

One Package Theater Reaps Windfall in Off Broadway Settings

By FRANCIS X. BRENNAN
 United Press International
 Back in 1800, when a gentleman wished to show his gentle lady a good time, he'd take her out for a drink, a meal and a play—all in the same place. The same idea is catching on today, far off Broadway.

On Broadway, a gentleman can get rid of \$50 or much more acquiring a gentle lady through the works of a first run stage production with all the fixings. This is pretty stiff going even for Broadway and the legitimate theater in New York is suffering as a consequence.

But far off Broadway, where the Minneapolis, Chicago and Pittsburgh commuter rooms, producers are cashing in with the lure of a dry martini, a square meal, and a theatrical menu ranging from Shakespeare to Tennessee Williams—all under one roof.

One of the new breed of outlandish impresarios, Mike McAloney of the Dorchester Music hall of Dolton, Ill., summed up his recipe for theatrical success:

"One package. No separate restaurant. No parking problems. Seats spacious and comfortable, not like some of the Broadway torture boxes. "And, if the husband cares to, he can drink and smoke during the show."

The new far off Broadway theater ranges from "supper theaters" like McAloney's to the prestigious Tyrone Guthrie Repertory theater in Minnesota's twin cities, from Chicago's bouncy "Second City" to the plush dining rooms and lounge of the Pittsburgh playhouse.

The formula is the same: to make good theater convenient, comfortable, and — by Broadway standards — cheap.

A typical supper theater—and a successful one — is the Del Prado hotel's in Chicago—where a musical, "Hits of Broadway," will observe its second anniversary this year.

The show, enjoying one of the longest runs of any ever to hit the windy Chicago provides a fresh edition every four weeks.

In One Setting

"A person can enjoy himself with a dinner and see the show without changing seats," Del Prado publicist Mark Glatt said. Robert Simpson, producer has similar supper shows running in St. Louis, Mo., and Denver. He swaps casts with each new edition.

The show picks up songs, skits and dances of top Broadway shows of the past 30 years, 15 numbers from about eight different Broadway productions in each edition.

Orrin B. Stine, producer of the Stagelight theater in Wheeling, Ill., agrees the package deal

"represents a whole new kind of theater springing up in this country."

Stine also credits convenience as a major factor behind the boom of legitimate theater in his part of the country.

"Instead of a central urban location," he said, "it's in a central suburban location and reflects the move of people with disposable income to spend on the theater."

"We bring the theater to them."

At the Stagelight, \$4.95 buys a ticket and a seven-course dinner during the week, with a one-dollar higher tab on week ends. The Stagelight stays open all year around.

"We got some pretty cold weather and some pretty deep snow," Stine said, "and they come out in any kind of weather."

Boom in West

The supper theater also is booming in the west.

San Francisco has several—the La Strada, the Sheraton-Palace hotel's Garden Court theater in the Round, and the Little Fox. In Los Angeles, the Le Grand, the Ivar, and the Civic theaters operate similar arrangements in conjunction with restaurants or bars next door.

Fodd and drink aren't the only lures for the far off Broadway theater.

Theaters doing fine with different techniques include the Barter in Abingdon, Va.; the Pittsburgh Playhouse; the Tyrone Guthrie in Minneapolis; the Gaslighters at Folsom, Calif., and Chicago's Drury Lane.

The Barter Theater, a stock company of 55 professional actors, is perhaps unique in that it operates in a small Appalachian town where "legit" theaters outnumber the movie houses 2 to 1.

Managing Director Robert Porterfield started the company 31 years ago in depression days when the actors traded entertainment for goods and services.

"The first season wound up with a total cash balance of \$4.30 lots of jams and jellies, and an overall weight gain among members of 305 pounds," he said.

Lures Williams

He credits success to the area audience, described as rurally sophisticated with honest reactions. The Barter has lured such writers as Tennessee Williams, who hopes to revive his Broadway flop, "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here."

By opening at Barter with his

reworked play, Williams said, the bugs can be worked out without fear of "cocktail conversations killing it before it reaches Broadway."

The Pittsburgh Playhouse, in operation since 1934, caters to a large private membership. There are three theaters, two dining rooms and a cocktail lounge, all under one roof.

Minnesota's brand new Tyrone Guthrie theater is rated among the aristocracy of far off Broadway theaters.

Housed in modernistic glass, wood and concrete just off Minneapolis Loop, the theatre opened last May with all fanfare and new critics in attendance. The opening production on the three-sided stage was Hamlet, Smack of Nazi.

George Gizzard delivered "to be or not to be" in a blue smoking jacket and Elsinore was stocked with guards with flashlights and soldiers wearing uniforms which smacked of the Nazi.

Some Minnesotans were disturbed. But as the season developed the audiences clamored for

more.

Out in the old gold mine country of the California Sierras, The Gas Lighters at Folsom keep going all year round.

Their show consists of a melodrama written in the 1880's or 90's and an "olio," a sort of a vaudeville staged by the actors after the play. The audience is encouraged to boo the villain, cheer the hero, and buy drinks at the bar adjoining the theater.

Other California groups operating in the same vein include The Clay Pipers at Drytown and The University of Pacific Summer Theater at Columbia.

Another mother lode is being tapped by cafe theaters such as Chicago's Second City.

Featuring permanent companies of five or six actors, the cafe theater has "virtually no production costs," Producer Bernard Sahlin of Second City says. Through improvisation of material, "We're able to free ourselves of dependency on writers."

Many in Revival

Also cashing in on the revival are the Melody theater, adjacent

to Disneyland at Anaheim, Calif.; Detroit's Vanguard playhouse; the Music Circus at Sacramento, Calif.; Milwaukee's Melody Top theater, and "The Committee's" on San Francisco's Broadway, which features off-beat plays with extemporaneous acting.

Manager Demetrios Vilan of Los Angeles' Huntington-Hartford blamed Broadway for some of his troubles.

"You would think a play run-

ning a year in New York would run at least six months here, but the longest play here so far was seven weeks," he said. "Another thing is that we're not getting enough good road shows. Broadway has had some bad shows lately which have hurt us."

But while Broadway has impaled itself on high costs, off Broadway groups have used imagination to cut costs and revitalize the theater.

Gimmicks have helped pull in

audiences, but they won't hold them unless the theater fare continues to be good and sparkling.

But for the time-being comfort, food, drink, and low prices are reaping a windfall for off Broadway.



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Delegates Study Fishing Provisions

TOKYO (UPI) — Japanese, Canadian and American negotiators met today to "clarify" American - proposed modifications to a new treaty governing fishing rights in the northeast Pacific.

A brief joint communique said there was "some discussion between the Japanese and U. S. delegations to clarify certain provisions contained" in a protocol proposed Wednesday by the United States.

The communique said the negotiators agreed to hold their next session Friday afternoon "so that the Canadian and Japanese delegations could have enough time for thorough examination of the U. S. proposal."

Today's session, the eighth in the current fisheries negotiations between the three countries in Tokyo, lasted for one hour and 20 minutes.



DINNER AND SHOW — Diners at Chicago's Del Prado hotel watch a musical number in this photo. This hotel offers a dinner and Del Prado hotel watch a musical number in this photo. This hotel offers a dinner and Del Prado hotel watch a musical number in this photo. (UPI)

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