

'Sandhog,' Exciting Musical Play On Men Who Dug Hudson Tunnel

By HARRY RAYMOND

The standard of the current season's musical theatre has been greatly enhanced by the Phoenix Theatre's production of "Sandhog," large-scale musical drama by Earl Robinson and Waldo Salt. There is rugged, dramatic strength in both the music and the story. It is a towering monument to the men who lived and died amid the muck and rock while digging the first tunnel under the Hudson River 50 years ago.

Here is exciting entertainment for both the eye and the ear. Mr. Robinson, whose beautiful choral work, "Ballad for Americans," stirred the nation some years ago, has written a memorable score. His music fuses naturally with Mr. Salt's lyrics. A happy blend of original music, poetic writing, good acting, vibrant dancing and skillful staging marks this production as a distinguished work of theatre art.

Messrs. Robinson and Salt have entitled their musical play a ballad in three acts. But it is not a simple choral work. I hazard inviting the wrath of the almighty music pundits by describing it as an American opera. It's good drama set to good music. And to this theatre-goer that's opera.

"Sandhog" is adapted from Theodore Dreiser's short story, "St. Columbia and the River." It tells of the labors, the joys, the fears, the men who built the first Hudson Tunnel in 1874. These men, their wives, children and neighbors, all have their lives shaped in one way or another by the huge tunnel job.

The story revolves around Johnny O'Sullivan, an Irish immigrant who goes to work in the tunnel under dangerous conditions and is lured by the boss to become a foreman. He drives the men in the



EARL ROBINSON

underground death traps to a fatal cave-in. Newly married and the father of new-born twins, he loses his job. He has already lost the trust of his fellow workers. He returns to the tunnel when English engineers install the new shield method of cutting the tube.

But new dangers lurk under the river. A leak in the under-water muck develops. And while the rest of the men run for safety, Johnny heroically tries to plug the hole with his body. He is propelled by the compressed air up through the muck and rock to the surface of the river where he is rescued by a ferryboat skipper. Although crippled, he lives to tell the tale. A man changed for the better by experience, he becomes a popular hero, united finally in happy brotherhood with his fellow sandhogs and neighbors.

This all happened in real life when Manhattan and Jersey were linked by the first under-water

tube. Also depicted on the stage is a united protest of the sandhogs against unsafe working conditions.

Some of the story is told in recitative. There are some 20 songs, more than you will hear in any musical play currently on Broadway. There is a beautiful choral opening number, entitled "Come Down," which sets the tone for the mounting dramatic action to follow. There is power and drive in this song and something pleasantly familiar, for it is composed in the style of "Ballad for Americans."

There is an intriguing Irish melody, "Johnny O," tastefully sung by Jack Cassidy and Betty Oakes. "Oh, Oh, Oh, O'Sullivan," sung by Paul Ukena, Roderick Timmons, Michael Keromyan and Douglas Collins, an excellent male quartette, and "T-w-i-n-s" and "Katie O'Sullivan," also male quartette numbers, have a beautiful lilting Irish quality.

"By the Glenside" is an enchanting romantic song which Alice Gosting sings with compassion and understanding. "Sandhog Song," introduced at the opening of the second act by Mordcaai Berman, the chorus and children, has a salty flavor in the tradition of the best American work songs. It also serves as a fitting third act finale.

Labors of the sandhogs are described by "Song of the Bends," "High Air," "Wock Song," "28 Men," "Sweat Song," "Greathead Shield," "Ring Iron" and "Stand Back." David Brooks, a talented actor with a fine voice, sings "Work Song" and "Sweat Song" with deep feeling and gusto.

There were times when I felt that some of the tunes were not sufficiently lyrical, a bit difficult for a layman to sing. But a famous opera singer bucked the same criticism at Beethoven, telling him his great choral movement of the Ninth Symphony was "unsingable." This has long been proven false. And only recently I heard a somewhat unmusical newspaperman humming some sizable passages from the last movement of the Ninth. Perhaps after I hear the "Sandhog" songs a few more times I'll be pouring them out to the amazement of my colleagues over the top of my battered typewriter.

The street dance scenes, performed by a teen-age ballet group under direction of Sophie Maslow, bring a light, gay touch of youth into the production. There is a remarkable stage setting by Howard Ray, which through the flick of a light switch carries the action from the tunnel entrance, to the air lock, to the tunnel head, to the O'Sullivan flat, to the corner saloon, to a downtown New York street.

"Sandhog" is a splendid big show. And Howard Da Silva has done a masterful job of stage direction. He has merged all the hundreds of details of music, acting, dancing and other stage business into "The work of art which has both dramatic power and beauty. T. Edward Hambleton and Norris are producing the show in their 1,200-seat Old Broadway house, 12th St. and Second Ave., through special arrangements with Rachel Productions.

being interrogated for murder and stuff, stand whenever a lady comes in, whether they hate her guts or not. But when a maid comes in, they do not stand. This is probably not because she is a maid, but perhaps because she is not what you would call of cinemascope dimension.

Now about the story: A very "on the make" young woman from Savannah, Ga., gets impregnated by a married man from New York, N. Y. And they actually speak of her as "pregnant." But not while she's alive. They only find out about it after she's murdered. You see, at first they think she only faked herself. But the rope proves to be just a cinemascope hoax. She was murdered first and hung up afterwards. Of course she was really a young bawd and the murderer really a vine—H.S.

Great Dutch Art Exhibit Worth Trip to Museum

For those within reach it is well worth a trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see the exhibition, "The Golden Age of Dutch Painting." Better hurry too, as this exhibit closes December 9.

Before going get a hold of Sidney Finkelstein's book, "Realism in Art" and read his section on Dutch art so that you can really appreciate the revolutionary character of these paintings in which, for the first time, artists chose to paint ordinary people and ordinary landscapes without religious purposes or mythical forms.

However the most powerful picture in the exhibit is one which uses religious symbolism. It is Rembrandt's "Peter Denying Christ." As Finkelstein suggests this may be because this painting poses a problem Rembrandt himself was unable to solve; the position of the individual awakening to the immoralities of the developing capitalist society.

This picture should be coupled with that other magnificent psychological study by Rembrandt on display in the Museum's own collection, "Pilate Washing His Hands." Both these pictures are very meaningful for these days of Smith Act frame-ups, cynicism and betrayal.

In "Peter Denying Christ" the moral violence and brute pressure brought to bear on Peter is suggested by the harsh light that is thrown on his face, by the weapons and the armor in the hands of those who are questioning him. The expression on his face is one of dissimulation and weakness; one of his hands draws his cloak protectively around him, the other makes a gesture of disavowal, a gesture which at the same time leads the eye to the figure of Christ, the Man of Peace, bound by his soldier captors, watching Peter from the darkness.

In contrast the coloring in the Pilate picture is soft, the lighting subdued, and seems to come from within the picture itself; here there is no objective force brought to bear on Pilate as the power of the state is brought to bear on Peter, in a manner that reduces a good but weak man to moral collapse and degradation, on the contrary, here is the other side of the coin, here is the state authority itself in the person of Pilate, who is disturbed by his sense of moral bankruptcy.

The conflict here is cut-throat, with Pilate and those around him are unaware that it even exists. For the faithful old retainer and the intent young serving boy the ritual of Pilate washing his hands is the matter of devoted attention and concentration. But the artist uses the play of light to focus attention on Pilate's face. Pilate's eyes gaze reflectively into space without focus; they are looking within himself and are full of heavy irony which the subtle expression of his mouth intensifies. This is the face of a man perfectly aware that the truth may be on the other side, but too tired and worldly wise to accept responsibility towards it. The weight of his social position, of his authority, is too great.

Both pictures suggest what Rembrandt doubtless felt deeply himself: the terrible isolation that existed for so long for those that approached the truth and became critical of the corruption and immorality of bourgeois existence.

This isolation is suggested in the Peter picture by the figure of Christ in the darkness surrounded by his captors; by those that surround Peter, the youth who holds a candle to Peter's face, excited to be a participant in this moment of high public interest, the inner meaning of which completely eludes him; it is suggested by the face of the soldier who interrogates; Peter is earnestly trying



to do his duty, to determine the innocence or guilt of Peter, but to him as well the inner significance of the moment is altogether lost, he tries to understand, but cannot; and of course this isolation is above all suggested by Peter himself, who collapses under its weight.

The irony of the Pilate picture lies in the contrast between Pilate's self doubt and the complete respect shown him by the old man and the boy who serve him. Pilate is alone, in spirit.

Doubtless the fact that Rembrandt felt this isolation himself explains the compassion and understanding he shows towards Peter who betrays the truth, and to Pilate who will not accept his responsibility towards it.

Today social conditions have so developed that the truth that is involved in the criticism of capitalist reality has brought a new way of life to nearly one half of the world, and strong working class movements for social change exist in all capitalist countries. Therefore the conditions which made isolation and loneliness inevitable for Rembrandt, today no longer exist. For every Pilate and Peter of the present day, there are many, many fighters for peace and progress.

We may well believe that Rembrandt himself would welcome this fact.

How else to explain the picture on the wall opposite "Peter Denying Christ" of "The Young Man in Armor"? Here the aggressive power and brute mechanism of the brilliantly shining helmet and armor worn by the youth are completely belied by the utterly pacific, gentle, and reflective expression on the face of the young man.

For Rembrandt too, it would seem, peace and good-will were the important things, not highly wrought armor plate and weapons.

When you go to this exhibition, study all the pictures carefully, but spend most of your time with the Rembrandts; he teaches most.

By the way, why doesn't the Metropolitan follow the example of other big city museums and stay open one night a week to that working people will have more opportunity to visit it. Sunday afternoon between 1 and 5 is very little time to allow for the overwhelming majority of the population of this city who have to work for a living.

-S. B.

'BLACK WIDOW' AT THE ALBEE, MURDER IN CINEMASCOPE

BLACK WIDOW—A Twentieth Century-Fox film produced and directed by Nunnally Johnson, starring Ginger Rogers, Gene Tierney, Van Heflin and George Raft. At the Albee, Bklyn.

Someone must have thought the name "Black Widow" would make a saleable movie title. But since the story filmed under this title had nothing to do with a black widow, they were in a little trouble. But not much. Immediately after the main title they fade in on a luscious cinemascope shot of a dummy black widow spider, settled on a dummy cinemascope web, and a commentator explains that a black widow kills its mate. That took care of the title, and then the movie which had nothing to do with the title, began.

They did much better about the story. It is advertised as "murder in cinemascope." And that represented truth in advertising. A cinemascope character is killed by a cinemascope character and the problem is to find out which cinemascope character did it.

At one point Gene Tierney says to Van Heflin, who is her cinemascope husband, "You are fool enough to do a lot of things, but not to hang a girl in your own house and leave it there." This establishes his innocence in his wife's eyes . . . and they are very nice cinemascope eyes. But about the innocence . . . you can't always tell.

Everyone is very polite in this film, being all supposedly upper middle class and cultured. In the police inspector's office, the men



GINGER ROGERS

