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BROADWAY OPENING



Ward Morehouse III, left, is the author of 'The Actor,' which stars Richard Waring, right, as an aging Shakespearean actor

Underlying cheerfulness buoys drama about twilight of Broadway career, era

By WILLIAM A. RAIDY

NEW YORK—Henry James obviously wasn't thinking of "memory plays" when he advised that although a writer must never put himself in a book, he cannot possibly keep himself out. In this genre, the more of the writer, the better.

The author of "The Actors," Ward Morehouse III, is the son of the late theater critic and dramatist, who, in many ways, cut as wide a swath along what used to be called "The Great White Way" as any of the performers, producers and playwrights he wrote about and called by their first names. To say that he was "colorful" is a decided understatement. Ward Morehouse, who died 20 years ago this week, loved the theater and the people who inhabit it with a passion. And passionately, he played a role in that world for four decades, chronicling a far healthier Broadway than exists today for newspapers that are now only distant memories: the New York Tribune, its offspring, the Herald-Tribune, the New York Sun and the New York World-Telegram.

In "The Actors," currently playing at the cozy little Royal Court Repertory Theater, we meet Jack McClain, obviously based partially on the playwright's father, in his precipitous decline. He is alcoholic, about to lose his job as theater critic and soon to surrender his life to his disintegrating liver.

Jack McClain isn't all that is disintegrating as we meet him, carrying an enormous revolver. The club he haunts—The Actors' Club, patterned after the legendary Lambs—is just about bankrupt. And so is the theater scene old Jack McClain writes about, mourning the fact that once there were 70 legitimate theaters in New York running at the same time, with as many actors "as there are pigeons in Duffy Square."

The gun McClain is wielding is to be put to good use. He's going up onto the roof of the Actors' and take potshots at the demolition men tearing down the Helen Hayes Theatre. (It's 1981).

Something else has disintegrated long ago as well. The relationship between the critic and his 28-year-old son, Jack McClain Jr., a budding playwright, living at the now shabby Actors' Club and supporting himself as a dishwasher. The gregarious, eccentric aisle sitter has time for everyone but his offspring, who describes himself as "Son of a critic . . . and I don't mean a drama critic."

The Actors' Club is alive—or should I say dead—with has-beens, including a Shakespeare-spouting old ham, who never quite made it to stardom, an elderly, broke playwright, who serves as a surrogate father to Jack Jr., and the old manager of the club, once a Broadway Lothario known as "Louis the Lizard."

Everybody's bill at the Actors' seems long overdue. Chapter 11 is being declared on their lives as well as their last port of call. But Morehouse III's play, which has an old-fashioned cheerfulness about things, has a happy ending.

Enter Irene Lawrence, once the star of the "Greenwich Village Follies," an old belle of dying Jack's, who magically saves the club from its demise. (Too bad she didn't do the same for the Helen Hayes!)

Jack Sr. and Jr. do finally come to respect each other a bit. The old, broken-down ham's agent finally does call. (After all these years).

Now if only we could start building a few more theaters in the old neighborhood.

"The Actors," staged by Phyllis Craig, who, incidentally, does a charming portrayal of Irene, the old actress as well, is great fun, especially if you're old enough to remember when Broadway was all lit up and the Lambs was indeed "a gentlemen's club." And nostalgia buffs will revel in the reminiscences about Jeanne Eagles opening in "Rain" at the old Maxine Elliott's Theatre back in 1922, the Eltinge Theatre (now a seedy 42nd Street movie house) and talk of Percy Hammond and "Woolcott of the Times" (I had forgotten Smart Alec actually did work for that newspaper 70 years ago).

Jack Aranson, who began his career at London's Old Vic, plays the boozing, self-dramatic drama critic . . . perhaps a bit too flamboyantly. The portrayal is more in the mood of a washed-up actor than an aisle sitter. And my personal memory of some of the now legendary critics goes back to Brooks Atkinson, bow-tied and professorial in his tweeds, and even George Jean Nathan, elegantly acerbic under his fur-collared overcoat but hardly in competition with the people he reviewed on stage. Aranson has the quality of a Jack Barrymore in his staggering decline, which does not remind me of the play's always witty but quite soft-spoken prototype. (Well, of course, I knew him too, having succeeded this remarkable man as critic for this newspaper).

Richard Waring, a legend himself on the New York stage, who started his career as the drummer boy in "Romeo and Juliet" with Eva LeGallienne's old Civic Repertory Company back in 1930, is splendid as the ancient down and out actor forever spouting the Bard.

John Blaylock as the sensitive son, almost ignored by his famous father, plays his role with admirable insight, never reaching for easy sympathy. And Lon Freeman and Ralph Douglas, as the other lost lambs, also contribute considerably to Ward Morehouse III's colorful canvas.

The Royal Court Theater is at 301 West 55th St., Manhattan, and an earlier workshop version of the play was first presented in New York four years ago.