

STAGE

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Robert Benchley

Dramatic Critic, *The New Yorker*

by Ben Pinchot



Mr. Benchley, who looks exactly like the Gluyas Williams' cartoons of him, sits all day in the delightful, cluttered gloom of his rooms at the Royalton, and reads the papers. He likes that. Sometimes he writes digests of the news which *The New Yorker* calls *The Wayward Press*, and signs Guy Fawkes for some quaint reason. These discuss such matters as what the newspapers will do without Prohibition. ("Perhaps one or two of the bravest can start an agitation for its return—using the same photographs," suggests Mr. Benchley); or the journalistic value of snow-storms. "A good blizzard," he finds, "seems to humanize everyone in a newspaper office, possibly because so many of the editorial staff are unable to get home to the suburbs that night."

From here he goes out, "mushing through Forty-fourth Street" on winter nights to see the shows; and he does see them all, though he is often accused of not doing it. Here he writes his light-hearted reviews. The fact that there is a laugh in every line sometimes blinds his chuckling customers to the fact that what he says is to the point. It ought to be, for Mr. Benchley knows about the theatre. He is one of our best comedians, as everyone realizes, who

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celestial doctor looked very much like the Benchley laundryman. Then there was the time when Arthur Samuels took him to Princeton and he gave the bewildered students a long harangue on the technicalities of Roosevelt's settling the anthracite coal strike in 1908. Back in college when he was president of *The Harvard Lampoon* and Frederick Allen was Ibis he often used to have a trolley full of suburbanites riding out from Harvard Square writhing with him as he treated himself to the fun of a fake sprained knee. And afterward, when he was one of the Curtis Publishing Company's bright young men he perfected his acting technique. One of his pranks once all but wrecked an advertising conference at the Bellevue-Stratford. It is too much of a story to tell here, but it involved a false beard, a western accent, and a speech on the seamy ethics of the firm's officers. Then, when that rumpus was quieted down, a plumber's assistant with a cap well down over his right eye burst in and began banging with a fair-sized sledge hammer on a steam pipe. Right there the dignity of the Messrs. Curtis, Lorimer, and Bok gave way, and Mr. Benchley, to make a long story short, has hardly been near Philadelphia since.

Later in New York, when he was, first, assistant editor of the *New York Tribune Sunday Magazine*, and second, managing editor of *Vanity Fair*, the tradition grew richer. One of the best yarns had to do with his walking out on Frank Crowninshield because he had fired Dorothy Parker for getting the goat of David Belasco, Flo Ziegfeld, and Charles Dillingham. Five of the nine years that he was dramatic editor of *Life* he spent writing a fresh blurb every week for *Abie's Irish Rose*, which he hated. In 1929 he went to *The New Yorker*, where he has been ever since, except for yearly excursions to Hollywood.

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Mr. Benchley believes that he got most of his jobs because he was president of *The Lampoon*, overlooking with almost sacrilegious simplicity the seemingly inexhaustible freshet of humor that has gone on and on through half-a-dozen or so books, thousands of reviews, scenarios, and what not; and still keeps fresh and irresistible in *The New Yorker* and the pieces running in the *New York American*, which come out under such newsy headings as *Keep Out the Dervishes* or *Buyer Education*. These are almost as funny as *Carnival Week in Sunny Las Los* or *The Bathroom Revolution* or *The Woolen Mitten Situation*, or any of the old classics.

Looking for Benchley quotations is a riot, but it eats into a crowded schedule badly. You can spend half a day and "laf and laf," and not get anywhere. An odd handful from this season's reviews are probably as good as any. Mr. Benchley is apt to toss off bad plays this way: "The last act of *Brain Sweat* has laughs enough to supply three hundred performances of *One More Honeymoon*. (This will suffice as a review of *One More Honeymoon*.)" He found that as for *Wife Insurance*, "you could almost write the rest of the play yourself, dumb as you are." He confessed that it was a little embarrassing to find himself "so enthusiastic about *The Dark Tower* as one of the authors, Mr. Woollcott, is a co-worker in this foundry, and the other, Mr. Kaufman, is the first (but by no means the last) man to try to show me about arranging carbon sheets in a typewriter." If, he later declared, *Mahogany Hall* depicted "life in a famous, high-class bordel of Washington, D. C. . . . and if such elite gymnasia exist today . . . we are fools to send our daughters to the Sorbonne. . . . The play ends with one feeling that if this is the life of sin, those long

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winter evenings at home with *The Yale Review* aren't so bad."

In other words, Mr. Benchley is worth having around, but there is one mystery about him that ought to be cleared up some day; his persistent amiability. He never bites the generation that feeds his jokes. Somehow it does not seem reasonable.

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