

Science Fiction on Broadway has been a dismal flop. Here's a suggestion as to why.

INTO THE FURNITURE

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Some years back a TV announcer or maybe a radio announcer introduced a kiddie-SF show with one wonderful blooper. "Here we go, boys and girls," he said breathlessly, "twenty thousand years into the furniture."

A little while ago a (theoretically) adult-SF show opened Broadway. It was called "Via Galactica" and it is now impossible for you to see it, which is just as well and, it might be, a little better. It was not the worst show ever to hit Broadway. It was not even the worst show I have ever seen on Broadway: there have been, and I have sat stunned and disbelieving through, some doozies. But it was distinctly, lousy. The curtain went up, a Prologue descended from flies in a small bosun's chair, off we went, "one thousand from now," according to the prologue, smack into the hardwooden furniture. A very little about the show may give you some faint notion.

The hero, Gabriel Finn, was a sanitation man on Earth. He flew around in a spaceship modeled to look like an ancient Ford, with headlights and *ooka-ooka* horn, collecting garbage and then getting rid of it by dumping it into the stratosphere. Earth was in pretty lousy shape, anyhow: everybody was kept happy by revolving cone-shaped hats, which people put on at birth and never, never took off (head size doesn't change? hats expand?) until the age of fifty-five. At fifty-five, everybody committed suicide. Sex was rampant, but babies were decanted or something (I saw this happen on stage but it looked more confusing than I can tell you: the attending doctor put a new hat on the new baby, though). Everybody was blue.

That last is a statement of fact. Blue was the only color Earth people could agree on, and all Earth skins were bright blue.

Ithaca was different, though. Ithaca (Gabriel got hijacked to Ithaca) was a small asteroid, gravity very low (with Earth-normal atmosphere, though) to which a few! freedom-loving people had emigrated long ago. Earth managed to lose Ithaca somehow or other, well as another nearby asteroid called Hy Brasil (described, off-hand, as lying "to the west" of Ithaca), and Ithaca and Hy Brasil became distant myths. (It is not easy to lose an asteroid, once charted especially since Earth civilization was spacegoing—a ship arrived on Ithaca near the end of the show in forty-four minutes from Earth takeoff.) The Ithacans converted Gabriel and garnered his genes for their gene pool, since they were about to leave for a new planet circling Aldebaran, in a voyage which will take one hundred years but will seem to them like fourteen months (I think; that got sort of cloudy, too).

Gabriel contributed his genes by going into the hay one (1) time with one (1) woman. He then died heroically fighting off the Earth ship which comes to get the Ithacans, after Earth figured out that Ithaca still existed (and was still where it was charted).

And so on, and so on. Believe me, you did not want to see this show.

Why am I telling you all this?

Seems I described the show to Ben Bova, and got asked why there wasn't any good SF on Broadway, and I said there never had been, and he said I wonder why, and I said damned if I know, but I'll think of something.

What, eventually, I thought of is that we were both wrong. We were also both right.

There has been SF on Broadway. There has been good, and successful, SF on Broadway. But there is not likely to be much more; and a good, successful straight play with an SF theme (“Via Galactica” was a musical, so described) has never happened and is not likely to.

The reasons, I think, are interesting enough to deserve a little space.

The successful jobs are all either musicals (“Connecticut Yankee” with time travel, “On a Clear Day” with psi) or screaming farces (just to start arguments, I’ll nominate “Three Men on a Horse” as a psi story, and SF). The failures—and there is quite a list, including Arch Oboler and Ray Bradbury—are mostly straight plays.

Part of the answer is that SF is thought to be a gimmick medium—lots of special effects—and only musicals, generally speaking, can stand the cost of the sets and the effects. (But “Via Galactica” had half a million dollars’ worth of effects, all marvelous, and failed; “Connecticut Yankee” and “On a Clear Day” had next to none. “Three Men on a Horse” had none, period.)

Another part is that Broadway has been taken over by the Broadway equivalent of the New Wave: Albee, say, and Hooch, and their followers. Not entirely, of course—but enough. And the New Wave is mostly surreal, interested in parable or straight-out lecture and not, definitely not, in the science half of science fiction. The New Wave hasn’t had much effect on TV or the movies yet: that’s why we’ve had “2001” and “Charlie” and, on a much smaller scale, “Star Trek.” And, being straight-arrow serious and dedicated, it isn’t interested in musicals or farces either, so we have had “On a Clear Day,” and a good SF farce is perfectly thinkable: Neil Simon may be working on one now.

Now, the science half of SF isn’t a necessity for the printed page, or for the movies either. You can get a reader, or a moviegoer, interested and involved in something having only the faintest relation to reality, as experimental novels and movies show. On Broadway things are different. Broadway cannot distort or ignore reality to nearly so great an extent: it involves real people on a real, visible stage. That much reality demands some measure of reality in the play and the playing, just to make it possible for an audience, seeing the real people, to accept and then get involved in what these people are doing.

There needn’t be much reality. “Tiny Alice” is fine, and “The Fantasticks.” And so are a lot of even stranger plays, and musicals. But no successful play exists which either contradicts what an audience believes to be reality without offering a pretty solid underpinning of the argument to sustain that contradiction, or which contradicts itself.

Working outside of SF these demands are not so troublesome: the second, in fact, is so much taken for granted that people don’t bother to mention it. But in SF the writer is suddenly required to invent relationships between his people, a society for them to live in, and anything else needed, from scratch.

The Broadway New Wave seems to know no science, to begin with; more, it seems to harbor a general belief that conscious logic is not a useful tool. (This also seems true of the SF New Wave, and has many of the same results there.) These qualifications, if that’s what they are, provide the writers with a handy shortcut to a number of dead ends: inventing societies that contain self-contradictions, for instance. (On Ithaca, I haven’t had room or strength to mention until now, everyone is entirely free; they keep on saying so, and the authors clearly mean me to believe that. But the most noticeable thing about the society is that everyone takes orders at all times and on every subject, without serious demur, from one single man, referred to as the Ithacans’ leader.)

There are other dead ends, of course. New Wave authors keep falling into the unamiable habit of | making statements without adequate defense (or, indeed, without any defense at all, as in “Via

Ga-lactica,” throughout) which affront the audience’s sense of reality—and which, therefore, no audience will accept. (Dumping garbage into the stratosphere? A low-gravity asteroid with Earth-normal atmosphere and temperatures, the living surface always faced away from the Earth? And I flatly cannot tell you how much more stuff like this there was.) What an audience perceives as self-contradictory, what it has not been persuaded to accept, it dislikes; and it should.

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So the New Wave SF, on Broadway, falls flat. In books, even in movies, it has an arguable place: God knows enough people have argued it. On Broadway it simply does not; except in the millionth case (an author lucky enough, or knowing enough despite the notions of the New Wave, to convince his audience), a straight-play SF appearance on Broadway is going to fail.

Of course a non-New-Wave writer might make it. The odds against it are-immense: there are not that many non-New-Wave writers on Broadway and there are not that many plays produced per season. And an SF writer, trying to crack Broadway, is against even bigger odds. All the same...

If it happened, I think the SF writer whose (original) play I would most quickly buy a ticket for is Robert Heinlein (closely followed by Ward Moore, Walter Miller and Fred Pohl). And I’d love to see an SF play by, say, Robert Anderson.

But it is not going to happen. The ignorance, and the disregard for logic, of the New Wave, on Broadway and in SF, have by all odds stranded that good, straight SF play not only somewhere twenty thousand years into the future, but flat, gasping and thoroughly doomed, right up there on the beach.