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Booklover-Theater

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It is late May/early June in Charleston and the Spoleto Festival is in full swing. The Festival hosts two weeks of opera, dance, a garden tour, theater, puppetry, physical theater, music, and artist talks capped with a Finale at the historic Middleton Place. This is late May/early June in Charleston and the Spoleto Festival is in full swing. The Festival hosts two weeks of opera, dance, a garden tour, theater, puppetry, physical theater, music, and artist talks capped with a Finale at the historic Middleton Place.

This year the Galway theater company Druid has taken over the Dock Street Theater for the presentation of Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett. Beckett won the 1969 Nobel Prize in Literature and was the subject of a previous Booklover column. But it is of note, in my quest to read one piece of work by every author to have won the Nobel Literature Prize, that this was a unique opportunity to experience an author’s work presented in a format other than words on a page. A simple stage with a tree and a rock, five characters and a play about nothing — it was funny and riveting. Now it is time to read a work by another author.

Thomas Mann was presented the 1929 Nobel Prize in Literature “principally for his great novel, Buddenbrooks, which has won steadily increased recognition as one of the classic works of contemporary literature.” It is unusual for the committee to reference a single work instead of the author’s body of work. I have chosen instead to read a short story entitled Little Lissy. It begins: “There are marriages which the farce is mechanically built up.”

This story unfolds about a couple in such a marriage. The charming, lovely and young wife, known as Amra has decided to organize a large party with entertainment. She has convinced her husband, “a perfect colossus of a man,” to be the climax of this entertainment event. “Christian (the husband’s name), suppose you come on at the end as a chanteuse, in a red satin baby frock, and do a dance.” Amra continues with her declaration that in addition to the dance he will perform a song. A song that Herr Alfred Läutner, her lover, will compose and provide the piano accompaniment.

“In a choked and gasping voice he sang, to the accompaniment of the piano. The lamentable figure exhaled more than ever a cold breath of anguish. It killed every light-hearted enjoyment and lay like an oppressive weight upon the assembled audience. Horror was in the depths of all these spellbound eyes, gazing at this pair at the piano and at that husband there. The monstrous, unspeakable scandal lasted five long minutes.”

Thomas Mann was born in Germany in 1875. Writing was in his genes. His older brother was the author Heinrich Mann and three of his children became prominent German writers. He was initially designated to run his father’s grain company. His father died when he was a young man and the company was liquidated releasing Mann from the business legacy.

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Endnotes


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Booklover — Theater

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Against the Grain / September 2017 <http://www.against-the-grain.com> 27
This is a serious book about printing history and some of the bizarre twists and turns it takes through authorship, typography, forgery, copyright, fine book printing and binding. That said, the style is a humorous and personal approach to the subject. The authors have picked seminal moments from the history of printing and added their own humorous takes on the strange situations that seem to arise when revolutionary change occurs. You may know Rebecca Romney from “Paw Stars” where she was resident book appraiser while employed by Bauman’s Rare Books in Las Vegas. What appears at first glance to be a popular and snarky series of anecdotes turns out to be a look behind the scenes that are often neglected in more dry and sober accounts of printing history.

The book takes a somewhat chronological path from Gutenberg and Galileo through to Shakespeare and then Benjamin Franklin, Blake, Dickens, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Morris finishing up with the arch publicist Edward Bernays. Along the way we learn that in the time of Galileo the cost of paper was the most expensive part of book production. Paper at that time was made from linen rags, as wool gummed up and matted together when wet. The ideal rags came from old stockings and underwear, hence the suppleness of paper from the first few hundred years of print.

Besides moveable type, one of Johannes Gensfleisch zur Laden zum Gutenberg’s (that is Johannes Gooseflesh from Good Mountain) inventions was the specialized ink necessary for printing using metal type. Writing inks at that time were derived from the gall wasp and the protuberance it produced in oak necessary for printing using metal type. Writ Mountain) inventions was the specialized ink (that is Johannes Gooseflesh from Good Gensfleisch zur Laden zum Gutenberg’s years of print.

In the history of fine press typography it was common practice for designers to destroy their fonts rather than let them fall into the hands of some mass production publisher. In this line of history, Doves Press takes the prize for not only creating possibly the most beautiful type design of all time, but also the most thorough attempt at eradication. After a dispute between the founders of the press in 1913 — T. J. Cobden-Sanderson and Emery Walker — T. J. carted the metal fonts to a nearby bridge over the Thames and over the course of 170 late night trips he drowned his great creation. Strangely enough, while trying to revive the font in 2014, Robert Green hired divers to search the river bed and they actually salvaged 150 separate pieces from the set. Thanks to that dive and painstaking work by Green we now have a working Doves Press font.

The authors end their book with stories from the career of Edward Bernays, the infamous publicist who convinced (paid?) doctors to recommend smoking as a means of appetite control and thus got women to take up the nasty habit as a way to stay thin...and independent. In the world of books he will be remembered for his successful campaign to increase book sales by shaming book borrowers. He ran a contest for the best invented word to describe these enemies of commerce. His winners came up with such pungent epithets as Book Sneak, Blifter, and Volume Vulture. He believed that people had to be taught to buy books. His campaign to encourage book ownership was a success and book sales went up along with the belief that simply owning books could improve one’s social status. That last bit of propaganda is hard to corroborate based on my own book hoarding experience.

For more about Rebecca Romney: https://www.facebook.com/biblioclast/ https://rebeccaromney.com/about/