

and when this process is continued regularly for the better part of a long first act, the effect becomes both monotonous and nerve-wracking. Further along there is music of slightly greater pretense in which roll-calls on trumpets and fife play a considerable part. But on the whole it cannot be said that this "score" will add greatly to the reputation of the author of *Four Saints*. It lacks his light hand and his usual ingenuity. No doubt he will claim that it is just the right thing as a commentary on the *Living Newspaper* and perhaps this is so.

Frederick Jacobi

WEILL SCORES FOR JOHNNY JOHNSON

I HAVE written some harsh things in the past about Kurt Weill and his music. I wish now to write a few good things. He hasn't changed, I have. The touchoff is the production the Group Theatre have given of his and Paul Green's *Johnny Johnson*. Whatever its fate at the hands of New York audiences (I have seen a preview of the work) I wish to go on record as being grateful to it for having shown me values I didn't know about before.

Johnny Johnson is a piece about an essentially pure, young, glib American of 1917, who goes off to the "war to end war" believing implicitly in Woodrow Wilson, and in all the trumped-up slogans of the time. It is the story of his disillusionment, and it also intends to show that Johnny is the only sane man in a mad world—this last through satire, with Johnny incarcerated in an asylum because of his sanity. The play misses because of deep confusion in the poet's mind as to just where real sanity such as Johnny displays would lead him; also because in his effort to make Johnny lovable, he has him do things which are not only sane but cute, and thus robs him of a necessary dignity. The end is pitifully bad, the last song hoping to retrieve some dignity out of defeat plus cuteness, and becoming impossibly sentimental, the embarrassing kind of sentimental.

It is sort of American *Schwejk*, a folk play. For it, Weill has written some of his best music. The song of the Goddess of Liberty, the one called *Soldiers, Masters, Men*, the comic one on psychiatry are in their way quite as fine as the *Barbarasong* or *Surabaya Johnny*. They are also less in the music-hall pattern

than the earlier songs. There is plenty of trite music in the new score too. I have formerly complained about Weill's banality, even his insipidity. I see now that triteness in a work of Weill is curiously not bad, but good. Weill deliberately tries for it—for the familiar turn, for the easy supine harmonies. He sticks slavishly to what the ear has through decades of association come to want. He has a great faith in the old-fashioned. I think he feels that certain ways of being expressive never die; and I think he believes he can crack open, make plastic, even re-form a mold which has hardened in the memory for other composers. If in listening one can make the first hurdle (I used to say "You *can't* write like that!") then one finds the music fresher and more appealing than all the smart-striving social-climbing Broadway songs. Weill's utter "corniness" is in a way terribly sophisticated; he writes a piece which is the last word in style of that kind. As to its taste, it has the confounding sureness which outlasts transient dicta concerning bad taste and lack of it.

It is soft-voiced music—but there is a message there. Velvet propaganda—as he calls it, poison. Danger exists—but not always. You get this danger to best advantage when Brecht is the poet; he hits hard clean sharp jabs to the chin with his texts. These, underpinned by Weill's nostalgic, inconsolably sad music have a compelling and unique effect which I have just got round to. The meanings jut out clearly as they pass by—they are usually bitter meanings—and the music acts as wheels, and oil for the wheels.

This doesn't always take place in *Johnny Johnson*. It appears that Paul Green is as soft-spoken a poet as Weill is a composer; the result is a message so gentle, so barely-whispered that it is missed. The velvet-propaganda becomes tulle, or even ectoplasm. But sometimes Weill can do things with a Green text—he can counterpoint the Valentine tango with wit, or the cowboy number with lustiness and breadth. It is a wonder that he can do anything with it at all; Green's poetry is special, lyrical in its own right, and not what one thinks of as musicable verse.

I wonder if the music-critics, who will doubtless spend a lot of time worrying that Weill's score is not sufficiently American or folksy—I wonder if they will have noticed that Weill has

practically added a new form to the musical theatre. It is not opera, although it partakes of the "number" form of Mozart. And it is decidedly not revue-form. It owes something to the movies, but it is much more attached to the script. Take the spot where the exasperated Sergeant tries to put Johnny through all the military paces, and winds up saying—"and you won't learn, and so the hell with you!" As he starts (speaking), music insinuates itself into his speech, and his enumeration of the maneuvers gains momentum and dash by becoming rhythmical and percussive—until the final expletive, when the music drops out. This almost elementary, uninhibited use of music, seemingly careless, really profoundly sensitive, predicts something new for the theatre. It runs a risk of being choppy, fragmentary; but Weill makes sure there are whole islands of music, and binding passages of music, and entr'acte sections of music. There is nothing wrong with his sense of topography.

I am by nature against having unseen voices sing the parts of the Goddess of Liberty or of having a song for three cannons. I am aware that the stylization of the piece permits this kind of conceit. But it is perilous charm-devising—also it is too difficult to handle well theatrically. Otherwise I think I consent to all Weill's notions in the work. I am hoping that when *Johnny Johnson* actually meets its public there will no longer be the dubious atmosphere of "experiment" about it; that it will have gathered up its best points into a production of unity and development. Certainly what it has to offer in the way of new musical form is needed in the New York theatre as few things are needed in it; and Weill is respected for that new form.

Marc Blitzstein

ON THE HOLLYWOOD FRONT

By GEORGE ANTHEIL

MUSIC, in the motion picture business, is on the upgrade. It may interest musicians to know that I have been remonstrated with because I did not write quite as discordantly as had been expected. "We engaged you to do 'modernistic' music