

THINGS TO COME

CRYSTAL-GAZING AT THE NEAR AND DISTANT FUTURE OF A DURABLE ART

BY ALAN SCHNEIDER

Like the fortune-teller lady in *The Skin of Our Teeth* says, telling the future is no problem. Especially the future of the American theatre. Telling the past—including the theatre's past—is something else again. Why was last season as bad as it turned out to be? What happened to that old dream of repertory with a company? Where is that wonderful new talent from two seasons ago? The past is tough to see into. But telling the future? The lady said it: "Nothing easier."

The shorter the time span, of course, the less easy the job of seeing ahead. Tomorrow is the hardest to predict—it's too close to yesterday. We all think we know what Frank Rich will say in the morning light, but will he? Will tomorrow's rehearsal go well or badly? Who is next week's artistic director?

Further ahead, the road becomes increasingly visible. In the next couple of seasons on Broadway, for example, there'll be 30 to 40 productions, mostly musicals, comedies and a growing number of both imports and revivals. The season will start out being "the best in years," and end up not as good as the year before. Production and operating costs will go up (as well as the number of seats in each theatre); and quality, artistic and vocal, will go down (as well as the number of available theatres). Lobbies—and stages—will be smaller, auditoriums larger. More will be taken in at the box office and by various Administrative Personnel, and less by ordinary working actors, directors, playwrights, designers and stage managers.

Fewer people will be going to the theatre in more places. The dominant form of playwriting will continue to be realism—mixed with surrealism. British plays will continue to dominate our mar-

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quees, brought in alternately from the repertoires of the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare (which in London are largely supported by American theatregoers).

In Samuel Beckett's newest and most minimal masterpiece, titled *Untitled*, the first act will open on an empty stage, no actors visible. The play will be composed of simple forms and fundamental sounds (in the words of the author, "no pun intended"). It will run approximately 7 to 11 minutes, depending on the director's interpretation of the pauses. In the second act, the curtain will not rise at all. It will be a very short act. Actors' Equity—ever vigilant and alert—will react by passing a new rule requiring a minimum of roles for its members per act, properly proportioned by sex, race and national origin.

Everyone will blame the playwrights, the producers, the unions, the system. And there will be no new American plays, no decent directors, no trained actors, and lots of extraordinary designers, mostly from Yale, capable of making the scenery move up and down and from side to side. Especially in overtime.

What will happen in about five years is even clearer. A musical version of *King Lear* (set in Houston in 1984 and renamed *Lear!* in order to save on ad space) will star Richard Burton and Angela Lansbury, alternating in the title role. *Lear!*'s production budget will be a relatively modest \$17.5 million; its producers (Alexander H. Cohen, the Messrs. Barr and Woodward, and the Messes. Nugent and McCann, in association with the Shuberts, the Nederlanders, the Minskoffs, the Feld Brothers and Lee Iacocca together with Neil Simon, who was called in to work on the last act) will announce that fact proudly in a full-page ad. The Broadway season will have 20 to 30 productions, mostly musicals, comedies, and an alarming number of imports and revivals. British plays will continue to dominate, including several hauled out of the RSC's and National's warehouses. The