directed with great sagacity, was brought to the Broadhurst Theatre last evening." Thus wrote New York World reviewer Alexander Woollcott after the opening night of Jed Harris' impressive new success. Woollcott added, "It was presented by Jed Harris and lends color to a recent but spreading suspicion that this young newcomer among the producers is one to be reckoned with in the theatre of to-day, to-morrow and the day after."  

Some five months after the opening of Broadway Woollcott wrote, 'Not since Arthur Hopkins forged the marvel of What Price Glory has any producer hereabouts brought so much to a manuscript---not only in the crafty choice of players for nearly all the roles, but in weaving the brilliant, graphic, ceaseless ballet of its

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24 Ibid.
puppets."25 He believed that in viewing this play for
the second time, it seemed even better than when he
first saw it. He added, "Small wonder that all the
sheeplike playwrights are sending in their plays to
Jed Harris, the ravenous, twenty-six year old producer
who came into his own with Broadway."26

Woollcott's praise, high though it was, seems
insignificant amid the scores of reviews and articles
trying to depict the excitement of this phenomenal hit
of 1926. Percy Hammond, critic of the New York Herald
Tribune, stated, "it is the conclusion of this amusement
seeker that Broadway . . . is the most completely acted
and perfectly directed hall show27 he has seen in thirty
years of professional playgoing."28 Another reviewer
enthusiastically concluded that "some of the audience
must have wondered subconsciously why they did not have
to pay cover charges."29

25Alexander Woolcott, "The Stage," New York World,
Feb. 1927.

26Ibid.

27This phrase in Hammond's review is one of the
few remarks about any of Harris' plays which Harris
recalls. When I mentioned that Hammond had called Broadway a "hall show," Harris said, "Yes! Hall Show. That's
the best description of it I ever heard."

Tribune, 17 Sept. 1926.

29Frank Vreeland, "Lee's Victory," New York
Evening Telegram, 17 Sept. 1926.
This remark stems from the fact that *Broadway* is set in the private party room of the Paradise Night Club in New York City. Performers make their entrances to and exits from the cabaret stage as a minor part of the play's action. The most significant events in their lives occur backstage. The drama opens just prior to the night's first show and the cabaret girls and their director Roy Lane, the show "hoofer," are in rehearsal. Lane has plans to put together an act with "Billie" Moore, one of the show girls, whom he also hopes eventually to marry. But Lane's territory as suitor is being covered by one Steve Crandall, who is much more elegant than his competitor. Before the play proceeds very far, one recognizes Crandall as a gunman, bootlegger and tough guy. Crandall shoots Scar Edwards, another gangster who has been trying to move in on his undercover business and in turn is killed by Scar's girl friend who works in the club. The confrontations with other gangsters, and a police detective amid the comings and goings of the various night club performers create an air of excitement and suspense difficult to capture in a mere plot summary.

Visualizing the patchwork action of this melodrama, critic Brooks Atkinson describes the events as "set against a garish strident background of cabaret singers, 'hoofers,' midnight parties, visiting gunmen from Chicago
on a drunken spree, with a jazz band outside beating the appropriate tempo."³⁰ He views the result of these scenes as "an exhilarating, madly colored melodrama, a kaleidoscope, spattered with the brightest pigments of local color."³¹ Corroborating the evaluation of Atkinson was Gilbert Gabriel of the Sun, who depicts Broadway as "bright, intense, painstakingly, good humoredly picturesque."³² He states, "For somebody—either the authors . . . or Jed Harris . . . ---has lived scrupulously up to his evident vow to forget no smallest property or character of cabaret life, inside looking out. . . . Not even a Belasco could scrape more correct local color off the palette of the everyday."³³

Reviewer Joseph Wood Krutch agreed with his critical colleagues when he wrote, "Every element which goes to make /Broadway/ up has been carefully and skillfully calculated for the meridian of Forty-second Street; scene has been linked to scene by people who not only have an uncanny sense of theatrical effectiveness but have, besides, a delicate finger upon the pulse of the

³¹Ibid.
³³Ibid.
Of the eighteen available reviews of this play, not one of them was negative. Perhaps Brooks Atkinson best reflected the admiration for Broadway when he wrote in a special Sunday tribute, "In the completest sense it is—just that—a dramatic production, every element in it a true quality of the theatre, a blaring, variegated pro­cessional of Broadway life, pushing impatiently through a private room in the Paradise Night Club. . . . How it moves! How many conflicting destinies upset its mad rhythm!" As a rule, he says "only the 'art theatre,' Russian and lower east side, shape their productions so beautifully."

How Jed Harris acquired this hit is as interesting as the recital of praise it got from the critics. The story is not far from the one accompanying the acquisition of Love 'Em and Leave 'Em. Phillip Dunning, author of Broadway, tells how he was stage manager in Chicago for a play that Jed Harris was interested in. Harris came out to see it and after the show Dunning says he told Harris about a play he had written. He records


36 Ibid.
Harris' response as "Yeah, what about?" At that time Harris had no interest in the play. Although disappointed at the rejection, Dunning surely was not surprised, for Harris was at the end of a long line of potential producers he had attempted to interest in his manuscript. For three years he had "peddled his script from one office to another," seeing it "kicked around, laughed at, flouted and scorned, as though it were a mongrel pup." He said, "I knew the play was a good one, but when the different managers got together and told me it was terrible—men like George M. Cohan, and all of them who ought to know—I thought they knew what they were talking about. So I got sort of tired trying to put it over after a while." He had to admit that it "Does sound silly, doesn't it, when you get right down to it?" Telling people you had a play "in which a bootlegger gets shot, in the back, in a night club, and the young hoofer in the place who is sweet on one of the show girls, gets mixed up in the murder." In any event, he says that Harris finally became interested in it and read it. "Then he called me into his office and told me if I'd let the script be worked over a little, he'd put it on. So he called George Abbott."
George Abbott, credited as the co-author of Broadway, gives his version of his relationship with this play. He says he had been "interested in finding a good part for a new actor named Lee Tracy." Eventually, "Jed called me one morning and asked me to hurry down to the office; and when I got there he said, 'If you will rewrite a show I've just read, we'll have a great part for your boy Lee Tracy.'" After reading the script, Abbott felt sure he could give the play the order it needed.\(^{40}\)

In his memoirs Harris states, "Intellectual snobbery was indeed one of my besetting sins. It had almost cost me the chance to produce Broadway."\(^{41}\) He describes his meeting with Dunning in Detroit, in which the playwright offered to show him the manuscript. He says, "I bluntly refused to read it." Dunning was shocked and hurt because Harris gave him no explanation for his decision. "The plain truth is," Harris explains, "that I thought he was much too fatuous to write a play that would interest me, which was of course one more sign of the amateur."\(^{42}\) Following that encounter, Dunning sold an option on the play to William A. Brady, and almost a year passed before he returned to Harris with the news that Brady's option had just run out. "He laid a

\(^{40}\)Abbott, *Mr. Abbott*, p. 117.

\(^{41}\)Harris, *Dance*, p. 159.

\(^{42}\)Ibid.
seedy-looking manuscript in a worn dun-colored cover on my desk and literally begged me to read it," Harris says. Just to get rid of him, Harris agreed to his request and "ostentatiously thrust it into a stout manila envelope already bulging with five other manuscripts." He had no intention of keeping his word. That night at home, when Harris emptied the envelope onto his night table, **Bright Lights** (the original title of **Broadway**) turned up on the top of the pile. "By eleven o'clock that night I was phoning Dunning to come to my office in the morning to sign a contract."43

A year after **Broadway** opened, it was still selling out. The gross receipts for that year totaled more than $1,200,000, establishing "a world's record for dramatic productions."44 The actual run of the production lasted until February, 1928; it played seventy-three and a half weeks, for 603 consecutive performances, and grossed receipts of $1,488,386. These figures represent only the New York production. Duplicate productions went to Chicago, Detroit, Boston, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles. All added to the **Broadway** bank account. London, Bucharest, Budapest, Vienna, Milan and Rome eventually applauded this Jed Harris hit. Its


remarkable success securely spread the fame of the "Wonder Boy" throughout the world. Famed director Max Reinhardt produced Broadway in Berlin. And the Russians pinched the rights to this play when they introduced it in Moscow. Harris says this action on the part of the Russians is a habit which they have not overcome, even today. In addition to the financial gains from the various road companies, $300,000 was added to these totals when Harris sold the films rights to Carl Laemmle of Universal Film Corporation in 1927.  

Perhaps one of the most interesting situations developed with the London production of this play. In order that Britishers would not be lost in the vernacular of the bootlegger's jargon, Harris asked his press agent, S. N. Behrman, "to prepare a glossary to explain the esoteric Broadway argot for English audiences." This was inserted in each of the printed programs for Broadway. The London production, subject to revision by the Lord Chamberlain, had "about thirty percent of the profanity" deleted. Producer Harris, upon his return from London, wrote an article for the New York Times, describing his visit to the Lord Chamberlain's office. As it turned


46Behrman, People, p. 23.

out, Lord Cromer was not in, and Harris dealt with his assistant, Major Gordon. Together, they went through the script, making deletions. Harris writes, "every place we found the word 'God' we put the word 'Gee,' and we were having loads of fun seeing who could find God the most times. Of course, I won. . . ." In addition to this change, "in the scene where the boot- legger becomes too familiar with a chorus girl she has to say 'Stop!' instead of 'Make your hands behave,'" Harris said. "I lost some points, but on the whole I was able to keep the play's virility."

In the British capital Broadway was greeted enthusiastically. Reviewer J. T. Grein, writing in the Illustrated London News, said that "the action is so vivid, the people are so vivacious, that you will have an experience rarely sensed in the theatre. As for the acting, it is the most complete 'assembling' that a producer can attain. . . ." Another London critic wrote that in watching the performance, "You hardly think of acting, so effaced do the actors seem in their parts. The murder of one gangster by the other is done . . .

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50Ibid.

so quietly, suddenly and cold-bloodly that it affects you as an outrage."\textsuperscript{52}

George Abbott, hired to direct \textit{Broadway}, reveals some of the background of this production. He writes, "After a successful tryout in Atlantic City, and Harris’ arrangements to open the play in the fall at the Broadhurst Theatre, the play was put away for the summer. "Then," he says, "Jed did a smart thing." He asked Phil Dunning and Abbott to meet him in his office one night where they would have no interruptions. The show, Harris said, would get by, whether or not they made any more improvements on it. "'But it will be a much more important production if we eliminate all the cheap jokes. We don't need them!' Harris continued, "'There is enough good comedy so that you can afford to throw out the stuff that downgrades the show.'\textsuperscript{53} After obtaining Dunning and Abbott's agreement, Harris "read the entire play aloud, indicating the material he felt should be deleted." Abbott gained something valuable from this experience. "It proved," he says, "a canny thing to do and a very good way in which to edit a play; since then I have often used the same tactic."\textsuperscript{54}


\textsuperscript{53}Abbott, \textit{Mr. Abbott}, p. 119.

\textsuperscript{54}Ibid.
Abbott's early admiration for Harris broke after this production because of money matters, he says. In addition to the royalties due him as co-author, he also expected a percentage in addition to his directing fee. Crosby Gaige, Harris' financial partner for Broadway, disagreed. Abbott says that Harris therefore explained "he was terribly sorry, but on account of his partner there wasn't much he could do about it." Harris did offer him $500 for each of the road companies of Broadway that Abbott would polish up. Abbott accepted the offer. "Nevertheless," he writes, "the schism was complete. We did business unsmilingly and with hostility— we were never friends again."

When I asked Harris about the encounter with Abbott over the royalties to which the director felt he was entitled, he said he never had the slightest intention of giving Abbott any amount of money above his royalties and director's fee. And, he added, he never gave any evidence to Abbott that he was ever due any of the profits of the play for directing. Abbott was hired for a set fee and where he got the idea that he was entitled to any of the profits, Harris said, was unknown to him.

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55 Ibid., p. 122.  
56 Ibid.  
57 Interview with Jed Harris.
The extraordinary success of Broadway had a great effect on the lives of those associated with it. Abbott, Dunning, actor Lee Tracy, as well as many others reaped a fortune and fame worthy of their efforts. Not the least of those affected was producer Jed Harris. Describing Harris after his Broadway triumph, S. N. Behrman writes, "Jed was an apparition in the city. There was a Svengali look about him. He was highly articulate; he talked about the theatre, about acting and directing, in terms of fine arts that had, so far, been only rudimentarily explored. He had a saturnine humor and was an infectious storyteller. He wowed everybody and was, for years, an obsessional subject of conversation. . . . Those in his orbit became his devotees and I was in his orbit."58 Behrman adds, "As his legend grew, so did his belief in it. In the end, this credulity undid him."59

Behrman describes Harris' charisma:

Jed's effect on people was extraordinary; the forward thrust of his personality, the physical embodiment of his total self-belief, was hypnotic. He simply knew that he was destined for mastery, that his success with Broadway was merely the first rung of a career that would be omnipotent. And it was so---for a long time it was so. No one in

58 Behrman, People, p. 19.

59 Ibid.
the theatre, now or since, has so magnetized attention on a managerial personality as Jed did for a decade.\textsuperscript{60}

In his memoirs Harris reflects upon the effect which Broadway had on his own life. Countless groups and individuals descended upon him, including real estate brokers with estates in South Carolina or ranches in Wyoming, and so called society women, devoted to the theatre, wishing an opportunity "to serve the sacred muse of the drama."\textsuperscript{61} In addition to these unknown callers, another anonymous stream of well wishers emerged, most of whom identified themselves as relatives or "at least, relatives of relatives." And coincidentally, Harris writes, "they all needed money. Rather than spend my time probing their consanguinity, I chose the path of accommodation."\textsuperscript{62}

He learned a very valuable lesson during this time, he says: it is impossible to exaggerate the respect for money. "I frequently found myself trapped between embarrassment and laughter, as people with whom I had always exchanged casual hellos now addressed me with deference. Even the members of my staff spoke to me in awed tones. Everybody seemed to be affected by the money except myself." He describes an incident which happened

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{60}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 36.
\item \textsuperscript{61}Harris, \textit{Dance}, p. 129.
\item \textsuperscript{62}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 130.
\end{itemize}
several months after *Broadway* opened, when he was walking up Fifth Avenue. He noticed a beautiful fawn-colored topcoat in a shop window and thought that he would like to have one like it. "I must have walked another six blocks before it occurred to me that I could now buy a hundred of them. But then, I reflected, I already had a topcoat. What would I do with two of them?"63 He adds, "But apart from the help I could give my family and the freedom to produce plays without having to hunt for financial backing, the money meant very little to me. I had lived without money all my life and had rarely given any thought to it."64

Speaking to me of his production, Harris says, "*Broadway* was by far the most perfect show I've ever seen. While there was not a single line wasted nor a single action not carefully constructed into the fabric of the play, even these would not quite explain what the liveliness of the play was. Vivacity, vitality, irony, humor—all these were mingled in such a crafty fashion that the effect was simply spellbinding."65 He reminded me that this play also introduced onto the American stage the first organized gangsters and bootleggers. "To all its dramatic and theatrical elements,"

63 *ibid.*

64 *ibid.*, p. 131.

65 Interview with Jed Harris.
he continued, "was added the novelty of seeing a new criminal world that was taking power in America."

Harris claimed that the international success given Broadway proved that no society of the western world could fail to be fascinated by the portrait of America produced in this play. Harris paused, then added, "It was certainly not a great play, but it is doubtful that there was ever a better show."66

Before the dust had settled from the lines in front of the Broadhurst Theatre, Jed Harris was in rehearsal for his next production. Spread Eagle, the first of three plays to be introduced by this young producer during 1927, became one of the most controversial of his entire career. The plot centered on the schemes of Martin Henderson, a wealthy American businessman who had reaped profits from business deals during the first World War. Henderson has mining properties in Mexico which are presently in jeopardy. In order to save his vast Spread Eagle Mines, he believes that United States intervention is necessary. He achieves his goal first, by buying enough Mexican influence to start a revolution there, and second, by allowing Charles Parkman, the son of an ex-United States President to go to Mexico, where he is sure to be murdered by the revolutionists, and thus provoke American intervention. After Parkman goes to Mexico and

66 Ibid.
word is received that he has been killed, the United States becomes involved in a war. But unexpectedly, Parkman returns home, ready to expose the outrageous action which Henderson precipitated and in which he himself was the pawn. Though never publically exposed, Henderson is left a broken man, deserted and alone.

The play not only raised questions about the immorality and power big business exerts over the political dealings of the United States as well as over other countries, it also undertook "to expose who makes wars and why." At one point during the play, a gentleman, supposedly the manager of the Martin Beck Theatre, in which the drama opened, stepped before the curtain "to read mobilization orders for all officers and enlisted men of the United States Army, all officers and enlisted men of the United States Navy, all officers and enlisted men of the National Guard." He then added a few patriotic words to incite a quick response to his appeal. One reviewer describes the ensuing scene, as frightening as it was powerful:

Immediately afterwards the auditorium re-echoes with the sound of loud-speakers. Station WPIX is interrupting its market reports to announce the declaration of


war with Mexico. More references to national honor and Old Glory. A motion-picture machine suddenly begins to project fragments of the weekly newsreel: scenes of marching men, flags on Fifth Avenue, soldiers kissing wives goodbye on railway platforms, more soldiers standing in line before a mess kitchen on the border, battleships belching white thunder beneath a smoke-screen pall, a picture of Martin Henderson signing contracts as a dollar-a-year volunteer.69

This scene, vivid in its satire, prompted reviewer Robert Benchley to write that it gave "the audience a terrible time deciding whether to applaud Old Glory or not. . . ."70

Had this play been produced some ten years earlier, some said both its producer and its authors would have landed in prison. As it was, the critics had high praise for the production, although less for the script; but most applauded the daring theme of the piece.

The subject matter of the new play compelled a comparison with What Price Glory? As one writer noted, "Jed Harris, that shrewdest and youngest of the producers, knew what he was about when he offered Spread Eagle. No more bitter lines, no sharper thrusts at vulnerable parts have been seen hereabouts since What Price Glory."71

Arthur Ruhl of the New York Herald Tribune wrote, "Messrs. Brooks and Lister [the authors] simply turned their eyes

69 Ibid.
forward instead of backward and picture with a savage frankness similar to that of Messrs. Stallings and Anderson, how a war with Mexico might be precipitated for business reasons—and the irresistible revanche of gush and poisonous sentimentality that would accompany it."

In evaluating the production of *Spread Eagle*, reviewers frequently referred to producer Harris' earlier success, *Broadway*. Herald Tribune reviewer Percy Hammond declared, "Those interested in the fortunes of Jed Harris, the young Bonaparte who produced *Broadway*, will be pleased to know that *Spread Eagle* shows symptoms of duplicating the prosperity of that rich entertainment. Aside from its bitterness as propaganda, it is a great show..." Once again, critic Woollcott esteemed Harris' work: "The same up-and-coming impressario who gave this country the bounding entertainment known as *Broadway* gave it pause last evening. The gift was rapturously received, for all the world as though he had been clever enough to know what pause was just what the country wanted. The medium was an indignant scorching hot play called *Spread Eagle*." And New York Times

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reviewer Brooks Atkinson began his review by saying, "Equipped with an extraordinarily ingenious plot and flippant, facile conversation, Spread Eagle ... provides an evening of absorbing melodramatic entertainment with sensational implications. As in *Broadway,* he continues, "sponsored by the same producer, the casting of *Spread Eagle* is excellent, and the direction is imaginative. ..."\(^{75}\)

Noting the weakness of the script, with which most reviewers agreed, Gilbert Seldes states, "It is produced by Jed Harris, whom every lover of the theatre wishes well because he produced *Broadway,* and it has at times some of the same expertness in production. It has not the same expertness in the script."\(^{76}\) "Towards the close," another critic observes, "it degenerates into rather forced and mannered theatrics, patently contrived to extricate its authors from a complicated situation."\(^{77}\)

"On the whole," notes Stark Young, "*Spread Eagle* ... is decidedly a play to see. But subject-matter ... is not all of a work of art in the theatre. ... *Spread Eagle,* after that capital first act, gets mixed up and blurred. It is, too often very poorly written and apt to


\(^{76}\)Gilbert Seldes, *Dial*, June 1927, p. 534.

wander into mere melodrama."\(^{78}\)

In spite of their approval of the production and their objections to the weaknesses in the script, critics expressed genuine admiration for the producer, the theatre and the audience itself for venturing and accepting such a startling work. Alexander Woollcott exclaims, "It is just because the theatre can produce a work like Spread Eagle, it is just on the chance that once a season it may produce a play like Spread Eagle, that the theatre is worth going to the barricades for, worth guarding against all the knaves who would misuse it and all the censors who would choke and cripple it. In intention, Spread Eagle is that kind of play."\(^{79}\) Taking a somewhat milder stance, critic Stark Young writes, "In a sort of rough and ready way, Spread Eagle is an encouraging thing in our theatre . . . because it wants to say something and because its matter is piping hot and close to American life, and thereby provocative and alive. It is encouraging, too because of its free, bold use of its medium."\(^{80}\) Another reviewer, after enumerating the various elements which enlivened the production of this play, concluded, "it is all these things at once which


\(^{80}\)Stark Young, The New Republic, 248.
make Spread Eagle claw and scream its way into the affections of an ordinary audience, fed up on a quite-to-often specious patriotism. The most alarming—and consoling—thing about Spread Eagle is that it is possible at all."81

Joseph Wood Krutch, recognizing the audience for whom Spread Eagle was written, assured his readers of the Nation that the play was not written for them, nor for the subscribers to other such "dangerous periodicals," as the American Mercury or the New Masses.82

"Neither is it a play written for production before a specialized audience in some corner known only to the intelligentsia. It is, on the contrary, a strictly popular melodrama, presented in a Broadway theatre, designed to attract the man in the street, and so managed as to be as sure as any play ever is actually to attract him."83 Robert Benchley wrote, "We have always stood firm against propaganda plays of any sort, but here is one which contains propaganda for our pet cause, Anti-Propaganda."84 Baffled as to what position he should

81D.W.B., Boston Evening Transcript.

82These magazines were considered intellectual, liberal and even radical. Harris says that today they would be considered "leftist."


take in advising his readers, Benchley says he has decided to "compromise and merely say that we hope that Spread Eagle runs for fifty years and that every man, woman and child in the United States sees it at least once a year."

The season in which both Chicago and Spread Eagle appeared, he continues, "may not necessarily be an important one in the drama, but it should be a memorable one in American history, for it has taken a big step in the tortoise-paced process of putting the People wise to themselves." 85

The acting talent most highly acclaimed is Spread Eagle was that of Fritz Williams as Martin Henderson and Osgood Perkins as Joe Cobb, Henderson's manager and right hand man. Perkins' performance was often called "perfect." However, the likelihood that his performance, and that of the entire company, would be cut short came only days after the New York opening.

In a letter sent to District Attorney Joal Banton, the Veterans of Foreign Wars Department of the State of New York asked that an investigation of the play take place immediately. Their appeal, in part, read: "We feel that the show is positively un-American and unwholesome for American youth." 86 Another group, members of a local VFW Post, took their case to a somewhat higher

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85 Ibid.
authority and "wrote to President Coolidge . . . calling his attention to alleged 'seditionous' portions of the play."87 Although these attempts to censure the play were loud and long, they proved unsuccessful. Repercussions from the protests were felt, however, in spite of the fact that the play continued to run for several weeks. For example, a scheduled radio broadcast of Spread Eagle over WGL, one of the local New York stations, was suddenly cancelled. In an announcement explaining the station's decision, Lewis Landes, station President said, "This action was decided upon after due consideration of criticism made by veteran organizations, and as this company consists mainly of veterans of the World War, it will under no circumstances broadcast anything that has not the full endorsement of veterans and patriotic organizations."88

Although the veterans' protests were not strong enough to force a cancellation of the play, they surely lent momentum to the idea that Spread Eagle was an unpatriotic play; by so doing, they prevented its airing on radio and stood in the way of Harris' selling the movie rights. Jed Harris consulted with lawyers over the possibility of taking "legal action against the Motion

87 Ibid.

Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc., for its alleged ban on the filming of the play." He threatened to "seek damages from various patriotic societies which . . . had been instrumental in keeping his productions from radio as well as the screen."89 But no suit was filed in court. The play lasted a run of eighty performances, an accomplishment which might be considered a feat, in view of the overt opposition to its nightly appearance on Broadway.

While producing Spread Eagle, Harris was working on The Royal Family and rehearsing Coquette, the two other plays he would produce in 1927. But he admits, "Spread Eagle interested me a great deal more than either of the other two."90 The plot to bring about American intervention in Mexico, Harris says, was "a dream then dear to the hearts of mining and oil tycoons and especially of William Randolph Hearst, whose inherited millions of acres in that country had been expropriated during the Mexican revolution." The play did not do nearly as well as he had hoped, but "it was disturbing enough to induce several officials of the State Department to come to New York to study it," he states. But, he adds, "Unfortunately there was no Joe McCarthy around at the time

90 Harris, Dance, p. 159.
to attack it as 'subversive' and make a commercial success of it."91

Why did this particular play appeal so much to Harris? What prompted him to throw himself in the midst of controversy so early in his career? His answer is embodied in the final scene of the play. Martin Henderson, the ruthless businessman, has seen his only daughter marry Parkman, the ex-president's son, whose murder he himself has plotted. Joe Cobb has quit as his assistant to reenlist as a private in the war. All his dreams of personal gain and professional expansion have been shattered. "The band plays the national anthem. Henderson sits with his head in his hands. Joe shouts to him: 'Stand up, you son of a bitch!' Curtain."92

"This was my own personal curse against big business," Harris explained. "The play made the public uneasy. The idea that people would stoop to murder in order to start a war seemed incomprehensible to them." Since that time, Harris added, smiling, many such stories from the government have been exposed—such as our interference in the Chilian government, as well as all sorts of CIA involvements in other countries.93 For him, Spread Eagle was a reality which needed to be voiced. The difficulties in the script and in casting proved almost insurmountable

91Ibid.
93Interview with Jed Harris.
to Harris. Yet, in talking to him, I got the very real impression that this was a production which has always been a source of genuine pride and satisfaction to him.

On November 8, 1927, Jed Harris opened his second play of the year, this time at the Maxine Elliott Theatre. Coquette, as it was called, brought an enthusiastic response from audiences and critics alike, and assured Helen Hayes' success as a dramatic actress from that time forth. Reviews for this play were merely the prelude to what would become a two-year success story for all those connected with the production. The hit, as Harris had predicted from the first, was due to Miss Hayes' performance. Certainly the producer and others received their share of the applause, but laurels were heaped upon the heroine.

One reviewer wrote, "Unquestioningly we may look to Miss Hayes to find the full secret of this play's magic." Another critic said, "Miss Hayes, called upon to illustrate the many moods and emotions of this exciting child, does so with superb truthfulness from the idle fascinations of a belle to the stark distresses of a woman in despair." And Brooks Atkinson commented, "In the most poignant moments she gives so much of herself

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that one feels ashamed to receive it; she beggars the most generous-minded people in her audience. For once the stale vocabulary of dramatic criticism is positively revolting."

Miss Hayes was not the only recipient of praises given by critics. "The choice of Elliot Cabot," who played the hillbilly, "was a stroke of genius in casting," Alexander Woollcott exclaimed. Brooks Atkinson added that the play was splendidly cast and acted, not only by Miss Hayes, "but also by every one of her associates. . . ." Robert Benchley admitted that the play "has been put into the hands of people who evidently were born for the roles (to mention the good performances would be to name the cast, beginning with Elliot Cabot), and these people have been guided by a master hand."

The more general responses to the production were equally enthusiastic. Brooks Atkinson, in a special Sunday article on Coquette, stated, "In the opinion of this reviewer, . . . nothing so complete and touching as Coquette has crossed the boards for many seasons."
In *Coquette*, wrote Alexander Woollcott, "Jed Harris has once again made so much out of so little that I am beginning to share with others the feeling that this young manager is the white (or, at least, the slate-gray) hope of the American theatre." Woollcott further states that "Indeed, in my dozen years as a professional playgoer I have not had before so strong a sense of an entire audience sobbing in unison as I have in the instance of this play. . . ." E. W. Osborn, critic of the *New York Evening World*, observing the reactions of his professional colleagues, said, "Percy Hammond wept unblushingly, Brooks Atkinson wept, John Anderson forgot he was a critic and clapped his august hands, Walter Winchell acted like a gallery god performing a sacrifice, . . . and there were others. It is of note worth mentioning that rarely has the critical corps found itself so perfectly and becomingly in line for the truly good and true in art." "Last night," reflected Percy Hammond, "when the placid country doctor went to his desk, took out his pistol and prepared to avenge his daughter's honor, it was so real that the audience felt like peeping toms. . . . some of us were tempted to climb upon the stage and

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102 Ibid.
dissuade him." 104 The naturalism of Coquette was noted by most of the reviewers. Perhaps the ultimate compliment was paid by the critic from the Boston Evening Transcript. He wrote that not long ago, "it was the custom to write these praises of a Russian company imported ... into the American theatre. ... In these Russians, we said, rapturously, has naturalistic drama come full circle." But no longer are the Russians the only group which deserves this praise; for "Coquette, out of American life, by American hands, in the American theatre, seeks and gains the far-famed Muscovite merit. The virtue that we praised as foreign upsprings in ourselves. ..." 105

Out of rather unusual circumstances, tribute was paid to producer Harris in an editorial in the New York Times. The praise was precipitated by an event on April 15, 1928, when the Theatre Club, Inc., "presented to George Abbott its medal for the season in behalf of himself and Ann Preston Bridgers for their work as authors of Coquette." 106 The following day an editorial entitled "The Forgotten Theatrical Producer." The editor noted that when a play achieves success, the actors and the authors are always the ones who receive acclaim and


publicity. Using the recent ceremonies honoring the players and playwrights of *Coquette* to illustrate his point, he adds, "They made no mention of the producer, however. One might think that the play produced itself, or that the authors and star put it on." The editor further comments, "The producer is, after all, responsible for the movement, the dramatic power, the resemblance to life of his show. He decides when to slow it down and when to snap it up. But if it goes well, he is forgotten while the others are patted on the back." Though never mentioning Jed Harris by name, the object of his discourse is clearly Harris.

The history of the writing and rehearsals of *Coquette* proves more interesting than its popular acclaim. It resulted in what Jed Harris describes as "my first encounter with disaster in the theatre." While in the midst of working on *The Royal Family*, getting out seven road companies of *Broadway*, reading plays and visiting theatre after theatre each night in search of actors, he undertook to revise *Coquette* from an ordinary comedy into an extraordinary serious drama.

The story begins in the spring of 1926 when George Abbott brought Harris the script of a light comedy entitled *Norma's Affair*. Returning it to Abbott the next
day, Harris said, "I find it trivial but I'm sure somebody will produce the play, if only because it's got a charming part for Helen Hayes. But as I was reading it I couldn't help thinking that if the heroine had to die for what began as a harmless flirtation, people would sob their hearts out for her."\(^{108}\) Harris recalls Abbott's response as a stare, and no comment. Several weeks later Abbott returned to the producer, telling him that "he was sure that Ann Bridgers, the author of the play, would be amenable to an offer of collaboration which would give us a free hand to adapt the play to our own liking."\(^{109}\) Harris thereupon entered into a contract with Miss Bridgers, formerly an actress from Raleigh, North Carolina, and immediately changed the title to *Coquette*.

The play focuses upon the misalliance of a Southern hillbilly and the daughter of a socially prominent Southern gentleman. The girl becomes pregnant and the father shoots the lover. In the end, the girl takes her own life. "Over the next year," Harris writes, "we would turn out a dozen drafts of the play."\(^{110}\) He admits that it would have been far easier to write an entirely new play. His project was not "a simple problem like

\(^{108}\) Harris, *Dance*, p. 157.


replacing a 'happy' ending with an 'unhappy' one," but involved "subtle changes in characterization and the creation of an entirely different scale of dramatic values." He says, "in the midst of a schedule that more often than not involved me in sixteen hours of work a day, I had blithely taken on a burden that frequently left me exhausted and sleepless."  

Harris knew his literary standards were different from those of Abbott, and demanded what he felt was a quality of writing beyond Abbott's capacity. "Unrealistic as this was," he states, "I was nevertheless confident that I could contribute all that Abbott lacked as a writer." And, "we somehow managed to carry it off—an accomplishment which owed as much to tenacity as to talent."

The situation was further complicated by the engagement of Helen Hayes for the leading role. Harris admits, "I had regarded Miss Hayes, then a popular light comedienne, as a technically accomplished performer with an assured future in the commercial theatre as a very 'cute' actress. But then she suddenly appeared in Barrie's What Every Woman Knows, and her subtlety and power astounded

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111 Ibid., p. 157.
112 Ibid., p. 158.
113 Ibid.
me." The public shared Harris' view of Miss Hayes as a comedienne, and were unprepared for her appearance in a tragic role. Thus, when Coquette opened in Atlantic City, Harris says, although Miss Hayes had "given a superlative performance and risen to her great emotional scenes with a virtuosity I have rarely witnessed, she was rewarded with outbursts of laughter. The fault lay not in Miss Hayes, nor in her stars," he states, "but in Abbott and even more particularly in myself." Not only were the audiences unsympathetic; so were the critics. Reviews in Atlantic City almost deemed the show a failure. Harris recalls, "During the rehearsals I had been very much disturbed by what I regarded as the excess of comedy in the first act." If the excesses included what he termed "delightful stuff," they also confused audiences, who anticipated viewing Miss Hayes in "a very pleasant evening of light entertainment." After that first performance, Harris broached Abbott on the subject of "cutting ten or twelve minutes of that delicious comedy out of the first act." Abbott replied, "I don't really see any reason for panic. Why not just relax for a couple of days and give the show a chance to play itself into shape?" These comments infuriated

114 Ibid.
115 Ibid., p. 163.
116 Ibid.
Harris, who "turned away from him without a word, walked into the box office and cursed a blue streak." It took him a little more than an hour to make the planned cuts and rehearse them.

Between the first and second nights in Atlantic City Harris returned to New York. During that brief visit he learned that word of Coquette's imminent death had already reached that city. The second night's performance yielded an improvement, but Harris realized that many more changes would be necessary if the play were to survive. The following morning, while waiting for his breakfast in the dining room of his hotel, Harris wrote out a new scene for the end of the second act on the back of a menu. In this scene, "Wild with grief over the murder of her lover, the heroine is suddenly confronted by the family lawyer who tells her that to save the life of her father who had done the killing, she must be prepared to testify that he committed the act in order to save her honor." Harris states, "In Abbott's version she said, "All right, go away . . . just go away.' In mine she cried, 'No, I hope they hang him! I want him to die!"

The new lines were performed that afternoon. Harris arrived at the matinee near the end of the second act ."and

117 Ibid., p. 164.
118 Ibid., p. 168.
enjoyed seeing the new scene evoke a real burst of applause, the first applause," he says, "there had ever been for the second act curtain."\(^{119}\)

The ensuing scene which occurred not on stage, but in the auditorium, climaxed the frustration of the preceding months and led to the final breakup between Harris and Abbott. Harris writes:

Abbott came hurrying up the aisle as the curtain fell. Miss Bridgers was with him.

"Who wrote that scene?" he asked.

"I did," I thought he would be elated by the effect.

"You know perfectly well you are not permitted to write anything into the play without the consent of the author."

"Well, I suppose you can always go to the Dramatists' Guild and file a protest."

"Mr. Harris," said Miss Bridgers, "I assure you that no Southern girl would say anything like that about her daddy." Then she added, "A Jewish girl might, but not a Southern girl."

"It's odd you should say that, Miss Bridgers," I said politely. "Because that happens to be the way I visualized your heroine---as a typical Southern Jewish girl. And that's why I engaged Miss Hayes to play the part."\(^{120}\)

At that point Abbott and Miss Bridgers stalked out of the theatre. Harris would not see Abbott again for over twenty

\(^{119}\) Ibid.

\(^{120}\) Ibid., p. 168-69.
Pursuing his plan to make further changes in the production, Harris arranged to rent the ballroom of the Belleview-Stratford Hotel in Philadelphia, for the next Sunday and Monday, to postpone the Philadelphia opening from Monday night to Tuesday night, and to rewrite extensively the parts which he felt needed to be changed in the script. By six-thirty the following Sunday evening Harris had rehearsed without interval for six-and-a-half hours and had gotten through almost half the notes he had made. Monday afternoon rehearsals ended at seven o'clock, Harris writes, and "we were all visibly exhausted, but the job had been done, as completely and comprehensively as I knew how to do it."\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 171.}

The effort put into these thirteen hours of rehearsals in Philadelphia proved the key to the fate of 	extit{Coquette}, for it was here that the fortunes of this play were reversed. Nightly performances sold out, and the critics hailed the show a theatrical triumph. Una Merkle, one of the young actresses in the play, recently confirmed Harris' and the critics' view of the vast difference between \textit{Coquette} as it opened in Atlantic City and as it was eventually performed in Philadelphia. She said, "There was a great improvement" in Philadelphia. "And then of course," she added, "the opening night in New
York. There's only one expression that I ever could use regarding it, and that was, it went as smooth as cream. There wasn't one breath out of place. Nothing. And Helen was absolutely magnificent."\textsuperscript{122}

Harris, feeling that his work with \textit{Coquette} was now complete, did not attend its New York opening. In fact, he never saw the play again. Yet the difficulties which he encountered with this production, including his decision to take over rehearsals, marked the turning point upon which his life as a director was to turn.

As one might expect, George Abbott's account of \textit{Coquette} differs from that of Harris. He credits Miss Bridgers with the idea of turning the comedy into a tragedy. He also includes an event which occurred during rehearsals, and although it centered around Harris and Miss Hayes, is unknown to either of them. Abbott says that Helen Hayes "told me that the show was going badly, and that it was my duty to resolve my differences with Jed and to take over the direction."\textsuperscript{123} George Cukor had originally been hired to direct \textit{Coquette}, and it was at this point that Abbott was about to replace Cukor. He continues, "I told Miss Hayes that I would do so on one consideration; that Jed stay away from the

\textsuperscript{122}Una Merkle, Telephone interview with the author, 20 Aug. 1977. Quoted by permission of Miss Merkle.

\textsuperscript{123}Abbott, \textit{Mr. Abbott}, p. 127.
rehearsals. She delivered the ultimatum and, I suppose, added pressure of her own. It was accepted."  

When I questioned Harris about the ultimatum delivered by Miss Hayes, he became adamant in his insistence that no such meeting ever took place. "If she had dared to suggest such a thing to me," he said, "I would have either punched her right in the nose or had her thrown out of the theatre then and there." Then he added, "George Abbott went into rehearsals in an absolute straight jacket. That straight jacket was me."  

In response to my questions regarding Abbott's account of this incident, Miss Hayes stated that she had absolutely no memory of ever confronting Harris in this manner, although such an event would have given her great pleasure. When asked if she felt that Coquette, as it appeared in Atlantic City, was destined to be the hit that it later became, Miss Hayes said, "No, I have to confess, I didn't have any faith in it."  

Abbott agrees that "Coquette didn't go well in Atlantic City." As he explains it, "To use the actors' phrase, it was a bit heavy for the peasants." He gives no other reason for its failure. He then states, "Jed,

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124 Ibid.

125 Interview with Jed Harris.

126 Helen Hayes, Telephone interview with the author, 13 Sept. 1977. Quoted by permission of Miss Hayes.
of course, was now in the picture again, and he reverted to his old tactics; there was some restless demon in that man that made him always seek changes. . . . Once again I resisted him and we had harsh words, but we opened at the Maxine Elliott without the changes."127

When I asked Harris about Abbott's view of what happened, he said, "I don't want to get into any disputes with George Abbott. All I can say is George Abbott was an actor."128 He explained that Abbott suffered some of the worst effects of being a member of that profession. "An actor does not need a mind, the chief instrument of memory," he added. "What an actor needs is antennae to grasp at methods of simulation. Beyond that, he has few powers that would suggest judgment, power of analysis, and those elements of imagination which are part and parcel of the creative mind." He further stated that although Abbott became a director and a writer, he never wrote an original play. "His work was chiefly hack work," Harris says. "And you will note that never in his life after Coquette was he ever connected with a work of that class. His career was devoted entirely to musical comedy and slam-bank farce." Basically, Harris continued, Abbott remained an actor, "with all the

127Abbott, Mr. Abbott, p. 128.

128Information in the following paragraph from an interview with Jed Harris.
self-serving vanity of an actor. You will note that he
says I couldn't stop changing things in a play. But any­
one who knows me and my career knows that time after time
my plays were finished in dress rehearsal, for good or
ill." Documentary evidence exists to support this claim
by Harris. "I would summarize Abbott's views of what
happened," he concluded, "as silly falsehoods, injured
self-esteem (a tragical experience for an actor). The
plain facts are that after one brief moment with me after
the matinee performance in Atlantic City, Abbott left the
theatre in a state of disarray (with the judgment that
the play was a failure). And I'm sure that if you con­
sult Miss Hayes, she will say the play was a failure."  
Harris then commented that he never saw Abbott subse­
quently for the next twenty years. He next heard from
him when Abbott called Harris to ask him to give his wife
a job in a television series he was doing. "My own views
of Abbott," Harris added, are recorded in a volume I am
finishing, of my stage memoirs, called A Dance on the
High Wire."

In his autobiography, Abbott says that during the
rehearsals of Coquette "My early admiration and fondness
for Jed eventually turned into a wholehearted, uncompli­
cated hate. I wanted to smash him in the face---in fact,
I often thought of doing just that." His mood alters,
however, as he comments, "As I look back upon the really
glorious halcyon days of our first friendship, I am full of regrets that we ended up in bitterness and recrimination." In sorting out his relationship with Jed Harris, Abbott arrives at the conclusion that he had been jealous of Harris. He writes, "Jealousy is an ignoble emotion... However, because of the publicity which attends those who work in the theatre, our jealousies or energies are probably the biggest and best. I was not immune to this affliction in those early days. I was jealous—particularly of Jed. I had that childish feeling of being unappreciated..." The events surrounding the closing of Coquette, after a run of almost two years, reveal something of the business sense attributed to Jed Harris and provide an insight into the business of the theatre. Miss Hayes, having married Charles MacAuthur during the play's run, became pregnant, forcing her to leave the show. Since the producer felt her appearance was vital to the success of the play, he decided to close it. Shortly thereafter, an article appeared in the New York Times which said that "the closing of Coquette, as a result of Helen Hayes' expected maternity... will be the subject of an arbitration to be held under the auspices of the American Arbitration Association. Five members

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129 Abbott, Mr. Abbott, p. 129.
130 Ibid.
of the company, who hold run-of-the-play contracts, claim they are entitled to two weeks salary in lieu of notice.\textsuperscript{131} Jed Harris, who was in London at the time, was not available for comment, but his office contended that it was impossible for him to continue the play without the services of his star.\textsuperscript{132} A few days later, another article revealed the basis upon which this producer planned to build his case. "Mr. Harris . . . contends that the 'act of God' clause in Equity contracts applies to the present case and that he should not be held responsible for the salaries of the five players."\textsuperscript{133} In deciding the case, the arbiters made no effort to define the "act of God" clause in the Equity contracts. Their decision stated that the actors were entitled to two weeks' salary and that the contracts did not restrict him to perform with Miss Hayes in \textit{Coquette}.\textsuperscript{134}

When I asked Harris about his actions related to this case, he assured me that he had absolutely nothing to do with it. He had been in London during the entire

\begin{footnotes}
\item[131]"Coquette Closing to be Arbitrated," \textit{New York Times}, 7 Sept. 1929, p. 25.
\item[132]\textit{Ibid.}
\end{footnotes}
period, and only when he returned did he learn of the proceedings. Although he had decided to close the show for the reasons given, he knew nothing of the "act of God" case which the members of his staff had developed.\(^{135}\)

Whatever the specifics were regarding the history of this production, credit must be given to Jed Harris in his evaluation that the success of Coquette rested with the availability of Helen Hayes. For, although this play has been presented hundreds of times, including the film version starring Mary Pickford, it never again achieved the acclaim it had with Miss Hayes as its heroine. As for his heroine, Harris says, "Apart from her work in the theatre, Miss Hayes was a perfect dunce. She is the classical example that you don't have to be a brilliant woman to give a brilliant performance."\(^{136}\)

"If working on Coquette was never anything more than hard, grinding labor, my experience with The Royal Family was more like a lark," writes Jed Harris. This play, which opened at the Selwyn Theatre on December 28, 1927, was the third hit Harris introduced during this year, and securely established his reputation as a man of unique abilities in the theatre.

\(^{135}\)Interview with Jed Harris.

\(^{136}\)Rbid.
Only one act of *The Royal Family* had been written when Harris agreed to produce it. George Kaufman told him about the incomplete play. Harris gathered from what Kaufman said that it was not going to be "a conventional play with a plot, but a series of sketches of a family of actors, held together, he hoped, by a line of connective tissue which they were at the moment in the process of working out. It was obviously intended to be a kind of fond spoof on the more legendary aspects of the Barrymores," Harris says. In the play Fanny Cavendish, the matriarch of this theatrical tribe, looks after the household in which her actress daughter, Julie, and actress granddaughter, Gwen, reside. Her actor son, Tony, who has centered his talents in Hollywood, suddenly returns home, in route to Europe. Other characters include the family's manager, two married cousins who also act, though not so successfully as the Cavendishes, and a young suitor of Gwen's who is bound to take her away from the unstructured life of the theatre. Harris says that the joy of the play rests with the abilities of the actors to create charming and maddening characters whom the audience will recognize as authentic show people.

Harris describes his meetings with Kaufman and

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137 Harris, *Dance*, p. 129.
Ferber as "holidays." "Unlike the authors of my earlier plays," he writes, "they were accomplished professional writers. Ideas for scenes, lines, jokes, and bits of stage business flew around the table while an old player-piano banged out Jerome Kern's 'Who' over and over again." Harris writes that the inscription Miss Ferber penned in his copy of the published version of the play, reads: "For, with and by Jed Harris." He admits this was an exaggeration, and believes he had far more to do with the writing of Coquette. He says, "There was never so much as a difference of opinion between us, except for the old lady's death scene I had once suggested." He came to feel this scene was contrived and regrets he ever thought of it. However, the scene remains in the script.

"Once the manuscript was completed, the fun stopped dead," Harris writes. Although Miss Ferber had entertained hopes that Ethel Barrymore could be induced to play the role of Julie Cavendish, Harris did not share her optimism. But since Miss Ferber considered Miss Barrymore something of a friend, he had no objection to sending her a script. Repercussions were immediately felt. He recalls, Miss Barrymore "regarded the play as a deliberate insult to her family and threatened

138 Ibid., p. 181.
139 Ibid.
us with a suit. She even consulted with the criminal
lawyer Max Struer, about enjoining us from producing
the play."\textsuperscript{140}

Of this incident, Miss Ferber writes. "We
couldn't get anyone to play Julie Cavendish. We had
hoped, in our innocence, that Ethel Barrymore would
play it. She would have been perfection." Then she adds
that for five years after \textbf{The Royal Family} was produced,
Miss Barrymore "refused to speak to George or to me. We
even heard that she had threatened to sue us. We never
knew why."\textsuperscript{141}

In the book \textbf{George S. Kaufman and His Friends},
author Scott Meredith states that some sixteen years
after the play opened Kaufman went to Miss Barrymore to
ask for her services at a benefit he was planning. She
inquired as to the date of the benefit, and he told her,
"unaware that he was being led into giving the cue for
a line originally spoken by the Ethel Barrymore character,
Julie Cavendish, in his own play. 'I'm sorry,' Miss
Barrymore said. 'I plan to have laryngitis that day.'"\textsuperscript{142}

Although Harris would like to have had Ethel
Barrymore in the play, he was not particularly surprised
at her attitude. "Long before Kaufman and Ferber had

\textsuperscript{140}Ibid., p. 182.

\textsuperscript{141}Edna Ferber, \textit{A Peculiar Treasure}, (New York:

\textsuperscript{142}Scott Meredith, \textit{George S. Kaufman}, p. 236.
ever been heard of," he writes, "the Barrymores were often referred to as the royal family of the American theatre. It was altogether natural that Ethel should have been horrified that the stereotypes passing for actors in The Royal Family might be identified with her own family." 143

On top of these various external pressures, Harris now faced what was the most difficult task of the entire project, that of casting the show. The only actor Harris knew would be perfect was Charles Dickson, cast in the role of Oscar Wolf, the manager of the Cavendish family. The day following the terrible opening of Coquette in Atlantic City, Dickson's doctor telephoned Harris to tell him Dickson was a dying man, and would never be able to rehearse, much less perform in The Royal Family. The actor had not been informed as to the severity of his condition and was still allowed to read the newspapers. Therefore Harris secretly engaged Jefferson De Angelis to replace Dickson, while the ailing actor's name continued to be listed in the cast appearing in the newspapers. Dickson died in his sleep, never knowing that the replacement had occurred, nor that rehearsals had begun. 144

Ann Andrews was cast in the role which originally

143 Harris, Dance, p. 182.
144 Ibid., pp. 186-87.
had been offered to Miss Barrymore, and Hadie Wright was to play the leading role of Fannie Cavendish. Although both women apparently were physically suited to their parts, and both ultimately were applauded by the critics, Harris was dissatisfied with both.

Beginning rehearsals with what he felt was an inadequate company, Harris states, "I marvelled at the way the scenes fitted together, a tribute to George Kaufman, a master of entrances and exits." Living on hot tea, occasionally spiked with cognac, he revelled in the extraordinary contradictions of the play: it was static, "yet it moved with a joyous, spontaneous air which made me feel sure about the play itself and increasingly doubtful of my principal actors," he writes. "It was an instance 'Where every prospect pleases and only man is vile.' in this case of course one man and two ladies."

In his memoirs, Harris entitled the chapter devoted to this play as "The Not So Royal Family." His lack of faith in his players became concretely evident on the ninth day of rehearsal, after the first uninterrupted run-through. On that day Harris fired the entire company. Two weeks' salary was paid to each member.

145 Ibid., p. 190.
146 Ibid.
of the cast upon their dismissal.\textsuperscript{147} This decision was based not only on what Harris felt to be a failure to cast the show properly, but in some measure, on his own failing health. He simply did not have the strength to face up to the difficulties before him. Having gone through the casting and rehearsing of two complete productions during this year, plus the almost insurmountable complications associated with \textit{Coquette}, he was now on the point of physical exhaustion. He recalls a conversation with his business manager, Whitaker Ray, which took place shortly after the opening of \textit{Coquette}. Ray, reminding Harris that he didn't sleep, didn't eat, and was beginning to look like a ghost, added that last month his income was over a hundred thousand dollars. "And here you are worrying yourself to death about another show with a cast that gives you the shakes," he continued. "What the hell for?"\textsuperscript{148} Eventually Harris agreed. For after seeing a doctor who insisted that he rest, Harris went to bed in a complete state of collapse.

Two days later Miss Ferber called to see how he was doing. During that conversation, she told him that she had taken the liberty of letting Winthrop Ames read the manuscript, with the potential plan of permitting him to take over rehearsals, should Harris decide to

\textsuperscript{147}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 192.

\textsuperscript{148}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 188.
withdraw. She added that she hoped he would not leave the show. Harris asked for forty-eight hours to think things over. After a good sixteen-hours sleep he telephoned Ames to discuss the situation. Ames encouraged him to continue, and within the hour Harris telephoned his office to reengage all the same actors (Harris says he was ready to get down on his hands and knees to get them back.) and to resume rehearsals beginning the next day. His general stage manager, David Burton, was to sit in on run-throughs until Harris was well enough to return to the theatre. After only five days rest, he was back at rehearsals, if still a bit shaky.  

What he saw when he returned to the theatre was somewhat heartening. He states, "The defects in the quality of the individual performances were still blatantly there but the performance as a whole was very different from the sum of the parts. And I was pleasantly surprised to find that my efforts during the strenuous rehearsals of the first few days had borne a few brights shoots."

Throughout the weeks of rehearsal, Harris comments, "From Kaufman I did not hear a word. Working together, we had become good friends. If a good friend is someone with whom you feel free to open your heart, it would perhaps

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149 Ibid., pp. 192, 199.
150 Ibid., p. 200.
be more accurate to say that we saw a great deal of each other. He neither encouraged intimacy nor did he offer any. It was like going around with a delightful woman who happens to be incurably frigid."¹⁵¹

Kaufman evidently bore great resentment toward Harris. In his biography, published in 1974, writer Scott Meredith states that Harris was sometimes "viciously nasty" to Kaufman and Ferber, "particularly when a line didn't play as well as he thought it should."¹⁵² He adds that they made a pledge to ignore his outbursts and somehow managed to survive this experience of working with him. However, they found it impossible to ignore his phone calls coming at all hours of the day and night, an echo of the experience of S. N. Behrman, and one which seems to have been a habit in the life of this producer. Meredith avoids describing specific incidents detailing what was said or done during rehearsals, but includes general comments such as, "Kaufman and Ferber also had to watch helplessly as Harris behaved with typical thoughtlessness toward the members of the cast."¹⁵³ And, "With Harris, the actors never knew if he meant what he said or was merely indulging in the pleasures of cruelty, so they obeyed him the way the

¹⁵¹Ibid., p. 193.
¹⁵²Meredith, George S. Kaufman, p. 243.
¹⁵³Ibid.
That the factual information about Harris in the Kaufman book is far from accurate leads one to speculate about the veracity in other sections. Of all that is said about Harris, only two mildly positive comments exist. The author states that two legends surrounded Jed Harris, neither of which were quite true. The first was that he was "an authentic genius of the theatre, capable of turning any play into a hit merely by associating himself with it as producer and/or director." The second legend was that he "was an absolute monster during his years in the theatre." The only credit given to Harris in Meredith's account of The Royal Family was that "There could, however, be no denying the fact that Harris worked hard."

Harris points specifically to the incident which he believes precipitated his own break with Kaufman. Earlier he had, as a gesture of friendship, offered Kaufman ten per cent of the profits of Coquette. Kaufman refused, saying, "That would be an outright gift." Harris says, "Kaufman was very worried about money. He couldn't live on what he made at the New York Times and

154 Ibid., p. 244.
155 Ibid., pp. 236-37.
156 Ibid., p. 244.
he needed the money. He had just had an outright demoralizing flop called The Good Fellow. I had a lot of money, but he wouldn't accept my offer." Perhaps Kaufman deeply resented this gesture. The event to which Harris refers came shortly before The Royal Family went into rehearsal. In order to see that Kaufman's financial situation was improved, Harris made another proposal. He writes, "I told the authors that they might consider foregoing their royalties and sharing the profits from the show equally with me. Miss Ferber accepted at once." Harris assured them that he could manage the losses, if any, and that if the play failed, there would not be any royalties anyway. And if it succeeded, the profits would more than double their royalties. Kaufman seemed to feel this was a gamble, but he "cautiously concurred." The play was a success. "My real motive for the arrangement," Harris says, "was to provide Kaufman with a larger stake in the venture. Miss Ferber was quite rich and she did not need the extra money."  

A month or two after the play began its successful run the show's manager told Harris that Kaufman has asked to see the payroll of the company. "I was busy at the moment and said, 'Show him anything he wants,' and promptly forgot the matter," Harris writes. "A few nights later,  

157 Interview with Jed Harris.  
158 Harris, Dance, pp. 195-96.
at dinner, Kaufman remarked that he thought I was overpaying a small part actress in the cast."159 Harris demanded to know what he was talking about. Kaufman said he felt the actress would have worked for twenty-five dollars a week less than she was getting. Harris blew up and when Kaufman tried to claim that it was just a matter of business which interested him, Harris assured him that he didn't conduct his business that way. He told Kaufman that he could have gotten everybody in the cast for less. Then he added, "Incidentally, I entered into a profit sharing arrangement with you and Edna. But that doesn't make you my partners."160

Harris says he continued to associate with Kaufman after that incident, and they even saw a great deal of each other. But, he notes, "I think our 'friendship' was never quite the same as it had been."161

Miss Ferber describes rehearsals for The Royal Family as "often a grisly business." The company would rehearse, she says, from eleven to five. "Then, at five in the afternoon when the actors were limp with strain and exhaustion, in would glide Jed Harris, having just got up out of bed, fresh as poison ivy and wearing a three-day beard. He would start to rehearse from the

159Ibid., p. 196.
160Ibid., p. 197.
161Ibid.
beginning just as though the others hadn't been at it for six solid hours."\textsuperscript{162}

The Royal Family was not particularly well received by the opening night audience in Atlantic City. Perhaps the play, centered on various episodes in the life of an extravagant theatrical family, could be fully appreciated only by a New York audience. Harris, undiscouraged by the reception on this opening night, says that the performance was all he could have hoped for. After the curtain fell, he said to Miss Ferber, "this production is as different from the one I dreamed of as day and night. But tonight it came to life, a life of its own. It's not the one I hoped for but it's real nevertheless and I found myself caught up in it."\textsuperscript{163}

Harris spent the opening night in New York in bed, having again suffered a relapse from his earlier state of exhaustion. Miss Ferber, who planned to attend the theatre that evening, dropped by to see how Harris was feeling. Offering her a glass of champagne, Harris began what developed into an all-evening session, ending with a little shriek from Miss Ferber as she looked at her watch and found it said ten thirty. "'Oh, I've missed the opening,' she cried mournfully. 'I can't believe it.

\textsuperscript{162}Ferber, \textit{Treasure}, p. 316.

\textsuperscript{163}Harris, \textit{Dance}, p. 201.
Jed, please check the time. Something may have gone wrong with my watch."164

Harris confirmed the late hour and suggested that she rush to the theatre to catch the final curtain. Resigned to the situation, she asked if they might have another glass of champagne. As they were sipping and talking, the phone rang. It was Dick Maney, Harris' press agent, in a somewhat drunken state. Harris recalls Maney's report on the opening night performance: "I have the honor to bring you homage and intelligence from Marshal Ney himself. The enemy is routed and in full retreat. My left wing crumbles, my right wing falls back. With my unguarded center I attack. Attaquez, mes enfants, attaquez! Toujours attaquez!" Harris told Maney to sober up and please relay to Miss Ferber, whom Maney was certain he had just seen in the theatre, the message he had just given to him. Harris handed the phone to Miss Ferber: "Her face was soon wreathed in smiles as Maney began describing the opening night. 'Ah, how wonderful,' she said blissfully. And she kept on murmuring, very softly, 'Oh, not really!—How perfectly marvelous!—Oh no, I can hardly believe it!'"165

164 Ibid., p. 204.
165 Ibid., p. 205.
In her autobiography, Miss Ferber says, "Of Jed Harris, the producer of The Royal Family, it is almost impossible to write. He is a five-foot shelf or a single paragraph. It would be useless to try to sketch this strange, gifted and paradoxical creature fated to destroy everything he loves, including himself."\(^{166}\)

New York critics hailed The Royal Family as a great success. "The big first night audience sat through a magnificent drama, magnificently performed," wrote E. W. Osborn of the New York Evening World.\(^{167}\) He also reported that "A thunderous five minute burst of applause greeted the curtain at the end of the second act." Woollcott rhapsodized that "it seemed to me one of the happiest evenings I ever spent in the theatre... a play of the theatre and by the theatre and for the theatre..."\(^{168}\) Reviewer Robert Littell wrote, "The play was packed full from beginning to end with all the glamour, false or real, that the stage has for those who aren't on it."\(^{169}\) Gilbert Gabriel of the New York Sun shared Littell's feelings when he admitted that for one,

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\(^{166}\) Ferber, Treasure, p. 313.


like himself, who had few actors for his friends, the authors had given some hilariously successful portraits of the profession, "as the nonprofessional loves to see them."\textsuperscript{170} He credits producer Harris with an eye for detail: "He has collected a lot of over-actors and turned them loose in front of mirrors. Result, layman's delight."

One exaggerated portrait, complete with the Harris detail, occurred during the scene in which the famous actor son of the Cavendish family returns from Hollywood. Accompanied by an entourage of bellboys, police dogs, live apes, parrots and a Hindu servant, Tony Cavendish unexpectedly disturbs the already hectic household of his mother and sister. Such extravagances were in evidence throughout the play, as one reviewer noted: "Each act poured out such a torrent of little plums of theatre that you couldn't stop to realize how magnificently exaggerated it was here and how uproariously obvious it was there—-you simply sat with your mouth open and drank it all down and laughed."\textsuperscript{171}

Brooks Atkinson noted that "The Royal Family proves the futility of expecting show folks to behave


\textsuperscript{171}Robert Littell, \textit{New York Evening Post}. 
He concludes, "The direction packs The Royal Family full of visual motion and general vivacity..." Almost all of the reviewers noted Harris' attention to minutiae, a vital element in the success of a play such as this. Richard Watts, critic of the New York Herald Tribune, stated that the play itself was "a shrewd, witty, smart and sophisticated satire, brilliantly acted and directed with a fond detail that renders it one of the most tastefully delightful and knowing comedies of the year." Oliver Sayler of Saturday Review said that the dynamic pace of the show is not evident when one reads the script. The stage directions to the reader are both confusing and monotonous. This is a play, he says, which really comes to life only on the stage: "Only a producer with the perspicacity and ingenuity of Jed Harris could, in the first place, have detected its oral and visual possibilities, and, in the second, have so completely and richly translated them, touched them to life."

Other critics were equally aware of the Harris touch and of his seemingly never-ending ability to wield


another hit. "Jed Harris is once again the toast of the town," wrote Alexander Woollcott. "My hat would be off to him here and now if it were not at the moment up in the air. . . ." 175 "The gods have been good to Jed Harris, . . ." commented another critic. And in return, to show his thanks, he has given them yet another success in his best style. 176 "The on-coming Mr. Jed Harris did it again last night," wrote Richard Watts. When Harris produced Broadway, Watts added, "there was to be found a skeptic or two who considered the work a lucky break for a fortunate manager." But with the subsequent success of Coquett e, these same objectors were left a trifle groggy. "And now with the presentation of The Royal Family, the gentlemen who talked about the Harris luck are approximately on their backs at the count of ten. . . ." 177

The theatrical prototypes of the Cavendish family were at once evident to all the critics. One reviewer commented, "Set in the topsy-turvy home of a great American actor-family, it needs no program note to explain that the Barrymores are the models from which it


176 Gilbert Gabriel, New York Sun.

177 Richard Watts, New York Herald Tribune.
Another critic observed, "Although The Royal Family employs the Barrymores merely as a sort of free start for a romantic and yet satirical picture of stage people at home, it is so charmingly done that you feel all the Barrymores should be delighted that their names are coupled with this excellent play." Obviously the displeasure of the Barrymores over this production had not reached the press.

With such a positive response to this play, one might imagine that Jed Harris would be content to sit back and wait for the profits to roll in. But the profits did not immediately begin to appear, and Harris did not sit back and wait. Instead, he decided to close the show after the first week. Kaufman's reaction is described by his biographer. Kaufman thought either he'd heard wrong or that Harris was joking, so he asked him to repeat what he'd said. He did and Kaufman knew then that the was completely serious. "'But why, for God's sake?' Kaufman asked. 'The reviews were just fine.' 'That's exactly the reason,' Harris said. 'The reviews were great, but we're not selling out. And a play which gets reviews like that and doesn't sell out ought to be closed.'"


180 Scott Meredith, George S. Kaufman, p. 246.
the play had opened during the week between Christmas and New Years, a particularly busy time for everyone. Also, a number of other good plays had opened that same month. When Harris remained adamant, Kaufman promised to murder him if he went through with his plan.

Harris admits that he was no doubt over-reacting. But his long-time feelings about the inadequacies of his cast, coupled with his earlier vision of what the show could have been, led him to this drastic decision. "Finding this cast in this play was like finding a dead herring in the doorway of the Taj Mahal," he said. "I just thought that as a company they had no class, no distinction of any kind. They were just actors. And the last straw was hearing that old dame (Haddie Wright) say, 'I know ... I know (there was of course only one 'I know' in the manuscript) h-m-m ... just a thick thoup...yes h-m-m...and a chup...ha...um-n... and a h-m-m...baked po-ta-to...''

Ultimately, he did change his mind, and the play ran for 345 performances in New York and eventually had a successful run in London. Harris writes in his memoirs that he regarded both Coquette and The Royal Family not as good plays but as superlative shows, an opinion he still holds today.

181 Interview with Jed Harris.
182 Harris, Dance, p. 186.
During a lecture given at the New School for Social Research in 1940, Jed Harris shocked a dignified old gentleman who asked which of the plays he had produced that he liked best. Harris states,

He was outraged when I said *The Front Page*.

"Do you mean to tell us that you prefer *The Front Page* to Uncle Vanya or Ibsen's *Doll's House* or *Our Town*?"

"The answer, I am sorry to say, sir, is yes, yes, yes. As a playgoer, I am an unreconstructed low-brow. The first two plays you mentioned are European classics. As for *Our Town*, it derives entirely from literature whereas *The Front Page* is an original comic masterpiece. Perhaps I ought to put it more simply and say that of the plays I've done *The Front Page* gave me the most delight."

Whether or not others share this view of *The Front Page*, certainly no one can dispute the delight it gave theatre-goers during its first run in New York. After its opening at the Times Square Theatre on August 14, 1928, one critic expressed an opinion similar to Harris: "the interest, the news of a play like *The Front Page* spills over the first night or even the second-night critiques; it is worth not only a six months' belated column but a whole chapter in a history, which I hardly doubt it will one day have."

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183 Interview with Jed Harris.

"The Front Page is grand entertainment," began Gilbert Gabriel. "It is a rowdy, hard-jawed, flaying farce about the reporters." He then admits, as did most of the critics, that "it is probably as silly to expect a cool report of it from a newspaper man as to expect sweet tenor praises from Gene Tunney on Willard Keefe's last year's farce about the prize fight champion." Everyone agreed that "Until the production of The Front Page no good newspaper play had ever been written in this country."

"For those who have wondered what feelings and emotions tug and pull at the newspaper reporter's heart (if he has one)," wrote the reviewer for the Nation, while he is busy gathering the Truth for the public, The Front Page . . . is quite the best thing that has yet come to Broadway." Other critics noted the realistic quality of the show, in such praises as "The play's real value lies in the absolute, living force of an authentic scene—a force which tears down the fourth wall and eliminates the footlights."

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The critic for the *New York World* explained, "You emerge three hours later either gibbeting the same adjectives or too weak-kneed with excitement to talk at all. For *The Front Page*, with its rowdy virility, its swift percussion of incident, its streaks of Gargantuan derision, is as breath-taking an event as ever dropped, with or without warning, into the middle of a becalmed August on Broadway."¹ And Brooks Atkinson commented that the first night audience, "obviously prepared to be delighted, hung on every line and episode until the end." And they were greeted with an evening of "loud, rapid, coarse and unfailing entertainment."²

The pace of the production appeared to be its dominant asset. The action moves like lightning, noted one reviewer.³ "Swift, galloping action; breathless dialogue, with the zip and crudity of real life," wrote another. And he continued, "But what a gorgeous excitement, what a magnificent riot, what a set of good fellows, what times, what stories, what extraordinary characters, what bon mots—--. . . ."⁴

¹Ibid.  
Atkinson called it a "perfectly timed and spaced performance." He further stated, "Hilarious, gruesome and strident by turns, The Front Page compresses lively dramatic material into a robust play." "But the remarkable quality of the performance of The Front Page," he continues, "is not so much the individual acting as the temper and tone of the play's expression. Resilient, stinging, it exploits every lurking gibe and excitement in the script; and if the direction has been domineering it has kept the play and acting in perfect balance." 193

Revealing the power of the pace of this production, two months after the opening New York World critic William Bolitho wrote, "It is more exciting than a cavalry charge, more breathless than breaking the automobile speed record on the sands, more dramatic than a council of war of an empire in the last ditch." 194 And an earlier review from the World stated, "It is almost unbelievably exciting when, as at this opening, it recaptures the mockery, the disillusion and the fierce unreasoning loyalty of that dusty, clattering, smoke-filled world with the grimy label of 'Press' above its door." 195

195 Alison Smith, New York World.
Nor did the critics fail to note again that Jed Harris was the one responsible for *The Front Page*. In a special Sunday review in the *New York Times*, Brooks Atkinson commented that those who recognize in *The Front Page* the same qualities which were evident in *Broadway*, *Coquette* and *The Royal Family* esteem Jed Harris as a genius with the capacity for taking great pains. He did not doubt that what Harris had done, any producer may do. "But the fact remains," he says, "that in the dramatic field no other individual producer has done it with so much consistent variety and vigor. ... Mr. Harris' sensitivity to plays as acted performances should be a priceless quality in the imaginative theatre."  

Robert Littell, writing for *Theatre Arts Monthly*, observed, "in other hands but those of Jed Harris [*The Front Page*] might easily have fallen apart and appeared as a succession of caustic wise-cracks strung upon the thread of an almost burlesque story and decorated with bursts of exuberant coarseness, acid satire, lurid melodrama and super-heated realism."  

He further states that although George Kaufman was officially billed as having staged this production, the Harris touch, which appeared in his earlier successes and "taught

us to respect [it] as the liveliest touch on Broadway, is unmistakable." 198 He concludes, "I should say casting is a lost art on Broadway. The 'type' isn't enough for Jed Harris, he goes beyond the type and gets the man, and in The Front Page it is exactly the right man."

Harris' casting for The Front Page, although not as difficult as for Coquette or The Royal Family, was not without its trials. Harris recalls a row which broke out over the casting of Lee Tracy for the part of Hildy Johnson. "Hecht simply could not see the actor who played the little hoofer in Broadway playing a role described in the manuscript as a 'big, pants-kicking Swede.' I said I didn't feel obliged to reproduce the actual physical types of the original characters," Harris states. 199 But Hecht confesses, "There was never a better actor for a part than Lee Tracy for Hildy. For one thing it was hard to believe he was an actor at all." 200 He then asserted that Osgood Perkins, in the role of Walter Burns, the managing editor, was "a Jed victory." Both he and Charles MacArthur had balked at his casting. Although Perkins lacked physically what the writers had envisioned, his was the soul they wanted. Hecht describes his friend Walter Howey, the living model

198 Ibid., p. 702.
199 Harris, Dance, p. 212.
200 Hecht, Charlie, p. 139.
for the character Walter Burns, as Howey witnessed *The Front Page*: "Even the original, sitting in the audience, swore the actor had copied every one of his mannerisms. . . . Howey added that we had exposed his inner life for the laughter of the world, and he was going to have us shot. But he loved Charlie and forgave us both. We apologized to Jed about our stupidity in the Perkins debate. . . ." He adds, "It's a rare thing for a playwright to see his work intimately revealed. It is usually performed by in-laws." 201 MacArthur and Hecht, in the printed version of *The Front Page*, wrote, "This play was beautifully produced by Jed Harris at The Times Square Theatre, New York, August 14, 1928." 202

In the Introduction to this same edition of *The Front Page*, Harris acknowledges his distaste for most authors, claiming they are rarely as interesting as their plays. He then writes a glowing tribute to Hecht and MacArthur, calling them "brilliantly unorthodox gentlemen." Here is a play, he says, "which reflects miraculously the real as well as the literary personalities of the playwrights. Every line of it glows with a demoniacal humor, sordid, insolent and mischievous to the point of downright perversity, in which


one instantly recognizes the heroic comic spirit of its
authors." Referring to them as the Katzenjammer kids
of the theatre, Harris says they are at once sophis-
ticated and artless. Even today, Harris' affection
for Hecht and MacArthur is evident as one listens to
him speak of them. "I never think of one without the
other," he once said. To show his friendship for Mac-
Arthur, and as a wedding present to him, Harris cancelled
a performance of his own production of Coquette. The
star of that production, Helen Hayes, then MacArthur's
girlfriend, recalls, "Jed Harris, who produced both
shows, closed Coquette for the night so I could see
The Front Page." She confesses that she was far more
nervous when The Front Page opened than when Coquette
opened. "I knew Charlie wouldn't marry me unless he
had a hit," she said. She sat in the balcony so she
could be near MacArthur and Hecht, who insisted on
sitting on the fire escape. During the first act,
after she felt sure the play was going to be a success,
she "ran out and jumped into Charlie's arms and started
babbling about the great reaction." She continues,
"Charlie held me tight and then asked me if I'd marry
him. And I said, 'You took the words right out of my
mouth.' "

203 Ibid., "Introduction."

Hecht's description of Harris during these early days in the theatre is worth repeating, for it emanates from one who not only was closely associated with Harris, but also was a sensitive writer of both plays and novels. He states,

He was grass hopper thin. He purred when he spoke. His skinny jaw jutted. His eyes were dark and slightly upturned as if listening to some inner music. He had the grin of a sorcerer. He was not an unkindly man. His voice usually held a note of pity for the listener. He was genuinely sorry for the listener was less brilliant than he. Yet he never boasted. He used the pronoun "I" seldom. The pronoun he featured was "you." What you were, what you weren't, what you needed, how you could improve."205

In another book, Hecht referred to the genius of Jed Harris as being the genius of certainty. Clarifying this remark, he writes, "His were not the pumped-up certitudes of one who hopes for success. They were as much a part of him as his features. He never had doubts. His opinions arrived suddenly and permanently. Quietly, never raising his voice above the purr that compelled listeners to lean toward him as if they and not he were a bit deaf, Jed spoke always like an oracle." He admits that he had been jealous of Harris, and had "often thought how much easier my life would be if I had a half of that talent which was Jed's."206

205Hecht, Charlie, pp. 36-7.

206Hecht, Child of the Century, p. 397.
Although Hecht includes many more passages about Harris and their relationship, one of the most interesting discussions contains his observations on the theatrical producer. Of all the geniuses of the theatre, he says, the quickest forgotten is the Great Producer. "Jed was twice as dominant a figure in the theatre as Elia Kazan plus Josh Logan," he writes. But he admits, the theatre does not belong to the producer or the director, but rather to the playwright, actor and actress. Lamenting this fact, he acknowledges that if these to whom the theatre belongs were to be left to put on the plays, 95 per cent of them "would make hash of it—and wind up in jail." He knew that from his own experience the credit for the success of The Front Page belonged to Jed Harris. "What a cast Jed had hired!" he exclaimed. "What we had written came out of exactly the right faces and the right voices. You would have thought that you were in Chicago, 1917, looking at the real beauties of the Criminal Courts pressroom."

One stage effect which Harris invented and no doubt helped to create the sense of realism for which The Front Page was famous is probably unknown to anyone

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208 Hecht, *Charlie*, p. 139.
today. Fifteen minutes prior to the opening of the curtain, Harris had all of the cigar-smoking, cigarette-breathing reporters go out on stage. Within minutes a dense cloud hung of those present. And this cloud, coupled with a slow-rising curtain, created the feeling that these reporters were not only authentic, but had been carrying on their work right there in the theatre for years. It was a touch Harris is particularly proud of. 209

Harris says that although the effect of The Front Page was a rapid-fire tempo, in actuality it was not. "There was only one door through which the actors made their entrances," he said. "An actor would come through that door, play his scene and then leave through that same door. Then another actor would come in, play his scene and exit." The liveliness of the production, he explained, was due in part to 240 dead lines which he had had inserted into the script to fill in between the laughs. He recalls a friend in Chicago (who had just seen The Front Page) who told him that he had missed half the jokes because the audience was laughing so hard, he couldn't hear what went between these lines. "He didn't miss a thing," Harris commented. "What he didn't know was that I had put in all those dead lines just to keep the show moving. This created the sense that it was

209 Interview with Jed Harris.
a fast-paced, funny show."\textsuperscript{210}

Exactly where George Kaufman fits into this picture is difficult to determine. After his supposedly disastrous relationship with Harris on \textit{The Royal Family}, why did he accept Harris' offer to be the director of \textit{The Front Page}? Meredith says that Kaufman became exhausted by the rehearsals and quotes him as referring to Hecht and MacArthur as total madmen. Of the authors, Meredith states, "They took absolutely nothing seriously, and when [Kaufman] sent them off to rewrite some lines or some pages,\textsuperscript{211} he sometimes went to look for them and found that they hadn't written a thing, but had instead broken out a deck of cards and were busily playing rummy."\textsuperscript{212} When he complained to his wife Beatrice, she asked what he did then. "'Well,' Kaufman said, 'I take the cards out of their hands and point them toward their typewriters.'" Kaufman then admitted that sooner or later they did get the right words written. "'So what are you complaining about?' Beatrice asked. 'We can't all be compulsive workers like you.'" Meredith states that Kaufman had hired most of the actors for \textit{The Front Page}, a fact disputed by both Hecht and Harris,

\textsuperscript{210}ibid.

\textsuperscript{211}Harris had asked Kaufman to help Hecht and MacArthur tighten up their script.

\textsuperscript{212}Meredith, \textit{George S. Kaufman}, p. 358.
and became convinced they were terrible. He apparently
developed grave self-doubts about his abilities, as well
as those of Hecht, MacArthur and Harris, for having
placed their faith in him. Interestingly, neither
Harris, Hecht nor MacArthur have anything to say about
Kaufman's work on The Front Page. The authors give
Harris the total credit for the final production, although
some critics give Kaufman his due in the reviews, prais­
ing his efforts at making The Front Page such lively
entertainment.

Perhaps no success is as sweet as it appears; even
this play had its detractors. The most scathing attack
on The Front Page was penned at the hands of one St.
John Ervine, former manager of the Abbey Theatre and
visiting dramatic critic of the New York World. Although
he did not attend the opening night, he reviewed the play
for Saturday Review of Literature on February 23, 1929,
and expressed unqualified disgust for the entire produc­
tion. Regarding it as "an extraordinary vulgar play," and later as "entirely thug," he believed "its
principal characters resemble no reporters that I have
ever seen. . . . They have no semblance of humanity in
them or on them." Ervine took this opportunity to

213 Ibid.

214 St. John Ervine, "Exit, the Theatre!", Saturday
use *The Front Page* as an all-out attack on everything that is wrong with the theatre; but his was the only negative evaluation of this production.

The language used in the play elicited comments from each of the reviewers. One called it "brazenly profane,"215 another, "Reality of dialogue."216 Percy Hammond, apparently trying to justify the use of this vivid dialogue, wrote "Some of the more finicky first-nighters were troubled last evening because of the prevalence of bad language in the dialogue. The authors, both of whom are sticklers for fidelity, dislike to put these wicked phrases in the mouths of their characters; but were forced to do so in the interest of truth."217 Robert Benchley warned the prospective clients of *The Front Page* "that they are likely to hear a lot of talk that they have never heard on the stage before, but it won't do them a bit of harm."218 The reviewer for the *New Republic* analyzed, "In speech, it must be admitted, the reporters are what Shakespeare calls 'liberal shepherds.' Among themselves they are, delightfully and

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innocently fairies, bastards and sons of bitches." And Atkinson reacted to the language by saying that it "bruises the sensitive ear with a Rabelaisian vernacular unprecedented for its up-hill and down-dale blasphemy."220

Not everyone was as broad-minded as the critics. Less than a month after the play opened in New York, complaints were filed against the moral character of the play with District Attorney Banton. Banton refused to say exactly who filed the complaints or just what the offense alleged against the play was. He did say that the complaints were bona fide and warranted investigation.221 Prior to a reading of the script, Banton announced "that it was not his intention to suggest to the managers of theatres in which possibly objectionable plays are being produced that lines or words in the script be deleted."222 He asserted that the District Attorney is not a censor, but a prosecuting officer, and that, "if a play does not violate the provisions of the penal law, no action will be taken."223

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223 Ibid.
The Front Page had a lengthy run in Chicago. Its supporters in that city were generally delighted, for the play itself grew out of the experiences which its authors had while reporters on the Chicago Herald Examiner. Every name in the play belonged to an actual reporter or another Chicago figure. And on the opening night the characters' living counterparts sat enthralled as they saw themselves reflected on stage for all to see and hear. Harris says in his memoirs, "When the curtain fell at the end of the first act, the roar that rose from the auditorium sounded like the bellowing of a herd of wild animals panicked by a fire in a zoo. Above this din one great monster of a voice could be heard yelling: 'MAKE IT MORE PERSONAL!'".

As in New York, not all Chicagoans accepted the play so enthusiastically, particularly its strong language. After the play's opening in early November, the superintendent of the Illinois Vigilance Association filed a suit for the arrest of all twenty-four members of the cast of The Front Page. Reverend Philip Yarrow, superintendent of the Vigilance Association, complained of sixty-three blasphemies in the play, and further alleged that "much of the 'moral breakdown of Chicago's

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224 Harris, Dance, p. 212.
Prior to the opening, rumors of possible municipal interference with the play were afloat, "more on account of the play's reference to Chicago's City Hall, however, than on the score of blasphemous language." No such action was ever taken when the actual case came to court, the judge held that such "robust vulgarities of speech from a criminal courts press room, even when reproduced on the stage, do not constitute a menace to public morals. . . ." Thus Rev. Mr. Yarrow's charge that "the play was 'obscene, indecent and immoral'" had no effect whatever on the play's freedom of expression.

After these two experiences with the law and The Front Page, Jed Harris was a third time faced with a potential court appearance. This time the plaintiffs were Lee and J. J. Shubert. They tried to restrain Harris from booking any road company of The Front Page into any theatre except one which was an official Shubert house or one which the Shuberts approved. The agreement under which the suit was filed, made in 1918, stated that any play "appearing in the Selwyn, Times

226 Ibid.
Square and Appollo Theatres, controlled by Arch and Edgar Selwyn and Crosby Gaige, were to be booked by the Shuberts on the road as a consideration of an investment by the Shuberts of $200,000.  The Supreme Court Justice McCook, who reviewed the case, ruled in Harris' favor and freed him from any such arrangements made by either the owners of the theatres, or the Shuberts.

Harris' press agent, Richard Maney, released an article to the press after the 250th performance, filled with behind-the-scenes anecdotes connected with The Front Page. He proudly claimed that up until this time not a single change had been made in the cast. And among those guests who had seen The Front Page at least four times were Ethel Barrymore, movie critic Will Hays and song writer Irving Berlin. Their attraction to what passed before them may have been rooted in the feeling Jed Harris expressed in his Introduction to The Front Page:

And in an age when the theatre seems imprisoned in a vise of literal and superficial realism, . . . and in a day when the successful portrayal of a newspaper reporter is accomplished by attaching to the person of the actor a hip-flask and a copy of the American Mercury, it is soothing and reassuring to stumble on a stage


reporter who begins an interview in this innocent fashion:

"Is it true, Madame, that you were the victim of a Peeping Tom?"

When S. N. Behrman, who was working as a press agent for Jed Harris when he produced *Broadway*, told his producer that he was going to quit in hopes of becoming a playwright, Behrman quotes Harris as saying, "You'd be very foolish to quit. I've read your plays. You'll never get anywhere with them. They're thin." Behrman says that this comment evidently slipped Harris' mind, for some three years later (1929) Harris accepted his play *Serena Blandish* to produce. Naturally he didn't accept the first draft. Behrman recalls a phone call which came from Harris during this time, in which he gave him a verbal shove in the direction of the final product. "'When in the hell are you going to get on with those *Serena* rewrites?' Harris demanded. 'The play is in poor shape. I don't have the nerve to send it to actors.'" The playwright assured Harris that he was going to Vermont the next day to work on it, as Harris continued to elaborate on the strong cast he was in the process of assembling—Ruth Gordon, A. E. Matthews,

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230 Jed Harris, *Introduction to The Front Page*.


Henry Daniell, Constance Collier. While in Vermont, Behrman received frequent calls from Harris, who he said was very amusing and would catch him up on the most recent show business activities. Behrman in turn would read Harris the scenes he had written in longhand. "At that time," Behrman recalls, "Jed was considered a kind of magician who couldn't produce a failure. It remained for me to impair that myth."  

Though not a flop, Serena Blandish, which opened at the Morosco Theatre January 23, 1929, was not the success that Harris' most recent productions had been. The reviews were mixed. Brooks Atkinson wrote, "It is lovely, dainty, fragile acting, rare to see, soothing to feel across the footlights. . . . This Serena is doubtless for the gourmets who can enjoy good acting apart from an elusive play." Using the phrase which Harris had used to characterize Behrman's earlier works, Atkinson comments, "Mr. Behrman has written an insecure play, thin at times to the point of transparence, too frail surely for the tumult of Broadway." Robert Benchley began his comments with, "It is a little difficult to pan a play like Serena Blandish whole

233Ibid., p. 68.  
234Ibid., p. 58.  
heartedly, because when it is good, it is so very good." He calls Miss Gordon's performance practically perfect all the way through, and surmises that Jed Harris, "in allowing this play to amble languorous-ly on at the slow tempo it maintains, was deliberately trying to show that all of his plays don't have to rush." 

The most negative review appeared in the Brooklyn Eagle, and included such censorious statements as, "It is stringy and repetitious," and "Serena Blandish moves slowly, no varying of the tempo helping to avoid monoton-ony, moves as if directed by someone who believes that a play, having a beginning and an end, has nothing to do between the two but proceed as best it can from one to the other." A more favorable review came from Percy Hammond, who termed the acting "expert." "Miss Collier's performance as the overflowing countess is a masterpiece of extravaganza," he noted and added high praise for the other performers.

Several reviewers, including Hammond, noted that

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237 Ibid.


the writing of this play, based on a novel by an unknown English author, represented a difficult feat. Joseph Wood Krutch felt that this production "never quite caught the spirit of the piece." Nevertheless he adds, "The fault lies no more with Miss Ruth Gordon . . . than it does with the adapter. It lies rather with the technique of the stage itself. . . ." Stark Young repeated Krutch's belief in the limitations of adapting a novel to the stage, but had approbation for the production. "You follow Serena Blandish all through and are never bored," he wrote, "which in itself is high praise of late."241

The critic for the New York Evening Post commented that from all outward manifestations, Serena Blandish was "a thing of calm and dignity, of indolent and easy gestures, of modulated conversations and rhythmically paced maneuvers. . . . it proceeds with decorum and grace, smooth, oily and temperate." This fluency was almost impossible to achieve, he wrote, when one considers the fact that the play consists of seven complete scene changes.242


At least six critics had high praise for the entire production. Robert Littell noted, "Once more Jed Harris has proved himself a man of courage, a director of uncanny genius and the American theatre's wizard No. 1." Referring to this play as "delightfully acted and superbly directed," Arthur Ruhl of the Herald Tribune had generous words of praise for each of the leading actors and the producer-director. "Not the least interesting aspect of the performance was Mr. Jed Harris's suave and understanding direction. . . ." Though he admitted that the script itself contained innate production problems, "The whole thing was in quite another vein from the swift, comparatively naturalistic, just-off-the-griddle pieces with which Mr. Harris's name has heretofore been associated, and so far as his directing versatility is concerned correspondingly promising."244

A lengthy review in the Boston Transcript stated, "Mr. Behrman has made a comedy beyond imagination, as it is beyond the ability of most American playwrights." The critic's words for Harris were even more enthusiastic: "And Mr. Jed Harris of Broadway and The Front Page


produced this fantasy of sophistication with a hand that seldom slips. . . . Some gape with wonder at Mr. Harris's deed. Are we so ingrained and clamped with our abominable fetich of uniformity that we cannot believe a producer has more than one ambition in his quiver? Besides there was Coquette between."246

The reviewer for Outlook magazine, crediting each of the actors as outstanding, upheld Ruth Gordon's performance as "almost flawless."247 Atkinson also praised Miss Gordon's acting, commenting that she "makes Serena constantly endearing in a sensitive and shining performance." He further expresses appreciation for Harris as the director who "relies completely upon his skill in evoking a tender mood by means of unassertive acting and off-stage music, and Robert Edmond Jones has abetted him with scenic effects of intangible beauty. . . . As limpid as it is fabulous," he concludes, "Serena is for those who crave subtlety in a cyclonic theatrical world."248

In a review written some three months after the play opened, the critic for Theatre magazine noted,

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246 Ibid.


"Serena Blandish is still appealing to large audiences as these lines are written, and it will, doubtless, go on its way well into the season—a success to which its merits both as entertainment and a refreshing novelty assuredly entitled it."\(^{249}\)

Serena Blandish ran ninety-three performances, proving that there was an audience that appreciated a theatrical production played in subtle keys. One audience member felt moved enough to write his reactions to the Dramatic Editor of the New York Times. In his letter he said, "But I have never seen quite the perfection of mood and tempo, the blending of character, and the expression of that character, both in reading and in the composition of the scenes, that Serena achieved. . . . By the manner of its presentation, it realized a rare grace and beauty."\(^{250}\)

Playwright Behrman wrote, "Though it was written about beautifully by Brooks Atkinson in the Times, Serena was not a success."\(^{251}\) Genuinely disappointed with his play, he did express pleasure over the acting. Behrman said that the part of Lord Ivon Cream, played


\(^{251}\)Behrman, People, p. 118.
by Henry Daniell, was perfectly cast, and his seduction scene with Ruth Gordon as Serena was a triumph of acting genius. He himself frequently attended the theatre just to catch this scene. "On one of these occasions," he writes, "I ran into Noel Coward, who said that it was the most perfectly staged and acted scene he had ever seen."252

Behrman writes in his autobiography that Coward was among many who admired Jed Harris in those days. Alexander Woollcott idolized Harris, he states, and when Coward came to America with his review, This Year of Grace, he told Behrman, "I've simply passed out over Jed Harris." Behrman adds, "Coward applied to Jed the sobriquet 'Destiny's Tot,' and this stuck to Jed for quite a long time. Jed was equally lambent about Noel. 'He's a one-man theatre,' he said. 'There's simply nothing in it he can't do.'"253 In Harris' memoirs, he affectionately writes about Coward and their warm friendship. Coward, writing in his autobiography, says of Harris: "He was an extraordinary creature, with an authentic flair for the theatre. He talked brilliantly, and turned on, whenever he considered it worthwhile, a personal charm that was impossible to resist. . . . His was one of the most interesting self devouring egos

252 Ibid., p. 120.
253 Ibid., p. 54.
I had ever met, and I found him enchanting company."254

Summarizing his feelings about Harris, Behrman asks himself, "Was I fond of him? Whether I was or not, I was fascinated by him. At his best—in my last meeting with him—he was irresistible. No matter what you might say, Jed was a primal force, an artist. He was not, as so many producers are, an assembler, an exporter-importer; he was an innovator."255

On April 28, 1929, a headline appeared in the New York Herald Tribune which read, "Jed Harris Disappears." The accompanying article by critic Percy Hammond laments the unannounced retirement of this producer from Broadway. He writes,

Usually when famous showmen retire they issue valedictories, excusing their abdication. As they wash up after their labors, they explain, through the newspapers, their reasons for doing so. These, as a rule are sufficient. But Mr. Harris has tip-toed away from Forty-second Street, not giving it the customary two-weeks' notice. Just when all of us were depending upon him for much of our next season's happiness, he walks out on us without even blowing a farewell kiss.256

Hammond adds, "Mr. Harris should not be permitted thus to

255Behrman, People, p. 60.
slink in privacy from the hippodrome he has glorified so satisfactorily. I, for one, propose to toot upon my bugle some mournful taps for his disappearance."257

This retirement was not the first one Harris had threatened. A year earlier, rumors had spread that he was going to retire. In Brooks Atkinson's review of The Front Page he commented that "those who respect Harris' productions for their insight into the theatre hope that instead of retiring, as he fondly imagines he will, he is merely at the beginning of a brilliant career."258

Though Harris produced one more play after his initial plans to retire, his determination to leave the theatre for good was secure. With evidence of the phenomenal hits accrued by this producer, even the hint of his retirement seems unthinkable. None of his shows were panned. He had twice been listed in the New York Times among its six "We Nominate for the Hall of Fame" recipients. He had made millions of dollars and had reproduced his successes in numerous road companies. He had traveled to Europe where he was regally received and where he had the opportunity to meet almost anyone he wished, including George Bernard Shaw and Winston Churchill. What could have prompted his departure from

257Ibid.

the theatre after such an impressive last five years?

The answer to this mystery is contained in one dream, unfulfilled.259 In the spring of 1928, prior to the opening of *The Front Page*, Harris approached Holbrook Blinn, then one of the most successful actors alive, to suggest their partnership in an acting company. The inspiration for this venture came in 1924 with the engagement of the Moscow Art Theatre in New York, where Harris never failed to turn up for a single night. Even today he discusses the performances of Stanislavski, Mme Cheknova, and particularly of Kachaloff and Moskvin. The experiences he had gone through in casting *Coquette* and *The Royal Family*, plus his recognition of the scarcity of acting talent in this country, led him to the decision that the best contribution he could make to the theatre in America would be the establishment of a great acting company.

Holbrook Blinn, then twice Harris' age, was not only a very successful star, Harris says, but also "a brilliant actor." Harris is a man who lives almost entirely in his own imagination. He envisioned a type of acting company that did not exist and he discussed with Blinn the possibility of going to England and bringing back a half-dozen English actors. "It is not

259 The following experience was related by Jed Harris in an interview.
an entirely unexplainable fact," says Harris, "that there is one thousand times more acting talent in England than in America. Part of the reason for that comes from the fact that England represents an ancient and mature culture, just as from the Greeks in their day, in that great Periclean period, there arose the greatest dramatists that had ever existed in the world. But that too came out of a very deep Mediterranean culture that goes all the way back to Homer and the great mythologists that wrote the Bible." These actors, taken from England, the continent and the United States, would form the basis of a company of about twenty people which would include a whole staff, each of whom would be a partner in the venture and share in its profits. They would be building something for themselves, Harris thought. He then described to Blinn the kind of school that would grow out of the company. He wanted both Robert Edmond Jones and Joe Mielziner to be on their fixed staff. In addition, young actors would be taken on, after first passing stiff examinations, given by a select committee. "Their course would be very costly to them," Harris said. "They could work off some of it by doing chores for the company." But what they really would learn would come from being allowed to watch all rehearsals from the first minute, until the show was put on the stage. They would learn by watching other actors act, Harris commented.
I was astonished to hear from Harris that he had gone so far as to interest William Randolph Hearst, who owned property on Central Park South, in the idea of building for Harris a self-contained theatre overlooking Central Park. All costumes, scenery and lights were to be assembled and housed in the theatre. A lighting booth with a master control board was to be installed at the back of the house, rather than its usual location backstage. Harris and Blinn discussed playwrights like Strindberg, Aristophanes, the Quintero brothers, Schnitzler, Hauptmann, Bjornson, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Molière, Lope de Vega, Goldoni, Pinero and Shaw.

Harris says, "Blinn, who was a highly seasoned actor, who had had his own company, his own theatre, had directed and played everything, responded with an absolutely boyish zest to this whole thing and offered to put money into it." But Harris declined his offer, saying that he now had a real use for the money he had made in the theatre. Besides, he added, "I don't think we'll ever run short of money, because I think everything we do will be successful, and because nobody's ever seen the kind of acting company we're going to have—not in this country. I don't think money will be the problem. The problem will be how to hold people together.

And that is one of the reasons he needed Blinn.
He was an actor whom "every actor would be tremendously impressed by," Harris said. Whereas Harris could envision the details and success of such a venture, the reality of having to deal so personally with actors, a group who frequently bored or depressed him, would be more than he could handle. Blinn would "keep me in balance, as it were," Harris said to me with a smile.

As they continued to talk, Blinn became carried away as Harris described the King Lear that he wanted to do and showed Blinn the sketches that Norman Bel Geddes had done for him. "I'll do that in ten years, when I'm sixty-four," Blinn said. "I'll need ten years time to think about it, because it is almost unproduceable and because its dimensions are so huge."

"It was going to be the theatre of my dreams," Harris states, "where I would have actors literate enough and capable enough to play the kind of thing that is so easy to do in The Front Page and so hard when you get a play that has more depth and takes more talent to understand, let alone play." What Harris wanted to do was to bring the company into being, organize it, set its policies and then, after ten years, move away from it. He estimates that he would have developed a repertory of about twenty-five productions, all of them masterpieces. They would play for a limited engagement of four weeks, then be put away until the
next season. Harris discussed many more ideas with Blinn during their three meetings, all of them arising from his past experiences in the theatre.

This project did not materialize. "The thing ended almost grotesquely in those months when I was getting ready to launch *The Front Page,*" Harris recalls. "I was already living in the prospect of this tremendous dream." Shortly before the opening of *The Front Page,* Blinn, who had a house in Rhinebeck, New York, made a trip there to relax. During his brief stay he went horseback riding. While returning home from his ride, his arms full of flowers gathered for his wife, Blinn encountered disaster. The horse stumbled and bolted, and Blinn was thrown off. But his foot caught in the stirrup and he was dragged for several hundred yards over a gravel path. Although his arm was mutilated, he refused to have it amputated and when the infection spread throughout his body, he died. Having visited Blinn only hours before his death, Harris remembers breaking down in the chauffer-driven car bringing him back to New York City. "I was sitting in the car," he said, "sobbing my heart out, both for him and myself and this whole vision. I instinctively knew that I would never have my enthusiasm this high again nor find a man with whom I wanted to be involved in that way. I knew that my real interest in the theatre had vanished
with his death."

This event, more than any other, led Harris to believe that he would never achieve what he hoped to achieve in the theatre. From this moment on, he believes, though he produced and directed many more plays, his career in the theatre was finished. Weary, despondent and utterly sick of the business of the theatre, Harris dismissed his staff, cleared out his office and went to Europe, once again hoping to find solace in flight. The following year, after the stock market crash, he returned to New York and to Broadway. But his productions and the attention which he gave to them were, from this time on, largely half-hearted and lacking in personal enthusiasm. A few exceptions to this exist, and their successes stand out as high as any which Harris ever produced. But the personal goals he had earlier set for himself in the American theatre vanished with the dream of his own acting company.
CHAPTER IV

Lillian Gish writes that she met Jed Harris indirectly through George Jean Nathan. Early in 1930 Nathan introduced Miss Gish to actress Ruth Gordon. Not long afterwards, Miss Gordon invited her to have dinner with Jed Harris and herself. "That night," Miss Gish writes, "I was . . . enthralled listening to Jed Harris. He glowed with love of the theatre. When I said goodnight to Ruth, I whispered, 'He's wonderful! I'd work for that man for nothing.' Three weeks later he called and asked me to play Helena in Anton Chekhov's Uncle Vanya."¹

On April 15, 1930, Uncle Vanya opened at the Cort Theatre in New York, and critics responded enthusiastically. Brooks Atkinson writes:

After a year's absence from Broadway Jed Harris has returned to stage a luminously beautiful performance of this intangible drama and to reawaken an old confidence in his uncanny preceptions. Producing Chekhov requires more than anything else the ability to translate limpness into limpidity, and to see the high comedy where most observers see merely the gloom of futility. With a cast including such variegated talents as those of Lillian Gish, Walter Connolly, Osgood Perkins, Joanna Roos, Kate Mayhew and Eugene Powers, Mr. Harris has succeeded

brilliantly. The simple generalities of a genius emerge as detached wisdom and beauty, leavened with the humors of compassion.2

The editor for *Theatre* magazine noted that of all the problems arising from presenting a Russian work to an American audience, the most difficult one was the ability to establish a mood which would enable the audience to understand exactly what the dramatist had to say. Harris, he says, "has created and held a mood so intensely Russian in its expression that it stands almost as a challenge of what we Americans can do in the theatre."3

Similar enthusiasm came from John Mason Brown, who states that past productions of Chekhov's plays seen in New York have consistently patterned themselves closely on the productions of the Moscow Art Theatre. "Mr. Harris's production is more personal . . . and more creative too."4 Stark Young, inserting a personal note in his review for the *New Republic*, writes, "Critics may sometimes be autobiographical, no doubt, and so I may say that this review of Chekhov's play is made easier and happier by the fact that writing criticism about a production so careful and intelligent is a pleasure and


3"The Editor Goes to the Play," *Theatre*, June 1930, p. 42.

a form of cooperation with the producer. In any right state of the theatre that is what it should be."\(^5\) Harris has done something astonishing, he says. "The whole directing is felt out with naturalness, brains and confidence. . . . The casting is often bold and intelligent, and sometimes a sheer stroke of genius."\(^6\)

Other reviewers were equally impressed. Percy Hammond, writing for the *New York Herald Tribune*, said that the casting of *Uncle Vanya* "was a marvel of effective selection and its portrayal of the play's dramatic inertia a complete and effortless picture."\(^7\) And John Hutchens, of *Theatre Arts Monthly*, stated, "It is Mr. Harris's finest achievement as a director. . . . Despair pervades *Uncle Vanya*, but compassion illuminates it; and under Mr. Harris's direction those searching elements play against each other pulsingly."\(^8\) The critic for *Theatre* magazine writes that the fusion of the actors in *Uncle Vanya* creates a production "Which strikes a new high note in the theatre." He adds that not only is it "one of finest things in our theatre this season; it is, so far as I can remember, the best

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\(^6\) Ibid.


of the Russian productions I have seen."  

All of the critics were enthralled by Miss Gish's performance. Percy Hammond referred to her portrayal as "something between a phantom and a pretty woman, warm though glacial and moving here and there with the powerful reticence of a gifted artist." And Ralph Barton of Life magazine wrote, "Miss Gish has a way of pouring her fragile self out into the auditorium and seeping into all your pores. . . . It was her mere presence. Miss Gish walking across the stage and smiling sweetly is as much climax as I can bear."  

"For Uncle Vanya," Miss Gish writes, "Jed, with his fine instinct, had gathered a superb cast." As Rose Caylor (Mrs. Ben Hecht) completed each act of the new translation, "with Jed working on the adaptation," she would show the script to George Jean Nathan. After the final act was presented to him he said:

"Lillian, you cannot do this play."

We had been in rehearsal for two weeks before the third act was completed. His statement was so contradictory to what he had said before I was astounded.

"You will have to get out of this play," he repeated.

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9 "The Editor Goes to the Play," Theatre.
12 Gish, The Movies, p. 309.
"How can I? We open in less than two weeks."

"That's immaterial," he persisted. "You get out of it, get sick, go out of town. You can't hold your own against that last great speech they've given Sonia. She will wipe up the floor with you."

"That's too bad," I said, "but I promised to do the play, and I shall do it."

"That doesn't mean a thing; you haven't signed a contract."

"My word is my contract."

"Well, if you don't step out now, you'll never get another job in the theatre as long as you live."

His judgment, which I valued, made me dread opening night.¹³

In his memoirs, Harris writes that Nathan frequently called him during the weeks of rehearsal. "But he did not ask me how Miss Gish was getting on. What he said was, 'Do you think she can really play the part?' I was ungallant enough to wonder whether he felt concerned for her sake or for his own. In the end, I chose not to discuss Miss Gish with him."¹⁴

As for Miss Gish, Harris says, "... she came to rehearsal in a palpable state of fright. As she had not been on stage since early childhood, this was not

¹³Ibid.
¹⁴Harris, Dance, p. 235.
altogether unnatural.\textsuperscript{15} His early meetings with Miss Gish left Harris greatly impressed. "There was absolutely nothing of the professional actress about her, let alone the great film star she had been," he states. "What struck me, even more than her rare, flower-like beauty, was the impression she gave of an admirable and even formidable character. In her presence, it was Nathan who seemed, for all his worldly charm, a little actorish."\textsuperscript{16}

Because Miss Gish had not signed a contract, Harris was never sure whether she would appear for rehearsal the next day. And this situation created a great deal of tension behind the scenes. Would she remain through the rehearsals until opening night? How much money would such a star expect? These were some of the questions in the mind of Harris' business manager, if not Harris himself. Harris notes, "Out of a clear sky, late one afternoon Miss Gish said, 'I wonder what the costumes are like. Do you think we might go over to Tappe's and have a look at them?'' And he breathed a sigh of relief. "All the accumulated tensions of the last ten days had vanished forever," he writes. "The patient, so mysteriously ill, had mysteriously recovered. And since Miss Gish had never been

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 233.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
given the slightest reason to suspect that there had been any tension, I asked no questions; I merely said, 'All right, if you like.'"

But there remained the question of salary. Hughie Schaff, Harris' business manager, continued to fret over the exorbitant fee he feared Miss Gish would demand.

"Don't you think I ought to talk to her now and try to settle this before things get out of hand?" he asked Harris after the successful opening in New Haven. Harris replied,

"No wait till Saturday. Stop in her dressing-room after you pay the rest of the company and I'm sure you'll find her perfectly reasonable."

It irked Hughie to be denied a free hand where his business acumen was concerned. Being German, however, he did exactly as he was told. When he came back to the hotel after the matinee on Saturday afternoon, he was covered with sweat.

"They won't let you open in New York," he said

"Who is they?"

"Equity. We have no contract with Miss Gish."

"You've spoken to her?"

"Yes, I've spoken to her." He was panting. "Believe it or not, she says she feels she ought to pay you."

"Really? Did she mention a figure?"17

17Ibid., p. 239.
Schaff was enraged. He shuddered at the headlines that would result if Equity kept them from opening. Harris then told Schaff to go to Miss Gish, explain the situation and ask her to write her expected salary on a slip of paper.

"The figure Miss Gish wrote on the corner of a bit of newspaper was just about what a good showgirl could command," Harris writes. "Hughie was elated and protested bitterly when it was very considerably increased. Like Hughie, Miss Gish also protested, and always believed that she had been wildly overpaid."18

Miss Gish admits that she had no contract with Harris. "I had said," she writes, "that I would work for nothing for the chance to make such a distinguished re-entry into the theatre, and I meant it. I was surprised when an envelope was handed to me at the end of the first week with a large sum of money. I heard later that Jed's staff was worried for fear that I would walk out. But apparently Jed counted on my professionalism and knew that I would carry on."19

On top of her fright and insecurity going into rehearsals, Miss Gish says that Harris gave her little if any direction on stage. Harris himself acknowledges

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18 Ibid., p. 240.
19 Gish, The Movies, p. 310.
this fact. She longed for some word from him and felt neglected. Many years later she asked Harris why he had not given her more guidance, and quotes Harris as responding, "I felt that I had a frightened bird in my hand, and if I gave it direction it would fly away." Harris says, "There was never the slightest doubt in my mind that she would play her part beautifully, yet her self-confidence steadily declined. I felt mystified and impotent, like a physician watching the life of a seemingly healthy patient slowly ebbing away. My hope that she would last out rehearsals rested entirely on my confidence in her character." He says she was almost inaudible on the stage, but was simply adored by her fellow actors.

"What nobody here seems to realize," said actor Osgood Perkins one day, "is that Lillian is not just another actress. What she really is, is an angel. . . . Mark my words---one day we'll see her rise from the stage and ascend toward the fly gallery. Then, like the Red Sea parting for the Children of Israel, the roof will open and she will be wafted back to Heaven.'" 'Yes,'" said Eugene Powers, "'she is just too beautiful and too good for this damned planet.'"

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20 Ibid.
21 Harris, Dance, p. 234.
22 Ibid.
Harris knew that it was George Jean Nathan who had undermined Miss Gish's confidence and he admits that after the opening night of *Uncle Vanya* in New Haven he considered walking up to Nathan and hitting him for all the pain he had caused Miss Gish. He says that on this occasion, Nathan was sitting in a huge leather wing chair in the corner of the Taft Hotel lobby in New Haven, "swinging his beautifully shod little feet like a happy, idle school-boy...." He greeted Harris with his hands clasped high above his head, in a victory salute. "I waved," Harris writes, "and crossed the lobby to get the key to my room. I had already heard that he had been utterly delighted with the show. But I was not thinking of that. What I was thinking about was the kind of play the newspapers would have given the story if I had walked the other way and given Nathan a solid punch in the nose."\(^{23}\) Although Harris says that hitting a dramatic critic is the fantasy of many stage people, he actually had no serious intention of doing it. "Besides, he continues, "Nathan was a good friend and, more often than not, a delightful companion."

*Uncle Vanya* ran for seventy-one performances, then closed briefly because of a planned vacation previously arranged by Miss Gish. It reopened in September for another Broadway engagement before going on tour. After

\(^{23}\)Ibid., p. 240-41.
the first closing, as the cast and director went their separate ways, one theatre-goer wrote to the Dramatic Editor of the New York Times: "Lillian Gish may be on the other side of the Atlantic, Jed Harris may be contemplating a new and fuller season and the rest of the actors may be playing stock engagements. Yet the sensitiveness of Helena, the excellence of the direction, the muted music of Telegin, the philosophising of Astrov ---they are all with us still."24

"Of all the successes I have had," Harris said recently, "I think Uncle Vanya was the sweetest. It was spring, in the heart of the Depression. Taking a sad, little Russian play and turning it into a hit at a time like that." There was something very special in the combination of all these elements, Harris confesses.25

We now approach a point in the career of Jed Harris that is so odd and uncharacteristic of his work thus far that I found it extremely puzzling. His energetic devotion to his profession apparent in his tireless efforts of the twenties disappeared. Even his plans for his own acting company, so enthusiastically laid in 1928, faded by the beginning of the next decade. He


25Interview with Jed Harris.
writes, "But even if Blinn were still alive and I still had all the money I had once possessed, and even if Mr. Hearst were still ready and willing to carry out the proposal to build a theatre, I don't believe I would have cared any longer to go through with my plan." He no longer roamed the theatres night after night in search of actors. He now read plays with a dread, fearful that he would find one he liked. Should this happen, he would feel compelled to do it. And this, above all else, he did not want to do.

The quality of his productions changed. In the twenties, Harris was innovative, daring, yet struggling to establish himself in the theatre. To do this, he chose plays which might be termed "popular," as seen in Broadway, Coquette, The Royal Family and The Front Page. In the thirties, his work fell into two extremes--either serious, artistic, non-commercial ventures or trivial, insignificant and often poorly-written comedies or melodramas. The Jed Harris of the twenties bore little resemblance to the Jed Harris of the thirties.

The thirties became bracketed by four of the most distinguished productions he ever did, with Uncle Vanya and The Green Bay Tree in the early thirties and A Doll's House and Our Town at the end of the decade. In between

26 Harris, Dance, p. 246.
these productions he did eight plays of practically no distinction whatever, with the exception of Gogol's *The Inspector General*. Throughout this period critics speculated on what Harris must have been thinking when he selected such inferior plays to produce, like *The Wiser They Are* or *Spring Dance*. They wondered why he let years pass without displaying his talents to a waiting public. Over the past few months, in response to my numerous questions regarding this period of his life, Harris has freely discussed exactly where he spent most of his time and energy while he was, in his words, "devoting myself to junk in the theatre."

Why did he come to do plays of that sort, I asked, most of which he now says he hardly remembers, "not because they weren't successful, but because they didn't have a hold on me." The fact is, he says, "I had lost my interest in the theatre and indeed in my life." He continues, "I was constantly haunted by what was happening in Germany. I was not only revolted and horrified by the brutality of Hitler's regime and what I suspected it was leading to. But even more despairing about the blindness and stupidity of the great powers who were supposed to represent civilization. The idea of being an entrepreneur dedicated to entertaining those people who stood by while these things were going on in Germany
was more than I could take."27

His acute despair took the form of retreat into books, exactly he says, as he had done when he encountered "the first-rank, flagrant anti-Semitism at Yale and turned greatfultly to the Linonian Library." His world "was a million miles from show business, the secret world of high literature."28 He corresponded with the Massachusetts Historical Society to obtain all available material on the Adams family, manuscripts and letters in many cases which had not yet been published. He centered his efforts on history, biography and memoirs; and he describes his life during this period:

To be sitting at White's Club in London, watching the great Whig leader, Charles James Fox, at the gaming table losing his entire fortune in a single night; or spending an evening in the somber dining-hall in the San Souci Palace in Potsdam, as Frederick the Great in his frayed, badly spotted old military coat was sitting down to supper with his two aged Scottish marshals, all three of them swaying like dry reeds on the thin edge of senility; or to observe the Founding Fathers assembled in Philadelphia to prepare the Declaration of Independence, gorging themselves on six-hour-long dinners which left them just barely enough energy to write their wives of their exhausting labors in a noble cause—all these were far more real to me than the world I was living in.29

27 Interview with Jed Harris.

28 Ibid.

29 Harris, Dance, p. 248.
Harris devoured such works as Prescott's *History of Mexico*, Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Gretz's twelve volume *History of the Jews*, Spengler's *Decline and Fall of the West* and Plutarch's *Lives*.

In addition to reading, he again took to travel. "I crossed the Atlantic thirteen times in the decade before the war," he writes. "There were, after all, plays to be seen in London and Paris, and actors and playwrights to meet." Then he adds, "Long afterward I realized that these 'business' trips were merely a facade for my real purpose which was to find brief interludes of relief in the womb-like security one finds in the stateroom of a ship."30 Since he always carried a portable library of at least twenty volumes, he could lock himself into the quietude of his insulated, literary world and for a time, separate himself from the horrors that haunted him.

At the same time, however, he maintained an office with a staff, and from time to time, he says, "I felt compelled to do something, even if it meant losing money in the effort." The stock market crash had reduced his fortune by about eighty percent. The million dollars

30 The following quotations and information are from an interview with Jed Harris.
he had accumulated by 1929 had shrunk to $60,000 by the
time he did *A Doll's House* and *Our Town*. "And since I
provided all the backing for my own plays all during
that period," he remembers, "the week *Our Town* opened,
I had a balance of some one hundred dollars left in the
bank. *Our Town*, with its disastrous week in Boston
before opening in New York, lost almost $11,000" prior
to its Broadway run.

I asked if he could explain his actions during this
time. What motivated him to turn loose of all of his
money, especially for these non-commercial ventures. "As
I look back on it," he replied, "the thought that I put
every cent I had into two plays which were never meant
for popular success, I am astonished even now that I
was so feckless and so indifferent to my own well being.
And I can only explain all this by an intelligent guess
that I was bent on destroying myself rather than live
in the world I now hated. That I did not commit
suicide, which I thought of constantly, still mystifies
me. Perhaps a letter I wrote in that decade, which will
appear in my memoirs, and which I'll be glad to furnish
you will explain the malaise that afflicted me during
that period."

The letter Harris mentions, written aboard the
Normandie in 1938, was sent to a friend he had just seen
in London. This letter, which he describes as "long" and
"rambling," was later returned to him by the widow of the correspondent. It was accompanied by a note, depicting Harris' words as prophetic, a description Harris rejects. Because it provides insight into Harris' mind during his decade of despair, I will quote it almost in its entirety.

I am sorry my forebodings, as you called them, left you feeling so gloomy. Your great fault is that you are not merely English but so very goddam English. If you only lived on another island halfway around the world, I might urge you to join a political society and knock off a few of the dolts who are leading your country to ruin. In Japan political assassination is not so much a crime as a kind of respected civil right. I can see the horror in your eyes as you read these words. But after all, be a man—and what is better, an Englishman—and remember that you are descended from people who once beheaded a king—and what is far worse, they did it right after he had taken the trouble to have his beard beautifully trimmed.

It has been my chronic bad luck to get involved in arguments with Communists who have never read Das Kapital and with anti-fascists who've never taken the trouble to browse through the pages of Mein Kampf. They all know without reading it that it's psychotic. What they don't know is that it's a psychotic masterpiece. They think that because a book is full of absurdities, it can't be seriously intended. This may go down as the mistake of the century. And Hitler's ravings plainly reflect the fantasies of a large part of which is called Christian Civilisation. If the Germans were really clever they would get out an American edition of Mein Kampf and sell it for a quarter, or even give it away, like Gideon bibles. There are plenty of rich loonies
in the U.S. who would be glad to contribute to such a worthy cause.

These "forebodings" of mine didn't seem to have quite so gloomy an effect on that very intelligent man, Vansittart. There is a style about that old boy which I suppose is fast disappearing from English life. But when I said I was afraid Hitler might slaughter the Jews in Germany, he smiled and said, "You have a highly theatrical imagination." It would appear that in matters outside my profession, a theatrical imagination is a disability, like epilepsy. Of course I did not mention Burke, Fox, Sheridan, Palmerston or Disraeli.

What worries the hell out of me is that there is no one in Europe for the Jews to turn to. The Kremlin is run by a blood-thirsty son-of-a-bitch who's murdered millions of Russians without turning a hair. He is hardly likely to trouble himself about the destruction of a few hundred thousand Jews.

A couple of years ago, I got to know a professional killer. He was a well-mannered, smartly turned out little fellow, something of a gourmet and to top it off, a real musical buff. We went to a couple of symphony concerts together and I found him extremely good company. Of course we never discussed his professional life. And I'm sure he had no idea that I knew what he did for a living. One night, over a drink, I took my life in my hands and asked him point blank if his conscience ever bothered him about the people he had knocked off. My fears were wasted. "How can you be so silly?" he said. "They're nothing but lice."

Now poor Chink who as a matter of course got knocked off himself, seems as innocent as a child alongside of Stalin and Hitler. The really great killers are not these poor little gunmen, but the revolutionaries, the priests, the intellectuals, slaughtering for the good
of humanity and the glory of God—fucking idealists all. Who was it—Blake?—who said, "Excess of sorrow laughs?"

Well, there's nothing funnier on the New York stage than the antics of the seedy rabble that swears by Stalin to justify his crimes. Some of them are Jews. Probably the greatest fraud ever perpetrated against the Jews wasn't the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, but the rumor, disseminated by crafty gentiles, that they are clever.

By the way, I think I forgot to mention a most comforting Boche on the boat coming over. This bloke assured his table companions that the coming war will be "most humane". It seems that the Germans know down to the last centimetre of rubber hose just how much fire-fighting equipment you Englisher have at your disposal. And it appears that their air-force can in one night drop more fire-bombs on England and cause more fires than you have the equipment to handle. The result: England in flames and your government suing for peace. But the important thing to remember is that while a regrettable amount of property will be damaged, very few lives will be lost. That is what makes the whole thing humane—see?

The most popular magazine in America recently published an article by a General Motors official, full of admiration for life in Germany. In spite of what he called "some unfortunate excesses," he found the Germans happy and healthy, with jobs for everyone, while we in America are for some strange reason wallowing in a ghastly depression. The lesson for my countrymen was plain: "Despoil and humiliate the Jews, expropriate their property, drive them out of the professions and the universities, and then perhaps America can be happy and prosperous."

31The Saturday Evening Post.
There is actually very little concern in the U.S. for the condition of the Jews in Germany. Respectable people regard the crimes committed against them as "regrettable," while the boobs are inclined to enjoy the spectacle of the Jews "getting what's coming to them." And we are even under weekly attack from a cruddy, Roman Catholic "radio-priest" named Father Coughlin who doesn't refer to us as Jews but as "international bankers." It is the droll charm of his program that he pronounces both words with the elegance of a drunken stage-Irishman in high society. Heigh-ho.

In times like these when there are no "external verities" to cling to and no guide to the future except for the inexhaustible stupidity and malevolence of the human race, it is a little less than comic to find myself entangled in anything as trivial as the theatre. Especially now with the prospect of the most collosal production in history looming ahead of us. A show with a cast of millions, with giant settings high in the sky and in the depths of the sea, with the spectacle of shattered cities silhouetted against glorious towers of flame and corpses everywhere. How it will dwarf our most ingenuous "stage effects." And we will owe it all to the stupidity of your politicians (and ours as well). Anyway, over the next few years, we are going to learn an awful lot of geography.

To quit the theatre, however, is more easily said than done. It's like trying to break off with a woman you no longer love but with whom you share enslaving memories. The worst of it is that the theatre is just about the only place in the world you are not asked your race, your religion, your antecedents. There are only two questions: Can you sing? Can you dance?

The real vice of the theatre is that it is a narcotic. Once you inhale the
fumes, you forget who and what you really are. If history were only written by the great comedians of literature--by Voltaire or Heine, by Swift or even some untamed bachelor Mark Twain--it might record that Herbert Hoover made more American communists than Marx, Lenin and Stalin all put together. And that Hitler jolted me into the discovery that I am a Jew. A Jew, I may add with mixed feelings, who has just been taken for a Dane.  

Feeling as he did, Harris was almost immobilized into a state of fright. His negative feelings about the human race were only heightened by the events taking place in Germany. Yet, he had not lost his talent. Indeed, those four outstanding productions of the thirties were qualitatively higher than his hits of the twenties. Why not do more productions of this kind, I asked. "I just didn't have the interest," he says. "Where I had once been a tireless amateur, doing only those plays that aroused my feelings," he writes, "I was now nothing more than a bored professional, waiting like Mr. Micawber for something to turn up."  

That is exactly what happened, with even his best productions of the thirties. They simply turned up. He did not go frantically searching for plays to do, and the circumstances out of which these productions grew differs sharply from those ventures during the preceding decade. For example, Uncle Vanya was prompted by Harris' desire

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32 Harris, Dance, pp. 250-56.
33 Ibid., p. 246.
to give employment to his actor friends, Osgood Perkins and Walter Connolly. He had been reading *The Cherry Orchard*, with an eye to producing it, when his friends arrived at his office. Their need and availability, plus Harris' recent introduction to Lillian Gish, prompted him to turn to another Chekhov play. When he decided to do *Uncle Vanya*, he had it cast within a matter of hours and was in rehearsal within three weeks. None of these events had he plotted.

As for his work on so many lack-lustre plays, he comments, "These plays are the plays to be dismissed." Even if they were successful, they were not the kinds of plays Jed Harris was interested in. Many of these eight productions were unsuccessful. They baffled critics, whose respect and esteem Harris had rightfully claimed during his previous years in the theatre. Although he often gave these plays admirable and even excellent productions, he was unable to overcome the weaknesses in the manuscripts. The four contrasting shows, so admired for the recognized Harris touch, only added to the reviewers' confusion. The few interviews he gave out during the thirties in no way clarified the situation nor reflected his true feelings. Yet today, he openly confesses, "Being constitutionally addicted to obsessions, I had replaced my obsession for the theatre with another one; one in which the stakes were
not worldly success, but actual survival."34

In light of the thoughts expressed in Harris' letter and his admission of what effect Hitler's actions had upon his personal and professional direction, perhaps now his work during this period of his life can be fully understood. The decade is filled with contradictions, yet there is a consistency when seen from this larger perspective.

On September 30, 1930, Harris introduced Mr. Gilhooley, an adaptation by Frank B. Elser of the novel by Liam O'Flaherty. Presented at the Broadhurst Theatre, the play was recognized for the excellent acting of Helen Hayes and Arthur Sinclair, a well-known Irish actor. The difficulty in the production, as noted by almost all of the critics, lay in the dramatizing of any work not written for the stage. George Jean Nathan mused, "Why anyone should wish to dramatize a novel is what I sit at home and ponder. . . ." He then launches into a discussion of various dramatizations, all equally unsuccessful, and concludes by saying, "Despite the dexterous direction of Jed Harris, Mr. Gilhooley impressed one as being little more than a talkie version of the novel minus only the screen and a movie theatres' smell. . . ."35

34Ibid., pp. 246-47.

In the play, Mr. Gilhooley, a man in his fifties, accidentally encounters a young girl, Nellie Fitzpatrick, alone and heartbroken over the breakup with her lover, Mick. He takes Nellie in to live with him, falls in love with her, yet his love is unrequited. When Mick, whom the girl has never ceased to love, returns, Gilhooley flies into a rage, kills Nellie and shoots himself.

The critic for Outlook magazine praised Sinclair's Gilhooley: "If there is a better actor than Arthur Sinclair speaking the English language it just means that I don't get around much." It is a portrayal "so real and effortless that it makes Helen Hayes' very fine performance seem just a bit forced in comparison." Calling the production generally "slow and pedestrian," Richard Lockridge of the New York Sun noted that "The lesser parts . . . are acted with the skill which Mr. Harris always sees is given even to minor roles."

As Nellie, Brooks Atkinson writes, "Miss Hayes gives a shining performance, full of carefully minted characterization." But he continues, "it is Mr. Sinclair who impregnated this drama with the immortal fire of mortal passion." Atkinson did not think so much...

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of the script as of the performances. "Mr. Harris has
designed a production with depth and color and tex­
ture." Nevertheless, he wonders, "How Mr. Harris came
to choose this parsimoniously-written, unimaginative
drama as the object of his current affections is hard
to discover, unless he wanted to bring Mr. Sinclair to
this country again. In that case explanations are im­
pertinent." 38

A more philosophical expression was voiced by the
reviewer for the Brooklyn Eagle. He said, "Mr. Gil­
hooley and Mr. Harris presuppose a greater intelligence
in audiences than is customarily credited to them, with
the result that nothing is overdone; all has the kind
of surface that is given by a fine varnish. . . . All
the parts are judiciously filled. It is a play and a
production of distinction." 39

Shortly after the closing of the play, a playgoer
again expressed genuine regret at its short life. In a
letter to the New York Times he wrote, "The recent clos­
ing of Mr. Gilhooley after a four-week stay on Broadway
is indicative of the lack of public interest in anything
much above the level of a leg and music show. Genuine

Oct. 1930.

Eagle, 1 Oct. 1930.
drama seems to be on the wane and the quick failure of
so rich and powerful a production as Mr. Gilhooley is
not encouraging."

The plays following Mr. Gilhooley continue to
represent what Harris terms "the very nadir of my interest
in the theatre." The Inspector General, the Russian farce
by Gogol, which opened at the Hudson Theatre on December
23, 1930, had a run of only six performances. Announcing
the close of the play, Harris sent the following tele­
gram to the dramatic editor of each of the New York
papers: "Owing to the phenomenal indifference of the
public I closed Inspector General Saturday night."41

Opening night reviewers were quick to mark the
production unsatisfactory. For example, Brooks Atkinson
termed it "temperately amusing," adding that "Mr. Harris's
iron-fisted theatrical wizardry is not much apparent in
the jumble of rowdy humors and dull passages that
scatters the acting."42 Robert Littell of the New York
World called the production "dreary,"43 and John Mason
Brown stated that "In brief, The Inspector General is

40 Frank Siebenhandel, "In the Dramatic Mailbag,"

41 Jed Harris, Variety, 31 Dec. 1930, p. 42.

Dec. 1930.

43 Robert Littell, "The New Play," New York World,
23 Dec. 1930.
not a fortunate sample of Mr. Harris's direction." 44
Theatre magazine noted, "Aside from the excellent, if slightly over-acted work of Romney Brent in the title role, the performance lacked that distinction which theatregoers have learned to expect from Jed Harris' productions, particularly after the monumental Uncle Vanya." 45

Although two reviewers praised the production, the overwhelming opinion was negative. Harris, greatly dissatisfied with his cast, told me that on the day of the New York opening, an actor playing a substantial role leaped to his death out of an eighth-story hotel window. "Some of the people were very good," he added, "yet most of the players were only vague approximations of the characters. I just did not have the actors." 46

The third play introduced by Jed Harris during this 1930-31 theatrical season was the most successful of his ventures, having a run of forty performances. Sheridan Gibney's comedy, The Wiser They Are, opened at the Plymouth Theatre on April 6, 1931, and starred Ruth Gordon and Osgood Perkins. Harris admits that it was primarily chosen to provide employment for his two


46 Interview with Jed Harris.
friends, Ruth Gordon (with whom he was living at the
time) and Osgood Perkins, who had appeared in several
Harris productions, including his very first play,
Weak Sisters (1925).

The play centers on the amorous misadventures of
two young people. Their attraction for each other has
been for some time temporarily hindered by their involve­
ment with other would-be lovers. Though they do marry
each other, neither regards this commitment as final,
as evidenced by the covert arrangements each made to
have a second companion available on their honeymoon
steamer. As Brooks Atkinson commented, "It is love
uneasily perched on a barrel of gunpowder."47

Although not overwhelmed, the critics were pleased
with the production's value in the realm of light enter­
tainment. John Mason Brown says that it "is a comedy
for which one cannot but be grateful for. "In its mild
way it provides an ample entertaining evening."48 Mark
Van Doren, writing for the Nation, called The Wiser They
Are not "a triumph exactly," but "very crisp entertain­
ment."49


1931, p. 460.
Atkinson comments, "Jed Harris has given the play a handsome production with luminously immaculate settings by Raymond Sovey and a civilized cast." But it needs "a crystallized script." Variety praised Harris for a well mounted and cleverly paced production, and Percy Hammond noted that the cast was "one of the most prudent that the skilled producer Jed Harris has ever assembled." Agreeing with Hammond, Gilbert Gabriel of the New York American writes, "There are expert players at work here." And John Mason Brown described the production as "a pleasant, featherweight comedy."

If satisfied with the production, none of the critics perceived The Wiser They Are as a play equal to the talents of Jed Harris. Had Harris not felt some obligation to his actor friends, this production never would have been done. It stands as another instance of his feeling moved to do something, not motivated from some inner passion, but from an external force. The result was a play which was of little interest to him.

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54 John Mason Brown, New York Evening Post.
His next production continues this pattern of undistinguished entertainment.

For the new season, Jed Harris brought to the Alvin Theatre a spoof of the motion picture industry as it tries to create a star out of an unknown and unwilling young man. Wonder Boy, by Edward Chodorov and Arthur Barton, opened on October 23, 1931. It traced the star-studded adventures of one Peter Hinkle, a youth who wants to be not a star, but a dentist. Unfortunately, Hinkle made a film in Hollywood called Shadows. It was seen by the top producers at Paragon Pictures who, in turn, decided that Hinkle would be their ticket to a great fortune. His name is changed to Buddy Windsor and although he is given mass publicity and star-image billing, the well-planned and meticulously executed campaign proves fatal.

Reviews of Wonder Boy were mixed, yet it had a run of forty-four performances. Richard Lockridge of the New York Sun writes, "The authors have written dialogue which is rough and boisterous, have pounded their victim without either mercy or stuffed gloves; Mr. Harris has provided for them a ready and enthusiastic cast and he has added to this direction which drives the whole thing through." Harris' greatest achievement, Lockridge believed, was his choice of actors.

Brooks Atkinson, less favorable toward this production, believed that Harris had not molded Wonder Boy into "shape," nevertheless, he had "constructed a versatile production" and "assembled some interesting actors." But Joseph Wood Krutch, writing in the Nation, clearly did not like it at all. He says Wonder Boy exhibited "an almost grim determination to be satiric," and achieved "something . . . more fatal to satire than to any other form—namely dullness."

From Robert Garland of the New York World-Telegram came one of the strongest reviews of Wonder Boy. Edward Chodorov and Arthur Barton, co-authors of the play, he writes, "should mention Mr. Jed Harris in their prayers, their comedy would be less entertaining without his adroit directions." Harris has given it a "gorgeous gusto." It has pace, style and a "Rabelaisian nose-thumbing in the direction of Hollywood." Although the script is uneven, Garland says that nevertheless Harris has done his best, "and that best is as good as anything on Broadway." Gilbert Gabriel stated that the play needed a great deal of cutting, but he praised


Harris for a cast "with the same kind of ragtag and animaliculae he used in his production of The Front Page." 59

John Mason Brown, with an enthusiastic response to Wonder Boy, said that Harris "returned once more to the sort of swift-paced, hard-boiled and contemporaneous productions that Broadway and The Front Page represented." If it does not have "the relentless drive or the final expertness of these earlier efforts," it nevertheless "remains by all odds the most entertaining play the new season has revealed." 60 As for the direction, Brown states, "Wonder Boy" necessitates a large and ingenious production. And both of these things it has been given by Mr. Harris, who directs it vigorously, with his usual eye for detail and shrewd mastery of pace. . . . On the whole, too, it is excellently acted."

Describing many of the scenes of Wonder Boy for me, Harris recalls this play with hearty laughter. "It came very near being a real success," he says. "It made a wonderful part for Gregory Ratoff. It got him into the movies. Wonder Boy was full of talent, full of gaiety. Oh, and Bob Benchley loved this show. He would

leave any play he was reviewing just to catch it, especially one particular scene." In the scene, a man has been secretly buying up shares of stock in his movie company in order to oust his brother from his partnership, and thus assume control of the corporation. The one who is being ousted learns of the scheme. While trying to reach his brother on the phone, he rages to a friend in his office: "My brother! My own brother! That no-good son-of-a-bitch! My own brother! (quietly, into the phone) Oh, hello Sam. How's Mama?" Harris laughs, adding, "I can still hear Benchley's laugh." He demonstrates. "Wonder Boy was filled with delightful bits," he continues. "But it just did not quite come off." 61

Although Jed Harris' next production, The Fatal Alibi, starred Charles Laughton and received generally favorable reviews, it had an engagement of only twenty-four performances. Before producing it, Harris had critic John Anderson revise the play, a dramatization by Michael Morton of the mystery novel The Murder of Roger Ackroyd by Agatha Christie. This revision seemed to have improved the original manuscript, which had been presented in London during the previous season. When the play opened at the Booth Theatre on February 9, 1932, reviewer Stark Young comments, "Mr. John Anderson's

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61 Interview with Jed Harris.
rewriting of the dialogue of The Fatal Alibi has given this production of Mr. Harris' a fresher value throughout than appeared in the London version.\(^\text{62}\)

An opinion shared by each of the critics was voiced by Arthur Pollock when he stated, "The play itself is smoothly written and articulate, but it is the performance of the star that gives it its liveliest interest."\(^\text{63}\) And John Mason Brown commented, "Though Mr. Harris is to be congratulated on the precision of his production, . . . the evening is Mr. Laughton's and he makes the most of it. Because of him The Fatal Alibi is not only something in which Crime Club members can find joy, but a production which no one really interested in acting can afford to miss."\(^\text{64}\) Stark Young called Laughton's playing "wit itself," adding, "such a performance as Mr. Laughton's builds up a kind of full and varied counterpoint that remains happily in our thoughts long after any mere solutions of the mystery are faded."\(^\text{65}\)

If impressed with Laughton's performance, Brooks Atkinson also believed it detracted from the movement and


\(^{65}\)Stark Young, The New Republic.
plot of the play. Referring to his portrayal as "the apothecary of concreteness," Atkinson adds that "his free sketch of Hercule Poirot . . . is an immensely entertaining exercise in poster portraiture. . . . But colorful acting, slightly detached from the flow of narrative, can also temper a drama's illusion." In his opinion, Laughton's "lithographic performing has that subtle effect. It diverts attention from the play."66

The most enthusiastic review of this play appeared in the New York American. Reviewer Gilbert Gabriel began, "Salutations and hosannas, it is here. The only truly rust proof, right, tight, tidy engrossing and excelling mystery melodrama which comes along in, say, three years." Harris produces it, he notes, "with a sure realization of where the fun of it will lie, and how the fascination of it will step in and out on patent-leather tiptoe." The character of the French detective, as played by Charles Laughton, he says,—by sheer force of averdupois and a hundred clever details of gesture and inflection—turns into a large, round, sentimental, volatile, superman, as loveable as frightful. He glistens with perspiration. . . . He is a Frenchman trying to speak English, not an Englishman

Harris says that he decided to do *The Fatal Alibi* only at the insistence of Charles Laughton. "I had seen him play it in London. Then he came to American to play in *Payment Deferred,*" which was not a success. "He and Elsa came to dinner every night," Harris continues. "He was very despondent about his career in America. If he could only play Hercule Poirot, he told me, he could make it big in the theatre. I was never a great admirer of Agatha Christie, and I was never a great admirer of *The Fatal Alibi.*" As a result of this production, as Laughton had hoped, the head of Paramount Pictures saw him and offered him his first large film role, that of Nero. Aware of Harris' expertise in business, Laughton sought his advice about his first contract. "I wrote up a seven-year contract," Harris said, "beginning with $1,500 a week and ending with $7,500. 'They'll never sign it,' Laughton said. But they did," Harris added. As for *The Fatal Alibi*, Harris commented, "It had nothing to do with me. He, Laughton, was the whole show."  

With the arrival of the 1933-34 theatrical season in New York, Jed Harris introduced *The Green Bay Tree*, the second of his four big hits during the thirties. But

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68 Interview with Jed Harris.
even this production developed out of a situation which Harris had neither anticipated nor initiated. He tells how one day early in 1933 he received a phone call from actor Nigel Bruce.

"Do you know Lee Shubert?" Bruce asked. "Do you think he's crazy?"

"He can't be crazy, he's so rich," Harris replied.

"He must be crazy. He sent around a play to me for which I'm totally unsuited. I told him to send the play to you."

Lee Shubert followed Bruce's suggestion and Harris accepted. Although Shubert was willing to put up all of the money for The Green Bay Tree, Harris insisted on a fifty-fifty arrangement, telling Shubert, "I don't want you calling me up and telling me I have to go to your store room and pull out some old flats or props that you believe will save the show money."69 Knowing of Shubert's strong-armed methods, Harris added that in short, he didn't want anyone telling him what to do with his production. Shubert agreed and on October 20, 1933, Harris brought to the Cort Theatre The Green Bay Tree, a drama by an Englishman, Mordaunt Shairp.

Containing a somewhat controversial theme, the play centers on the relationship between a wealthy aesthete, Mr. Dulcimer (James Dale) and his ward, Julian (Laurence

69 Ibid.
Oliver), a man in his early twenties. We learn that fifteen years ago Dulcy, as Mr. Dulcimer is called, adopted Julian after hearing his sweet soprano voice in a Welsh village choir. After paying the boy's father five hundred pounds, he took Julian in and over the years tutored him in the fine arts, while also instilling in him a deep dependence upon himself—emotionally, culturally and financially. Dulcy's home, a showcase of taste and elegance, is served by Trump (Leo G. Carroll), the manservant.

As the play opens, Dulcy's plan to keep Julian to himself and away from the real world has been disturbingly upset. Julian fancies himself in love with a young veterinary doctor, Leonora Yale (Jill Esmond) and announces to Dulcy his intentions to be married. He has decided to return to his real father's home in Wales, where he will study for a profession. Dulcy's home is unsuitable for the kind of life he now sees for himself. Julian, whose real name was David Owen, then leaves Dulcy after an abrupt good night. The first act curtain falls with Dulcy sitting alone, listening to a record of the choir-boy's voice of his foster son, heard so many years earlier.

The second act takes place in the cottage of William Owen (O. P. Heggie) who, though once a drunkard, has now become successful in the dairy business and is a
lay-preacher in a nearby chapel. As Julian tries to study for exams, he learns that Dulcy is in town. He must meet with him, for he is in desperate need of funds. Obviously Dulcy wants to give Julian his allowance. On the insistence of her fiance, Leonora agrees to dine with Julian and Dulcy that evening, in hopes of obtaining some money.

The third act opens with Leo, as Leonora is called, exiting from the dinner party in Dulcy's home. Afterwards, Dulcy tells Julian that he will not continue his allowance if he and Leo decide to marry. He urges his ward to go away on a trip to think things over. The next morning, Leo comes to see Julian and immediately offers to marry him. While she tells him that his real father has been up all night with worry, she begins to sense what Julian's decision is, although he has said nothing definite. As Julian dresses, Dulcy and Leo argue, with the girl insisting that she will see Julian again. Old Mr. Owen enters and after a heated argument, shoots Dulcy, in an effort to save his son.

The brief final scene shows Julian as the inheritor of Dulcy's wealth. Leo arrives. She will marry him if he gives up his fortune. He cannot and so she leaves. Julian is now alone. Trump appears, and wishes to withdraw his resignation, a gesture he made when the threat of a woman living in Dulcy's house seemed likely.
Certainly he will be allowed to stay. "Yes," says Julian. "you know my ways." He then asks Trump to please fetch him some brandy, a lighter for his cigarette and finally the flowers which he will shortly arrange. Trump has never been permitted the task of arranging the flowers. Julian sits alone on the sofa, smoking, while a mask of Dulcy faintly glows over his head. Curtain.

When the play appeared in London the previous year, a blatant homosexual theme was evident. Harris, wishing to make the relationship between the older and younger man more subtle, changed the script. Many, but not all, of the critics applauded this alteration. Harris had recognized that although the homosexual element in the play no doubt existed, it was not the central question of the piece. And by leaving the viewer to see the relationship as potentially homosexual, Harris was able to create far more dramatic tension than if he had made this question the sole center of interest. As Harris says, "In my production, there was no suggestion of homosexuality. Yet, as you watched it, you said, 'It must be there'." 70

Among those critics noting Harris' script changes was Percy Hammond of the Herald Tribune. He reports that The Green Bay Tree's New York nuances made a "much

70 Ibid.
better" and "far superior" play in American than in London. And Stark Young contends that the changes which Harris made do not, as some have said, "tone it down. Their meaning is obvious," he writes.

But what I should say is that he has toned it up. What Mr. Harris has done should be a lesson to a certain type of Freudian thinker, or, shall we say, wandering disciple. He does not isolate a human phenomenon and set it up as a kind of psychological, single dummy, extracted, or hypothesized, from some supposed life. He creates a life through which relationships and manifestations the phenomenon, or characteristic, can be made to appear, as a living part.

Not all of the critics agreed with the alterations in the Harris script. For example, George Jean Nathan commented, "But in the local version /The Green Bay Tree/ has experienced certain alterations which, while they do not by any means invalidate it, go no little way toward weakening it." He speculates that Harris may have feared censorship and surmises that he must have "deemed it the wiser share of policy to delete any emphasis on the abnormality of the men's relationship and to cast the emphasis, instead, on the pernicious effect upon


72Stark Young, "Cort Laurels," The New Republic, 15 Nov. 1933, p. 18.

In contrast to Nathan, William J. Farma, critic for Players Magazine, shared Young's evaluation of Harris' changes in the script. He writes, "To make homosexuality a center interest in the play merely betrays a morbid interest in the subject." The play, "brilliantly produced," has James Dale playing the wealthy dilettante "with a penetrating clear-cut deftness. Never is the effeminate stressed for its own sake; it arises always out of the egoistic, keenly intelligent, and precious character he is portraying."75

The acclaim given this production was enormous. Gilbert Gabriel states, "Mr. Harris has devoted himself expertly to the details of the staging, to all the values which the theatre can wring out of persons, things and places... The piece is fastidiously, quite exquisitely composed."76 Additional applause came from the reviewer of Stage magazine, when he noted, "The production which Mr. Harris has given the play is one of the smoothest and most revealing which we have seen in this or many other seasons. Here the dramatic moments leap

74 Ibid.
out from the stage picture as the centers of action leap out from a Renaissance mural painting. 77

At the conclusion of his review in the New York World-Telegram, Robert Garland comments, "As it stands, The Green Bay Tree is a thing to see on Broadway... because it's the theatre at its pinnacle. It grips you because Mr. Harris is a magician, a magician that sometimes fails but a magician just the same. He knows how to fuse the arts of the theatre into a tremendously effective whole—the art of the playwright, the art of the actor, the art of the scene painter, the art of the director." 78 John Mason Brown joined his colleagues in praise of Harris' work. The play, he says, is an "absorbing, if uncomfortable, experience in theatre-going; ... Jed Harris has given it the benefit of a production which combines reticence with power, and ... it is acted at the Cort by James Dale and Laurence Olivier with a skill which is often uncanny." 79

In an examination of the play itself, as well as the production, Joseph Wood Krutch concludes that the production as presented by Harris "is chiefly remarkable for its success in drawing an unfamiliar portrait with a

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fulness\textsuperscript{sic}, a delicacy and a power which one seldom finds outside the pages of a first-rate novel.\textsuperscript{80} The subject matter, Krutch believes, is one which has, up until this time, never been adequately portrayed on the stage. His final statement in his review reflects his detailed examination of the production: "The important fact is that \textit{The Green Bay Tree} is not only an absorbing play but one which gives the spectator a renewed respect for the drama as a vehicle for profound and absorbing psychological portraiture."\textsuperscript{81}

After the opening night performance, Brooks Atkinson wrote, "When the destinies of these characters have been established beyond a shadow of doubt you feel that the subject is exhausted and that the theatre has emptied itself of all its resources. It is difficult to believe that there will be anything left for tomorrow."\textsuperscript{82} Then he adds, "As the producer and director, Mr. Harris has taken \textsuperscript{83} at his word and given the performance an incandescent vitality. . . . The theatre has unleashed one of its thunderbolts, under Jed Harris's direction."\textsuperscript{83} Following this review, Atkinson wrote a

\textsuperscript{80}Joseph Wood Krutch, "Drama," \textit{The Nation}, 8 Nov. 1933, p. 548.

\textsuperscript{81}\textit{Ibid.}


\textsuperscript{83}\textit{Ibid.}
special Sunday article in which he praised Harris' alterations in the script.

Stark Young saw the shaping of the play in the hands of Harris as the key to its success. He notes, "The tone and taste arrived at in dealing with this play seemed to me unique in our theatre," resulting in a work that is "civilized." Though Young thoughtfully delineates all the various aspects of this production, his concluding statement reflects his admiration for the presentation as a whole. "I must repeat," he says, "that Mr. Harris has presented in his production what our theatre most needs: the proper respect for our intelligence that lies in a separation between what is theatre and what is significant. And even rarer, a unity of tone."\textsuperscript{84} The lengthy review by Young of \textit{The Green Bay Tree}, appearing in the \textit{New Republic}, is the most articulate and perceptive review written by any critic of any play ever staged by Jed Harris.

The setting of this play, as designed by Robert Edmond Jones, was highly praised by almost all of the critics. Although the living room contained only seven pieces of furniture, its elegance and aptness helped to create what one writer described as "a drawing room that was completely evocative of the mood desired."\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{84}Stark Young, \textit{The New Republic}.

\textsuperscript{85}Newspaper clipping, Lincoln Center.
Dulcy's room, as noted by the same writer, must and did convey "the feeling of enveloping luxury and beauty so fastidious as to be almost precious, so overcivlized as to convey a sense of decadence." According to Harris, if one sat in the balcony and saw the curtain rise on the deep green and cobalt blue, tinged with gold, painted on the linoleum floor, this was exactly the feeling one would have—decadence. "You already knew what the show was about. You might as well go home," he added.

Harris reveals that on the eleventh day of rehearsal two people were invited in to see the run-through. One was playwright Philip Barry, and the other was Lee Shubert, Harris' financial partner in The Green Bay Tree. Shubert, rather intimidated by Harris, told the director when he arrived, "I didn't think you'd let me into the theatre, Jed." During the performance the three men sat at a great distance from each other and after it was over, Barry just waved his hands in front of his face and shook his head saying, "I can't speak, I can't speak." Later he told Harris of the absolute power which this experience had upon him. Shubert came running up to Harris following the run-through, exclaiming, "Spend $50,000, spend $100,000. Spend anything you

86 Ibid.

87 Interview with Jed Harris.
like on this production," he repeated. Harris smiled and then commented, "All he'd seen were five actors, playing in street clothes on practically a bare stage, with no scenery." But Harris' estimate of his accomplishments in this venture equals that of the reviewers. He says, "I don't think there's ever been any production like it, or in a class with it." 88

Laurence Olivier, who played young Julian Dulcimer in The Green Bay Tree, shares Harris' view of this play. He recently wrote, "Considering the Jed Harris production is getting on for forty-four years ago, I find my memories of it quite sharp still. I do think it was a brilliant production of a strong play." 89 He states that Harris "was an absolute monster to work for, but, infuriatingly, pretty well always right. From the point of view of an experience," he adds, working on The Green Bay Tree "was undoubtedly good for me." Did Harris have any influence upon Olivier? "I have to say," he admits, "that Mr. Harris had a good effect upon my work." 90

Olivier agreed to play for Harris under one condition—that his wife, Jill Esmond, be allowed to perform

88 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
with him. Speaking of rehearsals for *The Green Bay Tree*, Harris recalls Olivier's surprise at some of his directions. For example, during the scene in which Julian persuades Leo to dine with Dulcy, Harris told Olivier to play "like a whore, assuring her pimp" not to worry, that she would get the money to him. "Olivier stood there and stared at me with a kind of horror that I would dare to make such a suggestion," Harris continued. Though greatly pleased with Olivier's performance in *The Green Bay Tree*, Harris says, "At that time, all he wanted was to get into the movies. So he patterned himself on Ronald Coleman—you know, with a thin little moustache."91

*The Green Bay Tree* ran 166 performances. The production must be considered as one of the finest ever done by Jed Harris. It stands out as a highlight in the American theatre during the first half of the century.

During the five years following Harris' production of *The Green Bay Tree*, Jed Harris introduced only three shows on Broadway, none of which became hits. His lack of interest in the theatre had now become concretely apparent. *The Lake*, by Dorothy Massingham and Murray MacDonald, the first of these productions, opened at the Martin Beck Theatre on December 26, 1933. Although it ran for fifty-five performances, its popular appeal

91 Interview with Jed Harris.
resided solely in its leading lady, the recently acclaimed Hollywood star, Katharine Hepburn. In Charles Higham's recent biography of Miss Hepburn, he quotes Harris as saying that after Hepburn had her big success in *A Bill of Divorce*ment, "She wrote and begged me to find a part for her in the theatre. She wanted to come back to Broadway." He suggested that she play the small role of Leonore Yale in *The Green Bay Tree*. "I thought it would be modest and brilliant for Hepburn to come in and take a small part, subsidiary to the man, in which she would have two or three really marvelous moments. I would have built scenes for her which would have made her tremendous. Hepburn would have been perfect for it." But Hepburn refused. Of the actress, Harris commented, "She didn't have brains or anything like that, she was just a terribly stagestruck girl, with certain odd components which I thought would be successful in the theatre, just by being herself. So I found *The Lake* for her."

The plot of *The Lake* centers on Stella Surrege, an English girl with a domineering mother and an unhappy, beaten father. Stella, in love with a married man,
realizes the futility of this arrangement, and becomes engaged to John Clayne, a kind, understanding young man. Prior to the marriage ceremony, Stella finds herself actually in love with John. As the couple leaves the wedding party to go on their honeymoon, the car in which they are riding crashes and John is thrown into a lake on Stella's estate, a lake which her mother had had built against the futile arguments from members of her family. The bridegroom drowns and in the final scene, Stella, totally distraught over these events, leaves her family in the house to go out to the lake. The question of whether or not she commits suicide is not answered.

Harris hated the play, calling it common, stupid and sentimental. He sent the script to Miss Hepburn who evidently loved it. "From that moment of decision," Harris states "I hated myself. It's the only time in my whole life in the theatre I ever ventured into 'show business,' which is all that The Lake with Katherine Hepburn amounted to." Higham writes that at first Hepburn could not secure a release from RKO to do the production. "She wanted to spend four weeks training with Jed Harris privately, but reluctantly agreed to make another picture, Spitfire." When she left for New York

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95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
in the late fall of 1933, Higham says, "she looked forward to working with Harris and to what she expected to be a triumphant Broadway return." 97

Harris says that stardom had changed Miss Hepburn "from a simple spontaneous girl into someone who acted scenes with self-pity, weeping tears constantly. I found her totally inept." 98 During one particular rehearsal Harris corrected Miss Hepburn rather sharply, whereupon she burst into tears. She ran over to Harris, threw her arms around him and cried, "I could have loved you so." Harris' immediate reaction, he says, was a mixture of embarrassment and pity. Following this episode, he turned over the rehearsals to his stage manager, Worthington Minor. At that point the staging had been virtually completed, and Harris simply did not feel like being in the theatre after that. 99

During the weeks prior to Miss Hepburn's outburst, Harris says, "I fought with her—I begged her to stop posing, striking attitudes, leaning against doorways, putting a limp hand to her forehead, to stop being a big movie star and feel the lines, feel the character. I was trying the impossible, to make an artificial showcase

97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
99 Interview with Jed Harris.
for an artificial star, and she couldn't handle it. Tremendous artificiality!" Then he adds, "I blame myself. I shouldn't have done it."

The Lake received mixed reviews; many critics were taken with Miss Hepburn as a stage presence, but recognized the inadequacy of her abilities as an actress. John Mason Brown said that the play has scant virtues, and "because of Mr. Harris's astute casting and direction and Miss Hepburn's performance, these are so emphasized that they seem to predominate." Arthur Pollock, somewhat more impressed, said that Hepburn "returns a better actress than when she left . . . to gain sudden fame in the movies, and her sensitive playing" and "the direction of Mr. Harris" made the production "almost as satisfying an event as was anticipated." 

Gilbert Gabriel of the New York American states, "Miss Hepburn plays . . . with characteristic vitality, greatly arresting individuality, a shining beauty in those high planes of her quaint face, a quickening litheness in her slim, steel-springing body." He adds,

100 Higham, Kate, p. 60.
"Her native personality is still her chief asset as an actress. Her voice is still her chief worry." John Anderson, too, believed that she displayed "a monotony of voice, which became harshly strident." Other critics echoed this opinion. However, Gabriel seemed generally pleased with the play and the production, commending Harris' good showmanship "in bringing this fine, fond play and this now celebrated player together to make a Broadway holiday."  

Although her review was primarily negative, Allene Talmey of <i>Stage</i> magazine admired Miss Hepburn as she took her curtain calls each night. Indicating perhaps the artificiality which Harris deplored, she states, "Miss Hepburn always stands alone, slim, in her fog-gray robe, her dimly auburn head inclined slightly. Only a sway acknowledges the audience. She does not smile. Hers is an aristocratic, imperial dignity, a Sargent portrait of a great actress of breeding accepting her audience's love. It is the most beautiful and prophetic moment of the evening."  

Several of the less favorable reviews of <i>The Lake</i> included phrases such as "Perhaps we expected too much"


105 Gilbert Gabriel, <i>New York American</i>.

106 Allene Talmey, "The Lake," <i>Stage</i>, Feb. 1934, p. 27.
or "Frankly, neither the play nor the star came up to expectations." Among those expressing this idea was Brooks Atkinson. He further observes that in his opinion, "Miss Hepburn is not a full-fledged dramatic actress yet." 107 Although he admits that "she has a sensitive and remarkably intense personality and an unworldly charm," she nevertheless "has not yet developed the flexibility of first-rate acting and her voice is a rather strident instrument." 108 Joseph Wood Krutch agrees, stating that though Miss Hepburn demonstrates moments of effectiveness in her portrayal, she is "shrill," "metallic," and very often "a spoiled adolescent." 109

Stark Young generally disliked Harris' play and production and soundly enumerated Miss Hepburn's weaknesses as an actress---emotionally, physically and vocally. Nevertheless he was genuinely moved by her presence on the stage, calling her appearance "not so much a performance on an actor's part as an exquisite experience on the part of the audience," with the result being "a beautiful and moving thing." 110 Even with her


108 Ibid.


technical limitations, Young concludes, "Miss Hepburn is one of those people on the stage who are born ready to give it life, just as some actors are trained to kill it."

In reflecting on his production of The Lake and on his relationship with its star, Harris says, "Looking back on the whole episode, I feel I should have been more patient with Miss Hepburn, more considerate. I should have paid more attention to her. . . . She was an imbecile, a damn fool, an idiot, yet I regret I wasn't more patient---there was a barrier of language and feeling I could not cross to reach her."\(^{111}\) Then, moving to the present, he commented that he recently saw Miss Hepburn in The Glass Menagerie on television, "and she was still babbling with a fixed smile on her face, the way she did in The Lake, and I thought 'God! She hasn't changed at all.' I don't want to take everything away from her," Harris continued. "She was sweet, she was well-bred, her face was stunning, people thought she had breeding. But I should never have worked with her, or she with me."\(^{112}\)

After the sixth week of the run of this show, Miss Hepburn wanted out. In order to break her contract, she had to pay $15,000. Higham states, "Kate herself admits

\(^{111}\)Higham, Kate, p. 61.

\(^{112}\)Ibid.
she was a disaster in the role, deserving the horrible reviews and Dorothy Parker's quip that in the play Kate 'ran the gamut of emotions from A to B.'”

Jed Harris' activity in the theatre during 1933 provided him with a temporary, yet superficial, retreat from his inner unrest. His fears about what was occurring in Germany had grown since the end of the preceding decade until they now consumed all of his mental and emotional energies. In his memoirs he writes, "In Europe after the stock-market crash, I had found the time to take a long look at the world and my prognosis was anything but hopeful.” Because, he says, he entertained few illusions about men and institutions, he was not really shocked by the collapse of the market. "But," he adds, "the growing unease that possessed me had nothing to do with the horrors of the Depression.”

Long before Hitler's annihilation of the Jews, Harris, a diligent student of both history and biography, had sensed what would ultimately be the outcome in Europe.

Thus, in 1933 Harris took steps to do what he could to avert the horrors of another war. President Roosevelt had just recognized the Russian government

113Ibid., p. 62.
114Harris, Dance, p. 247.
115Ibid., p. 248.
and the Soviets had opened an Embassy in Washington. Harris contacted the Russian officials and they sent their First Counselor of Embassy, Mr. Neumann, to see him. Harris outlined his idea to Mr. Neumann. He wanted them to bring over, for the season of 1934, what he terms the "flower of the Russian theatre." In succession, he would have presented four weeks of the Moscow Art Theatre, four weeks of Vachtangov Theatre, four weeks of the Kamerny, four weeks of the Meyerhold, four weeks of the Russian Opera, and four weeks of the Bolshoi. The opening performance would be given in Washington, D.C., where seats would cost $100 each, the proceeds of which would go to President Roosevelt's Warm Springs Fund for infantile paralysis.\textsuperscript{116}

Because Mr. Neumann was unable to follow all of Harris' English, the conversation was held in both French and German as well. After listening to the plan, Neumann asked, "What is your mutyif (motive), Mr. Garris?" (H is pronounced G in Russian.)

Harris said that his conventional motive was to bring these wonderful performers to America. "My real motive," he confessed, "is political." He explained that, due to the Russians' failure to pay back the huge debt which the Czarist government owed the United States, 

\textsuperscript{116} The following incident is briefly described by Harris in Watchman, pp. 115-117, and elaborated upon in an interview.
there existed in the Senate a very strong anti-Russian movement. Certainly the congressmen, who would have to be present at the opening performance of each of the Russian companies, would be impressed with what they saw. Harris further stated that if the United States and the Russians were to join together, it would lessen the possibility of the Nazi forces reeking destruction on the whole world.

"Ah-ha! Yes! I see!" replied Neumann. He told Harris he would file a report with the Russian Embassy immediately, but added that he should be patient, for things such as this take time.

Harris noted that all kinds of good will between the Americans and the Russians could result. Magazines would feature Russian fashions, a Russian open box office would be installed in the lobbies of the various theatres in New York where the Russians would perform; many other side benefits would develop out of their appearances. "Je ne suis pas impresario. Je suis regisseur," Harris said. ("I am not an impresario. I am a director.") "Take anyone you like, Morris Gest, for instance," who brought over the Moscow Art Theatre early in the twenties. Harris was not interested in being the one in charge, but merely hoped that his idea could be carried out. "No, Mr. Garris, we want you," responded Neumann.
Two months passed and Harris heard nothing. He went to Europe and while staying in Paris he received a wire at his hotel, addressed to "Honored Artist, Jed Harris," which read, "Mr. Stanislavsky joins me in the hope that your noble program will bear fruit. [signed] Nemerovich Danchenko." Harris, exhilarated, both from the wire and from the fact that the Russians knew exactly where he was staying, for the first time had high hopes that his plan might go through. A few weeks later, he heard there was some difficulty with the Ministry of Arts and with the Ministry of Education. Thereafter he heard no more about his proposal from the Russians. "That was Russian too," he says. "Russian politicians always acted like criminals always anxious not to be found out." Not until 1938 did he learn what really occurred.

At a party, some five years after his idea was introduced, he met Alex Gumberg, the financial representative of the Russian government in this country. When Harris unwound the table to him, Gumberg became furious and determined "to find out why the bureaucracy had floundered on what he considered a magnificent project." Two weeks later Gumberg, who had visited Russia in the interim, met Harris for lunch and explained to him what had happened. The commissars had consulted an American engineer named Cooper who had helped design
the great dam at Dneprostroi. At that time the Russians held any “enginyeer” in great awe and respect. Cooper wondered what the hell good bringing a few artists to America would do. No, it was a stupid idea, he believed. The Russians felt that he, being an engineer, ought to know and thus the whole idea dissolved.

While Gumberg was in Russia, he had seen a file kept on Harris. He reported the description which the Russians had used to characterize the producer: “Fiercely independent. Not interested in politics. Definitely not pro-communist, but a warm friend of the Russian people, who did a very fine production of Uncle Vanya.” Harris smiled as he admitted his pleasure and agreement with the description on file in the Soviet Union. As for his plan to bring over the Russian troupes, Harris says, “I was driven into this political action because I saw what was about to happen.”

In 1934 Harris took up another cause. Although he produced no plays during the year, he still maintained an office with a full staff of employees. On Labor Day he was in bed with a fever at his suite at the Warwick Hotel. Wishing to get some work done, he called his friend at the Empire Theatre, John Ryland, and asked him to go to his office, get some of his papers and bring them.

117 The following incident was given in an interview with Jed Harris.
to him. Mr. Ryland, a large black man, had been the Building Superintendent at the Empire Theatre for many years. He was fast friends with many of the producers and the stars, including Ethel and John Barrymore and John Drew. When he arrived at the hotel, however, Ryland was refused admittance on the elevator, a situation which compelled him to walk thirty-four flights of stairs to Harris' suite. By the time Harris met him, Ryland, then approaching sixty, was exhausted.

Harris heard Ryland's account of what had occurred, got out of bed and phoned the manager of the Warwick to prepare his bill. He would no longer be a tenant. He then phoned the Waldorf Astoria to reserve a suite at the Waldorf Towers, packed his things and went down to check out. "You've heard of my legendary temper," Harris said to me. "Well, when I phoned the manager of the hotel I told him I was going to come down and kill him. When I got to the lobby, I had a temperature of 102° and was covered with sweat. Standing in a pair of pants over my pajamas and robe, I denounced the manager of the hotel, and cursed him, in the presence of a lot of people." After paying his bill, he moved to the Waldorf.

Subsequently Harris went to Mr. Walter White, the President of the NAACP, and with his support filed a suit against the Hearst Corporation, owners of the Warwick,
on behalf of John Ryland. For more than two years the case bounced from one courtroom to another. The story, as reported in one New York newspaper, stated, "The court appears to be having a terrible time making up its mind. More than two years ago the first judge adjourned the trial with a sigh of relief. Last March another judge heard the case and invoked the right of dodging a decision by not deciding it within the fourteen day period allowed for Municipal Court judges. Now another judge has the case under advisement."

Harris explains that the Hearst tactic was to fish around, "hoping the case would come before a judge they could handle. And they had the means to handle any judge in the state of New York," he adds. When Harris and Ryland were finally allowed to testify in what Harris calls an open and shut case of discrimination, the Hearst organization offered no defense. The judge said he would take it under advisement. Months passed and finally the suit was thrown out, without any explanation. The entire effort cost Harris about $1,800, and he says, "once again I got a lesson in how justice is done in American courts." But he had done his best to see that the rights of his black friend were protected, long before such civil rights causes proved popular in this country. After recalling to me the events related

118 Newspaper clipping, Lincoln Center.
to John Ryland, Harris became silent. Then suddenly he buried his head in his hands, and with a voice filled with emotion, said, "Even today, when I think about it, I could just cry. John Ryland was such a good man. So kind. So good."

By this time, Harris was certain that the world as he knew it had ended. He occasionally shared with others his fears about what he visualized to be an eventuality. More often than not, he was met with responses such as "Oh, you're exaggerating." or "It's impossible!" His words were rarely, if ever, taken seriously. Usually they were dismissed as being "highly theatrical."

Achieving no results in moving men to action in behalf of what had now become his obsession, he occasionally returned to the theatre. "After all," he says, "it was something I knew how to do."

On September 20, 1935, Harris introduced Life's Too Short, a comedy by John Whedon and Arthur Caplan, at the Broadhurst Theatre. Variety, whose reviews try to provide a commercial estimate of the success or failure of a play, pinpointed the critical response to Life's Too Short, while indicating its weakness. It states, "As an exhibition of casting and direction first called Heroes Are Born, is of the best, but it is questionable whether it is diversion." 119 Despite

the applause given to Harris' work in directing and cast-
ing, the play lasted only ten performances.

Life's Too Short tells the story of an ordinary office worker during the Depression. Eddie Fowler, working in the claim-adjustment department of a wholesale grocery house, is suddenly laid off. For seven months he endures the financial losses and psychological pressures that accompany such an experience. His reasons for living, his self respect and mental and moral strength, disappear. His wife finally helps him regain his position. But in order to do this, she is almost thrown back into the arms of the man with whom she had an affair. Helen Fowler, up until the time she had met Eddie, was secretary and lover to James Collins, the man who hired Fowler. By the time Eddie regains his job, he has lost his wife. But even this shock is not enough to destroy him. Life is too short, he philosophizes, to let its minor tragedies beat you down.

Burns Mantle, terming the production "poignant," states, "It never has been easy in the theatre to sell the tragedy of frustration. . . . But if it is possible to find a market for a story of defeat, I believe Life's Too Short will reach it. Mr. Harris has done a masterly job, both in casting and directing the play." He

observes that it "held an audience at close attention, both because the story is one that falls into the human interest classification and because Harris' projection of it is pretty close to perfection." Percy Hammond referred to it as "the new season's best play." He adds, Harris, "whose knack in casting the right player in the right role is uncanny, excels himself in Life's Too Short."  

Differentiating between the script and the production, Richard Lockridge of the New York Sun points out, "Mr. Harris's direction is so able as partly to disguise the drama's lack of merit. He has guided it at the perfect tempo; he has chosen a cast which could hardly be improved upon. . . . Mr. Harris has carried his care that performances shall be unexceptionable. Everything, except, of course, the play, is exactly as it should be." Arthur Pollock agrees, when he writes that Harris, by his astute direction, has brought out "everything Life's Too Short has to say, making it, . . . seem a good deal more eloquent than, I should say, it really is."  

Indicating what may have been the real reason for the play's failure at the box office, Pollock notes that *Life's Too Short*, despite its fine production, is "rather depressing . . . as the truth so often is." In 1935, the reality of the Depression was still very vivid in the lives of those New York audiences, and perhaps too painful to be viewed as entertainment.

Disappointed in the play, John Mason Brown mused, "It is somewhat difficult to understand what it is that determined Jed Harris to choose *Life's Too Short* as a play with which he could make his re-entry into the ranks of local producers." Brooks Atkinson was even more baffled by the choice of this play. He calls it "one of the strangest sequences among the current Broadway works of art," stating that "It proceeds like an improvisation." Pleased with the acting, he notes,

As usual, Mr. Harris has hired some excellent actors. John B. Litel as the dazed and shattered office clerk; Leslie Adams as the general manager and philanderer; Priestly Morrison as the fatherly, distinguished head of the firm; Evelyn Varden as the good-hearted cynic of salesmanship; Doris Dalton as the handsome wife into mistress—give performances that arouse immediate enthusiasm.

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In a brief narrative about the producer included in his review, John Anderson says that since the beginning of Jed Harris' career, "it has been possible to distinguish certain marks of his showmanship. In his smash hits and in his flops there have been unmistakable signs of a personal taste and the prestige of a volatile and self-sufficient temperament." Harris' failures, Anderson comments, have often been more revealing than his successes. Now he is totally baffled. He can find no explanation for Harris' selection of this play. He feels the evening was dull, a first for a Jed Harris production. Yet he calls the acting "excellent" and the directing "penetrating."

Expressing an opinion shared by almost all the critics, Robert Garland points to Harris for "much of the piece's effectiveness," adding that this, not even the authors can deny. "Scene after scene is motivated gently but firmly underscored by the producing director. . . ." Despite the critical acclaim given this production, the public did not choose to support it.

In response to what the critics termed the vast


128 Ibid.

gulf between the play and the production, Harris himself reflected, "You ask, why do it? I was struck by the truth and pathos of what was happening to the lower middle class during the depression. And I was vain enough to think that I could make up the deficiencies in the writing with an excellent production." Pausing a moment to think, Harris added, "There are some plays which you can't rationalize as ever being connected with me. They represent my almost total decline of interest in the theatre." Life's Too Short may be one such play; yet it represents a type of effort which reflects Harris' own view of himself in the theatre. "I always regarded myself as a great amateur," he says. "An amateur loves what he does. The professional does it because he makes a living by it, makes money from it. I never did a play because I thought, 'Oh, boy, this will make a lot of money.'" His delight was in the process of turning a vision into a reality. "Sometimes, in the course of a dress rehearsal," Harris continued, "a scene would come to life in the exact image I dreamed of it." At these times, he says, "I would get a wonderful eerie feeling." His search for these rare, special moments in the theatre ultimately proved the magnet by which he was drawn back into the theatre time and time again, even

130 Interview with Jed Harris.

131 Ibid.
in a period which for him was personally so agonizing.

In July of 1936, following the Cape Cod tryouts of Jed Harris' production of *Spring Dance*, a reviewer for the *New York Times* predicted that author Philip Barry and Jed Harris "should have a beautiful little feather with which to tickle a lot of reviewers, come the fall." And *Literary Digest* believed that "*Spring Dance* due in New York in September, would be the first hit of the new season." The writer reveals that Jed Harris, having found a light comedy by two girls from Smith College, called for Philip Barry rather than the original authors, to do the rewriting. "Barry," he says, "must have rewritten everything but the plot theme, because the play now is heralded as 'by Philip Barry, adapted from an idea by Eleanor Golden and Eloise Barrangon'.

During these tryouts, Imogene Coca played the lead of the frustrated college girl about to lose her beaux. And the piece in *Literary Digest* indicated that critics who had seen her performance "forecast a brilliant new young star... In *Spring Dance*," it adds, "Jed Harris has a success in the making. In Imogene

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133"Hit From Cape Cod?" *Literary Digest*, 25 July 1936, p. 19.

Coca he has a potential American Elizabeth Bergner."\textsuperscript{135} Harris picked Miss Coca and was completely taken with her performance, describing her as "utterly delightful. She could make anyone who didn't write wittily seem witty, with that faint note of half mockery when she smiled."\textsuperscript{136} Philip Barry did not share Harris' opinion and put pressure on him to let her go. Since contracts with the Dramatist's Guild permit the author the final say in casting a play, Harris had to give in. Thus, when the play opened at the Empire Theatre on August 25, 1936, Louise Platt appeared in the role originally performed by Imogene Coca. "It broke my heart that she was replaced," says Harris, "because some of Barry's friends didn't think she was pretty enough." Then he added, "Philip Barry was one more example of authors, both good and bad, who hadn't the faintest idea of who to cast, nor any idea of what acting was."\textsuperscript{137}

The response of the New York critics contradicted the successful forecasts of this production. Walter Winchell called \textit{Spring Dance} "fluff with some pleasant dialogue and brisk repartee,"\textsuperscript{138} while Gilbert Gabriel

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{136} Interview with Jed Harris.

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.

termed it "just so much tissue paper around a lot of ill-folded prattle."\textsuperscript{139} And Richard Lockridge depicted Spring Dance as "a harmless little comedy of college life . . . enacted in a rather romping spirit."\textsuperscript{140}

Somewhat more favorably impressed, the critic for the New York Evening Post writes, "The comedy wears thin and seems a bit overdone by the time the third act has arrived, but the college atmosphere is well reproduced and Mr. Harris has collected a good cast of young people. . . .\textsuperscript{141} The New York Evening Journal claimed that the play "remains a surface comedy of minor tricks, with only the gaiety of the chase to commend it.\textsuperscript{142} But it adds, "Mr. Harris has directed it with a great deal of his old-time invention and energy, touching it up with revealing accents and giving it a flexibility of tempo which goes far to relieve the monotony of the telling."

John Mason Brown termed the play "a light comedy, ligher than an eggshell when the egg has been removed."\textsuperscript{143}


\textsuperscript{141}Wilella Waldorf, "Spring Dance a College Comedy at the Empire," New York Evening Post, 26 Aug, 1936.

\textsuperscript{142}John Anderson, New York Evening Post, 26 Aug. 1936.

He expected more from Philip Barry and Jed Harris. Recalling the Napoleonic tradition of Harris, Brown says that sooner or later an Elba, Waterloo or St. Helena may be inevitable. "Fortunately," he writes, "it takes many more than one Waterloo to turn such a dynamic figure as Mr. Harris into the Bonaparte of the Longwood days. Our theatre stands in need of Mr. Harris and the skillful touch he has brought to it." In the case of Spring Dance, Brown states that Harris' direction "bears so few traces of his former wizardry, that one is inclined to believe he must have supervised it from no less a distance than St. Helena." 144

Taking a more positive tone, the reviewer for the New York Times comments that "the Barry antics are the great achievement of Spring Dance," adding, "In casting Jed Harris, the producer, called upon a group of the theatre's young players and on the whole picked them well." 145 A young male in the cast was particularly impressive: "Save special mention for Jose Ferrer, who in a smallish sort of part, disappears with many honors of the evening." 146 Several of the critics noted this new performer in one of his first Broadway appearances.

In contrast to most of the mildly negative reviews

144 Ibid.
146 Ibid.
of this play, the critic for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle was impressed with the entire production. He begins, "If the rest of the season follows the bright pattern of Spring Dance, . . . we are in for a fine old time." Harris has staged the "romp with a skillfully light touch," demonstrating his directorial skills at turning "actors into human beings without sacrificing their dramatic effectiveness." Since Spring Dance, during its tryouts, had uniformly been hailed as a potential success, why did it fail? Harris indicates that the size of the theatre had a significant effect upon this particular production. The tryouts had usually been given in small, intimate playhouses, where the audience was drawn into the frolic of the play's events. The Empire Theatre, according to Harris, virtually swallowed up his production and made it appear much more frivolous than before. Whatever the reason, the play had a run of twenty-four performances, closing before the end of the fourth week.

Two and a half years passed before Jed Harris introduced another Broadway play. His earlier excursions into the theatre and politics no longer held the potential relief from his growing unease about the world.

148 Ibid.
149 Interview with Jed Harris.
situation. Harris says, "I had settled into a state of decathesix, a condition virtually incurable and therefore the equivalent of an annuity for a psychoanalyst." This state, which most people would recognize as extreme apathy, Harris describes as "like a free suit of armour for the 'victim.'" It was as if he had developed a psychological insensitivity or blindness to the horrors which had precipitated his condition. He writes that he was now able to "live with the spectacle of a President of the United States warning one of his daughters to stay away from museums lest she be contaminated by leftists and Jews—and smile. I can even smile at a general in charge of the national defense, earnestly warning an audience of college students that the press of the United States is entirely controlled by Jews." Harris cared little for what was happening around him and even less about himself. In 1937, however, motivated by a concern to help Ruth Gordon gain stature as a serious dramatic actress, Harris brought Ibsen's *A Doll's House* to the Morosco Theatre.

"Jed Harris is back!" announced Arthur Pollock on December 28, 1937. "A good many people wondered what happened to the man who produced *Broadway* and *Coquette.*" He adds, "But wherever he's been he's come back with a

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150 Harris, *Dance*, pp. 258 and 260.
loud report. He presented Ibsen's A Doll's House . . . last night the best production of that play, I should say, that this generation has seen."\(^{151}\) Ruth Gordon enacted Nora "as if Nora were entirely new to the world." Sam Jaffe sensitively portrayed the beaten, pathetically resentful, sad Krogstad, and Paul Lukas gave "knowingly to the role of Dr. Rank a reality and feeling I cannot remember its ever having before." The production's effectiveness, he concludes, make "Jed Harris seem an important young man again. It will be nice if now he stops giving his years to looking for bushels to hide his light under. I can't imagine what of late has made him so bashful."\(^{152}\)

Most of the reviewers who attended the opening night of Harris' A Doll's House enthusiastically responded to both its direction and its cast. But a few faulted the play and several seemed dissatisfied with Ruth Gordon's Nora. Robert Coleman applauded each of the players for outstanding performances, and hailed the Harris revival as "one of the current season's significant offerings," representing Harris, "at his discerning and discriminating best."\(^{153}\) John Gassner called


\(^{152}\)Ibid.

the production "a miracle," adding, "The wonder arises from the excellent ensemble." Ruth Gordon gives "the theatre one of the most glowing examples of virtuosity in many a year." And Jed Harris "returns to the stage with his old-time directorial power—in his casting of the secondary parts and his staging."

But the play disturbs Gassner. "Nora's departure at the end gets us nowhere." He finds it incredulous that "a devoted mother such as Nora would leave her two children, who are so affectingly represented in the Jed Harris production." Finally he reminds the reader that "despite his travels, Ibsen was a provincial Scandinavian in many respects. The type of woman he describes in A Doll's House was assuredly foreign to a majority of Europe's people. . . . It is therefore doubtful whether Nora was ever sufficiently typical; that she was ever a real problem."

Gassner's attitude about Nora and his dissatisfaction with the play itself were voiced by several of the critics. Richard Watts, for example, said that at the present time, "A Doll's House suffers the great danger of being a great deal of excitement about a dead

155 Ibid.
156 Ibid., p. 946.
157 Ibid., p. 847.
issue." And John Mason Brown believed the play to be totally out of date for today's audiences, stating that although "this revival of A Doll's House should prove interesting to students, the Morosco has been temporarily turned into a dramatic museum." In his review, Joseph Wood Krutch mused about Ibsen's intentions when he wrote this play. Sharing the opinion that the play has lost its meaning in today's world, he is unable to resolve certain questions regarding the "rather old-fashioned intrigue involving the forged note." He concludes, "Perhaps . . . the play is not really for all time and ceased to be thoroughly satisfactory when it ceased to have a paralyzing impact and when the lesson, after the way of lessons, came to seem less all-sufficient as it came to be more and more accepted." The consensus of critical opinion was that the female struggle which Nora represents, had by this time been overcome. Perhaps the passage of women's sufferage and the fact that women now held responsible positions in the labor force and even in the professions diminished

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the need for concern over a fragile, dominated female in a domestic environment. Twentieth-century America seemed to have outgrown the problems Ibsen depicted in his play.

Ruth Gordon's performance received mixed reaction from the critics. Gassner states, "She is too childish at the beginning to be representative of the woman of her own time" and "her mannerisms do not always help her performance."161 Richard Watts called Miss Gordon's performance "skillful and distinguished," yet expressed doubts arising from "a certain monotony of voice and gesture, a certain propensity for excessive mannerisms. . . ."162 Crediting Harris with a vigorous and interesting production, he has high praise for his casting, and even the lesser roles he refers to as excellent.

Theatre Arts Monthly recognized the drawbacks in Miss Gordon's playing, yet felt that a certain positive quality resulted from these attributes. "It is the actor's limitations in the part, what she does against her own nature to make Ibsen's heroine a natural woman (which the part insists upon) which gives her playing in this role its peculiar persuasion."163 He concludes, "For a generation that knows Ibsen, the enjoyment of this

161 John Gassner, One Act Play Monthly.
excellent performance of *A Doll's House* seems assured." Burns Mantle referred to Ruth Gordon's Nora as "fluttery," saying, "Hers was a conscious and nervous performance last night, but one that was played with complete honesty." 164

Applauding the production, *Stage* magazine expressed gratitude to each of the players for a fine performance, but specifically "to Ruth Gordon for this inscrutable, darting, glinting portrait. The whang of her hang against her tambourine in the tarantella scene will echo for a long time down these streets; the terror, the child's voice, the blank pauses, the groping hands of her Nora will haunt our theatre's legend." 165 Then the writer adds, "Double thanks to Sam Jeffe for a burning, tortured Krogstad, for giving the evening its highest moment of illumination...."

George Jean Nathan, the only critic totally displeased with the production and the performance, writes, "The whole enterprise, in short, not only makes Ibsen roll over in his grave, but makes him roll so far out of it that, when and if they dig up Henry Arthur Jones, they will probably find him there too, to say nothing of a number of the actresses who have played Nora and


165 "A Doll's House," *Stage*, 1938, 55.
have rolled in from various parts of the world."166

Unlike Nathan, Stark Young asserts, "If Ibsen had had the gift of foresight into the future . . . he would have seen at the Morosco a production that is precisely what the Ibsen tradition needs, the Ibsen problem needs, and the Ibsen audience, implicit in so many of us and in the serious theatre needs. Precisely."167 And Literary Digest writes, "If Henrik Ibsen has a vantage point from which to gaze down on Broadway, he must be pleased with Jed Harris' loving and brilliant revival of his masterpiece, . . . In the hands of Mr. Harris' fine cast . . . the master's genius is moving."168

The review by New York Times critic Brooks Atkinson begins, "Ruth Gordon slammed the door on Ibsen's A Doll's House at the Morosco last evening. Although no one was shocked or astounded, a good many people were profoundly impressed, for Miss Gordon is a remarkable actress."169 He continues, "Under Jed Harris's management she appears in one of the finest Ibsen

166 George Jean Nathan, "Theatre Week," Newsweek, 10 Jan. 1938, p. 28.


revivals we have had in this neighborhood in years. None of the parts is wasted or carelessly played, and none of the play is feebly explored." Unlike many of his colleagues, he believed that Miss Gordon is at her best during the last half of the play, "when doom begins to encircle this bird-like wife...." At this point, she goes right to the heart of her role: "Nora driven nearly out of her mind with apprehension; Nora quietly coming into her own inheritance of personal pride and taking command of the situation---these are the portions of the play that Miss Gordon has completely mastered." He concludes, "In every respect, this is a notable revival, incisively directed by Mr. Harris."170

Ruth Gordon has not written specifically about the production of A Doll's House. But she has said that perhaps her greatest personal triumph in the theatre, her performance at the Old Vic in Wycherley's The Country Wife, given during the 1935-36 theatrical season in London, was due to the suggestions given her by Jed Harris. She recounts how desperately she sought to find a reality in a role that seemed unplayable to modern audiences. When Harris arrived at her apartment one day, she reported to him:

"I'm a terrible trouble! It's the part. I don't know how to do it."170

Ibid.
"How are you doing it?" Harris asked.

"I know it's not right, but until I know how, I have to do it some way, so I'm doing my Church Mouse /1931/.

"Oh, my God."

Harris' response was like a punch below the belt, Miss Gordon writes. They discussed the rehearsals, and the director Harry Gribble. At this point, Miss Gordon was to do the play at Westport. (It was because of her success in this production during the summer of 1935 that she was later invited to perform with the Old Vic.) Speaking of the director, Miss Gordon said, "He's no good, but I'm worse.' 'Why?' Harris said. He looked at me, astounded. 'It's perfectly simple. She's from the country.'

He then proceeded to make clear what she should do with the role.

Prior to her performance in London, she recalls, "Important, Jed had warned, to show the contrast of filthy London streets and grand drawing rooms, the pox-ridden poor and the satin-clad, lace-frilled fops whose carriages splashed mud on beggars. Satin and cockroaches, frippery and neglect the keynote. "When Wycherley wrote it,' said Jed, 'everyone knew that. You have to remind them.'"

She used his suggestions,

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172Ibid.

173Ibid., p. 377.
she says, with great results. She had not only asked for his advice, but was meticulous in following it.

Harris was well aware of Miss Gordon's limitations as a performer—her artificiality and her vocal inflexibility. In fact, he says for his production of *A Doll's House* he had wanted to get Louise Rainer to play the lead, not Miss Gordon. As for the play's ending, Nora's slamming the door and leaving, Harris says it was a "cold-blooded theatrical thing on Ibsen's part." What was supposed to be sensational, Nora's departure, he adds, "was really the work of a theatrical vulgarian." 174

When *A Doll's House* tried out in Chicago, Harris remembers receiving a phone call from Alexander Woollcott, who talked for an hour and a half about the excellence of his production. "You've put all the agony of life into this production," Woollcott exclaimed. "I'm speechless. Whatever is wonderful and rare, you've put it into *A Doll's House*. I've seen this play dozens of times, and it's as if I'm seeing it for the first time." 175

As a result of his strong feeling about Harris' show, Woolcott asked the local New York CBS station to give him an uninterrupted half hour of broadcast time, under

174 Interview with Jed Harris.

his own name, to discuss the production. Harris didn't listen to the broadcast, he says, but one newspaper account states that it was presented on January 20, 1938; Woollcott "danced up and down the sky" over the production. 176

Harris' play had other supporters. Next door to the Morosco Theatre, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontain were performing in *Idiot's Delight*. Each night at their curtain calls, they made a brief speech about *A Doll's House*, exclaiming over its beauty and urging audiences not to miss it. 177 And Arthur Miller, who attributes his chief literary obligation to Henrik Ibsen, states that until the time he began *All My Sons* (1945), "only once in my life had I been truly engrossed in a production—when Ruth Gordon played in the Jed Harris production of *A Doll's House*." 178

Thus, after a year and a half's absence from the theatre and more than four years from his last big hit, Harris once again proved his uncanny ability to draw both critical acclaim and popular support for his efforts. His production of *A Doll's House* played to almost capacity crowds for a run of 144 performances.

176 Newspaper clipping, Lincoln Center.
177 Interview with Jed Harris.
On February 4, 1938, only six weeks after his opening of *A Doll's House*, Jed Harris introduced Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* to New York audiences. Harris' relationship with this play developed out of circumstances similar to his other plays during this decade. He was visiting in London when a friend there notified him that Thornton Wilder was trying to reach him from Switzerland. Speaking to Harris by phone, Wilder told him about a new play he was anxious for him to read. They agreed to meet in Paris, where the playwright handed Harris the hand-written manuscript of *Our Town*. He read it and immediately agreed to produce it. Things moved very quickly thereafter. Studying the script on the return voyage from Europe, Harris had the production planned by the time he reached New York. Long before a type-written copy of the play was completed, the cast and crew for *Our Town* had been selected. Harris says, "I was so busy casting it, I just didn't have time to turn loose of the manuscript long enough to have it typed."\(^{179}\)

Today, almost forty years after the first production of what has since become a classic in the American theatre, it is difficult to imagine that it had anything but a triumphant history. But such was not the case. Wilder was angry and dissatisfied with Jed

\(^{179}\)Interview with Jed Harris.
Harris' production, a few critics rejected it and large
audiences were not to be found for it.

The play originally opened in Princeton, New Jersey,
where Harris' stage manager, Edward Goodnow, says that
the production was all one could wish for. It received
great ovations and people walked up on stage to shower
their congratulations. But by far the most excited
person of all, "he writes, "was Wilder." "I could hear
him screaming over the heads of the people who had come
up to express their admiration to Jed: 'You simply do
not understand my play!'" This exact production, in
every detail, Goodnow states, was the show which opened
in New York less than two weeks later.

Critics generally hailed the production as a work
of artistic beauty. But because of its experimental form,
they devoted most of their reviews to an explanation of
how the play was staged. Richard Lockridge, for
example, describes the opening moments of the play.
"The play is acted on a bare stage, and Frank Craven,
casual and easy in old clothes and old manners, is the
commentator. The house lights are still on when he first
saunters across the stage and begins to put chairs into
place." 181 During the final act, he says, "'our town'

180 Harris, Watchman, p. 149.

becomes, symbolically, our earth and our life on it and the author begins to suspect that he is touching the garments of eternal truth. This I doubt very much. . . .\textsuperscript{182}

Calling \textit{Our Town} "a simple and compassionate chronical of a small New England community," Richard Watts shared Lockridge's view that the third act seemed "more of a stunt than a wise philosophic contribution."\textsuperscript{183} And the critic for the \textit{New York Post} states, "In the content of Mr. Wilder's play . . . this reviewer was disappointed."\textsuperscript{184} John Anderson was even less impressed. Harris, he says, "would avoid the common illusion of the theatre by eliminating the scenery and properties, but he would grab for it in every gesture and inflection of his players, and in a whole catalogue of off-stage noises." This exchange, he feels, is just the replacement of one brand of hokum for another.\textsuperscript{185}

In spite of these somewhat negative views, most critics found both beauty and excellence in this

\textsuperscript{182}\textit{Ibid.}.


production. "Staged without scenery and with the curtain always up," writes Brooks Atkinson, "Our Town has escaped the formal barrier of the modern theatre into the quintessence of acting, thought and speculation." As for the staging, he continues, "Jed Harris has appreciated the rare quality of Mr. Wilder's handwork and illuminates it with a shining performance. Our Town is, in this column's opinion, one of the finest achievements of the current stage." Like most of the critics, Atkinson spent the major portion of his review attempting to explain the play and its purpose. However, he specifically praised several members of the cast for their performances in this "hauntingly beautiful play." The four actors playing the parents of Emily and George, he states, "play with an honesty that is enriching," and Frank Craven as the Stage Manager, "plays with great sincerity and understanding, keeping the sublime well inside his homespun style." But John Craven and Martha Scott as the youthful center of the play, he adds, "turn youth into tremulous idealization, some of their scenes are lovely past all enduring." Finally, he notes, "With about the best script of his career in his hands, Mr. Harris has risen nobly to the occasion. He has

187 Ibid.
reduced theatre to its lowest common denominator without resort to perverse showmanship."

In a brief chapter about Our Town in his book Broadway Scrapbook, Atkinson gives additional plaudits to this producer. After first delineating the unique and rigid form set down by Thornton Wilder in his play, Atkinson writes, "As producer and director, Jed Harris has had the imagination and daring to go through the production on those severe terms; and with remarkable artistic integrity he has used the performance to express the play without falling back on showmanship."188

The critic for Theatre World magazine called Our Town, in Harris' hands, "an extraordinary achievement and a theatrical masterpiece for those who can appreciate experimental drama at its best and do not object to working for their entertainment---in other words, using their imagination...."189 And John Gassner termed Harris' staging as simple and as fluent as the writing of this play.190

Seven of the leading players were singled out by reviewer Robert Coleman. "These are performances to

send the pulses racing, to put lumps in the throat," he says. "You will search far for a more tender and touching, more lovely and compassionate characterization than Miss Scott's Emily Webb."\(^{191}\)

Jed Harris says that George Jean Nathan detested Thornton Wilder. If this is true, it may help to explain Nathan's review of the play. And his review was just that, a review of the play, not of the production. No mention is made of the actors, their performances, nor of any aspect of the production as given by Harris. "Granting that there is a certain theatrical novelty in applying the age old Chinese stage devices to a play about a small American town," he states, "Mr. Wilder cheats in the use he makes of such skeletonized drama."\(^{192}\) He lists the various phony devices which he believes Wilder has employed, and then strikes a final blow: "In Our Town there is no single achievement of character drawing, no single memorable line of dialogue, and the philosophy of death... amounts in sum to the remarkable cerebration that while life is turbulent death is serene and that the dead wouldn't care to come back if they could..." Parenthetically, he adds, 


"The exhibit, in short, remains fundamentally a stunt."\textsuperscript{193}

The reviewer for \textit{Variety}, making a rather uncharacteristic admission, writes, "'Box office' criticism has a tough one in \textit{Our Town} because its simple, sincere, philosophical and literary nature does not suggest the commercial wallop that its beautifully written, staged and acted fine points warrant."\textsuperscript{194} Calling this play "an artistic return to the soil," the writer continues, "In short, the very qualities that makes \textit{Our Town} a fine manuscript make it an uncertain theatrical property."

The performance of several actors is noted with enthusiasm, while that of Frank Craven is compared to the play, "starkly simple and wholly powerful."\textsuperscript{195} The influence of Jed Harris, he says, is notable throughout the production, a show which "has been thought out, planned, timed and balanced with canny theatrical sense."

Stark Young comments that the picture presented in the third act of \textit{Our Town} "is a stage image that is unforgettable. This scene was touched with the pathos of all familiar recollection, with the elegiac anecdote of Mr. Masters' \textit{Spoon River}, and now and then with the

\textsuperscript{193}\textit{Ibid.}


\textsuperscript{195}\textit{Ibid.}
The irony of Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead.*\(^{196}\) The scenes before the wedding, which take place between the girl with her father and the boy with his mother, Young calls "perfect in its length, and "beautiful and poignant." He credits Harris with avoiding "the coy, Yellow Jacket effect of knowing archness and naivete that has become so threadbare." In all, he states, "My impression was that *Our Town* had something it wanted to do and did it, something it wanted to say and said it."\(^{197}\)

*Our Town*, given the Pulitzer Prize for 1938, continued to play for 159 performances in New York before going on tour. Surprisingly, it rarely played to a full house and its producer never received his money back for the production costs until after he sold the film rights. Even with a cast of fifty-five, costume costs were kept under $1,000. But Harris spent almost $30,000 in electrical equipment on the production.

Harris has much to say about this play, its author and his production. Of the play, he says, "The critics say it was phony, and it is phony. *Our Town* is far from an interesting play. It was an academic, scholarly cribbing from all sorts of places."\(^{198}\) He

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\(^{197}\)Ibid.

\(^{198}\)The following comments by Harris on *Our Town* are from an interview with Jed Harris.
even agrees with George Jean Nathan's statement that there is no interesting line in the play. He views all of the characters as stereotypes—the good mother, the good father, the good children. But why, if he held such a low opinion of the play, did he do it? "What I loved," Harris comments as he leaned forward in his chair, "was the opportunity for me to do something like a free hand drawing. How I welcomed it, if only to get away from all the usual trappings that go into the realistic theatre. I welcomed every difficulty that the play imposed."

One such difficulty in this original staging of *Our Town* was the staging of the scene in the church. Wilder had the choir members merely walk out on the stage and sit down. Harris, trying to solve this awkward entrance, sat in the front row of the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, lighting the show, with his feet propped against the railing of the orchestra pit. Suddenly it occurred to him. He ordered packing crates to fill in the bottom of the pit. A black cloth was hung over the railing and narrow benches were installed behind the cloth, to facilitate the actors' rising during the scene. "When the choir master came out," Harris said, "the audience was shocked to see the choir suddenly appear from out of nowhere, in full view." What this play does, Harris added, is "make the
theatre what we all thought the theatre should be when we were children---a place of magic."

Probably an unknown fact to anyone today is that Harris was responsible for one of the most delightful scenes in this play. In the original manuscript, Wilder had written more than one scene in the boy's house on the day of the marriage, but none in the girl's. "You've got to get me over to the girl's house," Harris told the playwright. "I can't," Wilder replied. "He's not supposed to be there. A boy is not supposed to be at the girl's house on her wedding day." "That's just it. That's the point of the whole scene," Harris said. "He's not supposed to be there." He then explained to Wilder how the scene should proceed. "Oh," said Wilder, "I see what you mean."

Harris' feelings for Wilder are not warm. Long before Wilder's outburst at the Princeton opening, Harris had had to contend with what he describes as Wilder's pompous attitude. He recounts his experience of the very first reading of the play with his cast. "I sat there, my eyes half open, not listening to the actors," he says, "while the play was being read for the first time. The reading was for them, not for me." About eighty per cent of the cast had never read the play, and most of them sat with a small sheet of paper in their hands, with only their cues and their lines on
"All of a sudden," Harris says, "I felt a look of panic in their faces." He could not understand why this wave of terror had appeared, and after the reading was completed, he asked his assistant stage manager, "Do you know what's happened?" His assistant answered, "Mr. Wilder is sitting behind you, to your right, and every time an actor reads a line badly, he shakes his head, indicating his disapproval." Harris was astounded that Wilder "should be such a fool." He then called Wilder over to him and said, "You understand this was not a rehearsal. Most of the cast have never read the play. This reading of the script is just to let them know what the play is about. And here you are, showing disapproval. Most of these actors are on two weeks contracts and know that they can be released within the first five days. Many of them have taken jobs to get off the streets, and many are much better actors than the roles they are playing." Harris continued, "This is not a school room where students are reciting, like you're accustomed to. You could be a problem and I think it would be in your best interests to stay the hell away from here until the actors are on their feet." Wilder felt wounded. "Well, if you want me to go," the playwright responded. Harris assured him that was not the question. His main concern was for his cast. At this point Wilder swept out of the theatre and didn't come
back until the tenth day of rehearsal.

Upon his return to the theatre, almost two weeks after Harris asked him to leave, Wilder's response to the first run-through has been recorded in an earlier chapter of this study. On this occasion there was another guest in the audience, one who had been sneaked into the theatre without the knowledge of any of the actors. It was Brooks Atkinson, with whom Harris had had lunch that day at the Harvard Club. "After the rehearsal," Harris writes, "I let him out of the side door. His eyes were wet but all he said was, "You have spoiled a great opening night for me." 199

Goodnow relates another interesting episode about Wilder. He says, "Now here is the odd part of the business about Wilder. Violently dissatisfied as he obviously was (and for what reason I don't know to this very day) Wilder came all the way out to California a few years later and begged Jed to do Skin of Our Teeth." 200 Goodnow was working with Harris at the time and says Harris refused to do it. "Nor has he ever told me why he didn't do it," he adds. Harris says his answer is simple. He just did not want to have anything further to do with Wilder.

199 Harris, Watchman, p. 154.

200 Ibid., p. 150.
In January of 1944, Jean Dalrymple asked Harris if he would revive Our Town for the City Center in New York. He agreed, and recruited almost all of the original cast. Frank Craven was ill, so the part of the Stage Manager was played by actor-playwright Marc Connelly. Miss Dalrymple writes, "Our Town opened to become City Center's first unanimously acclaimed artistic triumph. The replacement for Frank Craven's son, John, playing the role of George, made a particular success; he was Montgomery Clift."\(^{201}\) Marc Connelly's performance was highly praised and he, along with the entire company, subsequently gave a successful run of the play in London.

Connelly, speaking of Jed Harris, states, "Harris has a wonderful editorial mind, and his direction of Broadway, Coquette and other productions sparkled with his inventive imagination."\(^{202}\) Referring to Our Town, he notes, "In the thirties he helped Thornton Wilder turn a structurally weak script into a masterpiece. . . Harris could also be one of the gayest companions. Until 1946, when I went with him to London to be in his production of Our Town, I spent many happy hours with

\(^{201}\) Dalrymple, September Child, p. 227.

Harris says that of all the compliments ever paid him or his production of Our Town, the highest was from actor, director and film director Elliot Nugent. Nugent told Harris that several weeks after seeing his production, he and his wife were motoring through Maine on a brief vacation. They drove into the town square of a small Maine village. "Isn't this just like Our Town?" his wife said to him. "Yes, it certainly is," Nugent replied. "It is our town." In telling the story to Harris, Nugent said, "We must have driven another sixteen miles before my wife reminded me, 'But we didn't see the town in Our Town.' 'My God, you're right,' I told her." In remembering this incident, Harris says, "That was the power of the play—to make you see what wasn't there."204

From 1929 through 1939 Harris' career became ambiguous, seemingly irresolute and at times confused. "The few plays I did in the thirties of significance," Harris says, "were those that I really wanted to do. As mentioned earlier, they were Uncle Vanya, The Green Bay Tree, A Doll's House and Our Town. "They meant more to me than those hits of the twenties, even though they

203 Ibid., p. 155.

204 Interview with Jed Harris.
made little if any profit."

Reflecting upon his despair during this period, Harris recently said, "I spent this whole decade in blank terror. That period represents my whole malaise about Hitler. I never thought America was a bulwark against the Nazis and I thought I might end up dead or in a concentration camp. But what depressed me even more than what the Nazis were doing was the fatuousness, gutlessness and apathy of the big powers who sat and watched what was going on." As for his work in the theatre, "I felt ashamed to be providing entertainment for people who were supine, accepting of what happened in Germany, saying, 'Well, it'll all blow over. You're exaggerating what this is.' I've never gotten over this at all. How our government or any other government refused to intervene in behalf of the Jews who were exterminated. I've never gotten over it."205

In 1939 Jed Harris moved to California. He would not return to Broadway until 1943.
CHAPTER V

Jed Harris’ frame of mind, so acutely disturbed during the thirties, altered little during the next decade. By this time, however, he was sure that his career in the theatre was over. By 1930, at the age of thirty, Harris writes, “For me the theatre as an adventure was finished.”¹ In talking to me of this break in his career, Harris quickly commented, “That’s not so unusual. Do you know how old Sheridan was when he wrote his greatest play? Twenty four! By the time he was thirty, he had quit the theatre for good.”²

From his 1933 production of Our Town through his final Broadway show in 1956, a period of seventeen years, Jed Harris produced only ten plays during eight theatrical seasons. Of these ten, Harris himself says he had only two real successes. Though from a financial standpoint this may be true, from a critical standpoint it is not. At least half of Harris’ productions were critically acclaimed. And his directing was commended in all but one of the remaining five. His interest in the theatre may have waned. His talent and perception remained as keen as ever. But a man as

¹Harris, Dance, p. 246.

²Interview with Jed Harris.

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intelligent, as aware and as sensitive as Harris, having once been shattered by the devastating occurrences in Hitler's Germany, never could overcome the effects of this shock upon his life.

Between 1938 and 1942 Harris lived in Hollywood. While there, he researched, wrote and completely prepared a film to produce. Entitled War Is Hell, the movie spoofed war and the military. Just as he was about to go into production, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The whole attitude of the country toward his subject made the project impossible at that time. Harris was forced to abandon it. After that, he worked on a couple of other movie scripts. He also maintained contact with several of his old friends from New York, since many of them had been drawn to California to work. It was out of one such friendship that he was to change his course and return to Broadway.

As Harris related to me the events surrounding his production of Dark Eyes, which he would introduce early in 1943, I began to share his belief that some of the strangest and most interesting aspects of a production are never seen by an audience. One afternoon early in 1942, Ben Hecht called Harris and invited him to his house to hear two Russian actresses read a comedy they

3 The events leading up to the production of Dark Eyes were related in an interview with Jed Harris.
had just written about three Russian actresses. Though Harris had no interest in hearing anyone read any play, Hecht was insistent. Harris finally agreed to come. That evening, actresses Elena Miramova and Eugenie Leontovich read their play called Love Is Not a Potato. "It wasn't a question of my listening to them," Harris comments. "All I had to do was to turn off my hearing aid. From time to time I would catch a few lines, but most of the time I just sat there with my hearing aid switched off."

After the actresses left, Hecht told Harris, "I think Rose [his wife] and I could put this into shape."

"Fine," Harris replied. "Do you want any help from me?"

"No!" said Rose, very positively. Then in what Harris describes as a surprising show of self-confidence, Hecht's wife launched into an elaborate monologue of how she and Hecht would do all the work and then show the play to Harris. "I hand't the faintest interest in the play," Harris says. "I thought it was poisonous." Following this brief exchange, Harris went home and forgot about it.

Several weeks later Hecht called him and began cursing the Russian actresses. "They don't like what we've written," he told Harris. Though sympathetic, Harris had no real words of encouragement. Within a few days, however, Elena Miramova called him and asked
if he would at least read their script. Yes, he said, if they sent it to him. He read it and believed that they then had a little less than one-third of a final product. Rewriting would be imperative. But he added, "Under no circumstances would I work with these people — the Russian actresses."

Thus he first went to Hecht to see if he would be willing to work with him. They would need only about ten days to finish the job, he said. Though very tempted, Hecht said there was no way he could keep Rose from finding out. "It seems Ben was trying to pay Rose back for some little infidelity," Harris explained, "and he had evidently promised to write a play with her to make up for it."

Having dinner with his friend Nunnally Johnson that evening, Harris asked him if he would be interested in working on the play. After reading the script, Johnson agreed. At that point Harris arranged with the authors to have Johnson be their collaborator, and receive one third of the royalties. Since he was working full time at Twentieth Century Fox, Johnson could only work at night. "We had completed two acts working ten nights," Harris says. "Nunnally would sit at a typewriter and I would dictate."

One night while working on the play, Johnson told Harris that he had talked about the play with Joe Schenk,
a top executive at Twentieth Century Fox. "I think Joe is interested in backing it," Johnson said. "Why don't you give him a call." When Harris called Schenk, he received word that Schenk wanted him to drive up to Arrowhead Springs to discuss the project. "I met Joe Schenk in a Turkish bath," Harris continued. "We sat there, completely naked, and Schenk agreed for Twentieth Century Fox to back the show."

Shortly thereafter Harris flew to New York to begin casting and rehearsals. "The play was east to cast," Harris says. Since the authors were both Russian actresses, they were already assured of their roles. For the third actress, Harris cast another Russian, a friend of the authors. Other than that, the roles were fairly ordinary types which proved no problem to the director. Johnson arrived in New York a few days later; yet he never came around to help finish the rewriting. "He stayed drunk," Harris added, "all the time he was in New York. So I would write one scene for act three each day and my secretary would type it up."

During rehearsals one day Miss Leontovich asked Harris, "Mester Harrees, eef you don't write the third act, how are we ever going to learn eet?" "All of the cast just stared at her," Harris said to me. "After all, she was supposed to be the co-author of the play."

Harris explained that Miss Miramova had no money and Miss
Leontovich, who was quite rich, practically took her in and often fed her. Evidently, Miramova wanted to repay her friend for her generosity and therefore listed her as co-author. Though Harris admits he wrote or dictated practically all of the rewriting, he received only ten percent of the royalties. "Why didn't you just rewrite the play all by yourself?" I asked him. "Well, at that time," he replied, "I just didn't think of myself as a writer."

The play had a terrible time on the road, Harris says. "I was ready to abandon it in Baltimore. The trouble was Miss Leontovich. She was terrible! She was illiterate—a horrible, stupid woman!" She couldn't speak English," Harris says, "yet all during rehearsals she kept a little Russian book inside her script." Because of the problems with this actress, Harris postponed the opening from Monday to Friday night. During those five days he rehearsed Miss Leontovich "over, and over and over again. I worked with her like one works with a puppet, trying to manipulate the strings. It wasn't a question of acting. I was just trying to get her not to drag down the show."

When Dark Eyes opened on January 14, 1943, critics were anxiously waiting to see what results this famed producer would have after his long absence from the theatre. According to George Jean Nathan, Harris had,
for the past four years, "sought refuge" in Hollywood. "In that remote slum," Nathan writes, Harris "busied himself giving our interviews loftily avowing that he was altogether too good for the theatre, that the theatre and its audiences had become too uncivilized and degraded for a genius like himself, that the playwrights, even the best of them, had all gone to pot... and that the critics... were a congress of morons... ."

Apparently, these denunciations did little more than whet the curiosity of those professionals who had been decried. For when Harris announced that he was returning to Broadway, it was "more or less logical, or at least human," Nathan says, that the announcement should be greeted, especially by critics, with suppressed grins.

Axes were mentally sharpened; Roget was combed for synonyms for decline, collapse, awful and terrible; and "Back to Hollywood!" was appetizingly rolled on the aggregate tongue. Came the night of the prodigal's state return. The curtain rose and for the first fifteen minutes you could hear the I-told-you-so's through the theatre... Then—bang!—something happened suddenly Harris's old, early exceptional talent in direction became manifest and for the rest of the evening the house was the redeemed chanticleer's own.

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5Ibid., p. 222.
Another reviewer describes Harris and his critics after that opening night. "There are a good many people who are not fond of Jed Harris, but this dark man of the theatre has so lofty an opinion of himself that he can well afford to ignore the gibes of his envious detractors." After such a successful opening, he continues, "The anti-Harris society can find little to cheer about these days."  

Looking back on previous Harris plays, such as Uncle Vanya or The Inspector General, several of the critics noted the producer's affinity for the Russians. John Anderson begins, "Though there used to be an old Broadway saying that if you scratched a Russian you would find Jed Harris, times changed and reports went out that Mr. Harris had combed the last Cossack out of his beard. At the Belasco last night this proved fortunately untrue, for Mr. Harris has brought to town a gay, foolish, amiably absurd and somehow gallant and beguiling comedy called Dark Eyes." A New York Times writer responded to Harris' past in a similarly affectionate manner: "The Harris affinity for the Russians


is one of Broadway's most bravely sentimental relationships, and while in his less romantic moments he may put forth an Our Town or The Green Bay Tree, the sound of a soft voice hissing a series of consonants brings him from hiding to show quite clearly that the passion has been only temporarily scotched and is not dead. Thus Mr. Harris is normal again, and with Dark Eyes as the case in point everything is all right."

Dark Eyes centers on the lively adventures of three Russian actresses attempting to secure backing for a play they have written about three Russian actresses. Adrift in New York, and trying to escape the consequences of having written their landlord a hot check prior to their eviction, the three refugees are desperate. A friend comes to the rescue by inviting them to the Long Island home of his fiance, an average American family, where they in turn, entertain the grandmother, obtain the needed financial backing from the father, console the son when the air force rejects him, accept and reject love, even though it may not have been offered, and mistake peach brandy for poison during an emotional suicide scene. According to one critic, "These unexpected scenes of emotional violence are the

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Although the press was divided in its reception of the script, no such ambivalence was expressed toward the director and his efforts. Stark Young began his review, "Dark Eyes has the credit of bringing Mr. Jed Harris back to the theatre as producer and director." Another reviewer noted, "After an absence of almost five years one of the theatre's most successful entrepreneurs returned to Broadway last week and scored a hit." Howard Barnes of the New York Herald Tribune stated, "Under the crafty manipulations of Jed Harris, who has been too long absent from the theatre, the script affords a rich fund of laughter. . . . There could scarcely have been a better treatment of the material at hand. Both in his production and his staging Harris has lavished his brilliant showmanship on Dark Eyes." During a theatre season filled with Russian plays, Lewis Nichols commends Harris for going beyond the mere introduction of a type of play. "Mr. Harris did more," Nichols writes, "for he brought to the Forties a very engaging,

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entertaining and charming play that is beautifully directed and acted to the last line in it. . . . In directing, Mr. Harris has followed his old scheme: no waste motion but plenty of motion. Dark eyes definitely are twinkling." Even the reviews which found fault with the play credit Harris with "expert," "exuberant," and "spirited" direction.

Contrasting the play with the performance, the critic for Theatre Arts called the script "little more than a three act charade, but one so disarmingly performed by the three Russian actresses that its extreme tenuousness is forgiven." Variety also lauded director Harris for having "the right idea in engaging Eugenie Leontovich, Elena Miramova and Ludmilla Toretzka." Calling the acting "splendid," Lewis Nichols of the New York Times, writes, "Mr. Harris has taken his chance and as a reward has come up with a comedy that is warm, human, funny and charming." In

14 Ibid.
conclusion, he states, "Try as he wishes to comb them out of his hair, Mr. Harris always finds the Russians stealing back. It is a good thing too. This time it improves the friendly state of the theatre." Dark Eyes ran for 174 performances, and once again brought Harris into the focus of Broadway discussions.

Harris recalled many of the delightful scenes in this play for me. One of these, he says, drew an astonishing show of solemnity from the audience when two of the actresses decide to commit suicide. Their poison, carefully wrapped in a small flask, is later discovered to be nothing more than peach brandy. They are not aware of this fact, however, and seriously believe they will soon die. As they prepare for the eventuality, many hilarious actions and observations spring up. For example, they decide to arrange themselves elegantly on the sofa, so as not to be found in some crude state of disarray when they are discovered dead. After about fifteen minutes of waiting and talking, one of them says, "But darling, shouldn't we be dead by now?" The other responds, "Don't forget. We are Russians. It takes a long time to kill us off." At this point, Harris describes the audience's response. They laughed. Then in unison, the entire audience

stood silently at attention. "I didn't attend the opening night," Harris says. "So when I heard about it I had to go and see for myself. I went the second night. The same thing happened—they laughed, then stood at attention. Such was the effect of Russian heroism at that time of the war." He explained to me that the Russians lost about a half a million men in the Battle of Stalingrad, which was then taking place. "They were the heroes of the war at that time," he continues, "stopping the German and Japanese forces from taking all of Europe and Asia. I know it's hard to believe," Harris added, "because usually after an audience laughs, there is a release of emotion". But in this case, the feeling was so strong the audience was physically moved to its feet.20

In the season following the success of *Dark Eyes*, Jed Harris introduced *The World's Full of Girls*, an adaptation by Nunnally Johnson of Thomas Bell's novel *Till I Come Back to You*. Opening at the Royale Theatre on December 6, 1943, *The World's Full of Girls* received just as poor a reception as the other dramatizations Harris had thus far attempted. His work as producer and director provoked several positive comments, yet the weaknesses in the script over-shadowed almost all of his efforts.

20Interview with Jed Harris.
Reviewer Louis Kronenberger began, "I wish I could report that The World's Full of Girls is a successful play, for it is full of pleasant things, touched with both likeable humor and a feeling for people, and free from the shoddiness that too often creeps into plays that are successful." Blaming the hazards in dramatizing any novel for the stage, Kronenberger laments the fact that Johnson's adaptation was "diffused and under-developed." Nevertheless, he adds, "Mr. Harris' direction is spirited and expert and there are some very good performances." Lewis Nichols agrees, stating, "despite Jed Harris's usual professional direction and good playing, there remains the feeling that as a visit to the theatre, the evening at the Royale has not been completely successful." And John Chapman reported that "It is well cast and well directed by Mr. Harris."

Most of the critics were less benign. The reviewer for the New York Sun said of The World's Full of Girls,


22 Ibid.


"Harris needn't have bothered. In fact, after spending two hours watching it slowly unfold, we find it a little hard to imagine why he did." Robert Garland feels "There's just no point to the play"; nevertheless, "a not uncelebrated cast does what it can . . . under Jed Harris' usually distinguished guidance. . . ." And the reviewer for the New York Post says, "there isn't any play. . . . Mr. Harris, however, has gone right ahead directing as if a play were there. . . ." Other reviewers were quick to point out failures in both the play and the direction; failures which no doubt were responsible for a run of only nine performances.

Of this production, Harris comments, "It was based on a book Nunnally Johnson read. We'd just had Dark Eyes. I didn't think much of the play, but I had committed myself to Johnson," whom Harris acknowledges as his best friend throughout his years in the theatre. "The World's Full of Girls represents my complete disenchantment with the theatre," he continued, "but it had no right to be done."  


28 Interview with Jed Harris.
Two years passed before Harris returned to the theatre. When I asked him what he was doing during this period, he said, "I was just terribly unhappy. I didn't know what the hell to do with myself. For five years I was preoccupied with the war. My radio was going twenty-four hours a day." Remaining in New York most of this time, though occasionally traveling to the west coast, he periodically asserted his bleak forecasts of the outcome in Germany to his friends. But, as he writes, "Playing Cassandra is a tedious business and, after hearing another banker in San Francisco pronounce a German butchery of the Jews 'absolutely unthinkable.' I threw up the part." Trying to console himself after so many casual dismissals greeted his words of despair, Harris states, "I might have gotten grim comfort from an entry in Virginia Woolf's diary, written on the day I spent in San Francisco: "A gritting day . . . Capitulation will mean all Jews to be given up . . . So the the garage.' Her husband had set aside some gasoline. If England fell they would commit suicide together." He continues, "The very least of the distinctions of Leonard Woolf is that he was a Jew. Being artists, not bankers, they understood what Hitler's victory over England would mean to the Jews." Then

29 Ibid.
30 Harris, Dance, p. 256.
Harris adds a line which reveals his own personal agony over this situation: "And not only to the Jews in England."\textsuperscript{31}

Knowing all Harris had suffered during the past decade and a half, I was unprepared for his reaction to the news emerging from Germany at the end of the war. He writes, "With the 'banal' tidings from the death camps after the war, I felt absolutely nothing. After fifteen years of private horror, I felt entitled to enjoy a benevolent numbness that could not be pierced by even the most appalling statistics ever recorded."\textsuperscript{32} Thus he continued to move in the world, just as he had before. The shock which shook the world in the mid-forties had been his dreaded reality since the early thirties. Perhaps I should have little wonder at his anesthetized state.

On February 8, 1945, Jed Harris brought Ruth Goodman and Augustus Goetz's \textit{One-Man Show} to the Barrymore Theatre. The play, centering on the extreme emotional ties of a father and daughter, was given an excellent production according to the critics, yet lasted only 36 performances.

Calling Harris' work "the theatre as it should be," critic John Chapman explains, "\textit{It is} intelligent.

\textsuperscript{31}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 257.

\textsuperscript{32}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 260.
provocative of more than surface interest, well written, and so smoothly, so effortlessly put upon the stage as to make one forget that actors and a director have been involved in it." He feels that Harris' direction is "splendid because it never seems like direction at all; it never imposes itself upon the play." The critic for the World Telegram called the 1944-45 theatrical season "the most notable one in twenty-five years." Yet, not until this production, he states, "could we boast of having a drama, in the best sense of that word, on Broadway." Harris, he says, has reminded us "that drama can be not only emotionally very compelling and instructive, but ... profoundly entertaining." He adds, "Harris has cast and directed this play with that care and skill which made him famous."35

Ward Morehouse termed Harris' efforts "adroit" and the acting "first rate." "If Mr. Harris is not offering us a tremendously impressive play," he continues, "he is at least giving us some expert theatre...."36


35Ibid.

And Theatre Arts concludes that Jed Harris "shows himself once again a master of mood, a skillful juggler of pace and movement. One-Man Show, though of slight importance as a play, is a saving reminder that there is such a thing as direction, that actors can be brought together in intelligent interplay of thought and feeling, that good theatre can exist even when exciting scripts are hard to find."37

Robert Garland was even more impressed. He writes, "may I tell you that One-Man Show has a perfect cast, working perfectly together under Jed Harris's perfect direction? It's hard to see how any performance could be bettered."38 Garland adds he can't imagine what this play would be without Jed Harris. "With him," he notes, "it's a memorable event in the modern show shop, an evening of sheer delight. . . ."

A few of the critics were less enthusiastic about the script. New York Herald Tribune reviewer Howard Barnes comments, "For all of Jed Harris's taut direction . . . the new play at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre is far from subtle."39 Lewis Nichols of the New York


Times said, "Jed Harris has given One-Man Show an honest production. Filled with the realistic touches that are Mr. Harris' direction." But the authors, he feels, have been unable "to blend the serious and the lighter sides of their play," resulting in an effort which isn't quite good enough to make it successful. Another critic echoed words from earlier reviewers of Harris' plays. He states, "Jed Harris's shrewd direction---as has often happened in the past two decades---makes the play seem better than it is."

With such strong reviews of One-Man Show, I asked Harris why it did not last. He responded, "It failed because I couldn't do anything with Mrs. Goetz [Ruth Goodman]. I was up against a thoroughly stupid woman---a notorious liar. This could have been a pretty good play about a girl who shares an obsession with her father. I settled for what I could do." Two years later, Harris would make another play by these same authors a phenomenal success. But, as he says, "By the time I directed The Heiress, I was so autocratic that I would not stand for any interference by Mrs. Goetz." One-Man Show represents Harris' willingness to compromise.


42 Interview with Jed Harris.
an exception to his usual approach. For it was his extreme insistence upon his own ideas which consistently brought him success in the theatre.

Almost a year to the day after the opening of One-Man Show, Jed Harris introduced his next play, Apple of His Eye, a comedy by Kenyon Nicholson and Charles Robinson, which opened at the Biltmore Theatre on February 5, 1946, set a precedent which Harris was to repeat on a much larger scale the following season. It succeeded in the face of negative critical opinion. Seeing little in a story about an Indiana farmer who woos a young maid, reviewers were quick to mark this May-December romance a failure.

John Chapman, referring to Harris as "the barnyard Balasco," termed this comedy "a bucolic version of the September song." Though he admits the casting and directing was "perfect," nevertheless the script "is something of an egg." Robert Garland called the production "on the silo side," adding, "This makes no hit with me!" And another critic said, "Apple of His Eye is as rustic---and as old fashioned---as a cow bell."

He continues, "It seems an unlikely play for the


dynamic Mr. Harris to produce—and as much in terms of his judgment as his tastes." And Ward Morehouse lamented the choice of Walter Huston as the farmer, saying, "It isn't worth his time."

What these reviewers did not know was that Harris did not want to do this play, and indeed would not have done it, were it not for his friend, Walter Huston. One day Huston brought Harris the script of *Apple of His Eye* and told him how much he wanted to play the lead. As Huston said in an interview after the show opened, "It's an unsophisticated little play. 'By Harry' and 'By Christmas' are the roughest expressions used in it. I like it because of the people in it—there's nothing mean or ugly about them; they're nice, simple, kind country people." Looking over the script, Harris knew immediately this was not a play he would be interested in. He told Huston and Huston understood. But after he left Harris' office, Harris' secretary showed him a check for $10,000 which the actor had left, just in case he changed his mind. Then Harris knew how


badly Huston wanted to do this play. So he agreed."48

Not all the critics were displeased with their efforts. Reviewer Burton Rascoe wrote that Apple of His Eye was presented "by that directorial precisionist, Jed Harris, with all the care for details of naturalism, plus imagination, that we have come to associate with a Jed Harris production."49 And the critic for the New York Post comments, "Seldom has a cast been filled with characters with greater care," obviously the work of "the expert direction by Mr. Harris."50 But the entire evening, he continues, contains "only an occasional laugh and too few interesting moments." In short, the consensus of opinion was, why do this play? Or as the reviewer for the New Yorker magazine said, "In his long, wayward career, Jed Harris has come up with a lot of peculiar enterprises, but none that seems quite as foreign to his rakish disposition as Apple of His Eye."51

An article written a few months after Apple of His Eye opened stated, "Ordinarily when a show is panned it

48 Interview with Jed Harris.


closes soon afterward because the critics have scared ticket-buyers away. Today *Apple of His Eye* is still running because many playgoers, in defiance of the critics have found it an appealing comedy. . . ."52 The public seemed to have shared Huston's evaluation of the play, rather than the critics'. They helped to give this production a run of 118 performances. Following the closing, Huston insisted on taking it on the road. Because of this gesture on Huston's part, Harris says, the show made back all of its money and even showed a small profit.

Harris' next production, a comedy entitled *Loco* by Dale Eunson and Katherine Albert, opened at the Biltmore Theatre on October 16, 1946. The brightest spot of the show came from film actress Jean Parker, making her Broadway debut in the title role. In fact, it was due to Miss Parker's agreement to play the lead that Harris decided to do the production. He felt she had excellent potential as a light comedienne. "She gave a delicious performance—adorable," he says. And the play "had some charming things in it. I felt so sad about that show," Harris added. He wanted Miss Parker to have a hit.53 The play, later known in the


53 Interview with Jed Harris.
films as *How to Marry a Millionaire,* had a run of only about six weeks.

Generally described as a mild comedy, the production centered on the efforts of a young redhead who sets her cap for a Wall Street broker. They go away to a mountain lodge where the girl comes down with measles and the broker becomes conscience stricken. Howard Barnes felt that Miss Parker "gave the role a lusty assurance" and Richard Watts called her performance "fresh and likeable." However her efforts were not enough to overcome the weaknesses in the script.

One critic stated, "With Harris' smart production *Loco* lacks almost nothing but good writing to make it an engaging farce." Louis Kronenberger notes, "*Loco* is a flimsy, plot famished little comedy that Jed Harris has sweated to direct to the hilt, quite forgetting that it has no blade." And Brooks Atkinson agrees, commenting, "Incomptently written, large sections of it seem like a prolonged non-sequitur."


56 Howard Barnes, *New York Herald Tribune*.


All the reviewers were baffled over Harris' choice of this play. Ward Morehouse said, "Loco is on the mild side. It is meager theatrical fare, I wonder why Jed Harris bothered." But Robert Garland emphasized Harris' unsatisfactory production through a series of rhetorical questions. Early in his review, Garland asks, "Oh where, Jed Harris, are your shows of yester-year?" Later he says, "And where, Jed Harris, is that revival of Broadway?" Then at the end of his review, he queries, "But where, Jed Harris, did you get that play?" Though many critics echoed these questions of Loco, none asked them of Harris' next venture.

September 29, 1947, is a day Jed Harris will never forget. On this day his production of The Heiress, an adaptation by Ruth and Augustus Goetz of Henry James' novel Washington Square, opened at the Biltmore Theatre. But it was not just another opening. Indeed, the history of this production, including its first night's performance, was of such significance to Harris that he wrote a book about it. Entitled Watchman, What of the Night?, Harris' narrative includes the agony, frustration and ultimate triumph of this unique venture. Of


all the productions with which Jed Harris was associated, none embodies the legendary qualities of this producer more than does The Heiress.

Almost a year prior to his production Harris had read the manuscript of the play, originally entitled Washington Square. He was not exhilarated by what he read. He says, "In the first place, I find all adaptations from the novel distasteful. They are secondhand goods. If it is a poor novel, it isn't worth bothering about. But a good novel is even worse. Because you will have to sacrifice a great deal of what is best in it, in order to squeeze it into the meaner dimensions of the theatre."61 His pleasure arose from the idea that it might make an effective theatre piece and also provide a wonderful part for Wendy Hiller.

Having worked with the Goetzes on their play One-Man Show, Harris was uncertain about dealing with Mrs. Goetz again. He told them that at least six to eight weeks of rewriting would be needed. In addition, he insisted upon getting Miss Hiller to play the leading role of Catherine Sloper. Meanwhile, the authors showed the script to Oscar Serlin who said he was prepared to produce it as it was. Serlin considered Miss Hiller too old for the part and he, along with the Goetzes, immediately cast a younger actress for Catherine. They

61 Harris, Watchman, p. 15.
chose an Englishman, Jack Minster, to direct their show and actor John Halliday to play Dr. Sloper, Catherine's father. Within two weeks their production was completely cast, and Harris writes, "I was rather relieved."62

Four months later Washington Square opened in New Haven and then in Boston. "We opened in New Haven," The Goetzes recall. "Well, we had friends in New Haven and, as always, your friends make excuses.... But in Boston a few nights later we had no friends. We had only an audience of forty-three people on the second night—and they told us the truth."63 As one reviewer noted, after seeing the play in Boston, "something had gone terribly wrong with Washington Square. It was lifeless. Its deliberate pace was sleep inducing."64 This production closed in Boston, without so much as a first night in New York.

Harris, viewing the show in New Haven, commented that it was "a disheartening experience." Nevertheless, he writes,

as I sat there watching the play, I could not help recreating it in my own mind. I found myself reconstructing it, elaborating a little here and changing it a little there, and recasting it. And

62 Ibid., p. 16.
63 Burns Mantle, Best Plays of 1947-48, p. 166.
suddenly, out of nowhere, with the utmost clarity and in the most complete detail, there came to me the exact ending of the play. And with that ending, the opportunity to deliver a stroke of very great dramatic power.65

One week later, Harris sat with the authors in their Fifty-eight Street apartment in New York and "recited that ending, almost word for word as it now stands."66 He recalls Mrs. Goetz's reaction. "She shook her head and said, 'No, it's too uncompromising, it's too bleak!'"67 After some rather pointed remarks directed at the authoress, Harris got up and walked out of the room. Augustus Goetz followed him out. "Jed, how can you talk to a woman like that?" Goetz asked. Harris explained that was exactly how he felt about his wife. "She's already had one flop," he said. "Now she wants to tell me what to do." Harris said that under no circumstances would he tolerate interference from Mrs. Goetz. He must have complete freedom to handle this show entirely his own way.68 As he writes, "I was able, not without some strained feelings, to help change Mrs. Goetz's mind."69

65Harris, Watchman, p. 21.
66Ibid.
67Ibid., p. 23.
68Interview with Jed Harris.
69Harris, Watchman, p. 24.
By the spring, the rewriting had been completed. Harris then announced that he would produce the play under the title of *The Heiress*. He says, "I was amused by the incredulity which this announcement provoked. Those who had seen the play in New Haven or Boston regarded the announcement as a capital piece of eccentricity. I must say," he continues, "this pleased me very much."  

Since Harris' funds were rather low, a backer had to be found. Bill Fitelson, his lawyer, could not find anyone to read the script, much less consider financing it. He told Harris, "They know all about the play from the tryout and they know just how much it lost $81,000$. And I want to tell you that I am convinced that you cannot possibly get this play financed."  

All the talking, urging and name calling that Fitelson did was to no avail. Harris stuck with his impossibility. Weeks passed and the situation remained the same. 

Quite by accident one day, Harris encountered Freddie Finklehoffe, a writer for M-G-M. Finklehoffe had just made a hit film, *Cheaper by the Dozen*, and was interested in finding a way to write off some of the high taxes he would have to pay on his successful movie.  

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Also, like Harris, Finklehoffe enjoyed a good gamble.  
So when he learned that no one was willing to listen to Harris on the subject of backing this play, he became interested immediately.

"Do you mind if I read it?" Finklehoffe said, as though asking for a special favor.

Harris says, I took a good look at Freddie. Perhaps he wasn't Freddie Finklehoffe at all. Perhaps he was only God's messenger. . . .

I said, "Of course you may read it, Freddie." Within twenty-four hours Finklehoffe said he had read the play, an event which Harris doubts ever really occurred, and agreed to back it.

The next afternoon the pair were on their way to London to get Wendy Hiller. At first Finklehoffe couldn't understand why Miss Hiller was so vital to the play. But after Harris took him to see her on stage in London, he seized Harris' arm and whispered, "Oh, she's perfect, perfect, I see exactly what you mean."

Miss Hiller's flat refusal of his offer, though most unwelcomed, was not enough to alter Harris' mind. He and Finklehoffe would spend a couple of days in Paris,

72 Interview with Jed Harris.
73 Harris, Watchman, p. 32.
74 Ibid., p. 46.
thinking things over. Perceiving Miss Hiller's difficulty to be a personal one, Harris, upon returning to London, offered to pay for her entire family to accompany her to New York. Under this arrangement, she agreed.

Harris next set his eye on Basil Rathbone for the role of Dr. Sloper. Like Miss Hiller, Rathbone's decision depended upon personal matters. Only this time Harris learned it was Rathbone's wife with whom he would have to contend. At their house, he writes, Mrs. Rathbone "disclosed to me, over a cup of tea, that, as Ouida Berger, she had been a very successful screen writer. . . . And she was frank to say that she thought the play needed a great deal of work." Harris said it would be a great favor if she would trouble herself to make a few notes. Harris adds that as they talked about the possibility of Rathbone's appearance, Miss Berger never referred to her husband as "Basil" or "my husband." "She always said 'Mr. Basil Rathbone,' as though she were referring to an institution."76

A few days later Rathbone called Harris to say that his wife had been working on the play and asked if he might be free that evening to discuss things. Harris

75 Ibid., p. 52.
76 Ibid.
immediately phoned Augustus Goetz to tell him they would all meet at the Rathbone's that night. "And I cautioned him to impress it upon his wife that we could not afford to get into any controversy with Miss Berger, because it was she who would probably decide whether or not Basil played the part." 77

The evening went well, consisting primarily of Miss Berger reading large portions of her rewriting. Handing the stack of yellow sheets to Harris, she said, "Here, you can have all of this. . . . You are free to use anything I've written." Harris and the Goetzes took the sheets, thanked her kindly and soon left. Of course, they had no intention of reading Miss Berger's work. The following day Rathbone called to say that he would agree to play Dr. Sloper.

Harris says that the first time he read The Heiress he thought of Patricia Collinge for the role of Lavinia, Catherine Sloper's aunt. The problem in dealing with Miss Collinge, he notes, was facing "the knowingness not only of a first-rate stage actress, but also of a delightful writer whose short stories are known to all readers of The New Yorker." 78 He also knew that he was gambling by offering such a fine

77 Ibid., p. 53.

78 Ibid., p. 54.
Actress a rather "tamely written part."

Arriving at Harris' office with the script he had sent her, Miss Collinge "wasted no time in preliminaries," Harris writes. "'How can you offer me a miserable part like that, if you admire me as much as you say you do?' she cried." Harris asked her to sit down, but he says, "before I could open my mouth she said, 'And the part is so wretchedly written,'" Sensing this remark to be the key to his difficulty, Harris bewildered the actress when he asked, "Miss Collinge, why don't you rewrite it yourself?" He assured her there would be no problem with the authors and she left his office agreeing to spend the next ten days rewriting.

Exactly ten days later, Harris recalls, Miss Collinge "arrived with her rewritten version and I pushed the contract across the desk for her to sign." "But you haven't read what I have written," she told Harris. He replied, "I gave you my word that I would accept it sight unseen." Miss Collinge was most upset that Harris didn't even care to discuss her work. He then told her, "Believe me, Miss Collinge, it is really unnecessary to discuss it. If you had written the part in Assyrian or in the symbols of calculus I would still direct it in exactly the same way that I had planned.

79 Ibid., p. 55.
all along and I am sure everything will come out all right."  

Herman Shapiro, stage manager of *The Heiress* describes Miss Collinge's eventual understanding of Harris' words on that day in his office. She arrived at the first rehearsal with her own typewritten part. The actors sat around a large table and began to read the play for the first time. Harris said nothing during the read-through. They began to go through the play a second time. Here, Shapiro says, Harris spoke to Miss Collinge.

He asked her to think of Mrs. Penniman, the widow of a rather dull country parson, who had had the great good fortune to be invited to live in fashionable Washington Square in New York, as the guest of her distinguished brother. Now, he continued, how might such a widow, long starved for romance, unconsciously respond to the presence of a handsome young man like Morris Townsend, paying court to her niece?

"Ah," said Miss Collinge, and a wonderful smile came over her face. She then quickly marked out some of the lines she had written. As she continued to read her part, Shapiro notes, "Her reading now had the beginnings of that delightful, entirely unconscious coquetry that ultimately made her performance so charming. In a few seconds Harris had altered the whole feeling of what I

80 *Tbid.*, pp. 55-56.
had until then considered a very pedestrian part."\(^{81}\)
Throughout that first week of rehearsals, Shapiro repeatedly heard Miss Collinge say, "Ah!" and then proceed to cross out a few more of her lines. "By the end of the week," he writes, "she was rehearsing the part exactly as it had been written by the authors."\(^{82}\)

All of the various episodes during rehearsals are too long to detail. But according to the stage manager, Harris repeatedly helped to guide the actors toward an understanding of their roles. "What is more difficult to convey," he says, "is the tone of Harris' voice, always soft, half speculative, suggesting things by images, often indirect in form, but always penetrating."\(^{83}\) An interesting method which Harris employed here, as well as in other plays, was to keep the actors seated during the first week to ten days of rehearsals. Only after they had read and read the play and thoroughly discussed each of the characters and their relationships were the players allowed to take the stage. By that time, Harris says, they were aching to get on their feet.

Calling Jed Harris "one of the two great Directors I have worked with," Wendy Hiller recently wrote, "His
handling of The Heiress was perfect." Then she adds, "His method of only reading the lines, sitting, for the first week—has always made me want to start that way on almost any play." 84

Two hours before the opening night's performance, Harris was fast asleep in his apartment. Some ten minutes after the curtain went up Freddie Finklehoffe called, urging Harris to join him at a bar across from the theatre. Meeting Harris at intermission, Finklehoffe gave glowing reports from all sides. "'Baby,' he said, 'I will love you all my life for getting over here. And the show is going like a house on fire. Don't you feel anything in the air?' 'Yes, I do Freddie,' [Harris] said, 'I feel tired.'" 85

But by the end of the evening Harris was sure that his gamble had paid off. Walking home that night, he writes, "I drifted up the street in a mild state of euphoria. It was one of the few times in my life when I felt thoroughly pleased with myself—as a gambler, as an artist of sorts, and as a man. Only those few who have staked all their worldly possessions on a hundred-to-one shot and seen it come in can know what this


85 Harris, Watchman, p. 66.
feeling is like."\textsuperscript{86}

Going to sleep in this contented frame of mind, Harris was rudely awakened only a couple of hours later by a phone call from the authors. Mrs. Goetz announced, "We're dead." Harris said, "What do you mean, dead? What is this?" She answered, "Atkinson and Barnes were brutal."\textsuperscript{87} Finding her report incredulous, Harris decided to verify the news for himself. Could both the \textit{Times} and the \textit{Herald Tribune} have panned the show? Reading Atkinson's review in the foyer of his hotel, Harris says, "I could not fault Mrs. Goetz for inaccuracy."\textsuperscript{88} But surely, he thought, Barnes' review couldn't be as bad as Atkinson's. "But I was wrong," he confesses. "It was worse."

In the \textit{New York Times}, Atkinson wrote, "the nature of the materials in the Henry James novel has sorely tried the resourcefulness of Jed Harris, as the director, and of the authors as well. The heroine cannot be acted; she can only be acted against. The story cannot be dramatized."\textsuperscript{89} Miss Hiller has not succeeded "in the task that defeated the authors," he adds.

\textsuperscript{86}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 69.

\textsuperscript{87}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 73.

\textsuperscript{88}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 75.
"Nothing Miss Hiller had been able to do alters a general impression that poor Catherine is better off inside the discreet, impeccable pages of Henry James."\(^90\)

Howard Barnes, writing for the *New York Herald Tribune*, began his review, "The story-telling of Henry James flickers feebly in *The Heiress*." Referring to the production as "a soporific show," Barnes adds that it "talks itself to a standstill." Harris, eventually bewitched by the script, directed this play "as though it were a Chekov masterpiece. From the standpoint of the spectator, it was a very bad idea." Striking a final blow, he writes, "The best that has been contrived in the way of staging is having several of the principals turn their backs on the audience, or introducing some off-stage noises designating the passing of hansom cabs and carriages on the square."\(^91\) The whole thing, he concludes, "labors it right up to point of ennui."

Musing over these words, Harris comments, "What I read in the reviews seemed to bear no relationship to anything I had done, or at least thought I had done, on the stage of the Biltmore Theatre. Yet, here was the

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\(^90\)Ibid.

written testimony of two theatrical reporters, not by any means Hazlitts, Beerbohms or Shaws as dramatic critics, but, beyond question, honest decent enough men. And, regardless of the words they had put on paper, it was plain that they were fatally unimpressed." How could he have been so wrong, Harris asked himself. Though aware of many of the possible setbacks, hadn't he considered the possibility of bad reviews? He responds, "The answer is: no. I was sure, dead sure, of my company, of the play, and of my own work. I was never more sure of anything in my life than of the absolute and unqualified success of The Heiress." He asked himself again. How could he have been so wrong? There was no answer.

Suddenly he saw a way out. He returned to his apartment, took out a bottle of pills which he had hidden from himself and began devouring them, two and three at a time. Having swallowed at least a dozen pills, Harris was suddenly seized by a fit of coughing. He tried to hold his breath, but the coughing became more violent. Everything began to come up, he writes, "as though a stomach pump had been put down my throat." The whole room was a mess—his clothes, the basin, the floor. He took a towel and began to clean up.

92Harris, Watchman, pp. 75-75.
93Ibid., p. 76.
Later, sitting on his bed he began to think. "I remembered once saying," he writes, "That even if all the dramatic critics in New York could conceivably gang up to destroy a good play, it would take no more than a week or ten days to overcome their malice by the sheer word of mouth." Then he adds, "But did I really believe what I was saying?" Harris awoke at nine the next morning and learned that the other critics were inclined to share his opinion, rather than Atkinson and Barnes'. However, it was known that the strength of their papers could be sufficient to kill a show.

In his review, the critic for the New York Post wrote, "There can be no doubt that when the eminent Jed Harris is in proper form his touch is one of the exciting things of the American theatre." Harris' direction of The Heiress, he continues, "is so sure and skillful, so filled with the proper style and the knowing appreciation of dramatic values," that in his hands, this drama "becomes what I think I am safe in calling the first big hit of the season." Ward Morehouse agreed. In a production which "holds you every instant," he says, "Jed Harris has recaptured all the

94 Ibid., pp. 78-79.
magic of his Green Bay Tree days in his job of direction. . . . He has made The Heiress something worth seeing."

"At long last Broadway has a thrilling new hit," noted Robert Coleman of the New York Daily Mirror. "Finklehoffe, Harris and associates have lent stature to a new season. We salute them gratefully." Calling The Heiress "affectionately written and intelligently directed," John Chapman adds, "Mr. Harris is one of the few people who really are stage-struck, and when he goes to work on a production he puts his autograph all over it. I happen to think that this autograph is a hallmark of stagecraft." If perhaps heartened by these reviews, Harris remained anxious throughout the day. Sometime during that day Harris had learned of a possible explanation for the terrible reviews by Atkinson and Barnes. Atkinson, it seems, had sat up most of the night before the opening reading Washington Square, the novel. His review clearly reflects his desire to return to the words in Henry


James. Prior to the second night's show, Harris spoke with Sam Zolotow, the "leg man for the New York Times dramatic department for many years." Harris writes,

Sam greeted me warmly. "Jed," he said, "I've got some great news for you."

I said "Sam, I've already had some great news from the Times. I don't think I would care for any more just now.

"Ah you don't understand," said Sam. "Brooks is going to do something to make up for his review."

"How?" I said.

"He's going to do something," said Sam, "that has never been done before by any dramatic critic in history. He is going to run the good reviews you got in next Sunday's Times, right in his own column."

I made no comment.

Sam was incredulous, "Jed," he cried, "didn't you hear what I said?"

I said, "Yes,", I did."

"Well, aren't you pleased? Don't you think that's a terrific thing for Brooks to do?"

I said, "Tell Brooks he can go to hell!"

Sam's voice seemed to be on the point of breaking. "Jed," he cried, "I'm shocked! Here's a man bending over backward to try to be fair!"

"Sam," I said, "I don't care which way he bends. I don't care what he prints on Sunday. All I care about is what he printed this morning. And you can tell
him for me that the next time he gets free tickets for a new play, he should walk into the theatre with an open mind and report nothing more or less than what happens on the stage. And tell him never to try to second-guess his betters. He must learn to catch up on his reading after the show, not before. And for God's sake, tell him I'd like to know if he spent the night before he got married with a book on comparative anatomy."

"Brooks Atkinson," said Sam fervently, "is one of the finest men in the world."

"That is true, Sam, and I am very fond of him. Unfortunately," I said, "I can't feel the least bit grateful to him, however disappointed you may be in me. Brooks may very well have killed this show. The fact that he did it out of stupidity rather than out of malice is no comfort to those most vitally concerned. And if this show should get over, it will owe nothing whatever to what Brooks writes or doesn't write on Sunday."99

Atkinson did what Zolotow had promised and reprinted several of the best reviews of The Heiress in his column the following Sunday. While not completely capitulating, he did change his estimate markedly. Near the end of his review he wrote, "Jed Harris has staged a performance that represents theatre with artistic standards and self respect. Not since The Green Bay Tree has he presided over a performance with so much good taste. But Washington Square resists this valiant

99Harris, Watchman, pp. 105-6.
The explanation for the bad review by Howard Barnes is somewhat more subtle and personal. From Bill Doll, Harris' press agent, Harris learned that on the morning of the opening, Mrs. Howard Barnes, also employed by the New York Herald Tribune, was fired by the owner of the paper, Mrs. Reid. "This had evidently come as a shock to Barnes, who was known to be something of a favorite of that great lady." By curtain time that evening, Harris says, news of this incident had spread quickly throughout newspaper circles in Times Square. This event, surprising as it was, provides only the background for the more critical episode which Barnes was to encounter at the theatre that opening night.

First, an explanation is needed of the seating arrangement of theatre critics for a New York premiere. Seats for reviewers are fixed, Harris says, "even sacrosanct." Each critic is given two seats on the aisle, seats which are his for each opening night, month in and month out. Harris explains that the critic for the Herald Tribune, for example, has numbered seats C1 and C3 in the third row, while the New York Times seats


101 Harris, Watchman, p. 92.
are directly behind, in D1 and D3.  

As Howard Barnes came to the theatre on September 29, he picked up his tickets as usual and headed for his seat. Harris writes, "But when the usher escorted him not to seats C1 and C3 but to seats C5 and C7, Barnes protested violently."  

Verifying the ticket stubs, Barnes rushed into the lobby and demanded his proper seats. The men in the box office, obviously at fault, found themselves in the impossible position of not knowing who had Barnes' tickets, and caught within seconds of a rising curtain. "And here was the dramatic critic of one of the great newspapers of New York," Harris continues, "clearly beside himself with rage and threatening not to cover the show. But somehow, after a long, loud acrimonious wrangle, Barnes was finally induced to accept the two seats to the immediate left of his accustomed place."  

Barnes' troubles were not over yet. He took his seat in the dim glow of the footlights. Brooks Atkinson, securely placed in his usual seat, D1, "having observed the somewhat agitated manner in which his colleague took his unaccustomed place, permitted himself  

\[102\text{Ibid., p. 96.}\]
\[103\text{Ibid.}\]
\[104\text{Ibid., p. 97.}\]
a wee joke," Harris says. "He leaned across Mrs. Atkin-
son's seat and tapped Mr. Barnes on the shoulder and
whispered, 'Howard, have you quit the Herald Tribune,
too?" According to Doll, Barnes was the first critic
out of the theatre at the end of the evening. 105
Though it is impossible to say all these events were
directly responsible for Barnes' bad review, surely they
could contribute to an unsettled frame of mind from which
this critic viewed The Heiress.

Just as the curtain rose on the second night's
performance, a man came running up to the box office.
He purchased the last seat in the house. They had sold
out! And the Times and the Herald Tribune were defeated!
This latter fact was one which did not escape the notice
of those critics on rival newspapers, as many of them
gloat ed to Harris over his and their own victory.

Jed Harris' gamble in taking a flop and turning
it into a hit fills pages of newspaper and magazine
copy. His expert direction was given repeated praise in
the magazines which followed the opening night. "Harris
is the hero of the evening," wrote the critic for the
New Republic. "Every scene betrays a relentless, crea-
tive finickiness on his part." 106 Another reviewer

105 Ibid.

106 Irwin Shaw, "Theatre," The New Republic, 13
Oct. 1947, p. 36.
states that the effect of *The Heiress* "is so moving that people who haven't cried since *Birth of a Nation*, cry." It is a "production which is as immaculate in direction and setting as the speech of an extraordinary cast." Impressed with the settings, the writer adds, "The direction by Jed Harris is equally cool, elegant, rich and restrained." Even *Variety* had words of praise. It comments, "Fred Finklehoffe turned the production of *The Heiress* over to Jed Harris entirely, and it's richly mounted, the leads expertly cast." Even Variety had words of praise. It comments, "Fred Finklehoffe turned the production of *The Heiress* over to Jed Harris entirely, and it's richly mounted, the leads expertly cast."  

Calling this venture "a truly impressive theatrical success story," Paul Nathan of *Publisher's Weekly* writes of the saga of *The Heiress* from Boston to Broadway. "Jed Harris, maintaining that *Washington Square* didn't have to be a flop . . . did a brilliant restaging." He concludes, "It doesn't happen often, of course, because the faith needed to convert failure into triumph—and the skill along with the faith—is too frequently lacking."  

Looking back on the success of *The Heiress*, Ruth and Augustus Goetz examined the changes which occurred


from the time they first took their script to Jed Harris. Calling the first production "a marvel of efficient business administration," they add, "It has since become our deepest conviction that while that may be the way to conduct a nut and bolt factory, it is not the way to create fine theatre." They then discuss the final production of *The Heiress* and its director. "As for Jed Harris, well there isn't an efficient hair in his head. He's just a brilliant director and worker of theatre magic."

Harris, obviously satisfied with his work on this production, recently told me, "What I responded to in *The Heiress* was the challenge." Then he added, "That's not the feeling of a man in the theatre." He explained that most producers go after a winner, a sure bet. Rarely do they choose to promote a script which has few strengths, and never do they try to revive a failure.

*The Heiress* had a run of 280 performances. Three years later Harris restaged his production at the New York City Center. Of the leads, only Basil Rathbone appeared from the original cast. Calling this production "Excellent," Brooks Atkinson writes, "Mr. Rathbone will

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112 Interview with Jed Harris.
be lucky if he ever has another part as suitable. . . . His performance was memorable when it was new in 1947, and it is every bit as good now— . . . a perfectly designed piece of work." 113

In his book, Harris writes, "Bringing The Heiress to the stage was like getting an obstreperously drunk friend home from a party. One minute his knees give way and he collapses on the side-walk. You get him on his feet and he unaccountably begins to yodel. Then he dashes into the middle of the street in the path of a speeding taxicab. . . ." 114 This "Theatrical phoenix," as one reviewer called it, 115 shows Harris in all his eccentric, legendary glory. His vision, tenacity, willingness to gamble, his faith, autocracy, defiance, and above all, his supreme self-confidence in his own ideas and abilities were collectively bound in this one production.

Harris' next production also stirred a bit of controversy. Red Gloves, adapted by Daniel Taradash from the play Les Mains Sales by Jean-Paul Sartre, opened at the Mansfield Theatre on December 5, 1948. The play

114 Harris, Watchman, p. 13.
had the distinction of introducing French actor Charles Boyer to the American stage. His portrayal was hailed as superb, while the play itself received far less acclaim and stimulated much discussion as to its merit and its similarity to the original.

The play focuses upon Hoederer (Charles Boyer), a national leader of the Communist party in a "country in Middle Europe." Just as he is about to forge a coalition with more conservative groups, the local Communist party directs a new recruit, Hugo (John Dall), to assassinate him. Feeling sympathetic to Hoederer, Hugo nevertheless tries to carry out his assignment. His first attempt is unsuccessful. Only when he convinces himself that Hoederer is having an affair with his wife (Joan Tetzel) does he summon the courage to kill him. This crime of passion, rather than politics, suddenly transforms Hoederer into a martyr. His picture appears next to Lenin's on Communist walls. Ironically, two years later the party adopts as their official position the line of compromise for which Hoederer was ordered shot. In turn, Hugo is now condemned to his death for having killed his party's hero.

In Paris, just a few days prior to the opening, Jean-Paul Sartre went to court in Paris to voice his objections to the handling of the American version of his play by his representative, Louis Nagel. Sam
Zolotow, in an article written for the *New York Times*, wrote, "In court Sartre said he had letters from friends saying Daniel Taradash's version was 'a vulgar, common melodrama with an anti-Communist bias.'"\(^{116}\) Louis Nagel, in refuting Sartre's claim "pointed out that Boyer had informed Andre Luget, the Parisian lead in *Les Mains Sales*, that the two texts were so alike that he could exchange parts if necessary." And Jean Dalrymple, the show's producer, "insisted that an agreement had been made in good faith with Nagel . . . to make whatever script changes deemed necessary. It's true, she said, the play has been greatly shortened, but the anti-communist angle hasn't been stressed as all."\(^{117}\)

Greatly incensed at Sartre's action, Jed Harris issued his own statement regarding this dispute. He says he was present when Sartre gave Miss Dalrymple, the American producer, and Gabriel Pascal, the English producer, "complete carte blanche for the American adaptation." Sartre's only restriction, Harris notes, was "that he did not want the ideology tampered with and that he was chiefly concerned that the play should be a financial success in America." Then he adds, "If Sartre is now willing to testify that *Red Gloves* . . . is a


\(^{117}\)Ibid.
'vulgar, common melodrama with an anti-communist bias' then it is so because that is the way he wrote it."\textsuperscript{118}

Though Sartre found a replacement for his representative, no formal action was ever taken to interfere with the American debut of his play.

Aware of the dispute between Sartre and Harris and Dalrymple, several critics seemed obliged to comment upon whether or not they thought the play represented the original and was either pro or anti Communist in theme. Brooks Atkinson states, "\textit{Red Gloves} appears to be neither pro nor anti Communist. It is an analytical play about the intellectual evils of totalitarian political parties. . . ."\textsuperscript{119} Robert Garland agrees, saying, "Only a Communist, ideologically hypersensitive, could call the Daniel Taradash adaptation 'pro' or 'anti' anything."\textsuperscript{120}

But George Jean Nathan states, "If Sartre thinks he has written a play neither pro nor anti he is a very confused man." Speculating on what might have occurred, Nathan comments, "What most likely happened is that \textit{Sartre} appreciated . . . that almost every other person you meet in France nowadays is a Communist; that, with

\textsuperscript{118}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{119}\textit{Ibid.}

a weather eye to the box office, he tried to please both pros and antis; . . ." The present American version, Nathan believes, "has unintentionally been turned into a considerably more pro Communist one than the French original."121

A possible explanation for Nathan's conclusion is offered by a writer for Variety. In a preliminary examination of the French vs. the American version, she concludes that the political angle in each of these scripts "is exactly the same." She adds, "Sartre has no cause for complaint."122 The difference arises out of the individuals playing the leads in the two countries. "On Broadway, as Hoederer, . . . Boyer is the hero of the play. In Paris, Hoederer, though well played by Andre Luguet, merely supports the part of Hugo . . . splendidly acted by Francois Perier. The personality of both actors is responsible for this, though hardly a line is changed, but it alters the whole aspect of the play."123 Though it is impossible to verify this observation, certainly what this writer says seems plausible.

123 Ibid.
Most critics were sharp in their criticism of the play, while giving highest praise to Charles Boyer. Few were impressed with the production as a whole. Calling Red Gloves "adroitly directed by Jed Harris," Ward Morehouse adds that it "is a slipshod melodrama that is turned into a fairly effective theatrical piece by the hypnotic playing of Charles Boyer."\textsuperscript{124} Howard Barnes writes, "Harris has done wonders with an inactive script. . . . There is no lack of painstaking production in Red Gloves. It is still a wearisome play, saved in part by Boyer's handsome acting."\textsuperscript{125}

Other critics were similarly unimpressed. Brooks Atkinson wrote, "Under Jed Harris' direction, the performance gives an illusion of dealing with momentous matters, which argues sleight-of-hand of one kind or another. . . . Everything about Red Gloves is good theatre work except the play and the characters."\textsuperscript{126}

Dissatisfied with the direction and the production as a whole, the critic for Saturday Review concludes, "The real blame, however, for the emptiness, the absurdity, and the dullness of Red Gloves must fall


\textsuperscript{126}Brooks Atkinson, \textit{New York Times}. 
squarely, on M. Sartre's guilty head." But the reviewer for Variety comments, "Jed Harris, who is understood to have worked closely with Daniel Taradash in the adaptation and must therefore take some of the rap for the script flaws, has apparently gotten the maximum movement and tempo from an essentially static play. . . ."

Harold Clurman, writing for the New Republic, accused Harris of envying Sartre. He comments, "Jed Harris is a director of considerable skill, talent and intelligence. One asks oneself how such an able showman could so completely have muffed a single chance for a first-rate production." This show reveals no understanding of Sartre's intention, Clurman feels, nor any practical wisdom as to how it should be produced. The critic for Theatre Arts partially shares Clurman's opinions. "It needs outright saying that Red Gloves, as seen in New York, was seen through a thickening air of regrets for a poor job, a stubbornly obtuse and botching job, from slow beginning to slack end. Sartre

was certainly badly done... "130 Though most of the critics seemed dissatisfied with Red Gloves, either as a play or a production, the strength of Charles Boyer's portrayal was enough to give it a run of 113 performances.

According to Miss Dalrymple, Boyer "had always wanted to work with Jed Harris." And Harris, having just performed a miracle with The Heiress, "was just about the 'hottest' director around."131 As for Harris, she writes, "I did not know Jed very well before this, but he turned out to be an absolutely delightful companion. . . . I had heard and read so many horrendous tales about Jed that I was quite unprepared to find him gentle and easygoing and, above all, vastly amusing."132

Miss Dalrymple says they were given no warning as to Sartre's action against Louis Nagel. They first read of it in the newspapers. "I was sick at heart," say says, "... as I felt the critics would review the controversy and not our production. And I was right."133 Though the play did quite good business, "the production was an expensive one, geared for smash-hit proportions. . .


132 Ibid.

133 Ibid., p. 255.
"Satisfaction from this show, she says, came from the fact that "It did make Charles Boyer a Broadway star..."  

In a recent letter, Miss Dalrymple wrote, "Jed Harris was the most creative producer director Broadway ever had. He is also a remarkably talented writer... including playwright, film writer, and narrative writer. His *Watchman, What of the Night* is something of a masterpiece and his articles in the *New York Times* and elsewhere are always outstandingly well written..."

What has Miss Dalrymple observed in Harris' work with playwrights and performers? "Authors are afraid of him, but actors love him for his skilled direction and pleasant manner with them," she states. As for Harris, the man, she adds, "He is one of the best conteurs I ever listened to and altogether a delightful person to be with. I have always enjoyed his company."  

Of *Red Gloves*, Harris says, "I never liked it as a play. I thought it was a phony play—except for the character of the Communist, Hoederer." His joy in doing it was in working with Charles Boyer. "He's my dream of what an actor ought to be," Harris says. "I directed him entirely in a restaurant." During one such session,  

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Boyer asked Harris how he should play the scene in which Hugo comes to kill Hoederer, but does not succeed. "Have you ever seen a bullfight?" Harris asked. "Think of the bullfighters. They turn their backs on the bull and walk away. And the bull stands there bewildered." "Ah, I see, I see," replied Boyar. On another occasion Boyer asked Harris what he should wear in the part. "The only thing I can compare this character to is a dedicated priest," Harris told him. "Oh, a black turtle neck," responded Boyer. "Yes," said Harris.

Harris smiled, and then continued, "Everyone in the cast just loved him. They were terribly excited about working with Charles Boyer. I remember when he first arrived at the theatre, they all came up to him and said in French, 'Bonjour, Monsieur Boyer.' Boyer lifted his head, then replied, 'Hi, kids!'" "Charles is a very, very intelligent man," Harris says. "He put a quarter of a million dollars of his own money to endow a French library in Los Angeles." Then he added, "There were three men during my career who were really men, and not just actors—Holbrook Blinn, Walter Huston and Charles Boyer."

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Harris' words for Sartre are not so warm. Meeting the author at his home in Paris, Harris says, "He was

136Interview with Jed Harris.
surrounded by acolytes. I distrusted him at sight. He is wall-eyed, with each eye going in a different direction. I've read his books and think his reputation as a philosopher is wildly overrated." In short, he comments, "I hated the play. I hated Sartre. Red Gloves is a perfect example of its author—he's an ambivalent, basically dishonest writer. He wrote for effect." Comparing Sartre with his French contemporary, Albert Camus, Harris notes, "Camus is like a pool of absolutely crystal clear water. Sartre is like a shallow, muddy, turbulent little stream going everywhere and arriving nowhere."137

On March 31, 1949, Jed Harris introduced Herman Wouk's spy melodrama The Traitor at the Forty-eighth Street Theatre. Critics immediately called the show a hit and enthusiastically greeted both the performers and the production. Terming Harris' work "canny showmanship," and "imaginative direction," Howard Barnes notes, "He has given The Traitor the pace and urgency that it demanded. A play of promise and no mean achievement has been eloquently projected."138 John Chapman, writing in the New York Daily News comments, "Mr. Harris seems to be incapable of doing a bad job in

137 Ibid.

putting a play upon a stage; his failures are just as
good work as his hits. He knows casting and he knows
what to do with actors once they've been hired. The
company in The Traitor is excellent.\textsuperscript{139}

Referring to this production as "good hokum cops-
and-robbers playing at the point of two pistols," Brooks
Atkinson writes, "Jed Harris keeps the stage swarming
with efficient naval personnel, to say nothing of quite
a lot of ostentatiously ingenious spy paraphernalia.
You never saw so many spy-hunters pop into and out of
doors and windows or connect so many mechanical gadgets
to radios and telephones. The Traitor is Superman with
a noble message."\textsuperscript{140}

The Traitor deals with a gifted young atomic
scientist who believes that the best way to avert the
threat of war is to give the Russians the American secret
to the atom bomb. His colleague and mentor is wise
professor Tobias Emanuel. Emanuel tries to stand up
for his youthful associate when he is suspected of being
a Communist. But the young man dies, having shamelessly
failed at trying to bring about world peace in his own
idealistic way.

Lee Tracy, who, more than twenty years earlier,

\textsuperscript{139}John Chapman, "Lee Tracy a Grand Spy-Catcher
1 Apr. 1949.

\textsuperscript{140}Brooks Atkinson, "At the Theatre," New York
Times, 1 Apr. 1949.
played the young "hoofer" in *Broadway* and then Hildy Johnson in *The Front Page*, returned to the stage after an absence of nine years. He, as the investigating Naval officer, along with Water Hampden as the old professor, took the laurels of the evening. John Mason Brown, writing for *Saturday Review*, commented upon the leisurely first act. Then he continues,

> But once Lee Tracy makes his entrance as a Navy captain; once the mild, old professor's study . . . begins to swarm with sailors turned investigators; once it becomes clear that an important young scientist, for whatever reasons of his own, is in cahoots with the Communists, and a Geiger counter—a real one, mind you—starts ticking away to indicate the presence of top-secret atomic materials, why then the evening begins to do wanted damage to the nerves.141

As for Harris' work, Brown states that "Although the writing may fail /Harris/, he never fails it. He stages it throughout as if all of it were first rate, which it is not, and makes it acceptably effective by doing so."142

And Ward Morehouse notes, "The Traitor, given Jed Harris's expert and professional direction, and skillfully played by an able cast, . . . comes through as a piece that remains steadily dramatic. . . ."143

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142 ibid.

Hampden, Morehouse adds, is "excellent," "And Lee Tracy is simply great."

*Variety* called *The Traitor* "a tingling thriller on a topically urgent subject." It adds, "It is brilliantly produced by Jed Harris and engrossingly played by a strong cast. . . ."¹⁴⁴ Though not "to be taken seriously as a serious drama, *The Traitor* can hardly miss as commercial entertainment."¹⁴⁵ Robert Garland shared *Variety*'s estimate of this production. He states, "If Herman Wouk's *The Traitor* isn't a resounding hit, I don't know a resounding hit when Jed Harris has one."¹⁴⁶ Despite the glowing reviews with their optimistic predictions, *The Traitor* had a run of only sixty-seven performances. A writer for *Theatre World* magazine conjectured as to the possible reason for the show's slow box office business. He wrote, "Perhaps its tense topical theme is scaring the audience away. . . ."¹⁴⁷

In announcing the closing of the show, Harris had high praise for his staff and performers. He said, "This is a matter of great regret, for . . . never before


¹⁴⁵Ibid.


did I have a company that worked harder, or more enthusiastically or more earnestly to keep a show going than this one."\textsuperscript{148}

Following his production of \textit{The Traitor}, Harris left New York and returned to California. Four years would pass before he reappeared on Broadway. The forties had seen a finish to the war which had haunted him for so long. Interestingly, as Harris looks back on his dire predictions of what he felt would happen in Germany, he says, "Before the war, everyone said I was exaggerating. I had said that probably two or three hundred thousand Jews would be slaughtered. But I underestimated. I had no idea that the figures would rise into the millions, six million."\textsuperscript{149} Even after the ending of the war, Harris continued to bear its psychological scars.

The beginning of the fifties brought Harris into a somewhat revised view of himself. He says, "I began to think of myself as a writer." Just as he can recall his first experience in directing, Harris remembers the incident which triggered the idea that he might be a writer. He was in Hollywood and was contacted by Tom Reed, a young writer trying to sell his first big screen script.\textsuperscript{148} Louis Calton, "The Traitor Stay on Saturday," Newspaper clipping, Lincoln Center.\textsuperscript{149} The following information was given in an interview with Jed Harris.
play. He showed Harris his script, and after reading it, Harris mentally began to rewrite it. He then recited his altered version to Reed. "Tremendous!" responded the writer. Reed then went home to write the play as Harris had described it to him. Showing it to Harris the next day, Reed was shocked to find he had left out the second act. "Remind me what it is," he said, "and I'll write it." At that moment Harris thought, "Why should I?" He immediately hired a secretary, dictated a draft, and then gave it to Reed. After only three or four days' work, Harris had completely rewritten Reed's original version. They then sold it for $65,000, and it was later produced under the title Once Over Lightly. Up until this time, Harris says, Reed had never gotten more than $5,000 for anything he'd written. With this one experience, Harris knew he was a writer, though history shows that he had been writing for the past twenty-five years. Nevertheless it was several years before he actually took seriously this newly-discovered talent.

During the four years Harris was away from New York he worked on several screen plays. In 1953 he returned to the theatre, even though he says, "I basically was not interested in it. I came back because I didn't know what to do or what I wanted to do." Harris paused and shook his head, adding, "What I should
The Crucible in Wilmington, Delaware, Arthur Miller and Jed Harris, heading for that city by train, discussed their upcoming production with a reporter. After a lengthy explanation of how he came to write the play, Miller talked about freedom in art. "If a man can't speak his heart he is robbing his art," he said. Harris broke in, "Art—schmart. That this should have to be said is a symbol of the times we are living in." The subject changed to how the play would be received, what meanings might arise from The Crucible. Again Harris interrupted, "I object to discussing what this play, any play, is about," He said. "This is not a neat, well made, well constructed little play. What Arthur has tried to do is to create a world on the stage, a world of that time." Speaking of the script, Harris continued, "This play has got flaws. There are going to be people who will say . . . that it is over written, that Arthur has tried to cover too much ground. . . . They will say that it would have been more fitting for him to have confined himself to this or that aspect of the play. . . ." Harris admitted he didn't care about

that. In spite of the flaws in *The Crucible*, he states, "this play has a certain bigness . . . a certain power... If this play is any good it can be good for one reason. As a theatrical experience. In other words, there is nothing to be said about this play that will be of any help to anyone. It has to speak for itself. Let it speak for itself."151

Following the try-out in Wilmington, a critic for *Variety* wrote, "*The Crucible* is another star in *Harris* directorial crown." Undoubtedly there are quite a few flaws in the script, "but what comes across the footlights is powerful theatre." Harris' direction is "superb" he notes, "gaining every ounce of drama from an explosive script."152 After the play opened on January 23, 1953, at the Martin Beck Theatre, *Variety* predicted, "It should be a substantial run on Broadway." *The Crucible* is a play "that will (and, indeed, already had begun to) provoke lively discussion and perhaps controversy." Though "overwritten," this play has been forcefully staged by Jed Harris."153

Since this play was introduced during the heat of the McCarthy hearings, several critics called attention

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151 Ibid., p. 3.
to the timely parallel between the courtroom occurrences in *The Crucible* and the live drama taking place in Washington, D.C. For example, Walter Kerr states:

As Mr. Miller pursues his very clear contemporary parallel, there are all sorts of relevant thrusts: the folk who do the final damage are not the lunatic fringe but the gullible pillars of society: . . . slander becomes the weapon of opportunists ('Is the accuser always holy now?'). . . . even the upright man is eventually tormented into going along with the mobs to secure his own way of life, his own family.\footnote{Walter F. Kerr, "The Crucible," *New York Herald Tribune*, 23 Jan. 1953.}

And Brooks Atkinson commented, "Neither Mr. Miller nor his audiences are unaware of certain similarities between the perversions of justice then and today." Nevertheless, he continues, Miller is not "pleading a cause in dramatic form." *The Crucible*, in spite of "its current implications," is a wholly "self-contained play."\footnote{Brooks Atkinson, "At the Theatre," *New York Times*, 23 Jan. 1953.}

But another critic felt the playwright intended no obvious contemporary analogy. He writes, "In writing of Salem, Mr. Miller attempts no blatant modern comparisons, beyond stating timeless truths about guilt and conscience and hysteria and bandwagon instincts."\footnote{William Hawkins, "Witchcraft Boiled in The Crucible," *New York World Telegram and the Sun*, 23 Jan. 1953.}
in these instances, all references to the McCarthy hearings made by the critics were kept very general, almost incidental in their tone. No one involved was ever mentioned specifically by name.

A more overt controversy over *The Crucible* arose from the American Bar Association. This group issued a statement on January 29, 1953, less than a week after the play's opening. Sent by the standing committee on public relations of the ABA, the letter was addressed to the Martin Beck Theatre. It stated that several complaints had been sent by members to the ABA "regarding certain lines disparaging of lawyers or the legal profession which occur" in *The Crucible*. One specific complaint pointed out "that there never was a time when respect for law and legal process was more important to our people and to civilization itself than right now." In conclusion, the letter asked for action to be taken which would correct this situation. In other words, they wanted the script of *The Crucible* to be altered."157

Miller refused to change his play. He did, however, write a reply in which he called upon the lawyers to note that "The role played in history by the judges of the court, was, if anything, much more reprehensible

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than the play describes." He continues, "My amelioration of it cannot be taken as an antipathy toward lawyers." The point he wishes to stress, which evidently the protestants seemed to have overlooked, was that on stage the Rev. John Hale pleads with the Deputy Governor "to permit lawyers to defend the accused, a plea which can only imply that it was the barring of lawyers rather than their presence which helped rule the day." Miller then adds, "I cannot end this letter without saying that the growing sensitivity of people to any sort of open and frank discussion of important issues is no service to civilization, let alone law and order." 

Although The Crucible did cause some controversy, generally it received an excellent reception from the critics, for its script, its casting and its directing. As this was Miller's first play since his colossal hit, Death of a Salesman, most reviewers felt compelled to draw a comparison between the two plays. In his review, Brooks Atkinson writes, "Arthur Miller has written another powerful play . . . [with] an equally powerful performance." As director, he notes, "Jed Harris has given it a driving performance in which the clashes are fierce and clamorous." John Chapman calls The Crucible "a

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158 Ibid.
159 Ibid.
160 Ibid.
stunning production, splendidly acted and strongly written." Harris, he says, "has directed the play with great force and precision. . . ."161 And Walter Kerr comments, "Under Jed Harris' firm and driving hand, a large and meticulously cast company performs expertly."162

An indication of the positive audience response on that opening night is the fact that The Crucible received nineteen curtain calls by what one critic called "a vociferous audience."163 Robert Coleman notes, "Director Jed Harris has wisely staged The Crucible in vigorous style. He makes his players act in the grand manner, with resounding tones and large gestures. He, like us, must believe that our theatre has grown too anemic. That it needs big doses of sheer vitality."164

Performances by several of the actors was singled out, especially those of Arthur Kennedy, Beatrice Straight, Walter Hampden and E. G. Marshall. Harris originally had not been in favor of Kennedy for the lead of John Proctor, but Arthur Miller insisted. In an

article discussing Kennedy's success in his role, reporter Seymour Peck tells how during rehearsal one day Harris complained bitterly to this actor about his colloquial speech. "Arthur believed Harris," Peck writes. "He said worriedly, 'I guess all those Western and gangster movies must have put a crimp in my speech,' and he went running nervously to Mildred Dunnock for speech lessons."165

Kennedy recalls an incident involving Harris and another actor during rehearsals. "To me one of the noble characters in the theatre is Joseph Sweeney," Kennedy says. Sweeney, who played old Giles Corey told Kennedy that he had been in thirty-three shows and thirty-three flops. The Crucible was his thirty-fourth. Kennedy continues, "How many years that represents in a man's life! I remember in the midst of all the excitement of rehearsing, Jed Harris suddenly stopped and said, 'Joe, I want you to know you're exquisite in this part.' I thought that was very sweet of Jed," Kennedy commented.166

Harris says that one day, while rehearsing the scene in which John Proctor receives the death sentence, he noticed Arthur Kennedy crying. Harris studied the actor carefully, to make sure he was seeing correctly.


166Ibid., p. 34.
Then he asked, "Arthur, why are you crying?" I feel like crying," Kennedy replied. "Who the hell cares what you feel?" Harris demanded. "Well, I'm going to die," Kennedy continued. "Wouldn't you cry if you knew you were going to die?" "No," said Harris. "I've known a lot of men who were about to die. And they didn't cry." Kennedy looked at Harris for a moment, then said, "Well, I would!" In relating this incident to me, Harris added, "Arthur Kennedy was the lousiest actor I ever worked with. Nature had fitted him to play a Brooklyn truck driver."167

A writer for the Saturday Review, Henry Hewes, was allowed to attend rehearsals of The Crucible. Primarily there to interview Miller, Hewes quotes the playwright as he talked about Jed Harris. Harris, Miller says, "is a very serious man, with superb taste and perception. Sometimes there'll be hours of rehearsal when I get worried because nothing seems to be getting accomplished. But then suddenly he'll work very quickly and closely with the actors, and do in half an hour what some directors would take days to do. Above all, he's a perfectionist."168 Hewes added that Miller was ultimately "Dissatisfied with Harris's direction, for

167 Interview with Jed Harris.

he restaged the play himself when a new scene was added" to the script. But the production, as directed by Harris had a strong run of 149 performances. The official "Miller" production did not open until several months after Harris' had closed.

As for Arthur Miller, Harris says, "Arthur was a Communist, and like all Communists, a liar." Being a "petit bourgeois," Harris says of himself, "it didn't matter what I said. So when Miller began to restage the play, he did it without even consulting me." In telling me about this, Harris seemed unconcerned. At this point, he was almost at the end of his career. After his production of The Crucible, he would introduce only one more play on Broadway.

Harris' final production was based on another Henry James novel. Child of Fortune, adapted by Guy Bolton from James' Wings of the Dove, opened at the Royale Theatre on November 13, 1956. Critics were uniform in their disapproval of this play, and it had a run of only 23 performances.

The reviewer for the New York Journal American wrote, "Jed Harris is one of the most gifted and controversial figures in the American theatre. ..." When

169 Ibid.

170 Interview with Jed Harris.
his name is associated with a production, he continues, "one is perhaps inclined to expect too much. Harris has a lavish cast and agreeable mountings, but I found no trace of the erstwhile genius which was equal to lifting a rather pedestrian story into eminence." Another critic commented, "The heroine of Child of Fortune ... is a sweet gentle, soft-spoken invalid who is not long for this world. So, too, I fear, is the play." Jed Harris, he adds, "has directed this little nosegay in the low key it is written—and a low key is no key for an okay today.

Possessing both the "Jamesian faults and virtues, Child of Fortune," Robert Coleman states, "is a drama of distinction—in momentary flashes. We can only regret that it lacks the consistent drive, inspiration and focus to make it a genuinely absorbing evening of theatre." Though it has much to commend it, Coleman notes, "it is with hesitancy we report—-not quite enough." Child of Fortune "does have its moments," Brooks Atkinson commented, "For a strain of tenderness runs through it." Nevertheless he feels Harris has been


unable "to do anything in the staging to rescue the story from triteness." 174

None of the critics could muster any real enthusiasm for Child of Fortune. Of this production, Harris says, "I didn't have one good actor. It no more than opened than I knew it would close, and I was on my way to California." 175 After the closing, Harris quit the stage for good. His earlier, unsuccessful attempts had paved the way for this final exit. But, to anyone who knows Harris' attitude and his work, this should not come as a surprise. The theatre for him was an adventure, not a profession. And like any adventure, it ends, and another takes its place. Unlike most men in the modern theatre, Jed Harris' motivation and outlook toward his work was never geared at fame or fortune, although in his lifetime, he was granted both.

In 1929, after his initial decision to retire, Harris talked with John Anderson about his departure from the theatre. At that time, Anderson asked him (or at least wrote that he did)

Shall I deliver your farewell message to the people of the United States? Shall we make them all privy to the secrets of a Broadway Napoleon who at the great age of twenty-eight, or is it nine, exiles


175 Interview with Jed Harris.
himself from the orbits of the major planets? May we not, pausing herewith on a great occasion, reduce the matter to words and the words to type? Speak, while the presses wait to thunder across the silence, and tell us why it is that you, standing at the zenith of a spectacular career, quit?

Harris' reply, simple and direct, could easily have been made in 1956. He commented, "It's fun to be a phenomenon, but to be a tradition is just old hat." 176

176 John Anderson, Newspaper clipping, Lincoln Center.
CONCLUSION

Of the thirty Broadway shows which Jed Harris introduced, at least half were successful and eleven were big hits. In all but three, Harris' work was soundly praised, even though the plays sometimes were not. Often critics questioned Harris' selection of a script, either because of its poor writing or its subject matter. Rarely did they object to his treatment of it. One of the recurring phrases in the reviews of Harris' productions was that he made even the best scripts seem better than they really were.

Throughout his career, Harris took the work of a "no name" playwright, saw the challenge and/or the potential in the script, and through the contribution of his own production values and through extensive reworking of the script, was able to bring that potential to a unique fruition. Examples of these may be found in Broadway, The Front Page, Dark Eyes, The Royal Family, Our Town, Coquette, The Green Bay Tree and The Heiress. The authors of many of his biggest hits never had another success as great as when Harris directed or produced his work. And for some, Harris' production constituted their single theatrical venture during their entire lifetime.
Nor did Harris choose his players for their star reputations. Often, however, after a performer appeared successfully in one of his productions, he became recognized as a star. One day in 1927, while Harris was in rehearsals for Coquette, he talked to Edna Ferber about Helen Hayes. "I'm not interested in Helen as a star," Harris commented, "but as an actress. I would have taken her even if she had been completely unknown. I don't want to be a Belasco or a Frohman, with a stable of stars to provide with vehicles." Nevertheless, time and again, Harris saw the career of a player suddenly skyrocket after he or she had successfully played for him. Lee Tracy, Helen Hayes, Laurence Olivier, Charles Laughton, Gregory Ratoff and Martha Scott are some of the many whose fortunes changed as a result of performing for Harris.

For this producer, the most important element in any theatrical venture is the script itself. Harris says, "With me the play is not only the thing—it's absolutely everything." How does he approach a script? He recently told me "I don't read a play. I see it." He has the capacity to visualize each aspect of a production merely by looking at a printed manuscript.

1 Harris, Dance, p. 173.
2 Ibid.
3 Interview with Jed Harris.
Perhaps that is why, as with his choice of *Broadway*, *The Royal Family* and *The Heiress*, he was able to glimpse something which other producers were unable to see. By the time he goes into rehearsal, every detail of his production is crystal clear in his own mind. Only when he fails to match the right actor with the character so clearly defined in his own imagination does Harris become frustrated.

Ultimately, Harris’ inability to reconcile his vision of a production with the high-pressured reality of show business resulted in his most severe clashes with people in the theatre and also gave him his biggest hits. Pursuing his own belief in the way a particular play should be done, Harris often became intolerant of others who would try to dissuade or influence him. For example, he never listened to those who insisted that he must produce to please the public. He writes,

> I have a singular distrust of all people who know what the public wants and how to cater to that public. At the beginning of my career in the theatre . . . I was told that no backstage play had ever been a success. So I produced *Broadway*. Then I was told that no play about actors had ever been a popular success, so I produced *The Royal Family*. While I was in rehearsal with *The Front Page* I must have heard a hundred times, "You must remember one thing. There's never been a newspaper play that's ever been a popular success."[^4]

[^4]: Harris, *Dance*, pp. 6-7.
Then he sums up the very personal nature of all of his productions: "I had never set out to produce a popular success in any of the ventures I ever undertook. I simply did what I felt an irresistible urge to do."  

Like any man who achieves a reputation for singular accomplishment, Harris' career centers around and reflects his own unique personality. But, as one writer says, "More perhaps, than in the case of . . . almost any other figure connected with the stage and Broadway, it is difficult to capture and describe the elusive texture of Jed Harris's personality." Perhaps the only way to understand the magnetic union between Harris and the theatre is to recognize the innate contradictions of the theatre itself. Among its characteristics, the theatre stands first as an unreal world, created out of the imagination of those who would give it life. The theatre also is supremely personal, for the performer, for the director and for the audience. Each of these individuals brings something of himself, his own desire for meaning and significance to a production. And the experiences—elusive, thrilling, even terrifying—that one shares in the theatre can fulfill creative needs and provide escape not possible in one's life.

5Ibid., p. 7.

6Lucius Beebe, "Jed Harris Back on Broadway With Not One But Three Plays," Newspaper clipping, Lincoln Center.
For Harris, a man who lives in the realm of literature, of ideas and in his own imagination, the theatre is the natural place for merging that inner self with the harsh reality of a world to which he rarely feels he belongs.

Harris tells that in 1927 when he met George Bernard Shaw, this great playwright who had been such an inspiration to him as a child told Harris to forget the theatre. Go into movies. Make films, he said. If he had it all to do over, Shaw added, he would never do a play. Instead he would devote himself entirely to the movies. Harris, then at the beginning of his career, could have done what Shaw suggested. But, as he told one reporter, the difference between the screen and the living power of the legitimate theatre lies in the personal equation. A Broadway producer, although aware that he must make money to survive, undertakes a particular production because "he still has a feeling for a script in hand." Beyond that, he is usually "doing it for himself." A film director, under greater commercial pressure to please the public than a theatre director, must keep in mind, Harris says, that the product must be as acceptable to the people of Beaumont, Texas, as to the accountants who review his books.

7Interview with Jed Harris.

8Lucius Beebe, Lincoln Center.
Another handicap which the films possess is that they are the product of a corporation, something Harris had never held in high esteem. In 1926, the day after the opening of Love 'Em and Leave 'Em, the top officers of Paramount Pictures, Adolph Zukor, Walter Wanger and Jesse Lasky, invited Harris to lunch. Before the meal was over, they had offered him fifty, seventy-five and a hundred thousand dollars for the next three years to join their organization. Though Harris had no money at that time, he immediately refused their offer. When asked what he had against corporations, Harris replied,

"The thing I have against corporations is that they are corporations. That means large bodies of men dedicated to making profits for stockholders in order to hold on to their jobs. And to do that they must seek for accommodation among themselves—that is, they must cooperate. And if there is one word in the English language I hate, it's the word cooperation."

"I think it is a wonderful word," said Zukor. "How could the important things in the world be accomplished without cooperation?"

"I am sorry to disagree with you, Mr. Zukor [Harris said]. The greatest things have been accomplished not only without cooperation but against overwhelming opposition. Anyway, my experience is that cooperation always requires me to do something I don't want to do or, what is even worse, not to do something I want very much to do. . . ."  

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Harris, Dance, p. 111.
By the 1940's, the theatre still held more of an attraction for Harris than the films. Then, in the midst of World War II, he commented, "In these times of shaking ideas and rapidly changing standards and other sources of confusion and distress, the theatre is more than ever a refuge." Up until and including the time of Harris' personal crisis over the events taking place in Germany, the theatre offered him fulfillment as well as a periodic respite from the real world. Ultimately, however, the slaughter of the Jews so affected him that he withdrew more and more to himself. His one-time adventure and refuge was insufficient; and he turned to the much more solitary world of the writer.

Following Harris' departure from the theatre in 1956, he became involved in various activities, such as directing a television series and making movies. Primarily, however, he began to write. The two complete scripts which he wrote for the films, Night People and Operation Mad Ball (which he also produced), were both nominated for an academy award for the best original script. He also continued to work with many other playwrights, helping them rewrite their scripts. One such play, entitled How to Pick a Winner, Harris still hopes to produce.

In 1963, with Harris' publication of his book, Lucius Beebe, Lincoln Center.
Watchman, What of the Night?, Whitney Bolton of the New York Morning-Telegraph reminisced about his relationship with this producer. He wrote, "Back there around 1928, when he was producing plays and I was a young, green sprig at the business of writing dramatic criticism, I used to get warm, encouraging and reassuring little hand-written notes from Jed Harris saying briefly such charming things as "What are you trying to say?" or "Why don't you learn to write?" Bolton says that except for these notes, he was never able to locate anything else Harris had written, "---and thus was frustrated from penning a similar token of genuine affection. But now," he continues, "Mr. Harris has written; he has written a slender book called Watchman, What of the Night? and I am still frustrated. He has written it with such style, such dagger-like intention, such pure and unalloyed humor steeped in intellectual venom that I am prevented from joyous recital of any defects in it. There are none." All of the reviewers had highest praise for Harris' book. His talent as a writer was finally recognized. Since then, he has had many articles published in the New York Times and elsewhere.


12 Ibid.
The sudden rise to fame which this producer experienced is not unusual in the theatre, Harris says. "Look at Garrick for instance," he added, as he related to me the story of this wine seller who frequented the London pubs. Because of his early experience as a reciter, Garrick knew most of Shakespeare's plays by heart. And when an actor playing Richard III became ill, someone who knew of Garrick's past recommended that he take the actor's place for the night. "Overnight," Harris says, "Garrick was proclaimed the greatest actor of his time. But these sudden bursts of fame," he noted, "are not the career. The career is the man."\(^{13}\)

Had Hitler not slaughtered the Jews, Harris' life and career might have been entirely different. After his first five years of popular successes, during a period which Harris terms his "apprenticeship," his biggest hits were of the quality which he loved, such as the plays of Chekhov, Ibsen and Henry James. With these, Harris demonstrated that an audience could be found who appreciated sound productions of profoundly complex dramas. Had he established his own acting company, these would have been the types of plays he would have introduced.

In trying to piece together the various elements of Harris, the man, and Harris, the theatrical producer and director, I have read literally hundreds of newspaper

\(^{13}\)Interview with Jed Harris.
and magazine articles, biographies, memoirs and letters. The most surprising and significant discovery throughout all of my work was the growing realization of how different the legend is from the man. Harris' success stands as unquestioned as his talent. His humor and his temper are just as much a part of him as his passion for the theatre and his unwillingness to compromise. Yet, the elaboration of circumstance and gossip which surround such a figure as Jed Harris was consistently and notoriously distorted. Time and again, I questioned Harris about accounts of what he was supposed to have said or done, only to be met with a corrected version of the incident.

Harris' high regard for animals and low esteem for man was vividly told in one such tale. "Of all the legendary stories told about me," Harris says, "this is the one I like the best. It's said that when I was living in Beverly Hills a man came to visit me and seeing my beautifully trained dog, commented, 'Why, he's almost human.' Whereupon, I was supposed to have kicked the man so hard in the shins that he had to go to the hospital." Harris laughed.14 Many of the stories I questioned Harris about, he could quote word for word. "But," he would add, "they just never happened."

He says it reminds him of George Bernard Shaw. During his day, Shaw was frequently misquoted and viciously

14 Ibid.
caricatured. When Harris met him, he recounted to Shaw one of these stories, involving Shaw's cruelty to an actress performing in one of his plays. When Harris finished the description, Shaw glared at him and said, "It's a damnable lie!" "Of course I knew that," Harris told me. Throughout his career, Harris, like Shaw, never publically stooped to oppose or dispute what was falsely written or said about him.

To those who knew of Harris' work in the theatre, it must be said that he ranks as one of those few individuals in a century who rose to success and fame because of innate talent and creative intelligence. "I was born with an almost perfect dramatic sense," Harris confesses. Leaning forward, he continues, "What is dramatic---is revelation!" Softening his tone, he says, "A man and a woman are sitting talking, just like they've done for a year and a half. Everything is perfectly normal. But if you find out the woman is a bastard, a horrible creature---then bang! Everything changes! Their conversation takes on a sinister tone. You wonder what's going to happen next." Harris paused and looked at me, his eyes shining, "Now, that is dramatic!" Quietly he asked, "Do you see what I mean?" He admits that he was aware of this sense when he was only twenty years old. "But I didn't say anything about it to anyone. They would have said, "Oh, sure.'" and Harris rolls his eyes back. "If you have this sense, you don't need anything else---to go to drama school, to
acting school."15

Ben Hecht said of Harris that his assertions are not pumped-up certitudes from a man wishing to show off his knowledge. Rather, he possesses complete confidence in his own ability and his ideas. But his certainty of mind turns into objective probing and questioning when Harris starts to work. As he writes, I see him cut, rewrite, add a line, omit a phrase, then start over. For instance, he worked five weeks on one page of his memoirs before he allowed it to remain. He painstakingly suffers over everything he does. Is it just right, he asks. How could he improve? Rarely is he satisfied with a final product.

Harris' rewriting, cutting and "tightening" the script all helped to establish the tempo and style for which he became famous. Perhaps the most frequently mentioned quality of a Jed Harris production is the pace of his shows. "Pacing is not speed," Harris says, "The pace comes from the density of the dialogue." Could he recall any words or experience in his life, I asked, which influenced his idea on pacing or tempo in a performance? Yes, he says, from Ed Wynn. When Harris was a young press agent he saw Wynn give a delightful vaudeville show in Philadelphia. After the show, he became very excited when a friend introduced him to Wynn in Lou Tender's restaurant. As Wynn shook hands, he said, "Did you see the

15 Ibid.
show?" "Yes," replied Harris. "Tell me, was I on too long?" Wynn asked. Having related this incident to me, Harris said, "I can't tell you how that impressed me." 16

Throughout his years in the theatre, Harris made significant contributions to his profession, both from an artistic and practical standpoint. In looking back over his career, I discovered four outstanding characteristics or contributions which were singularly Jed Harris'. First is his ability to turn out what is called "perfectly timed and paced" productions. As one modern director has said, Jed Harris set the tempo for the modern theatre.

The next characteristic inherent in nearly all of his ventures was his innovative spirit. Time and again he accomplished what had never been successfully achieved and often what was described as impossible.

Further, Harris is a master of casting. In almost all of his plays, the minor roles received special mention. Indeed, this trait is perhaps the dominant one in Harris' work. Though many of his hits were later repeated, their success usually depended upon the selection of a star in the lead role. For example, a recent production of A Doll's House performed in New York gained attention because of its Norma, played by Clare Bloom. Harris' production of this play gained recognition because of the ensemble acting of Sam Jaffe, Dennis King and Margaret Waller as well

16 I b i d. .
as Ruth Gordon. Though many of Harris' players achieved stardom after performing for him, sometimes his players failed completely in their next roles. Harris somehow had the ability to bring out the best in even the weakest performer.

A final attribute which Jed Harris lent to the theatre was his own personality. This singular quality may be seen in his productions as well as in his professional relationships. His work reflects his own personal style, taste and perfectionism, and his influence encompasses actors, directors and playwrights. The distinctive feature in all of his theatrical activities was his total self-belief and uncompromising adherence to his own ideas and abilities. Books and plays have been written about him. He became a legend. In and of himself, Jed Harris can be called a force in the American theatre. As many others have said, he is perhaps the most significant producer-director in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century.

Though others may speak of Harris as a legend and his career as an exciting, glamorous life, Harris says, "The theatre for me was never filled with glamour. It was a workshop. I went to work, did my job and that was all. If this were true for Harris, those who knew him and his productions see more. Two such glimpses of Jed Harris reflect the spark of his unique personality and talent. First, a
friend of Harris' was quoted as saying, "Jed will quarrel with you, he will embarrass you, he will break your heart, he will drive you crazy—but he will always be good for the show." And critic John Mason Brown, capturing the essence of Harris' work from a theatre-goer's point of view writes,

No one of the proper age who is not the victim of amnesia can have forgotten Broadway and The Front Page. Or, for that matter, the luminous sensitivity of Mr. Harris' direction of The Green Bay Tree. Over the years it stands out as one of the contemporary theatre's memorable productions. It showed how unpredictable are the demonstrations of perfect taste and utter gentility. More recently, of course, The Heiress has supplied another example of Mr. Harris' informed instinct as a director.

He knows how to draw a line that is clean and strong. His touch is blissfully unmarred by fuzziness. He has an uncanny sense of theatre. It is comparable to a musician's ear or an artist's eye...

Today, at age 77, Harris has just completed his book of memoirs. He is now hard at work on at least two other books, two plays and a movie script. Besides these, he has numerous additional projects in view. This continued activity and drive are remarkable in and of themselves. They are even more phenomenal when one realizes that Harris is nearly blind. Three years ago Harris' eyesight suddenly failed. Since then he has been unable to read a word he

has written. Only after I type up his writing, and with the aid of a strong pair of glasses plus a high-powered magnifier held in his hand, can he read his work, one word at a time. The strain of such a system is terrific, especially to a man who likes for things to be completed almost by the time they are conceived. Although Harris' situation had been marked as hopeless by numerous eye specialists throughout the country, he would not accept their verdict. A few weeks ago he heard of a first-rate optometrist in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Harris immediately made an appointment. And after a thorough examination and three grueling weeks of waiting, a special pair of telescopic lenses arrived. Now he can read his own writing and, with the aid of a typewriter with extra large type, can see several words at a time. His determination to overcome this handicap is typical of his lifelong drive to achieve what others said was impossible. Harris himself sees nothing unusual or extraordinary in what he is doing.

As recorded in this study, contemporaries of Harris dismissed his departure from the theatre as though he were washed up. Some, such as Edna Ferber, talked about his self-destructive nature; and others, like S. N. Behrman, said that his over-blown image of himself finished him in his profession. Even Ben Hecht spoke of Harris' confidence as a thing of the past. They obviously did not know the real Jed Harris. His powers of observation and analysis,
his energy, vitality and self-confidence, even his impa-
tience and quick temper balanced by his concern and
generosity, are just as keen at 77 as when he first
arrived on Broadway.
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## APPENDIX I

### JED HARRIS PRODUCTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Play Title</th>
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<td>Weak Sisters</td>
<td>October 13, 1925</td>
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<tr>
<td>Love 'Em and Leave 'Em</td>
<td>February 3, 1926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadway</td>
<td>September 16, 1926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Coquette</td>
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<td>Mr. Gilhooly</td>
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<td>Our Town</td>
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One-Man Show
Apple of His Eye
Loco
The Heiress
Red Gloves
The Traitor
The Crucible
Child of Fortune

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December 6, 1943
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October 16, 1946
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December 5, 1948
March 31, 1949
January 22, 1953
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APPENDIX II

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF JED HARRIS

Jed Harris (né Jacob Horowitz) was born in Austria on February 25, 1900. Brought to this country as an infant, he grew up in Newark, New Jersey and New York City. He attended Yale University for three years (1916-1919), dropping out before the end of his junior year. From 1919 through 1924 he hoboed around the United States and worked as a press agent. In 1925 he produced his initial Broadway show (Weak Sisters). The following year he had his first big hit, entitled Broadway; and it was followed by three of his greatest successes: Coquette (1927), The Royal Family (1927), and The Front Page (1928). After 1930 his productions include Uncle Vanya (1930), The Green Bay Tree (1933), A Doll's House (1938), Our Town (1938), Dark Eyes (1943), The Heiress (1948) and The Crucible (1953). Harris' career spans 32 years (1925-1956) and encompasses 30 productions introduced during 20 theatrical seasons. For brief periods, Harris was married to Anita Green (mid 1920s), Louise Platt (mid 1940s) and Beatrice Allan (1958).

Since retiring from the theatre in 1956, Harris has spent most of his time writing; he has also directed shows for television, written and produced movies, and
given a limited number of lectures. Having just completed his memoirs, entitled *A Dance on the High Wire*, at age 77, Harris is presently working on at least two other books, two plays and a movie script.
VITA

Patricia Lynn Burroughs was born April 1, 1942, in Hope, Arkansas. After graduation from Hope High School, she attended Ouachita Baptist College in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, where she received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1964. Between 1964 and 1967, she taught in the public school systems of Little Rock, Arkansas, and High Point, North Carolina. From September, 1967 through August, 1969, she attended Louisiana State University, where she received the degree of Master of Arts in January, 1970. Between 1969 and 1971 she taught at Trenton (N.J.) State College and from 1971 through June 1974 she was director of an arts project for the public school system of Winston-Salem, North Carolina. During the summer of 1973 she was accepted into a special summer program in arts administration at Harvard University. In September, 1974, she entered Louisiana State University as a graduate student in the Doctor of Philosophy program of Theatre in the Department of Speech.
Candidate: Patricia Lynn Burroughs

Major Field: Speech

Title of Thesis: "The Theatrical Career of Jed Harris in New York, 1925-1956"

Approved:

[Signatures]

Date of Examination: April 21, 1978