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Book review:

People in a Magazine: The Selected Letters of S. N. Behrman and his Editors at The New Yorker

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People in a Magazine: The Selected Letters of S. N. Behrman and his Editors at The New Yorker, edited by Joseph Goodrich, introduction by Thomas Vinciguerra (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), ISBN 978-1-62534-399-4, pp. 372, \$24.95.

This well-edited volume contains the engaging correspondence of the Jewish playwright and memoirist S. N. Behrman (1893–1973) with the major *New Yorker* editors – Harold Ross, Katharine White, St. Clair McKelway, and William Shawn – from the 1920s to the early 1970s. Before his work for the magazine, Behrman had crafted a reputation as a master of sophisticated high comedy with a series of successes on Broadway and in London’s West End. His plays presented smart, worldly characters, creative and attuned to the world around them; they adopted, moreover, sceptical or ironic attitudes toward conventional thinking. Given his comic perspective, it seemed only natural that Behrman would have been attracted to the *New Yorker*, which patented its own brand of urban sophistication, typified by witty, clever prose geared towards a knowing audience and its stylish way of living. The emphasis on style in the respective fields of light comedy and satirical prose were embodied in two figures Behrman deeply admired, Noel Coward and Max Beerbohm, whose appetite for refined self-presentation could be observed in their sharp wit as well as the cut of their clothes. Coward appeared in Behrman’s early plays and Beerbohm was the subject of his seven-part profile in the *New Yorker*.

Behrman devoted early *New Yorker* pieces to vaudevillian Eddie Cantor and the composer George Gershwin but, as Goodrich shows, his interests and the magazine’s seemed to converge more fully as the Second World War approached. Behrman, who had abandoned the Orthodox Jewish faith of his childhood, was sickened by growing antisemitism and the threat of fascism in Europe. One of the earliest dramatic expressions of the fear of Jewish extermination by the Nazis surfaced in his *Rain from Heaven* (1934), set in England, in which the music critic Hugo Willens recounts his suffering in Germany on account of his being insufficiently Aryan (one of his grandmothers was Jewish). Willens ultimately returns to Germany to continue his opposition to Nazi ideology, and at the same time Behrman initiated a sustained campaign to save Jewish refugees by interceding personally on their behalf and supporting Jewish organizations.

The 1930s was Behrman’s most prolific decade for plays, but as the war wound down in the subsequent decade, his attention turned more

emphatically to nonfiction prose. A particularly memorable piece for the *New Yorker* was based on a trip to wartime England arranged by Ross. Amid the food and clothing shortages of bombed-out London, Behrman paused to observe the skeleton of a damaged building, “an exquisite suspended drawing room” that was missing its theatrical fourth wall. This image, serving as a metaphor for the British nation and its obliterated aristocracy, marked the passing of a refined but outdated kind of theatre and the magazine’s transition into a more sober phase when it was no longer seen primarily as a humour magazine. “The Suspended Drawing Room”, appearing in the *New Yorker* in 1945, ushered in the period of Behrman’s most active engagement with the magazine. All this is capably recorded and discussed by Goodrich as he fluidly shifts his editorial focus among Behrman’s myriad activities in theatre and prose.

In its early years, *New Yorker* editors displayed a skittishness about dealing with ethnicity and gritty urban subject matter. That it encouraged Behrman to publish his series on the immigrant experience of his Orthodox Jewish family in the industrial city of Worcester, Massachusetts, indicates an emerging more receptive posture towards such material. In this series, Behrman traded the upper-class characters of his plays for recognizable working-class characters, and the drawing rooms of his comedies for the tenements, streets, and trolley-buses where different classes and ethnic groups confronted one another. The witty dialogue and elegant manners of the well-heeled figures in his plays are replaced by ethnic dialect and earthy humour. Perhaps his most striking character was his vivacious Aunt Ida, the daughter of a Boston rabbi, whose energetic match-making activities contrasted sharply with the sobriety of Behrman’s father, a scholar of the Talmud. To some readers, this series, published between 1946 and 1954, represented pure nostalgia but, as the scholar Gerald Weales has shown, these reminiscences offered far more than the usual coming of age story of an innocent son of immigrants. Each instalment focused on a dramatic incident or complex of incidents from which Behrman’s naïve persona works towards some general perception. Rather than a conventional recounting of past circumstances, these narratives ran the gamut of universal emotions: pain, isolation, loss, humiliation, disillusionment, and thwarted aspiration. Subsequently published independently as *The Worcester Account*, the volume was dedicated to Katharine White, and Goodrich shows that this work was clearly a collaborative venture between author and editor.

Goodrich offers informative profiles of each editor, and a helpful listing of people identified in the letters appears before the volume's index. Goodrich's judicious selection of Behrman's letters highlights the author's intelligence, wit, compassion, and respect for the magazine and its staff. Ben Yagoda's *About Town: 'The New Yorker' and the World It Made* (2010) devoted significant attention to the contributions of Jewish writers to the magazine: Arthur Kober, Daniel Fuchs, Jerome Weidman, Irwin Shaw, S. J. Perelman, J. D. Salinger, and Philip Roth. Goodrich adds a meaningful chapter to that record, and if the volume falls a bit short of presenting "a life in letters", it does capture and illuminate the lively interactions between Behrman and his talented correspondents at the *New Yorker*.

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