

Lynn Riggs, ex '23, Oklahoma poet and playwright, has set Broadway to talking as it has not talked for some time, with his play «Roadside», which had a week's run at the Longacre theater in New York. Mr Riggs was a Guggenheim fellow two years ago and while in Italy wrote «Green Grow the Lilacs» which the Theater Guild is to produce

For vs. «Roadside»

Few dramas that close after a hectic week on Broadway achieve fame through the short run.

Roadside by Lynn Riggs, ex '23, is an exception. It has the dramatic critics of New York up to their ears in controversy. Letters were written to the *Times* and other papers about Mr Riggs.

Was he a rose bush pulled up by the roots from his native environment, Oklahoma? Was he a Dunsany trying to crash Broadway?

This and more is back of the controversy. Certainly, few dramatists of recent years have achieved such mention in the columns as Lynn Riggs over his play that ran for one short week on Broadway.

In the meantime, the Theater Guild continued with its preparation to present *Green Grow the Lilacs*, another Oklahoma play written when Mr Riggs was in Italy on a Guggenheim fellowship.

Roadside opened Friday evening, September 26, 1930, at the Longacre theater. Mr Arthur Hopkins was the producer. You had about every element that should give the play a good ride along treacherous Broadway—an important author, a noted producer, a fine theater. And Oklahoma. For the *locale* was Oklahoma of Indian Territory days, in 1906, with Claremore, Verdigris, and other Rogerian territory for the setting.

The critics, as is their wont, descended *en masse* on the Longacre. The next day, they waved their stilettos. A week later, the box office girl locked up the



receipts, the curtain dropped and *Roadside* was another play suffering from a Broadwayside.

Samuel French, Mr Riggs' publisher, produced the book. Mr Hopkins wrote the preface. And the battle by the *Roadside* had just begun.

The caustic Percy Hammond of the *New York Herald-Tribune* keyed his typewriter to say these kind words:

"*Roadside* is but an exercise in atmosphere, dialect and character, scarcely an anecdote, and not at all, a play."

John Anderson of the *New York Journal* caught the folk loral significance of the play:

"The play is flavorsome and full of gusto, and touches a fine fresh field of native material with both humor and poetry. It has quality and richness and the simplicity of the backwoods whose roots go deeper into Americana than the Broadway subway."

Mr John Mason Brown in the staid *New York Evening Post* was frolicsome:

"A very folksy and extremely garulous little comedy."

Laurence Stallings thought it a fine play. He told Mr Gilbert W. Gabriel of the *New York American* so. "In front of the Longacre theater last night I met Laurence Stallings, who, with that fighting look in his eye which I've liked, told me I was going to see a fine play indoors there—a play with poetry in it, a beautiful play.

"And the sort of play you boys will burn up," he added grimly.

Robert Benchley in *The New Yorker*

revealed the effects of brick canyons on one seeing life from real canyons:

Roadside was built around one of those highly literary characters who think, and recite words to the effect, that because they were born in Texas they belong to a race of men apart, a race whose chief prerogative is that of boring the living whatziz out of the rest of their fellow countrymen.

Mr Lynn Riggs, who wrote *Roadside*, was under all kinds of illusions which he found practically impossible to communicate to the audience. Undoubtedly a sensitive young man and keenly alive to the wind on the heath, he evidently felt that he could send his hero on with his shirt open at the neck and a rollicking line of shore-chanteys and folk-recitations to deliver with his thumbs stuck in his cartridge-belt, and that the sheer beauty and lilt of the thing would sweep an audience off its feet. And the funny part of it is that Mr Arthur Hopkins evidently thought so, too, for he produced *Roadside*. Robert Edmond Jones, who did the scenery, seems to have been the only one connected with the enterprise who had any inkling of what he was dealing with, for he made the background of Indian Territory woods in Ritz-Carlton lavenders and pastel greens.

"We boys are the critics. And Mr Stallings is probably right.

"I've never seen a play of which I could be surer that is going to be a dismal failure here."

Mr Hopkins, in the preface to the book, said that Mr Riggs "brings an unfamiliar richness to the American theater." He has "caught our fading glory and left it for posterity. It is my belief that his play will reach posterity. It has the feel of survival."

Should Mr Riggs have remained in the Southwest to do his writing?

That seems to be the burden of a review of his book of poems, *The Iron Dish*, by a critic in *The New Republic*. This critic found the poems dealing with Mr Riggs' own country the most delightful and bemoaned the fact that there were so few in the volume.

That was the theme of a letter Ruth Putnam Mason wrote the *New York Times* several days after the play *Roadside* opened:

This is a strange country. We are always complaining that we have so few native playwrights of distinction compared to the numbers of people who are writing plays. And yet when one springs up out of our own soil we do everything we can to kill the spark which, if nourished, might become a flame which would cast a little more glory onto our drab dramaturgical horizon.

I refer to Lynn Riggs, whose *Roadside* opened at the Longacre theater recently. Here is a first-rate poet highly regarded by Witter Bynner and other poets who have no other reason to laud him except on his actual merit. Here is a sensitive nature that can express beauty in its essence. He is a poet! Perhaps he is and perhaps he isn't a playwright. Judging by *Big Lake* which the American Laboratory theater produced a few years ago, we had good reason to believe that Mr Riggs might develop into a very fine playwright some day. Judging by *Roadside*, we are quite certain that Mr Riggs has not developed one iota in his technique since *Big Lake*, and we even have

good reason to doubt that he will ever write a fine play.

But how is a young writer expected to develop in a country where he is subjected always to one of its two great artistic evils—starvation and lack of encouragement from no exploitation, or (in many ways far the worst evil) the discouragement and heartbreak resulting from too much premature exploitation? Undoubtedly Mr Riggs is a victim of the latter evil. His agent has talked, written about and "sold" Mr Riggs for so many months now that all who judge intrinsic merit by what they hear, rather than what they recognize and discover for themselves, have been thoroughly convinced that in Mr Riggs a genius was ascendant. And, of course, when a genius was not immediately apparent behind the writing of *Roadside* Mr Riggs was labeled "amateur" (not in its real sense—"love of one's work"—but in the derogatory sense), "comic supplement writer," etc.

It seems to me that a complete course of the finest tactics to discourage and dishearten thoroughly a young writer has been used on Mr Riggs. No doubt the intention was friendly, interested and for Mr Riggs' own good. The motive must be given its due. But if we are to be of any value to our young writers, it seems to me, as a theater lover, we have to let a talent develop with great patience, find its own faults and rectify them with the greater wisdom and facility that a real writer employs through growing and learning, finally achieving a place for himself.

A rose bush pulled up by its roots in its infancy does not bear roses. Mr Riggs has been pulled up by the roots before he has even borne leaves. But if he demands for himself the proper soil, I think we will still gather roses from his garden.

Henry Roth of New York City, writing in *Folk-Say: A Regional Miscellany*, 1930, acclaims Mr Riggs as "by imagination and sensitivity of equipment the best poet writing for the American stage, and by depth of meaning and definiteness one of the most important dramatists." His opinion of *Roadside*, written before production, is interesting and in keeping with the judgment of several of America's foremost critics of the drama:

In *Roadside*, Rigg's latest play, the inner law of the individual is again confronted by society's demands that he live according to the uniform pattern. But this time the outcome is overwhelmingly comic—and for this reason: that uniform patterns, whether institutions, conventions, or laws, reveal themselves in the light of free human impulses to be a veneration for mechanical procedure, and meaningless taboo; useful guides and restraints to the herd, but useless to the genuine individual, and apt to collapse at the first thrust of human impulse. This collapse of the pattern and the final victory of the inner law is the central theme of *Roadside* and affirmatively fulfills the cycle. Nor do I believe there exists of its kind, another comedy so rich, airy and joyous. Its two chief characters, Hannie and Texas, as a result of the easy largeness and adequacy of their actions, and their perfect freedom, are invested with the timeless and mythical quality which one attributes to a demigod, or associates with an epic character such as Paul Bunyan.

Barrett H. Clark, who has been one of the most consistent friends of Mr Riggs, attributed part of the failure of the play on Broadway to amateurish acting. He expressed his opinion in an article in *The Drama Magazine* for November.

The play, he said, lacked the rush Broadway expects. He said, however that the play was an "honest attempt to write a poetic and fantastic play made up of elements both strange and familiar. Even the timidest reviewer might have praised the poetry of the lines if he had ears to hear it; might have perceived that the court scene, far from being a vaudeville burlesque, was something in the grand manner, but with a note of passion exceptionally rare in such grand fooling; might too, have noted with some satisfaction a glimmer of the ecstasy in the grand unfolding of the love of Hannie and Texas."

Is *Roadside* then a perfect play? Are the critics muddle-headed? Are they prejudiced? No, to all three questions. Mr Riggs' play is an honest, forthright, footloose extravaganza, hilarious, lyric, farcical; original because of its treatment and subject matter; leisurely, rambling—imperfect. Imperfect even in its original form, which was somewhat toned down and prettified for the production, washed and diluted; but its imperfections were relatively unimportant; scenes not wholly realized, situations sketched rather than moulded. But these, as I say, matter little if you get the point of the whole thing, and to do that you must have a mind not too used to the slick trickery of the theater. For Mr Riggs' greatest gift is that he writes out of his exultation and his experience, as a poet who feels life as life, and not as material to be used in plays.

Why then should he bother with the theater? Because the theater need not always go on repeating the old tricks in the old way. It has always survived because every so often a man of talent and originality has come along and given it a jab. The reviewers don't like the sensation; they still itch a bit. But that's good for them, and some day *Roadside* will be done again, and done right, and a new generation of critics will wonder why the play failed.



A Sooner on prohibition

Prohibition is viewed favorably by Tully A. Nettleton, '22 journ., an editorial writer for the *Christian Science Monitor*, in a series of articles for his paper. Some pertinent observations on the question "What is wrong with prohibition" follow:

"Prohibition is demoralizing youth," asserts the modificationist. "Boys and girls are drinking more than before."

What is the answer?

First—High school officials, who are in a position to know, say the facts are the reverse. J. W. Crabtree, secretary of the National Education Association, says reports from many high schools show conditions are better with respect to drinking than in 1920, and that "the eighteenth amendment has benefited the schools beyond measure."

Second—Perhaps you have heard some parents who began with "I never tell Johnny he mustn't do a thing; I want him to develop his personality." And after a while you heard "I can't do a thing with John any more. He simply won't listen to me. I guess I'll have to let him have his own way."

You have heard something like that? Well, a number of children have been brought up that

way in the last few years, and prohibition is not entirely responsible for their training. Should the United States let liquor get out of hand and have its own way because these few youngsters have done so? Would that method actually help the youngsters?

Third—If youths are drinking, what is it the wets are afraid will harm them? Do they mean that liquor is injurious? This is one of the places where the wets try to make the misdeeds of liquor weigh against prohibition. What is it the youths supposedly have been drinking, prohibition or liquor? What is it, then, that allegedly has been corrupting youth, prohibition or liquor? If liquor, what is the remedy, more liquor or more prohibition?

Is it hopeless to expect to eradicate an abuse such as intoxicating drink? Other debasing institutions at various times have been firmly entrenched in society and have resisted stubbornly, but have been uprooted in the march of civilization. Slavery had its vested property rights, but it is gone from nearly all the world. Dueling was a "code of honor," but now it comes under the statutes on homicide. Piracy laid tribute on empires, but now it has been scourged from the seas.

Is enforcement impossible? In the realm of physical achievement, engineering is continually doing the impossible. Former generations declared it impossible for a man to fly, to talk across the ocean, transmit energy on a wire, travel a mile in 20 seconds, tunnel under a river, rear a building hundreds of feet high, or reclaim half a county from a swamp. But these things are being done all the time. Shall the Nation devote less energy or give up with less effort in an undertaking to improve human welfare, an undertaking in social engineering which will make possible a fuller utilization of the wonders of physical engineering?

Estimating the Cost

"That sounds very fine, but what about the cost? I read somewhere that it amounts to \$936,000,000 a year."

That is the estimate of the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment. Three things may be said about this matter of cost.

First. Only the \$36,000,000, and not all of that, is direct cost of enforcing national prohibition. This charge is covered twice over by fines, penalties and alcohol taxes collected by the Prohibition Bureau. The \$900,000,000 which makes the figure look big is an amount of revenue which the association estimates the Government could collect from legalized liquor manufacture and sale. In other words, a \$900,000,000 bribe to taxpayers to allow the taking of millions more in private profits and to let liquor and its attendant evils get back into the community.

Second. Does anyone suppose that because this theoretical \$900,000,000 would be collected through the liquor trade that it would not in the last analysis come from the pocketbook of the individual spender just the same as a gasoline tax or a tariff duty? It would take indirectly instead of directly just as much or more from the public pocket as the income tax to which the wets compare it, would not take it in proportion to ability to pay, and would give injury instead of service in return.

Third. The carefully grounded estimate of Prof. Irving Fisher that prohibition is saving the United States \$6,000,000,000 a year in improved efficiency of workers and in diversion of liquor money to other purchases has never been authoritatively contradicted. If the actual gain were only one-third this amount, and if the United States were actually paying \$936,000,000 a year for prohibition, it would be more than doubling its money on the transaction.

Fourth. Suppose we take the aggregate figures in which the wets assert that the cost of prohibition over 10 years is \$3,400,000,000. The United States, according to recent Treasury compilations, has spent \$51,400,000,000 as the cost of its participation in the World War. The effort to end traffic in beverage alcohol is a war against a public enemy the same as was the World War.