

Hatcher Hughes, Rising Genius From Hills Of Cleveland County

High Spots In Life Of Native Playwright Are Told. Mountain Ideas.

(Mayme Moore Sifford In Charlotte Observer.)

In those years before the turn of the century, there was a little boy in the far reaches of Cleveland county in North Carolina; a little boy who had hit upon the grim resolution of spending the remainder of his days in a cave hidden away in the Blue Ridge mountains. During the ten years of his existence how often he had watched the mountaineers descending from their haunts selling apples and chestnuts. They were a simple rugged people who held a wild, weird beauty for the boy. They suggested romance, freedom, escape from the evenness of life on his father's farm. At length, he answered the fascination and determined to follow them back into the hills. A partner was almost necessary to the scheme so he recruited a chum who shared the same enthusiasm for adventure and revolt. Together they planned how they would absent themselves from civilization and live upon hunting and fishing such as the mountaineers would surely provide.

Friend Deserted Him.

A date was about to be fixed for this momentous departure when the chum suddenly declared in favor of a special bread of his mother's making, which he feared would be wanting in the mountain retreat. The favorite bread proved to be a formidable and crushing opposition. The long-anticipated flight to nature had to be abandoned. The boy was left alone with his scheme for living by the gun and the rod. He might have dared it alone had he not been disconcerted over the fact that his abilities as a hunter were miserably dwarfed by an elder brother's superior marksmanship—a brother who could twenty-five times and return home with



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twenty-five quail in his bag. Such was the discouragement of young Hatcher Hughes when he resigned himself again to the ponderous lessons of the local country school. He would endure society. His own rebellion had failed. Fortunately, however, there was very soon opportunity to participate in another. The pupils murmured against the prim and principal teacher who was presuming to make their speech adhere to grammatical rules. They rose up in a body voicing implacable hatred for rules, especially those out of that detestable Harvey's English grammar, and walked out. Mr. Hughes is inclined to forget who was the victor in that conflict. Most likely, it was Harvey.

Made His Own Way.

Two years of high school followed and then he presented himself at the University of North Carolina accompanied by his father's complete disapproval. Young Hughes had broken away from the established principle of all good Baptists and Presbyterians attending a religious college, and had taken up with one of those supposedly theistic institutions. The trustees of the university not unaware of this generally adopted prejudice strove to make their school irreplicable from the moral point of view. For one thing the railroad was not permitted to run past the university buildings, since it was unquestionably a device to lure the young people to temptation and misconduct in the faraway cities. Consequently, the nearest town, Durham, was twelve miles away and that distance had to be accomplished, for the most part, by walking. For Hughes it always meant walking. His father had refused to support him at a non-religious school.

It was in his freshman year on one of these walks to Durham that Hatcher Hughes, playwright, author and professor, saw a play for the first time in his life. A road company was given Owen Davis' flickering thriller of that era, "Bertha the Sewing Machine Girl." Indeed Bertha and her duplicate, Nellie, the beautiful cloak model were precepts in the theater that season and many seasons to follow. Yet the amount of dramatic edification these maidens of heroic virtue is generously left undetermined.

Ben Greet Players.

Following upon this savory spectacle of Bertha came Ben Greet's Shakesperian company for a series of out-of-door performances. Young Hughes had never read the poet. These productions in the open air impressed him, but it was not until his sophomore year that he casually picked up "Romeo and Juliet." A discovery! Within less than six months time he had read outside of class work the entire thirty-two plays and all the poems and sonnets.

It was an era of discovery. That devastating Victorian, Robert Browning was examined. The newly-heralded Kipling proved to be excellent reading. Even the indefinable Bernard Shaw demanded investigation. The Shaw whose "Man and Superman" had so recently been produced. The Shaw whom the world was considering just a trifle indecent.

Most important of all, Hatcher Hughes discovered that he himself wanted to write. The realization came in a short story which he called, "When Bunkum Went Dry." A well directed thrust it was at the current prohibition agitation in the state. To the young writer's astonishment, The Observer was willing to publish it, and, what is more, pay twenty dollars for the privilege. Twenty dollars! It was an unheard-of sum to him who had so recently put to work an ambition.

Well-Feyed Satire.

The story proceeded to evoke widespread attention throughout the state. It made the author recipient of numerous letters expressing enjoyment at the well-keyed satire emanating from the wits of Bunkum county who cast a dry vote only when their minds were blissfully freed from that compromising sobriety.

It naturally followed that Hughes became an editor on the university magazine and later editor-in-chief. In this office he contributed numerous articles, essays and short stories. The latter form he delighted in where he could abandon at times the narrative passage and give away to pure dialogue. It was at once apparent to him that his secret desire was to write for the theatre.

As a senior he collaborated with another classman in his first attempt of the dramatic form. The experiment was a farce based on a Greek formula with a high resounding title best translated as "Man From the Machine." Its purpose was to hold up to gentle ridicule the characters and habits of the faculty members. Hughes himself acted the head of the German department. Suffice to say, it was extraordinarily successful entertainment with the students. As for the faculty—well, they acquiesced in its favor save one irascible member, who, unaccustomed to his dignity being made light of, drily remarked that the piece was very good

providing it was done only at intervals of twenty years.

Becomes A Teacher.

Upon completing his senior term Hatcher Hughes was immediately appointed an instructor at the university with courses in composition and literature for freshmen and sophomores. The disadvantage of it was, that a large number of the students who were not compelled to be under his supervision had known him as a classmate the previous year.

A problem! Where was to be found enough professorial dignity to sustain him at the first meeting of that class. Mr. Hughes is always reminded of the episode. It was comparable to an actor's first night. Laboriously he had prepared a lecture with which to put them in a mirage of impressions for an hour. And to avoid the hazards of a super-abundance of time he had fortified himself with generous portions of Paradise Lost for discussion.

He mounted the platform to the accompaniment of sympathetic silence. He spoke. Fifteen minutes passed. The odious fact was upon him that he had utterly exhausted his elaborate notes. In the emergency he called in the most reliable of time-consumers. He instructed the students to open their books and read the sonorous passages. . . . farewell (pronounced a sophomore's voice) farewell happy fields Where joy forever dwells: hail, horrors, hail Infernal world, and thou profoundest hell

Receive thy new— For the Miltonic "possessor" the drowsy voice substituted professor Pandamonium had been sighted. The class broke into a riot of laughter, and there, too vanished the young instructor's painful embarrassment. From that time on the class was his because of a simple and informal attitude.

Stories Rejected.

Outside of his teaching he continued to write. More short stories he attempted—and pretentious ones they were—which he ceded to Harper's Magazine. They were recognized by rejection slips and promptly returned. Whereupon, Hughes kindly led the well-meaning, though misguided, manuscripts to the cloisters of a trunk, far away from the harshness and brusqueries of life on an editor's desk. He assures us now that his was an act of high-minded charity both to the editors and to the stories.

Some time later he made a venture into the novel. It treated of conditions in the reconstruction period following the Civil war. Here he was back with the scene he knew so well, with characters of whom he could give an honest portrayal. He had grown up with the saga of the war and its aftermath. He had learned so vividly the harrowing accounts of the Ku Klux Klan's opposition to the carpet baggers; of his father's mistaken identification with those drunken members, who undisguised, went out to hang one "Pukey" Bickerstaff for giving evidence to the despised carpet baggers. The intoxicated avengers, had arranged everything, even the rope around the culprit's neck and then gone off leaving him standing on the collapsible platform. A chance passer-by cut down the fuming Bickerstaff who immediately arraigned his enemies before the law. The elder Hughes was saved from the penitentiary only by an alibi establishing the fact that he was not present at the hanging.

Becomes Playwright.

In the year 1909 Hatcher Hughes came to New York and to Columbia. With that university his name has been associated ever since. At last, that compelling fascination for plays and play writing was to find an outlet. Once in New York he could explore and study for himself the theatre—the theatre to which Bertha had been the "melodrammer" introduction.

Within a few years—1914 to be precise—Mr. Hughes had succeeded in establishing at Columbia a course in practical play writing. This course, though some years younger than Professor Baker's "47 Work-

shop," is definitely a pioneer. Even today, play writing is comparatively an innovation in the college curriculum. To Professor Hughes, then, goes vast credit for putting to practice his principles of play craftsmanship as long ago as fourteen years.

American developments, especially those educational, move with such astounding rapidity it is difficult to recapture an accurate picture of conditions as they existed when the World War began. One truth is, that the theatre then was not as intelligently regarded as it is today; certainly not in the college classroom. Thus viewing the theatre from the academic point of view one can readily appreciate the uncultivated field Professor Hughes turned to when he inaugurated his course.

Quote Naturally.

The war brought an interruption inasmuch as Professor Hughes himself saw action at the front. Not content as a captain in the 80th division on this side, he saw to it that he was transferred to the ambulance service on the other side.

Study In Classes.

By 1919 the class which Professor Hughes calls the Preparation of Manuscripts. To this group belong the advanced students who have shown distinct promise in the first one. From the fifty to sixty students who elect playwriting each year he estimates that on an average there are five or six plays that might be offered to Broadway managers for a reading. This fact in itself indicates that college men and women are adopting the theatre for study as they would science or philosophy.

One need only attend a meeting of the class to find illustration of what Professor Hughes accomplishes with the students. The hour is generally devoted to an open discussion of a current play on Broadway. A close analysis is made of each act (with not an infrequent allusion to the Giant Ibsen's technique), supplemented by a process of comparison and contrast with past productions of the same genre. And a stimulus for constructive argument is provided by the happy circumstances that the students have the New York drama close at hand which enables them to bring to the class individual reactions and criticisms.

Shorten Apprenticeship.

The instinctive question one asks is: what are the requirements of this course? "At least one full length play," Professor Hughes will reply to you in his kind and direct manner, "and before that, I like them to work out a scenario to clarify their own ideas as to the development of the plot."

"But, Professor Hughes, can you actually teach them how to set down a play?"

"No, but there surely is a certain amount of dramatic technique that can be taught which will shorten the period of apprenticeship. That is the objective of this course. Perhaps, then, fewer trunks will be employed to lodge hopeless manuscripts. I don't believe any teacher can make a dramatist. Those who have real success in playwriting have it largely because of their own talent and initiative. Those who would write should know every side of the theatre. Here, I try to make the course as practical as possible by having the students become familiar with many phases of stage production."

And this familiarity, we learned afterward, is made possible by a student group known as the Morningside Players. This organization existed before the war, later became defunct, and then was re-established for the purpose of testing those dramatic pieces which Professor Hughes considers worthy of a try-out before footlights. It goes without saying that these players lend invaluable aid to the young author by holding up to view the difficulties and merits in his script, which he could never so clearly visualize from a number of readings.

Mrs. Fiske Buys Play.

After Professor Hughes had un-

dergone the usual deluge of questions from anxious, young playwrights concerning their scenarios, the difficulties of bringing down that first act curtain, that elusive "big scene" that was supposed to be in the second act, et cetera, we got him aside and inquired about his own writings.

"Oh, I've never stopped writing," he returned, with his warm gray eyes sending out a twinkle assuring the inquirer that another question was in order.

"When did you have a play first produced?"

"A short while after I returned from the war. In 1920 I wrote in collaboration with Elmer Rice 'Wake Up, Jonathan.' The interest for me in that piece was chiefly psychological. We fashioned it as a satire on the egoism of the successful man. I took it to Harrison Gray Fiske for a reading. He accepted it in behalf of Mrs. Fiske for production."

At this juncture the professor couldn't resist a comment on the generosity of that famous actress. The script, it seems, allotted a considerable portion of the speeches to the husband, Jonathan. Mrs. Fiske would not allow the part to be cut down in deference to her. Those who are at all cognizant of a playwright's despair over a star's whims and demands will appreciate Mrs. Fiske's magnanimous stand in the matter.

"Hell Bent For Heaven."

At last we were on the favorite topic, "Hell Bent For Heaven," the play by which we best know Hatcher Hughes of Columbia; the play that brought the award of the Pulitzer prize. He conceived the idea of writing it, so he explained, as far back as the summer of 1916. It was during a trip on horseback through the mountains of North Carolina, those same mountains that were to have been a refuge from society for the boy of ten. A flood was on. The French Broad river had overflowed its banks. Tributary streams were torrents.

"It rained," continued Professor Hughes distinctly at home with his description, "it rained thirty-nine days and nights, just lacking one."

EXECUTOR'S NOTICE.

Having qualified as executors of the will of T. H. Bridges, late of Cleveland county, North Carolina, this is to notify all persons having claims against the estate of the said deceased to present them to the undersigned on or before the 21st day of December, 1929, or this notice will be pleaded in bar of their recovery. All persons indebted to the said estate will please make immediate payment.

JOHN L. BRIDGES, GEO. O. BRIDGES, Executors of T. H. Bridges, Dec'd.

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