

Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Playbill for Jelly's Last Jam

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PASSING STAGES by Louis Botto

PRIZE LIP

One of choreographer Susan Stroman's show-stopping numbers in Crazy for You is sung and danced to George and Ira Gershwin's jaunty song called "Stiff Upper Lip." We have received several letters inquiring the name of the show or movie that originally featured this song. The answer is the 1937 film musical A Damsel in Distress. The song was sung by Gracie Allen to George Burns and Fred Astaire, then danced by all three over a spectacular fun house with moving platforms, rotating barrels and distorted mirrors. Choreographer Hermes Pan won an Academy Award for this sequence.

MAXWELL ON STREETCAR

The current revival of A Streetcar Named Desire at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre (where the original production also played in 1947-1948) brings to mind the totally sappy review written of the first production by none other than the jet set's pet of that era - the roly-poly, gravel-voiced party giver, Elsa Maxwell. Ms. Maxwell at that time wrote a column for the New York Post called Party Line. She caught Streetcar in Philadelphia prior to its New York opening, and here are some excerpts from her review: "Jessica Tandy plays the New Orleans school teacher who is oh-so-genteel yet a real slut at heart, with a street-walker's complex. She returns to New Orleans to visit her sister, who is married to a Pole, beautifully played by Marlon Brando (a terrible name which should be changed immédiately to either Marlow Brandon or Brand Lomar). Jessica Tandy, who plays Candy [sic], does the best acting of her life...It's a sordid play and concerns characters from the gutter who prefer the gutter to the sidewalk ... There is very little, if any, plot. The sequences are inconsequential, but under psychological shock treatment one's consciousness is hurled an exciting and shattering bit of theatre! This play with the strange name was written for Irene Selznick by Tennessee Williams, the talented young author of The Glass Menagerie...I like it much more...Marlon Brando wants no part of Hollywood. He doesn't want to make Pictures." (Ha, ha!)

WORK IN PROGRESS

At a recent PLAYBILL luncheon in honor of the cast of Private Lives, star Joan Collins was asked what her plans were after the show closed. Her reply: "I'm going to London to finish my third novel, which Random House is going to publish. I write four hours a day. I like the freedom of writing. I say my dialogue out loud. I've always loved word games and reading." Asked if she would rather be in a hit play or write a best seller, she answered, "I'd like both."

THE PHANTOM MYSTERY

We have received so many letters about the Prologue in The Phantom of the Opera that we want to settle the matter once and for all. Who is the old man sitting in the wheelchair at the auction in the Paris Opera House who bids for and buys the monkey music box? Many writers believe he's the Phantom. Not so. It's Raoul - Christine's lover - in his twilight years.

GRUMPY EXIT

PASSING STAGES

by Louis Botto

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The late critic/wit and radio personality Alexander Woollcott had this to say about Broadway opening nights in the 1930's: "Where can you find a gathering as dreary, as ruthless and as moronic as you do at a Broadway first night? First nights have lost their charm and flavor. I never go anymore. I simply won't sit in that company. The newspapers have helped to ruin premieres and the theatres have let them get away with it. A premiere should be a pleasant occasion. It used to be. But now it has become an unbearable one."

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