

OPO #31

I CAN'T THINK OF ANY CARTOON IDEAS - I'VE GONE TO HELL AS A CAR-TOON-IST. DRAW A CARTOON ABOUT IT.



So I did!

February 5, 1965; published by Pat & Dick Lupoff, Merry Hell, Poughkeepsie, New York 12603. Yup.

THEATRE WEEK: HIGH SPIRITS by Hugh Martin and Timothy Gray, based upon "Blithe Spirit" by Noel Coward; directed by Noel Coward.

Presented as "an improbable musical comedy" at the Alvin Theatre, this is of course a musical version of Coward's fantasy-comedy, and with renewed debate over stfnal drama, its absence from the fannish page to this time must be attributed to NYarea fans' nearly total lack of interest in the living theatre...or, perhaps, to their shock at the scale of prices (bottom is \$3 for last-row balcony - orbital heights and guaranteed right behind a pillar; a decent seat on a Saturday night can go up to \$9.90 totally without ice).

At any rate, to review briefly the plot of "Blithe Spirit"/"High Spirits," Charles Condomine (Edward Woodward) is a successful author of mystery novels, living in reasonable happiness with his second wife, Ruth (Louise Troy). His first wife, Elvira, had died seven years earlier.

To gather material for a new book, Condomine invites a local Esther Davis type who operate The Inner Circle coffee house, to come perform a seance in his living room. The coffee-house proprietress, Madame Arcati (Bea Lillie) arrives weirdly costumed, dismounts her bicycle, and proceeds to perform a seance, succeeding beyond all expectation by calling up the shade of Elvira Condomine (Tammy Grimes). Elvira still loves Condomine, and competes with Ruth for his love; Elvira's idea of triumph would be to get Charles nicely killed off so that he would be in the spirit world with her, while Ruth naturally responds by trying to keep Charles alive, and to get rid of Elvira's ghost. The comic possibilities are fairly obvious, and need not be gone into.

The music for "High Spirits" is pleasant but unmemorable, as are most of the lines: entertaining but not especially noteworthy. All of the cast do a creditable job, and the ghostly special effects are adequate (they would be a lot better if the ghost looked a little less substantial.) But the real reason for seeing "High Spirits" (unless one is a fantasy-theatre completist, of which I know of none) is Bea Lillie, whose timing, delivery, costume, and overall comic inventiveness are fantastic. I do not know how old she is, but I know she was well established before I was born -- in 1935 -- and although she avoids a few of the wilder exertions that might otherwise go into her part, she still performs marvelously. How many more plays she will appear in is subject to conjecture, and if you want to see her in action, it's worth at least the three bucks for a matinee balcony seat.

For Effers, that is. Ellers may want to see a couple of the other fantasies on Broadway to justify the fare. (A recent Sunday Times noted that not fewer than four fantasies are on the boards just now.) Of borderline interest, BAKER STREET opens a week from tomorrow. I will report after I see it, but that will be a while yet.

BOOK WEEK: SKULL FACE AND OTHERS by Robert E. Howard, Arkham House, 1946. Yeh, yeh, I know it's been some time since 1946, but I get around to these things slowly, slowly. This was one of the four early Arkham "giants" -- the two original Lovecraft collections, Hodgson's four-in-one, and the Howard. It contains over 500 pages, including introductory material by Derleth, Lovecraft, and E. Hoffman Price. Price's portrait of Howard is particularly excellent.

Over two dozen Howard items are included, of which "Skull Face" is the longest -- it was a Weird Tales serial in 1929, when Howard was just twenty-three -- and was a great surprise to me. Howard is widely known for his bloody-barbarian adventures, of which a plenitude are included here, but "Skull Face" is -- astonishingly -- a pastiche of Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu novels. (Only three of the latter, plus a similar book featuring an enigmatic "Mr. King", had appeared from Rohmer by 1929.)

In OPO 22 I said that "If [a successor author] sticks faithfully to the existing and authentic material, he really is performing no creative act, but merely parroting the original author's work, which, with the original available, makes the copy superfluous. On the other hand, if he does innovate, he may strain the very fabric of the illusion-universe created by the author originally." I'm afraid that reading "Skull Face" has forced me to institute a new feature in this department, the Lupoff Retracts and Recants feature.

What Howard did in "Skull Face" in fact proves me wrong on both points. For much of the tale, Howard provides a faithful imitation of Rohmer's classic Fu Manchu pattern, with the Limehouse dope den, disguised secret agents, beautiful oriental girl inexplicably enslaved by the seldom-seen Secret Master, honeycomb of tunnels beneath the streets of London, world-wide secret conspiracy, and so on. Only...Howard writes it all better than Rohmer ever did!!

And when Howard does innovate, he does not "strain the very fabric of the illusion-universe created by the author originally," but instead provides the key to the entire enigma of Fu Manchu, his "secret origin" which is so masterfully conceived and so magnificently presented that it is entirely acceptable even to an old Fuphile like yr 'umble reviewer.

I must say that reading this huge book -- but especially its title story -- has raised Howard's standing in my eyes vastly. That he ended his own career at the age of thirty by (to quote Sprague de Camp) "blowing his silly head off," is rendered all the more tragic in view of the prolific output, varying in quality but at its best outstanding, prior to that age. With a full career, I am convinced that Howard would have been one of the towering figures ever produced in our field, and perhaps beyond it as well.

 Early last fall Sprague de Camp asked me if Canaveral would be interested in a complete version of the Conan stories, properly sequenced and edited by himself. I had to decline with regrets, due to buying strictures, but I understand that Lancer is doing the set. I look forward to reading at least the first of the books, perhaps all of them; I'm proud that my fellow founding Fanoclast Larry Shaw is the editor who bought them.