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Theatre

It's a Small Stage

There is not much that could cause a rustle or a flutter of curiosity in the "Old Town" of the old Swiss city of Basle. It is quaint, faintly run-down though still elegant, and extremely exclusive. It has seen its share of escapades and extravagances. But still there was a flurry of excitement and surprise the night the new theatre opened on the Spalenberg.

Through the quite streets of Basle clumped furniture movers. Men struggled through the narrow ways with chairs overstuffed to the point of sagging. Young couples dragged a loveseat between them. Ladies tripped over the cobbles, bearing rocking chairs. It was late in the evening, the movers in dress-up best. Was it a fire-drill, a mass hegira? Nothing so serious. Quite the contrary. A new cabaret, named "Fauteuil" or "Easy chair", was opening and the entrance fee for the first-nighters who had bought a "seat" was that they bring their seat with them and leave it to furnish the theatre. Quite a normal procedure for a Swiss cabaret, where everything is unique, and the staid Swiss pay for the privilege of going a little crazy in a crowd, and laughing at themselves.

In reading the word "cabaret", forget whatever you may have seen, unless perhaps in Germany. Forget the girls in pink, and the over-paid, under-dressed chanteuse. Forget the *double-entendre* and the single-minded comic. Remember this is Swiss cabaret. Here the girls are more laughable than luscious. The lines are witty not curvaceous. The scenery is meagre, the cast is rarely more than a half-dozen, the stage is about as big as a billiard table, the auditorium the size of a private cellar. (It generally is just that.) Swiss cabaret is literally "little theatre". But only in the physical sense. Its fantasy is lavish, its popularity tremendous, and its impudence unbounded. It is a precisely polished pointed pin poised to prick pomposity, particularly political. It all started about 25 years ago when three Swiss of insight, intellect and insouciance put themselves, their neighbours and their country into the spotlight of satire. Max Werner Lenz, Walter Lesch and C. F. Vaucher were sober-seeming men, kind of sad of countenance and abstinent of character. They were rather like the dignified and heavy form of a champagne bottle. But, when they pulled the cork on their imaginations, what sparkles and fizzles and laughter bubbled over, and sometimes what a headache followed the morning after for some people! These theatrical "amateurs" set up their makeshift theatre in a cellar, got together five or six amateur players, an amateur piano player, and opened their theatre. They called it "Cornichon", or sour pickle. An apt name indeed, for even if the pickle is delicious, while enjoying it one cannot help pulling a wry face.

The authors put the finger on the little weaknesses of their compatriots, homely habits and civic questions as well. And the public laughed. They laughed at themselves. Actually, they thought they were laughing at their fellow men, because, of course, the idiosyncrasies so deftly characterized could not apply to them.

In order to be truly national, good political satire cannot be of international appeal. Swiss cabaret is written, sung, and shorted in Swiss German. Thanks to superb pantomime, its performance is appealing to the casual visitor, but not bitingly funny.

It is the same in any country. Bea Lillie tickled anyone who ever saw her in her four-square topee, but one had to speak English well, and British English at that, to roll in the aisles with tear-wet cheeks at "Mad Dogs and Englishmen". Professional Swiss cabaret is an exquisitely tailored private joke for the public-minded Swiss.

Cabaret need not be professional to be good, however. At the recent opening of a new school of business training in Zurich, the students put on a homegrown cabaret. It was anyone's meat to see a vital young artist stride out, bow to the audience, nod to the full orchestra accompanying him, and twirl his piano stool to the proper height. He flung his tails out behind him — they were of diabolical length — and crashed into his "Solo Concerto for Typewriter", with magnificent carriage returns and impassioned bell ringing. Typical cabaret. Anybody can do it if they have the wit and fantasy — everybody loves it.

Towards the end of a typical programme, usually about 15 numbers, spoken or sung, one thinks, "They've done fashion and franchise, education and emancipation, alpine glow and the iron curtain. They've taken apart top diplomats of seven countries and neglected to reassemble them, they've lectured on temperance and given tips on senile delinquency. Is nothing sacred?"

Apparently nothing is! For at that moment a handsome couple in Swissair blue take the stage. He a keen-eyed pilot, she an alluring hostess. Voli Geiler and Walter Morath, a famous cabaret twosome, have gone Swissterical! With an eye so keen as to be frantic, with an allure so welcoming as to be a leer, they urge you to:

"Fly, fly, fly, fly, Swissair . . ."

SUZANNE FELCHLIN.

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