

T H E A T E R

# Inviting a Toast Of Broadway Past To Visit the Present

By NICHOLAS DELBANCO



The Pollock Theater Collection, Howard University

**T**O TRIVIA BUFFS AND THEATER historians the answer is Avery Hopwood, and the question: Which American playwright had four shows running simultaneously on Broadway in 1920? Or, who is the author of "The Gold Diggers," "The Bat," "Spanish Love" and "Ladies' Night"? And, why do so few know his name when he was once the toast of the town?

To critics as well as a gratified public, this Neil Simon of the Roaring Twenties seemed inexhaustible, but he has had no work revived in more than 40 years. Now, with the production here of his drawing-room comedy, "The Best People," a curtain will rise yet again.

Avery Hopwood was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1884; he graduated from the University of Michigan, Phi Beta Kappa, in 1905. Thereafter, he went to New York.

Although known as the "playboy playwright" and accused of mere frivolity, he had a productive career; he was the author or co-author of 33 plays. In her memoir, "What Is Remembered," Alice B. Toklas describes Hopwood and the photographer and novelist Carl Van Vechten as having jointly "created modern New York."

"They changed everything to their way of seeing and doing. It became as gay, irresponsible and brilliant as they were."

Hopwood recalled his own original impetus, and why he wrote his first play, "Clothes": "An intense admiration for the theater, a fondness for writing, and the ambition to make money, contrived to pave the way for my career as a dramatist; but the influence that focused my efforts was an article written by Louis V. De Foe that appeared in the Michigan Alumnus, when I was a student at the University of Michigan. 'The Call of the Playwright' was its title, and in it Mr. De Foe told of the fabulous sums that dramatists had made; the more I thought about it, the more determined I

Nicholas Delbanco, whose most recent novel is "Old Scores," directs the Hopwood Awards program at the University of Michigan.



Paul Thompson

**FROTHMEISTER** Avery Hopwood in 1911 and, left, Charles Carson and Tallulah Bankhead in the London version of his hit "The Gold Diggers" in 1926.

that had six touring companies within a year and broke box-office records in every region of the country.

Finally, working out of what Alexander Woollcott called the "Avery Hopwood Playmaking Factory," he wrote "Spanish Love" for Broadway that season and, together with Charlton Andrews, "Ladies' Night (in a Turkish Bath)."

Such titles suggest Hopwood's style; he wrote bedroom farces with sexual innuendo just out of range of the censor and guaranteed to please. His success was of a transient kind: entertainment based on titillation, well-built if lightweight vehicles designed to float a star. By 1922, The New York Times described him as "almost unquestionably the richest of all playwrights."

But he never quite relinquished the dream of artistic achievement, and he could be engagingly snappish when accused of selling out: "I do not write more serious plays, for one thing, because it is too easy. I mean, too easy to write the sort of serious plays

with which our stage, lately, has been inundated. They are written, mostly, by men who think that they think, and who pretend to solve, in the course of a couple of hours, one or more of the great problems which confront humanity. I could not do that sort of thing and retain my intellectual honesty."

**I**N HIS LAST YEARS, HE SPENT LITTLE time in America; both artistic and personal freedom seemed constrained to him at home. The liquor and cocaine on which he gorged himself in Paris and Nice could qualify this expatriate as a card-carrying member of the Lost Generation, and he celebrated, lavishly, with a series of male companions until his luck ran out.

Hopwood died in 1928 while swimming at Juan-les-Pins on the French Riviera. There were suspicions: he had been drunk, he had been battered by a vengeful lover, he went swimming too soon after lunch. The coroner's verdict, however, was coronary occlu-

sion. Under the terms of his will, and after the death of his mother, one-fifth of Hopwood's estate was left to the University of Michigan. The will stipulated that prizes be awarded to students "who perform the best creative work in the fields of dramatic writing, fiction, poetry and the essay."

Although the successful author of "Nobody's Widow," "Fair and Warmer," "Girl in a Limousine" and "Getting Gertie's Garter" may be almost wholly forgotten, what is remembered today are the awards in his name.

The first writing contest was held in 1930-31, and since then winners have included John Ciardi, Frank O'Hara, Lawrence Kasdan, Marge Piercy and Arthur Miller. The

**In the 20's, Avery Hopwood wrote plays prolifically, then was forgotten. In the roaring 90's, a new production shows, he's up to date again.**

program has honored almost 3,000 students and dispensed \$1.5 million in prize money.

Avery Hopwood's legacy, if not his writing, endures. For the last few days, the Department of Theater and Drama and the university have mounted a production of "The Best People," written in 1924 by Hopwood and David Gray (who concocted the plot as a short story in The Saturday Evening Post). The final performance is this afternoon in the Mendelssohn Theater on the Ann Arbor campus.

"The Best People" is the humorous telling of the strained relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Bronson Lenox and their two spoiled children. Their daughter, bored with life, refuses to marry the man her parents deem worthy and instead falls in love with someone "beneath her." Meanwhile, the Lenoxes' prodigal son becomes infatuated with a chorus girl. Scandal ensues.

As part of the same enterprise of discovery, the University of Michigan Press has reissued "Avery Hopwood: His Life and Plays" by the dramaturge Jack F. Sharrar. This sort of theater no longer looks dated but instead representative of a period in our history which we now find familiar; the Broadway and the Wall Street of the 90's remind us of their antecedents in the pre-Depression 20's. If only as a cautionary tale about the transient nature of success, the life of Avery Hopwood should be better understood and the plays more widely known.

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