

NEW BELASCO THEATER OPENS

Splendor Marks Occasion of Initial Play

"Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" Proves Full of Mirth

Audience Likened to Gem Set in Brilliant Sunburst

(Reprinted from Tuesday's late edition of The Times)

BY EDWIN SCHALLERT

You have read it, and how you can see it. And it is and has "It."

That's "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," which opened to a dazzling sunburst of mirth and an audience well-nigh as brilliant as Lorelei's genuine diamond tiara last night at the Belasco Theater.

An up-to-the-minute play in an up-to-the-minute playhouse, and everything as it should be in a show world still radiant from another double premiere!

One can almost spare the details of a theatrical opening nowadays, because there are so many actually taking place. Nevertheless, for yet another time the glittering adjectives may be summoned to render tribute to a new and inviting abode of entertainment, particularly as it has begun its career with one of the sprightliest and liveliest attractions of the year.

The Belasco Theater was host to as representative a throng of the social and professional realms as have attended any of the food of events that have been besieging the playgoer. Eleventh and Broadway, heretofore an untried sector in the domain of amusement, blazed its beckoning call in true cinemascopic fashion, and the response rivaled a first-night in Hollywood. There was not a seat to spare within the portal of the architecturally satisfying new show palace that is located within a stone's throw of that corner, and in accustomed fashion the star-gazers around the entrance did their best to give an added splash to the occasion.

Everybody will, I believe, view the Belasco approvingly. To the old-time theatergoer, particularly, its name will spell pleasant recollections of another Belasco that flourished when show-going, which is still comparatively young here, was actually in its infancy. There were great old plays produced there, like "The Bird of Paradise" and "Peg of My Heart"—but then sufficient of reminiscence. The new Belasco somehow revives them, although it may be only a matter of name association.

It is rich and replete with an old-gold luxuriance, individual in its almost church-like decorative jade windows above the balcony. It has an ample breadth, and an adequate degree of intimacy. Nothing ostentatious, though with quality bedecked, and definitely homelike in the best, and not the Babbitt, sense of that word. All in all, it has set a pleasing precedent for that theatrical progress which has been under way now for many months.

Fred J. Butler did the official honors last evening with a brief speech before the curtain, introducing Bert Lytell, who made the speech of dedication. Mr. Butler shares with Edward Belasco and Gerhold O. Davis the sponsoring of the enterprise, which, to all intents and purposes, enjoys the especial interest of eastern producers, including David Belasco, Edger Selwyn and others. Many of their successful plays are scheduled for production there simultaneously or nearly simultaneously with the premiere in Manhattan.

BELASCO HILL AT 11TH
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ANITA LOOS PRESENT

Anita Loos, who enabled Lorelei Lee to achieve her now famous debut in the book, "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," was present at the performance, as was her husband, John Emerson, who was co-author of the stage version. They arrived on the Coast only two days ago.

To go to "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" without a certain knowledge of its play and purpose—if it may be said to have so dignified a thing as purpose—would perhaps be the height of mistaken judgment. I wonder, though, who there may be that is so benighted as not to have read the book, which has had a circulation running into hundreds of thousands of copies, and has maintained its popularity for more than a season.

To say that it is the story of a gold-digger's adventures on a trip to Europe is to tell but half of what transpires in either the literary or, for that matter, the stage version, for Lorelei is one character in a million in action. The epigrams of herself and of her companion, Dorothy, have become the bright coin that is exchanged in the realm of all smart and sophisticated circles. The cleverest sayings of the book are now almost proverbial.

PLAY MEASURES UP

"Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" was not a book that one laughed over with wild hilarity as regards every page that one read. There were many, indeed, that were uproarious, but there was not a single one that lacked a fascination.

In a way, it may be said that the play measures up to this general pattern. It is not all hectically mirthful, but it all moves along on the wings of gaiety. Only the opening scene may be said to lag somewhat, and this is partly owing to the difficulty of getting adjusted to the characters that one sees upon the stage. Those who have read "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" are bound to have a preconceived notion of Lorelei and Dorothy, and of Sir Francis Beekman and Lady Beekman, and perhaps even Robert and Louis that will in some respect be different from their various and assorted theatrical presences.

Due allowance must be made for this condition, which is one that is virtually impossible to eliminate in the case of a book that has evoked such a terrific vogue as Anita Loos's capricious and satirical creation.

FINE BUBBLES LOST

"Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" couldn't be quite as sparkling an achievement in its footlight form as it was in a book form, because it was too good in that fine vintage. Some of the bubbles are bound to be lost in the process of transferring it from one bottle to the other.

With this matter disposed of, it may be duly asserted that the stage version is an exceedingly efficacious one. It had to be far more compact than the original, and the destinies of the characters of necessity had to be more closely woven together. We find, for instance, Sir Francis Beekman and Lady Beekman aboard the steamer en route to England, which also carries Lorelei and Dorothy. Sir Francis becomes a somewhat broad and blusteringly giddy Englishman, while it is Lady Beekman who is attempting to dispose of the tiara. A seastick Henry Spoffard is introduced here, as well as his kittenish mother, and they all become involved in the

affairs of Dorothy, with several plots moving simultaneously that were originally treated in sequence.

SECOND ACT GREAT

The great act, from a mirthful standpoint, is the second one. The entrance of Robert and Louis, the two French solicitors, is triumphant. "Madelon" should really be played upon their arrival on the scene, for they represent everything that is conventional about the American's viewpoint on the Gallic citizen. Robert's voluble attempts to talk an English, intermingled with French that the American girls do not understand, their effusive embraces, the manner in which Louis converts Robert to the charm of the girls are unforgettable moments in this play. There has seldom been anything more delightfully funny than this particular climax. In itself, it is worth anyone's time for amusement, and it is far from being the only big high spot, because the French episode throughout is inspiring.

There is good fun also in the opening scene, particularly as regards the way that Lorelei wheedles Beeky. There is fun also in the final act with Lorelei's coming-out party, and when the invalided Old Spoffard under the enchantment of youth's allurements gets up out of his wheel chair and runs off stage, the house is in convulsions.

Brief credits only can be compressed at this hour of writing for the portrayals of the principal roles. Perhaps none of them is ideal if you see them through the same vision that thrilled over their counterparts on the printed page. I wonder if they ever could be?

The most commendable fact about the production was that although first impressions were in the majority of cases disillusioning, all the players built their way to favor before the evening was over.

Joan Marion, especially, merited definite praise for her efforts as Lorelei, and though she seemed much less irrepresible than our original heroine, she was occasionally very deft, even elsewhere obvious, in her vamping tactics. Her story of her early life experience at the murder trial was adroitly told.

The Beekmans are sketched very broadly and played that way by Ada Sinclair and Herbert Standing. One has to grant some leeway in the change of type from the original, because it would require a certain amount of burlesque for their acceptance in a stage version.

Mary Ricard as Dorothy has the brightest laugh opportunities, and she makes much of them, although her role was to my mind played at times too obviously. It seemed to win favor with the public, though this might be ascribed to smariness of the lines allotted to her.

The Frenchmen were great as done by Edouard La Roche and Martin Wolfson. While their chances to register are easily the best, they provided great fun.

William Courneen was at times good as Spoffard; at other times not so good. It was an uneven portrayal, though the role is among the more difficult.

Very amusing was Gene Paul as Connie, and Leona Maricle pleased as Gloria. Jay Reed appeared as Gus Elsmann, though he figures comparatively little in the play. The performance as a whole needs more dash.