

From a Cellar in Moscow to a Roof in New York

By MERIAN C. COOPER

EIGHT-TWENTY at night, and two men were perched on the fifth row of steps of the Forty-ninth Street Theatre, apparently oblivious to the crowds pouring in past them to see the Chauve-Souris. The fat, red-faced man was visibly worried. He gesticulated and talked eagerly. The second man, his pale face expressionless under his soft, black felt hat, stared straight ahead. His only movement was occasionally to touch his flowing black tie.

The man in the black hat suddenly dismissed the fat man with a word. A moment later his mouth smiled when I asked him where I could find Morris Gest's office.

"I'm Gest," he said, "have a seat in my office," and he smiled still more broadly as he pointed to the vacated place beside him on the fire-escape steps.

It was then that he said it isn't. But it is. There is no doubt about it—it is. There is no doubt about it to the layman's mind, at any rate. Morris Gest, one of Broadway's clearest minds on the art of the stage, is surely wrong on this point.

The Chauve-Souris is vaudeville.

The fact that it is just that is what makes its success so puzzling to the experts of the Rialto. They all agree that it is vaudeville. So does Mr. Webster's dictionary. His second definition says: "Vaudeville—a series of short sketches, songs, dances, acrobatic feats, &c., having no dramatic connection, a variety show." These required elements are found in the Chauve-Souris. Yes, it is vaudeville.

But who ever heard of a vaudeville show without a change of act playing six continuous months on Broadway? And all in Russian. Not an English word, unless Nikita Balieff's introduction can be so termed. And, as one American actor said, "Five-dollar vaudeville. Gawd!"

The thing is impossible. But it is one of those impossibilities that sometimes happen despite the laws of reason, and are called miracles. This half-year run on Broadway of an unchanging Russian vaudeville is a miracle—no less. But most miracles when closely examined usually show reasons for their existence. So does this one. The reason, as I see it, is this:

Here for the first time vaudeville has been made into a unified artistic production.

That is something quite new to the American theatre. Previously vaudeville here has been made up of an entirely disconnected series of "acts." Each act in the American variety show is in large part under the control of the actors themselves. It is a question of each act for itself. There is no relation between the jokes of the man with the Frank Tinney dialogue and the trained seals, or between the Billy Sisters' dances and the comedy skit. And if any player thinks he sees a little impromptu change that "sounds good" he puts it in then and there, and listens for the applause to know if that is the thing to give 'em.

Now, it is true that the Chauve-Souris is vaudeville, too. But it is vaudeville constructed on a basically different plan. At casual glance one recognizes that there is a difference. Every one sees it. But to one who has not been behind the scenes it is difficult to say just what it is. There are toy soldiers in one act, in another Italian opera, a third is a mad farce of a runaway couple, then gypsy songs, and so on. Apparently unconnected. But . . .

They are not. No. Distinctly not. For Chauve-Souris is one company under a single direction, while American vaudeville is built up of a dozen little "acts," each a company unto itself. In Chauve-Souris the triumph of any particular act is considered unimportant except in so far as it affects the success of the entire show. There are no star acts, nor any stars. It is all Chauve-Souris. Nor are there any impromptu injections. Every stage position, every gesture, every voice inflection is practiced again and again, not to please, at the final judgment, the

taste and wishes of the actor, but to fit the director's idea of artistic accord with every other bit of work in the performance.

This results in changing a series of disconnected songs and dances and skits into one harmonious, synchronized production.

Tears drop between bursts of laughter. Age follows youth. The contrast of emotions is so smooth, every artistic touch is so lightly handled, that one fails to notice the mechanical perfection that makes it all possible. It is a graceful woman walking on a soft, green lawn. It is a slim athlete diving into a still pool.

But the mechanical perfection does exist. It is the factor that makes the difficult seem easy to the onlooker. And it is in a curious and interesting way that Balieff, the genius of the idea of a unified vaudeville company, developed it.

To make this development Balieff has apparently worked out principles in relation to vaudeville similar to those that Henry Ford has used in the manufacture of motor cars. Balieff believes that there is one best way of doing everything. His method is to discover this best way, and then to standardize it. Every act in Chauve-Souris was worked over many times until Balieff decided what was the best way for each. Then the acts were tried out in connection with each other until they fitted exactly into the positions and times that he deemed best. He then had a vaudeville composed of one company, trained to give a performance as nearly artistically and mechanically perfect as he was able to make it.

The next step was to keep it to this standard, to see that no spots became blurred, no edges were jagged.

To this end, Balieff adopted an idea that might be a suggestion to America as to what to do with her out-of-work critics. What Balieff did

in Koiransky's notebook, and after the curtain drops on the last act Russian words flash out as sharply behind the scenes as bullets from a machine-gun nest. Balieff is the gunner.

But Koiransky's duties do not end there. Balieff believes like Ford that methods of production can always be bettered. And so the former critic watches the effect of every touch on the audience, considers the play of color and sound, and whenever he sees something that somehow seems discordant, no matter how slight, once again there is a scribbled line in the notebook, and later a consultation of the consulting theatrical engineer with the director.

This results, perhaps, in some change so minute that a person in the audience who has seen the performance several times—and there are numbers of New Yorkers who have gone to see it a half dozen times—does not notice it. But the Russian chief play engineer believes in shifting the position of a screw or nut a millimeter if it helps the action of the engine in even an infinitesimal degree. Innumerable such small corrections give perfection to the machine.

In employing a consulting theatrical engineer Balieff chose the best man he could find, for he considers the theatre a fine art, distinctly related to painting, music, sculpture and writing and including part of each and all. He thinks a man must be able to create beauty as well as see it in many forms to be fitted to correct and aid in the creation of a beautiful theatrical production, for beauty on the stage is expressed in numerous ways. Sound, color words, movement are all combined to make this beauty, and to do it they must be as closely related as the chemical elements of a lovely, rich colored liquid.

So Alexander Koiransky, special



"As in front of our gates."

From the new or roof edition of the Chauve-Souris.

chosen field, has made vaudeville an Art.

I capitalized that word purposely, because I shuddered at the thought of using it at all, and I thought that if I must I had better bring it out with a loud bang. I hated to use it, for somehow the very abuse and misuse of the word brings to mind freakish women and effeminate men making distorted smears on canvas or causing music or the stage to be ridiculous or dull.

But just the same that is what Chauve-Souris is—vaudeville as an Art. And that, after all, is a huge joke on the American audiences who

been going to vaudeville off and on all his life that any kind of variety show has any connection with things artistic? He would laugh at you if you tried. But when some friend says to him that Chauve-Souris is a corking good Russian vaudeville, he hurries to get tickets.

At the show itself when he somehow gets a different "kick" out of it than at other vaudevilles, he attributes it to the fact that this is a Russian performance.

But the joke is all on him.

The real truth of the matter is that that sense of beauty that lies hidden somewhere in every man is roused from its sleep. He laughs and applauds—does this American man at Chauve-Souris—but always there is a subtler something enveloping his more apparent emotions. It is that, all unknowing, he is feeling the real touch of beauty.

Of course, there is the other sort of American who is fearfully in earnest about Art. There was the young New Yorker who went to the Chauve-Souris and sat through the whole performance without cracking a smile—just as if he'd been at the Metropolitan Opera. He hadn't heard that it was vaudeville. He wasn't expecting vaudeville. His receiving machinery wasn't set for a funny show.

He had heard that it was Art—and Russian Art at that. His mind was so fixed on that one grand idea and his attitude toward Art was so entirely respectful that it never occurred to him that there was also an Art of Laughter. Balieff was wasted on him.

The Chauve-Souris has had 153 continuous performances at the Forty-ninth Street Theatre. Gest says that he could go on with this same bill throughout the Summer, but that the restless spirit of Balieff demands change. So the Chauve-Souris is going to open at the Century roof tomorrow with the same company, but with an almost entirely new set of acts—at least new to New York.

Once again will the machine start revolving. And once again will Balieff and his consulting theatrical engineer watch every revolution of the wheels, adjusting, correcting, synchronizing, making once more this super-vaudeville that has astonished Broadway.

Many years ago when Balieff first had this idea he hunted for a place in Moscow to try it out. He went to inspect a dark old cellar. As he entered a bat brushed across his face. "There is the name for my production," he said to his companion. "I will call it 'The Bat,'" which name in French translates Chauve-Souris. The Chauve-Souris opened shortly afterward in that same cellar. Since then have passed eighteen years during which Balieff has worked on the development of his dream of a unified artistic vaudeville.

Eighteen years. The time it has taken Chauve-Souris to travel from a cellar in Moscow to a New York roof.



Balieff and the Soldiers Before the Revolution.

Also from the new edition of the Chauve-Souris.

was to hire an art critic "for the house." Therefore, there sits in the audience every night Alexander Koiransky, former art critic. He is not there for pleasure but for duty, and his duties differ greatly from that of the average critic. They are constructive, not destructive.

Koiransky is the engineer who stands always on watch over the revolving machinery to see that every cylinder hits on time, that every crank arm is fitted on at the correct angle, that every minute part is synchronized with the whole. If a toy soldier blinks an eyelid at the wrong time, if there is one voice of the gypsy chorus off key for a single note, if any movement or sound in the entire Chauve-Souris performance differs from Balieff's plan, then down a notation of it goes

critic of the Chauve-Souris, is a man who was graduated from the University of Moscow, studied art in Moscow and Paris, and won in 1911 the Panin Prize for portrait painting. He has written several novels and a book of essays on "Stage and Style." He has been art editor of two large Moscow papers, and has lectured on dramatic art at the school for drama in Moscow. He has also translated into Russian the works of Anatole France, Maeterlinck, Oscar Wilde, and other well-known writers.

Such as the training of him who sits nightly among the audience of Chauve-Souris, always watching, notebook in hand.

It is by the building up of his main idea of a unified variety show by the methods I have described that Balieff, a pioneer and a genius in his

have crowded to see it. If some one had mentioned that word Art to them in the beginning the size of those audiences would have been vastly smaller.

The average American doesn't want to see Art. He wants to laugh and feel sentimental—he wants his emotions stirred. And the things that he has been told are artistic do not do that as a rule. As a matter of fact, they bore him. And he has no intention of being bored and paying for the privilege. If he can help it. Of course, sometimes he cannot. Once or twice a season it becomes unavoidable when he is dragged by his womankind to hear opera. But he begins to weary of it long before his taxi has stopped in front of the Metropolitan.

No. Art is not in his line. But who can tell a man who has