

Cleveland County Playwright, Making a Hit In New York With His Latest Success "Hell-Bent Fer Heaven" On Broadway

Not many Cleveland county people remember Hatcher Hughes, but he is a native of the Lawndale section of the county and the fact that he is a Cleveland county citizen lends interest to the following story about him written by Mildred Harrington for the Greensboro News. Hatcher Hughes promises to be a second Thomas Dixon.

New York, Jan. 12.—The theater-wise claim that it is the reaction of the second-night audience which makes or breaks a play. Granting that the dictum is true and that it may be stretched to include the reaction of second matinee audiences, then Hatcher Hughes, Tar Heel playwright, and Marc Klaw, New York producer, have nothing to fear for the fate of "Hell-Bent fer Heaven," the high spirited drama of the Carolina mountains which hung out its sign on Broadway a week ago yesterday.

If I speak with conviction it is because on the afternoon of the second performance, I was one of a wriggling human queue which doubled twice across the fairly capacious lobby of the Klaw theater bent upon getting tickets before the S. R. O. could be shovled up on the bulletin board. A little later, I was one of a packed house which smiled and chuckled and applauded uproariously during the first act, and sat tensely forward upon the edge of its collective seat during the second and third acts wondering how on earth the tangle could be straightened out.

Appropos of the immediate and decided success of "Hell-Bent fer Heaven," the dignified Mr. Klaw might be forgiven for cutting a pigeon wing or so on top of the august managerial desk when he saw the initial reviews of his latest offering in Saturday's papers. John Corbin's estimate recorded in the Times, is a pretty fair sample of the comment of the press: "A play of the first order. . . . Novel and interesting. . . . Warmly human and richly humorous." About the most pessimistic criticism to date is the expressed fear of one reviewer that the play would prove too good to attract the public. Box office receipts, however, suggest that the much-maligned public, is frequently more appreciative of the real thing than it gets credit for being. Be that as it may, Mr. Klaw is to be congratulated upon his astuteness—or his luck—in picking a piece which is meeting with such hearty and heartening approval from all hands.

Owing to the prevailing theater shortage, the Hughes play was originally advertised for two special matinees only. The morning after the first performance, it became apparent that the public had no idea of allowing Mr. Klaw to adhere to his announced plan. Telephone orders poured in for reservations two weeks ahead. They have continued to pour in with the result that the management has been obliged to announce that the engagement of the new play will be extended indefinitely.

The Play.
Even those among us who are admittedly ignorant of the technical side of play writing can hardly fail to see why the critics say that "Hell Bent fer Heaven" proves Hatcher Hughes a master craftsman.

To begin with the play is compact and economical. All the action takes place in one room in the Hunt home between 4 o'clock in the afternoon and 9 o'clock at night of a mid-summer day. Thus, the Greek unities of time and place are neatly observed, and the audience and scene shifters are saved a lot of trouble.

In the second instance, the dialogue depends for its verisimilitude upon idiom rather than dialect. That is, it is true talk—the natural speech and the natural expression of the folks who employ it. And you don't know what a relief that can be unless you have been compelled to listen to the painfully distorted and artificial jargon purporting to be southern dialect which is frequently perpetrated upon New York theatergoers by ambitious young playwrights who were born and bred in Yonkers or the Bronx and have never been south of the Brooklyn bridge. It is a safe bet that any Buncombe county mountaineer could step into the Hunt living room at any time during the progress of Mr. Hughes' play and join in the conversation without feeling that he was among strangers. And when all is said and done, that is the acid test of good dialect in a piece of writing.

The characterization is both sincere and effective. Again, it is a safe bet that the average Buncombe county farmer would recognize neighbors or kinsmen in likable, hot-tempered young Andy Lowry, or the ready laugh, the ready oath, and the ready trigger-finger, of old man Dave Hunt with his unconscious but clear-sighted philosophy of life and his abiding and satisfying confidence in the ability of the Almighty to look after us humans adequately without "gittin' Hisself all tuckered out over the job."

Other things being equal, a deftly maneuvered plot is always cause for thanksgiving. In "Hell-Bent fer Heaven," Mr. Hughes shows more than once that he knows the value of contrast, of a skillfully inserted clue

of complication, of properly placed climax. But it is all done with such consummate art as to leave the impression that the playwright had very little to do with things. The plot, like Topsy, seems to have "just grown" out of something inherent in the lives of the people.

Finally, the play sparkles with clever lines. But Mr. Hughes has not made Oscar Wilde's mistake of bestowing some of his own brilliance upon innately stupid characters. The pungent, homely wit which lends zest to the whole is unmistakably the wit of old man Dave Hunt and his grandson, young Sid, who didn't know he was a war hero until he read about it in the papers.

But there is something vastly bigger and more compelling in Mr. Hughes' play than craftsmanship. It is vision. As the action moves forward toward its unforeseen but irresistible conclusion, every line and every incident pile up cumulative evidence that the young playwright from North Carolina has what old Carlyle was fond of calling "the seeing eye." Or, to garb the same thought in the modern phrase, he gets under the skins of his characters because he sees past the outward show of folks into their secret selves. And because he looks deep enough to discover hidden motives, he understands and sympathizes with actions which to the surface observer are incomprehensible, and even intolerable. That is why he is able to depict so convincingly the medly-mouthed, Uriah Heep-ish Rufe Pryor whose warped brain saw in professed religion a means of making himself solid with God while he went busily about achieving his own selfish ends.

Incidentally, and without being all didactic about it, "Hell-Bent fer Heaven" drives home a salutary lesson which all who run may read. There is no sickly sentimentality about the play, but there is plenty of honest, up-standing sentiment as wholesome and invigorating as the breeze which sweeps down a balsam clad mountain slope.

Sold by Accident.
In view of the fact that there are at present three plays on Broadway having to do with the lives of Carolina mountain folk, it is interesting to know that "Hell-Bent fer Heaven" was written three years ago while Mr. Hughes was on a vacation near his old home in western North Carolina. It is equally diverting to learn that it was sold to Mr. Klaw two years later quite by accident.

The sale came about in this wise: Mr. Hughes called at Mr. Klaw's office one afternoon about a year ago to talk over another play of the Blue Ridge section in which the latter was at that time interested. During the interview, Mr. Hughes mentioned that he had just been looking over the first rough draft of a second piece using the same locale. At Mr. Klaw's request Mr. Hughes briefly outlined the plot and touched upon the theme of the unfinished play. Mr. Klaw was very much interested and demanded to see the manuscript which he observed protruding from the playwright's overcoat pocket. Mr. Hughes surrendered the manuscript to the producer under protest. The next morning he received a telephone message from Mr. Klaw saying that he was ready to sign a contract for the unfinished play.

And the fiction writers would have us believe that the young playwright must spend weary years and much shoe leather peddling his wares from one heartless producer to another. But at that, the quality of the proffered wares may have something to do with the success of the peddling business!

The Playwright.
If I were preparing a sketch of Hatcher Hughes' career to date for "Who's Who," I should probably begin in somewhat this fashion: Native of Cleveland county, North Carolina. Family moved to South Carolina when young Hughes was in his seventh year. He later returned to North Carolina to enter the State university from which he was graduated with the class of 1907. Following graduation, he taught in the English department of his alma mater for two years. The intervening year until 1912 were spent in studying and writing. In 1912 Mr. Hughes became lecturer in play writing at Columbia university in which connection he has served with conspicuous success to this good day with the exception of two years spent in the army.

At this point I should probably grow desperately tired of unembroidered facts and revert to type and adjectives. At any rate, I know I could never sustain the above encyclopedic style for more than a paragraph at a time.

To resume.
Mr. Hughes likes to write plays. He told me himself that he had a good time writing "Hell-Bent fer Heaven." I believe him. Everybody had so much fun seeing the play on the stage that it stands a reason it must have been fun to write it.

When a man gets famous, or stands on the ragged edge of becoming so, the folks who read news-

papers always want to know how he got his start.

As nearly as I can make out, Hatcher Hughes began his literary career by writing stories of Blue Ridge mountain life while he was still an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina. Along about 1904 or 1905, the Charlotte Observer published one of his tales called "When Buncombe Went Dry." It must have been a pretty good story. At any rate, it netted the youthful writer congratulatory letters from the editor and other prominent persons scattered throughout the state.

Mr. Hughes made his initial bow to the Broadway public two years ago with "Wake Up, Jonathan!" in which Mrs. Fiske was starred. At present he is engaged on a third play which may see production before the dog days arrive.

How Hughes Got His Idea.
The story of how Mr. Hughes got his idea for "Hell-Bent fer Heaven" is a good yarn in itself.

It all came about during the summer of the terrible floods in the western part of the state. In company with a horse, a light road wagon, and a lighter camping outfit, Mr. Hughes set out from Boone the day before the rainy spell set in, determined to climb every considerable mountain peak in western North Carolina. And he carried out his program notwithstanding the fact that it rained 39 days of the 40 which he had planned to devote to mountain climbing.

Nor did his intrepidity end here. When he got ready to make the return trip he found that every bridge between Asheville and Del Rio, Tennessee, had been washed away by the rapidly rising rivers. It was imperative that Mr. Hughes get back to Asheville in time to make railway connection to New York by a certain date. Failing in efforts to persuade the ferryman to take him across the

river, Mr. Hughes announced that he would have to swim it then. The scandalized ferryman said it couldn't be done. Mr. Hughes said it could be done. The ferryman maintained that it couldn't be done. To settle the argument, Mr. Hughes plunged into the river and swam to the other side and back.

When he climbed out of the water, he informed the ferryman that he would be back at four in the afternoon with his camping outfit which he would expect to have ferried across.

By 4 o'clock, the entire village was gathered on the river bank to see the crazy man from New York get his just deserts in a watery grave. "And to tell you the truth," laughed Mr. Hughes when I asked

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4:50p	15	Monroe-Rutherfordton	15
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