

# VGW: Peas in the mattress

If we are to believe the critic-of-all-trades for Edmonton's other paper, last weekend's production of *Once Upon a Mattress* was a bad comedy badly performed. I am inclined to agree that this former Broadway flop was perhaps a bad choice for the Jubilaires' Guest Weekend presentation; but it is by no means true that the players' performance was bad, or even mediocre.

The music and lyrics, of course, are far from memorable. There are none of the catchy, lively tunes which we heard in *Li'l Abner* last year, and often the musical pieces seem to have crept into the play by accident. There is a marked lack of choral pieces, which are the safer thing in a production not gifted with professional soloists.

Many of the scenes, while enjoyable in themselves, are too obviously geared to give the stage crew time to change sets, and at these points the action drags badly—I am thinking especially of the part of the play culminated by the clown's soft shoe dance.

But for the Jubilaires' handling

of what is a flawed play I can have little else but praise. The sets were magnificent, conveying remarkably well the bright, dreamy atmosphere of a fairy-tale court. Particularly impressing was the scene of the prologue—a background of moon and scudding clouds which miraculously changed into a misty ballet routine. The lighting effects here and elsewhere made the best use of the Jubilee Auditorium facilities.

Director John Madill is to be congratulated for having persuaded his subjects to sing and talk to the audience instead of the wings, as was the case in the somewhat catastrophic production of *Li'l Abner*.

As a result, most of the speaking and singing was audible throughout the theatre, although one or two of the soloists tended to be drowned out by the orchestra. But whether this was the fault of the singers or of the absurdly designed orchestra pit in the Auditorium I would hesitate to guess.

About Anne Wheeler's performance as Princess Winnifred little

need be said. She was magnificent—powerful, vibrant, and versatile. Mr. Westgate has likened her to Carol Burnett, a comparison which is perhaps fair; but it would be unfortunate if Miss Wheeler's career should labour under the restrictions of such a classification. I would like to believe that she can be more than brash, loud, and lively—and her ability to be more was at least hinted at in the splendid performance which she gave last weekend.

The other members of the cast were all competent, and most were quite good. The minor female characters were a little meek, except of course for Marva Swenson, who as the Queen overdid her part if anything. Larry Ethier as Prince Dauntless made the most of a rather silly part. The chorus presented itself well visually, not having much of a chance to do so vocally, but the choreography was by no means breathtaking.

As an amateur production *Once Upon a Mattress* should be remembered as a success. It was not unflawed, but this is hardly a basis for condemning it as if it were a Broadway eight-dollars-the-ticket affair. In short, it was very, very good—and in comparison to last year's rather sloppy Varieties presentation, it was superb.

—Dyllon Rentrey

## films

Occasionally people ask me—well, no, they don't, in fact nobody has spoken to me since everybody went to see Jerry Lewis in *Way Way Out* some months back on my frenzied recommendation—but if they could bring themselves to ask me anything they'd ask me, "Why do you keep sending us off to lowbrow tripe when you warn us away from prestigious films like *Alfie*, and *Georgy Girl* and *The Blue Max*?"

It's a good question, and we might as well try thrashing it out now, because it wouldn't be easy to find a more lowbrow film than that which engages my critical attention this week: *The Return of the Seven* (at the Rialto, Dean Martinless for the first time in months).

But if you've got nothing better to do, or if you recognize in yourself a taste for the sort of monumentality which I'm going to maintain the Sensitive Spectator can discover in this cliché-ridden armageddon, then I can cautiously suggest that the seats in the Rialto are comfortable enough to make the evening bearable.

The Seven are, I gather, left over from an older Hollywood movie I haven't seen, *The Magnificent Seven*, which was by all accounts a deplorable transmutation of Kurasawa's brilliant *The Seven Samurai*, which I haven't seen either. I forget whether Kurasawa had Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* in mind, and I haven't read the play, so, all in all, I'm not really qualified to discuss the genesis of the Rialto's current offering.

However, its plot will probably not startle you with its novelty. Yul Bryner plays Chris, a big gunman with the executive talents of Robert Macnamara and the morale-building powers of a sexier Lord Baden-Powell.

The other six are (1) old buddy of Chris' (2) ex-gunman peasant who's carried off with all the other men in his village by the villain (3) quasi-psychopath picked up in jail (4) good-natured bandit ditto (5) woman-chasing loudmouth with good heart (6) untried young Mexican who wants to Prove Himself.

The Seven ride out into the desert to vanquish evil, which turns out to be vaguely Freudian (the villain has commandeered all the peasants to build a church in memory of his dead sons who in life had been a bitter disappointment to him), and to instil a sense of self-respect in the peasantry, who (almost like the South Vietnamese—this is the first film I've seen this year whose tendency is to lend support to the Johnson line) need the strong, kind, honest Seven to teach them how to fight.

Hopelessly outnumbered, the Seven (plus quivering useless peasantry) stand firm. The tide is turned by the young Mexican, who has a bright idea I can't be bothered to reveal.

The only one of the Seven to die is the psychopath, who turns out just to be suicidal because he'd had to shoot his wife to save her from rape at the hands of drunken Comanchees. He dies very nicely.

The picture derives its vague charm from precisely the way in which the old formulas of the western and the garrison-film are worked through, one by one, sedately and efficiently.

Call these formulas "archetypes", and perhaps the monumentality I claim for the Seven won't seem misplaced.

Archetypes, as every neurotic English-studies-oriented schoolboy knows, were invented (well, they weren't, but let it pass) by C. G. Jung to account for just such powerful recurring patterns in world literature and mythology.

The concept was smuggled into criticism by, among others, Canada's own Northrop Frye. And Frye has another useful bit of machinery we may use here.

He sees literature as capable of being arranged in various cycles; one of these starts with the mythic (tales of the gods), progresses through tales of heroes and kings, to tales of the "common man", finally arriving at the ironic mode, in which man's "subhumanity", his essential powerlessness, is emphasized.

But here, mysteriously, the cycle begins again, and we are back with the gods.

To see this happening, try looking at the ironies of *The Professionals*, and then move on to *The Magnificent Seven*, which is the same plot de-ironized, turned over to the old gods, stupid and magnificent.

—John Thompson



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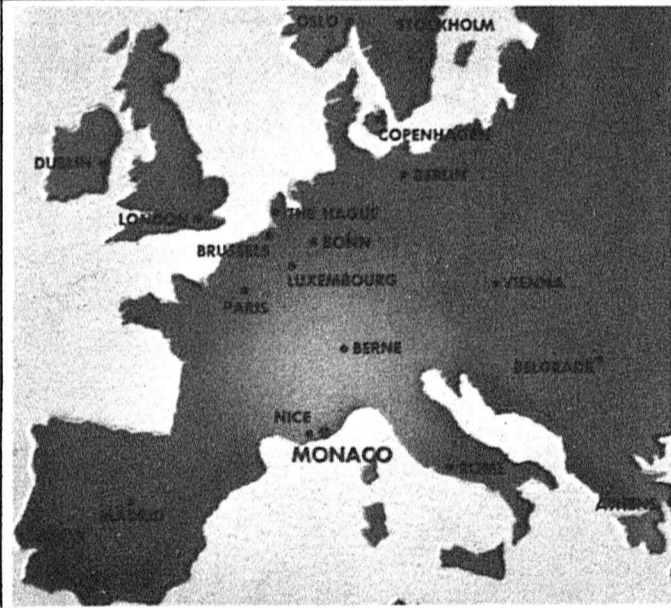
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