

Study Guide For
THE FRONT PAGE
Charles MacArthur and Ben Hecht

Indiana Repertory Theatre
140 W. Washington Street
Indianapolis IN 46204

Compiled by Janet Allen, Dramaturg
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A NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHTS

When we applied ourselves to write a newspaper play we had in mind a piece of work which would reflect our intellectual disdain of and superiority to the Newspaper.

What we finally turned out is a romantic and rather doting tale of our friends--the reporters of Chicago.

It developed in writing this play that our contempt for the institution of the Press was a bogus attitude; that we looked back on the Local Room where we had spent half our lives as a veritable fairyland--and that we were both full of a nostalgia for the bouncing days of our servitude.

The same uncontrollable sentimentality operated in our treatment of Chicago which, as much as any of our characters, is the hero of our play.

The iniquities, double dealings, chicaneries and immoralities which as ex-Chicagoans we knew so well returned to us in a mist called the Good Old Days, and our delight in our memories would not be denied.

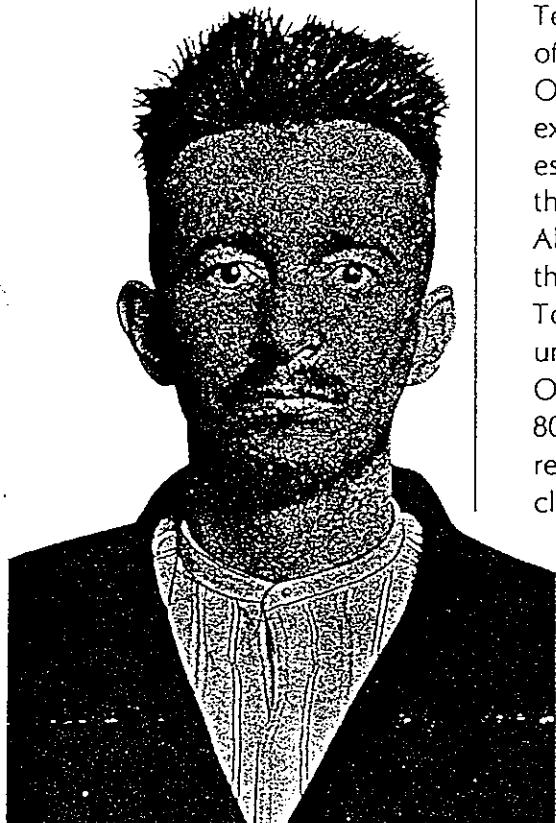
As a result THE FRONT PAGE, despite its oaths and realisms is a Valentine thrown to the past, a Ballad (to us) full of Heim Weh and Love.

So it remains for more stern and uncompromising intellects than ours to write of the true Significance of the Press. Therefore our apology to such combinatorists, radicals, Utopians and Schoengeisten who might see this work expecting intellectual mayhem.

In writing it we found we were not so much dramatists or intellectuals as two reporters in exile.

Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, 1933

"I was told a weird tale about the Cook County Jail still having gallows waiting for a man who escaped years ago. Is this true?"—D.G.



The gallows have been hanging around the County Jail for more than 50 years. Now they are in a storage room near the boiler in the Criminal Courts Building next to the jail. They were to be used for the execution of Tommy O'Connor, a Maxwell Street terrorist and killer, on Dec. 19, 1921. Terrible Tommy had been convicted of the murder of Detective Paddy O'Neil. Four days before the execution date, however, O'Connor escaped by slipping over the wall of the jail, then at 54 W. Hubbard St. Although he was never recaptured, the gallows were kept so Terrible Tommy could be "hanged by the neck until dead" if he ever turned up. O'Connor, who would be in his early 80s, probably would have his case retried if he ever did fall within the clutches of the law, we are told.

reprinted in Is There Only One Chicago edited by journalist Kenan Heise from questions and answers appearing in "Action Line" a newspaper column that is itself a Chicago institution.

A VALENTINE THROWN AT THE PAST--HECHT AND MACARTHUR'S THE FRONT PAGE

It's a fine thing to be a reporter. And young and working in Chicago. Other towns have newpapers and fine saloons. But they're far away. St. Louis, Kansas City, Omaha, New Orleans, New York -- they are places you go to hide.

In Chicago you're out in the open with the eyes of great editors and reporters on you. These men were not only truth sticklers, but they sneered at obscurantism and bridled at bird calls. They were for lucidity and laughter, when sober. Lit

up, they wrote their names across the sky in crane wings--meaning they were high and noisy and as full of combinations as a swarm of sorcerers.

Frank Lloyd Wright, Edna Ferber, Sherwood Anderson, Benny Goodman, Ernest Hemingway, Bix Beiderbecke and Clarence Darrow walked the byways of this town.

About Chicago there is something you can say about no other town. First, everybody is alive, and next--you don't need press notices for renown. You can get famous just standing in a barroom, heisting a beer, Jap, the laconic barkeep, will growl, "Never mind paying this week. I'll put it on the bill." And you're famous. Or let me put it this way--you'll never feel more famous than in that hour.

I write in this fashion (a little naively) hoping to bring out the mood of innocence in that day. For innocent is what we were; not in our doings but in our point of view.

We looked on the hopheads, crooks, and gunsels and on their bawdy ladies as members of a family among whom we were privileged to move. The reporters hello was the same for the psycho-killer as for the obliging waitress. There was no caste system, moral or social, in our manners. We trotted, coach-dog fashion, at the heels of the human race, our tails a-wag.

We were all fools to have left Chicago. It was a town to play in; a town where you could stay yourself, and where the hoots of the critics couldn't frighten your style or drain your soul. Charlie preserved it in his heart. Our friendship was based, largely, on the nostalgia we shared for this stockyard Athens. We both knew that the world would turn up nothing better for us than the frowsy streets and hooligan towers of Chicago.

Thus wrote Ben Hecht about the glorious years of his youth in the late 1910's and 20's in the biography he wrote of his friend and collaborator, Charlie MacArthur. THE FRONT PAGE is quite literally based on their escapades in the "yellow press" in the days when Chicago had 17 daily news-

papers with metropolitan circulation--a far cry from the 2 that exist today. In the mid 20's, both Hecht and MacArthur left Chicago to go to New York, where they could turn their attentions to more legitimate forms of writing than journalism. But they never lost their enthusiasm for the newspaper business and, as they discovered when writing this play, their deep affection for the men they had known in this wild and woolly profession.

Hildy Johnson, the central character of THE FRONT PAGE, is modelled on Charlie MacArthur himself, and the tyrannical managing editor of the play, Walter Burns, shares many comic characteristics with MacArthur's real editor on the Herald-Examiner, Walter Howey. The other reporters, politicians, and policeman are loosely based on men that Hecht and MacArthur remembered, their individual characteristics drawn from a wealth of material which the two men shared in reminiscence. Many of the actual stories referred to in the play were stories which MacArthur had covered but, as Hecht wrote in his biography of Charlie, "We wrote the volatile friendship of Howey and MacArthur in THE FRONT PAGE. But we watered it down. The Howey and MacArthur of the Examiner office would have made too wild a tale for any theatre."

THE FRONT PAGE portrays what has since become a stereotype of the city reporter. He is tough, wise-cracking, cocky. His battered fedora is never off his head; the angle at which he slants its brim denotes his mood. His feet are always on his desk, and his desk drawer is never without its pint. He is sentimental, generous, and utterly democratic, at ease anywhere with anyone.

A delightful story goes with the opening of this play in New York in 1928. MacArthur was then dating actress Helen Hayes, but Charlie had declared that he could not marry Helen until one of his plays was "really significant.... a play that changes things." Dame Fortune smiled on the collaboration of Hecht and MacArthur and as Charlie said while in the early stages of work on THE FRONT PAGE, "This play about the newspaper business should work out pretty good." This, of course, was to become a giant understatement, as THE FRONT PAGE was to become one of Broadway's greatest successes.

On opening night, Helen Hayes was privileged to be in the audience--she was then playing in COQUETTE, and well on her way to becoming the darling of the American stage. As fate would have it, Jed Harris, the producer of COQUETTE, was also producing THE FRONT PAGE, and knowing the significance of the production to Miss Hayes, he kindly cancelled the performance of the play so that Helen could attend the

opening night of THE FRONT PAGE. Hecht and MacArthur had chosen to sit on the fire escape off the balcony, apparently in order to make a fast escape if the play were to prove a flop. According to her biography titled FRONT PAGE MARRIAGE, Helen sat in the balcony alone, with her fingers crossed and a prayer in her heart. From the moment the reporters spoke their first lines, Helen knew they had a hit. The audience roared. Charlie Chaplin, who was sitting in the front row, later reported that he nearly wet his pants from laughing so hard. After the final curtain, Helen rushed out onto the fire escape to announce that the producer thought the play would run forever. Charlie quietly proposed and Helen accepted. Thus began the fairy tale success of THE FRONT PAGE, which was to revolutionize the American theatre with its candid and humorous realism. As Tennessee Williams was to later observe, "THE FRONT PAGE took the corsets off the American theatre and made it possible for me to write my kind of a play."

Hecht and MacArthur went on to write several more plays and screenplays together, but as Hecht happily records in his autobiography: "We remained newspaper reporters and continued to keep our hats on before the boss, drop ashes on the floor and disdain all practical people."

SYNOPSIS - THE FRONT PAGE

THE FRONT PAGE takes place on an Indian summer night in 1928, in the Press Room of the Criminal Courts Building. Hildy Johnson, a reporter has fallen in love with a conventional-minded sweet young thing. She agrees to marry him only if he will move to New York City and take a respectable job in advertising. He has agreed, given notice, and is going. His fierce, opportunistic, unprincipled city editor, Walter Burns, has threatened, schemed, and bribed in an attempt to dissuade him. But to no avail. Sadly, and with his fingers crossed, Burns gives Hildy his last assignment--to cover the execution of Earl Williams, a white man who has killed a black policeman. The viewer is given to understand that if the shooting had occurred in a white neighborhood, little notice would have been taken, but the blacks control four valuable precincts and an election is coming up. In his desperation, Williams, a confused radical, says that he is being persecuted as an "anarchist," a word that aroused intense feelings in a nation still arguing about the Sacco-Vanzetti execution of only two years earlier.

Lolling in the press room, Hildy is suddenly confronted by the murderer, who has escaped, and the condemned man's sweetheart, a prostitute who has helped him. Hildy abruptly stops dreaming of Madison Avenue and the respectable life. Here is a lifetime opportunity for a great news scoop. As pursuing footsteps and shouts are heard, Hildy hides the fugitive in a rolltop desk. Then he grabs the telephone and yells for his editor. Stop the presses! Examiner Captures Escaped Murderer!"

The door bursts open, and in rush the police, the mayor, the rival newsmen, Hildy's angry fiancee, her mother, a hoodlum, and the city editor. In the frantic action that follows, the prostitute jumps out a window to avoid betraying her lover; Hildy's mother-in-law-to-be is taken for a ride by the hoodlum; telephones ring shrilly; reporters holler and bawl; and in the background, like a Greek chorus, players in a perpetual poker game chant: "Raise you ten!" "I'm out." "Shuffle that deck."

A messenger from the governor's office brings a reprieve. Everyone is happy. The editor gives Hildy his gold watch. The newspapers go to press. Hildy, his fiancee, and her mother are reconciled, and Hildy promises again that he will go to New York and give up reporting forever.

Then as the curtain begins to descend, the city editor, alone in the littered press room, grabs the telephone. He is calling his own newspaper. "Hello, Duffy? Send a wire to the chief of police of La Porte, Indiana, Tell him to meet the 12:40 New York Central out of Chicago and arrest Hildy Johnson and bring him back here....The son of a bitch stole my watch!"

PLAYWRIGHTS' BIOGRAPHIES

HECHT, Ben (1894-1964) Born in New York and raised in Wisconsin, Hecht made unsuccessful attempts at becoming an acrobat and a violinist before finding a niche as a flamboyant Chicago newspaperman. Besides his newspaper writing, novels, and other literary works he wrote numerous plays. The most memorable were two acerbic comedies written in collaboration with Charles MacArthur: THE FRONT PAGE (1928), in which Chicago newsmen cover an execution; and TWENTIETH CENTURY (1932), in which a fading producer makes a desperate attempt at a comeback. Among his other plays were THE EGOTIST (1922); THE STORK (1925), an adaptation of a Hungarian play; THE GREAT MAGOO (1932), written with Gene Fowler; the libretto for JUMBO (1935), with MacArthur; TO QUITO AND BACK (1937); LADIES AND GENTLEMEN (1939), with MacArthur; SWAN SONG (1946), with MacArthur; A FLAG IS BORN (1946); and the libretto of HAZEL FLAGG (1953).

Autobiography: A CHILD OF THE CENTURY, New York, 1954.

MacARTHUR, Charles (1895-1956) Born in Scranton, Penn., the son of a clergyman, he became a respected, if antic, figure in Chicago journalism, working for the Hearst papers. Typical of the stories about him is one recounting the time he was sent to interview the famous philanthropist Otto Kahn. Kept waiting in the library, he pulled ancient classics from the shelf, entered appropriate inscriptions and signed them with the names of the long-dead authors. Broadway first knew him when he collaborated with Edward Sheldon on *LULU BELLE* (1926), the story of the downfall of a black prostitute. With Sidney Howard he wrote a thinly veiled expose of evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson, *SALVATION* (1928), but the play was short-lived. That same year, however, he joined for the first time with another Chicago newsman, Ben Hecht, to write a marvelous comedy about the jungle-like world of reporting, *THE FRONT PAGE* (1928). Two more successes followed for the team: *TWENTIETH CENTURY* (1932), centering on a failing Hollywood producer's desperate attempt at a comeback; and the book for the musical, *JUMBO* (1935). However, the pair came a cropper when they wrote a vehicle for MacArthur's wife, Helen Hayes. The play, *LADIES AND GENTLEMEN* (1939), told of a romance on a murder trial jury. On his own MacArthur next wrote a failed political satire, *JOHNNY ON A SPOT* (1942), in which a political campaign manager attempts to conceal the news that his candidate has dropped dead in a bordello. He rejoined Hecht for a final play, *SWAN SONG* (1946), in which a pianist attempts to murder a young rival. He also had a successful career as a screen writer.

Biography: *THE IMPROBABLE LIFE AND TIMES OF CHARLES MacARTHUR*, Ben Hecht, New York, 1957.

Oxford Companion To The American Theatre. Editor, Gerald Bordman