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**Story of a Playshop  
Play that Made Good  
Out in the Big World**

By Alice C. D. Riley

This is the story of how a one-acter made good and "got over."

Everyone who knows anything about plays knows that back in the days of Rosina Vokes one-act plays were popular as curtain-raisers. Then, for some thirty years, so far as America was concerned, there was no place professionally for the one-acter. The birth of the Little Theater movement again caused this form of drama to come into its own on the amateur stage, the vaudeville theaters adopting now and then a successful one for their own uses.

However, vaudeville managers and players have been hypersensitive about types of plays. With a mental picture of the "hoofers," the trained animals and whatnot which sweep across their stages they have been afraid that any sincere picture of real life, especially if a little sordid, would not be tolerated by an audience which frankly adores the broadest of low comedy. This kept most of the really good one-act plays off the vaudeville stage. It was only when Ethel Barrymore chose Barry's "The Ten Pound Look" that they made an exception.

Then comes a manager with vision and courage like Mr. Singer of the Palace theater, Chicago, and all the fears are proved groundless; as witness the success of Fay Ehlert's play, "The Undercurrent," which has only recently completed a successful week there and now goes to the Palace in Milwaukee, to return later to the State and Lake.

Mrs. Ehlert's play had its first hearing before an audience just a year ago, when it had a "walking reading" at the field day of the playwright class of Northwestern university. A "walking reading" means that the characters read the lines from manuscript while walking through their stage positions. It gives no chance for acting nor for production. The play stood this test well. It had criticism and was re-written, as is Playshop custom.

The following fall it was given a

real production at the Playshop and gained acclaim by the Little Theater audience. At this time Mr. Small, Miss Allyn and Mr. White played the same roles they play now. The other roles were in other hands.

Now this is precisely the point at which most good one-acters stop. They may, if fortunate, get publication and be used by other little theaters, but that is usually all. "The Undercurrent" did not stop—it went on. Its author and the Playshop entered it in the play contest instituted by the National Drama League of America at the Goodman theater in May and, against sixteen other one-acters (most of them published and well established), it won first place. This meant that it had won, for the Playshop, on the points of playwriting, production and acting, the handsome silver cup given as a prize by Mrs. Edith Rockefeller McCormick and recognition for its playwright. The Playshop sounded the trumpet. But more was to follow.

Then came Mr. Singer and offered to give the play a tryout on his leading vaudeville stage. Everyone said, "Oh, it won't go in vaudeville. It's too somber. It has no comic relief. It's too balanced. There's no star role. It isn't a bit like the things that are done in vaudeville. And then—amateur actors! Well, of course—"

However, Mr. Singer had plenty of courage. He gave it a fair position on the bill and on it went, amateur cast and all. How breathless that first playing! Acrobats, "hoofers," song and dance teams preceded it. We felt our courage ooze from our toes as we heard the applause for these frothy things. That audience, which packed the magnificent palace—what would they do to our little Playshop play?

We hadn't long to wait to find out. See! The lantern is throwing its information on the silver screen. "The Undercurrent"—by Fay Ehlert. Our memory races back to that "walking reading" in the little drawing-room at the Riley's a year ago—such a different audience!—can it make its effect here? See! There goes the name of the Playshop—and Northwestern university! Could anything seem farther from this great laughing, shouting audience? We broke into a cold sweat.

There goes the curtain! The same little, shabby set—for the milieu of the play is a tenement—janitor's room—a red-clothed dinner-table, a shabby lounge, a few chairs. Nothing gay to help the eye. Listen! Ma Fischer (Harriette Allyn) has only spoken a line or two and a hush has fallen on this great audience.

The pitiful story unfolds, simply, inevitably, true to life. We see Pa Fischer's theory of spare the rod and spoil the child working out to its logical effect in a son made almost imbecile, a daughter gone wrong, a broken-hearted wife and mother. Feel what is happening to the audience. How still they are, how tense. How they gasp when they fear Pa is about to beat the daughter, how they breath relief when she is rescued by the social worker!

Are they criticising "amateur acting"? Are they longing for "comic relief"? They are not. They are weeping real tears into their handkerchiefs. The curtain falls. A moment's pause—then a great burst of applause. Up goes the curtain. Our little Playshop cast is making its bow.

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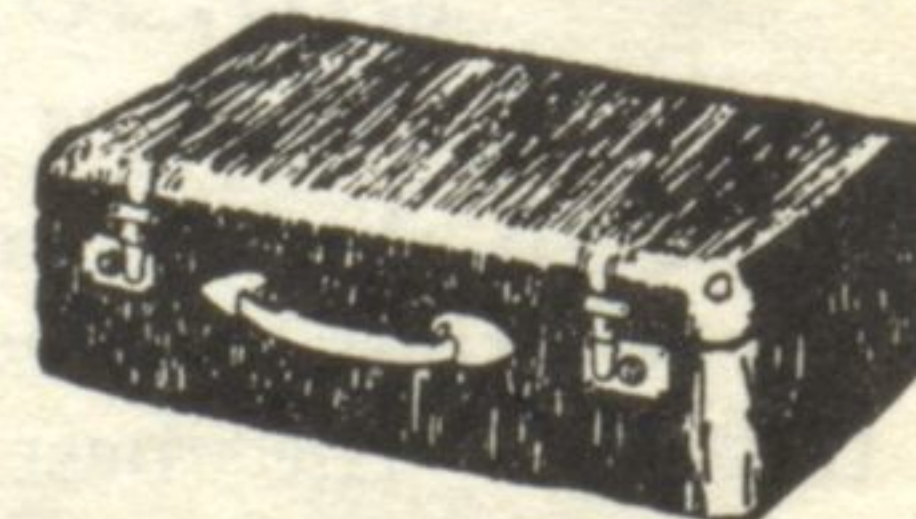
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