



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Notes and Comment

A WHILE ago, intelligence was received by the American Association of Advertising Agencies that some people in this country are not tremendously keen on advertising. The Association was much upset by the news. In the first shock of dismay, the group planned a sweeping campaign of advertising to change the public's mind about advertising. This announcement filled us with interest. We began searching the highways for new billboards, the skies for skywriting, and the magazines for colorful illustrations. We watched and waited. But now we learn, to our regret, that the campaign has been postponed. The Association, upon reflection, has decided to withhold its big guns until it has executed a "definitive depth-attitude survey," which is intended to "explore further the premise that the principal problem of advertising is not with the general public but with criticism of it that stems through thought-leader groups." We gather that the general public, in its natural state, likes advertising unreservedly, and grows restless only when thought leaders stir it up.

Well, as it happens, we had lunch last week with the Thought Leader Group for West Forty-third Street and heard another side of the story. The chairman of the Group, who wears a little red fez and is known as the Thought Leader Leader, opened the session by observing that the proposed survey attacks the very foundations of Thought Leadership. "There was a time, gentlemen, when those whom we criticized could be counted on to respond in simple ways," he said. "They might, for example, declare that the faults we mentioned had never existed, and besides, a committee had been appointed to correct them. Alternatively, they might merely urge us, with maximum publicity, to go back where we came from, Russia being most commonly mentioned as our suppositional homeland. Thought Leadership

was a lively game then, and followed elementary rules. But now the sport, I fear, has become infinitely more complex, not to say baroque."

"Right," interjected the Supreme Recorder of Snap Judgments. "Take these Madison Avenue Space Cadets. We tell them billboards make the highways ugly. 'I wonder what he means by that,' they say to one another. We tell them we have seen ads on television that would offend the sensibilities of the dimmest lout. They nudge one another and say, 'He's a subtle one, all right. The devil himself couldn't figure out what he's getting at. We must take a deep, deep, *definitive* survey of his attitudes and find out what he has against advertising.' I don't call that playing the game. Thought Leading isn't what it used to be. For two cents I'd give it up and join the Rotary."

The Corresponding Secretary in Charge of Broadening Intellectual Horizons gained the floor. He seemed disturbed. "The peril, gentlemen, is even greater than our worthy brothers perhaps have realized," he said. "I call your attention to a pair of newspaper clippings. The first is from *Variety*, and it reports that a Broadway producer named David Merrick has organized a committee of his fellow-impresarios to 'explore possible means of getting the critics to write more box-office-spurring reviews.' A box-office-spurring review, I believe, is one in which the critic employs words like 'sexsational' and phrases like 'a laff riot,' which fit neatly into advertisements and theatre marquees. Once again, you will note, Thought Leaders are being 'explored' with an eye to converting them, conceivably by violent means, from critics

into blind enthusiasts. Similar methods are advocated by the principal figure in my second clipping, which comes from the *Daily News*. He is Felix R. McKnight, the executive editor of the *Dallas Times Herald*, and he told the American Newspaper Publishers Association that the American newspaper is better than it ever was before. [Hearty laughter and much cheerful tapping of forks on glasses by the Thought Leaders, who again became solemn, however, as the Corresponding Secretary continued his speech.] Mr. McKnight challenged the assembled newspaper executives

'to get off their seats and do something about the constant carping by critics of the press.' He said, 'It will take initiative, imagination, deep perception, and just plain hard work to run these fellows back to their own fields and out of the critic business.' There was silence as the Corresponding Secretary sat down.

The chairman called for suggestions to cope with this crisis in Thought Leadership. The silence remained

unbroken. After a few moments, the Thought Leader Leader himself rustled, brightened, and brought his hand down heavily on the table. "Gentlemen!" he exclaimed. "Let us fight fire with fire. Let us announce to the world that we Thought Leaders are forming a committee to explore the feasibility of a survey that will examine possible means of persuading those whom we criticize to ponder whether faults that are evident to all the world except themselves might not be worth a brief moment of their attention."

This statesmanlike resolution of the crisis brought cheers from the assembled savants, and the redoubtable Thought





"Is everything A-O.K., sir?"

Leader Leader was lifted in triumph and carried twice around the room on the sloping shoulders of the membership.

House Painter

THE rich have their problems, but they are not insurmountable. It appears from a talk we've just had with Miss Muriel King—doubtless known to the more fashionable of our older readers as an outstanding dress designer of the thirties and forties—that people with two or more houses tend to get homesick for the abode, or abodes, they aren't in. In town, they long for a glimpse of the absent sitting room giving on the topiary garden, or for the garden itself. In the country, they seek to conjure up the library looking out on the East River. Furthermore, splinter-group rural nostalgia abounds. Beach-house householders who are equally propertied inland want to be reminded of their country seats away from the sea; ensconced therein, they pine for a souvenir of the shore. Who has sprung to the aid of these troubled folk but Miss King? To accomplish this,

she has turned into a painter. During the past three years, working on commission and, naturally, *in situ*, she has painted likenesses of many a panelled interior and landscaped exterior for such multiple-home owners as Mrs. Ward Cheney, of Locust Valley, Amagansett, and Sutton Square; Mrs. Jackson Burke, of East Seventy-seventh Street and Centre Island; Mrs. Oliver G. Jennings, of Park Avenue and Locust Valley; Mrs. Joseph A. Thomas, of Old Brookville, West Fifty-fourth Street, and Jamaica; Mr. Richard Blow, of Clinton Corners (New York), Florence (Italy), and East Sixty-sixth Street (Manhattan); and Mrs. Charles W. Engelhard, of Far Hills, Boca Grande, the Waldorf Towers, Quebec, and Johannesburg.

We went to see this kindly woman at one of her two homes, an apartment on East Eighty-seventh Street (she also has a house in Bethlehem, Connecticut), where she showed us a strikingly attractive twenty-by-fourteen-inch picture of Mrs. Cheney's urban living room. "My first commission," she said. "I've borrowed it to show people what

I can do. Mrs. Cheney is an old friend—I used to design her dresses—and several years ago, after visiting her at her Amagansett beach house, I did a picture of her bedroom there and gave it to her as a thank-you present. She just loved it. In the spring of 1958, she ordered the Sutton Square living room, and I've since done her city dining room, the big living room in Amagansett, and the dining pavilion in Locust Valley. People got to know about these by word of mouth, and other commissions started coming in. I've used a technique of India-ink wash drawings with a water-color wash on top, which I think gives the look of a print. I don't put people in my rooms, though occasionally I put in a pet dog, on request. Customers often change the arrangement of a room before I paint it; they'll hang a favorite picture, or install a favorite statue or vase where it will show up prominently. I like to make things look as though somebody had just left the room, or as though somebody was just about to come in. I've done four pictures for Mrs. Burke, and Dick Blow sent me to Italy last winter

to do two of his house in Florence. He's hanging them in Clinton Corners. I've also done several for people who have only one house, such as Mrs. Artemus Gates, of Locust Valley, and Mrs. James B. Campbell, of Tuxedo Park. I don't think anyone else has done this sort of thing since Walter Gay, who died in 1937."

We asked whether one-house householders liked to be able to admire their bedrooms while sitting in their sitting rooms, and Miss King said she thought the motivation was less self-centered. "They want their grandchildren to know what their homes looked like," she said. "They know that the houses will eventually be torn down."

We next asked Miss K. whether she had a picture of her first home. She said no, and that she had no recollection of it, having moved out at the age of two months. "It was in Bayview, a tiny village on Puget Sound, near the Canadian border of Washington," she said. "Father ran a shingle mill there. We moved to Seattle. I left the university there when I was nineteen to come to New York." Here, after draw-

THE NEW YORKER

35

ing fashions for *Women's Wear* and *Vogue*, she presently created them. "Around 1932, I had my own little shop, next to the Colony Restaurant," she said. "Then Lord & Taylor commissioned me to do a collection, and then Altman's, and in 1937 one of my customers, Mrs. Josiah Marvel, who was Gwladys Whitney then, backed me in a sizable business of my own. I had a seven-story house, with seventy-two employees, on East Fifty-first Street. We made dresses for Mrs. Cheney, Mrs. Gates, Mrs. Averell Harriman, Katharine Hepburn, Miriam Hopkins, Dorothy Schiff, Mrs. Thomas Hitchcock, Mrs. Robert A. Lovett, and so on. It was like a club." The club dissolved in 1939, and its foundress went on to a custom-designing career so varied and far-flung as to defeat description.

"I still don't know how to sew," Miss King said as we rose to leave.

"How can you make dresses if you can't sew?" we asked.

"Why, you design them on paper and criticize them in muslin," she replied. "And then you supervise the fitting."

HAND-LETTERED sign recently observed in the side window of a car parked in a no-parking zone in front of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church: "Emergency Repair for Pipe Organ."

Live Actors

AT a very early hour one morning last week, on the deserted corner of Twelfth Street and Second Avenue, we were picked up by five strangers in a green station wagon with Maryland license plates and driven swiftly over the Manhattan Bridge into the labyrinthine heart of Brooklyn. So began an exceedingly pleasant three-hour adventure. The time of day is accounted for by the fact that we were about to observe a characteristic performance of a branch of the Phoenix Theatre known as Theatre-at-the-Schools, which, at hours that would make most actors blanch (anywhere from 8:15 A.M. to 3 P.M.), puts on selections from plays in the auditoriums of public and private schools all over the metropolitan area. We were at Twelfth Street and Second Avenue because that's where the Phoenix is, and the strangers we encountered there were three actors named Olympia Dukakis, Gene Gross, and Robert Barend, who, over a period of sixty minutes, were to enact substantial samples of Shakespeare, Shaw, and Chekhov; an actor named Tom Moly-

neaux, who was serving as stage manager for the little troupe; and a Phoenix functionary named Jerome Max. As for the mystery of the Maryland license plates, we can clear that up by explaining that the station wagon belonged to T. Edward Hambleton, managing director of the Phoenix, who has a place outside Baltimore.

Our destination in Brooklyn was the Prospect Heights High School, on Classon Avenue. En route, Mr. Max and his slowly awakening band of actors gave us a quick précis of the project's history. It began last October, and a total of a hundred and thirty-four performances have been given in thirty weeks. A fee of ten dollars is charged to New York City public schools and fifty dollars to all other schools, but a

considerable deficit has been run up, which gifts from friends of the Phoenix are counted on to mitigate. Mr. Max hopes that next year Theatre-at-the-Schools will be able to give at least two hundred and fifty performances and, by raising its rate for the public schools to twenty-five dollars, will be able to afford four actors instead of three, as well as music, a bit of scenery, and perhaps even a Volkswagen bus to travel about in. This year, no scenery and very little costuming—a feathered cap, a pair of high boots, a fur coat—have been used. "Our purpose is to show young people what real theatre is like," Max said. "Eighty per cent of the children we've played to have never seen a live actor before, and the response has been terrific. Of course, the teachers are



"You castaways are all alike!"

thrilled, because a playwright acted is ten times more exciting than a playwright read. We give them parts of the opening scenes of 'The Taming of the Shrew' and 'Caesar and Cleopatra' and nearly the whole of Chekhov's one-act comedy 'The Brute.' Strong, high-spirited, knockabout things, and the children are enchanted with them."

Having arrived at the school, we all piled out of the station wagon and carried into the school auditorium a couple of broken-down suitcases full of costumes and a pair of small theatrical spotlights. An English teacher was on hand to welcome us. "This is an all-girl high school," he said. "Many of our students come from what I guess you'd have to call culturally deprived backgrounds. Only a tiny percentage of them are financially able to go on to college. They rarely get to Manhattan, and the only professional acting they've seen is in movies and on TV. We're delighted to have you here. We think you'll find us a good audience." The actors went backstage, and Mr. Molyneux arranged his lights (one on top of the school organ, the other on a table) and props, which consisted of three or four wooden classroom chairs and a second school table. We watched the children file into the auditorium—a thousand-odd girls, Oriental, Negro, Puerto Rican, white. Mr. Barend, as narrator, sketched for them the setting of "The Taming of the Shrew," and then on came Mr. Gross, as Petruchio, and Miss Dukakis, as Kate. As they fell to quarrelling and the exchange of abusive epithets grew faster and funnier, the children burst into peal after peal of laughter; when Kate took to striking Petruchio, the children's happiness was unbounded. Many of them kept hissing "Sh-h-h!" to still the too noisy laughers among them; not a word must be lost. Shakespeare, that phoenix of phoenixes, had them in the palm of his hand, and it appeared that that was where they had always wanted to be.



INCIDENTAL INTELLIGENCE (VALLEY FORGE DIVISION): The hand-painted plastic models of cadets sold at the West Point Souvenir Shop, hard by the United States Military Academy, are made in England.

Grosvenor Revisited

DR. GILBERT H. GROSVENOR, the man who transmogrified the *National Geographic Magazine* from a small technical publication into an in-

stitution, was recently the guest of honor at a special Book and Author supper given by the Cosmos Club, of Washington, which heralded the event with a card reading:

President Scherer will preside and accept on behalf of the Club a magnificently bound full set (1888-1960) of the *National Geographic Magazine* as a symbol of the life work of our honored and beloved guest. The set is the gift of the National Geographic Society, which was formed at meetings at the Cosmos Club on January 13, 20, and 27 in 1888, for the increase and diffusion of geographic knowledge.

The renowned increaser and diffuser of this knowledge, now eighty-five and—after fifty-three years of triumphant editorship, during which circulation rose from nine hundred to two million one hundred and fifty thousand—chairman of the Society's board, is an old friend of ours from wartime Washington, so we journeyed south for the occasion, and, as luck would have it, met him and his son, Dr. Melville Bell Grosvenor, the Society's present president and the editor of its magazine, in the club lobby. Both men were wearing dark-blue suits and the National Geographic tie, which has brown, green, and blue stripes. "These represent earth, sea, and sky, and express the wide range of the Society's interests," said Grosvenor *père*, who was looking chipper.

We knew he had retired as editor seven years ago, and we asked him what he was up to. "My wife and I are almost like migrating birds today," he said—a reference that reflected his controlling interest, ornithology. "We divide our time between our homes in Maryland, Florida, and Nova Scotia. Melville's doing a wonderful job of livening up the magazine. The Society gained two hundred and fifty-eight thousand new members this year. We're almost up to two million eight hundred thousand. We're within sight of three million!"

We followed this sanguine man, who looked as much like an inquisitive grasshopper as ever, to an upstairs reception room of the club, of which he is a sixty-year member and a 1922 president. There he briskly introduced us to a group that included the club's president, Paul A. Scherer; Carl Schurz Scofield, eighty-six, a retired agriculturist; Dr. Charles Greeley Abbot, eighty-nine this month, a retired astrophysicist and the fifth secretary (1928-44) of the Smithsonian Institution; Dr. Alexander Wetmore, the sixth secretary *idem* (1945-52); several senior *Geographic* editors and cartographers; Joseph P. Jones, Jr., a Grosvenor son-in-law; Cabot Coville,

a Grosvenor ex-son-in-law; and three fully grown Grosvenor grandsons—Gilbert M. Grosvenor, Gilbert Grosvenor Coville, and E. A. Grosvenor Blair. "I've seventeen grandchildren and ten greats," Gilbert H. said. "It was Abbot who started Goddard on the missiles—Professor Robert H. Goddard, of Clark University, who began to work on multiple-charge rockets forty or more years ago. Scofield used to explore Siberia for hard grains in the early nineteen-hundreds, when he was in charge of irrigation for the Department of Agriculture."

"North Africa," Mr. Scofield said as Dr. Melville Grosvenor handed us a whiskey-and-soda. "We got cereals, dates, and figs."

We besought Dr. Abbot for a word on rockets. "I'd rather sing you a song," he said, and he sang us an old English love song, off the record.

"The idea for this evening's party started three or four administrations ago," President Scherer said, alluding not to the White House but to the Cosmos, which rotates its chief executive annually. "Three or four years is but a moment in the history of the Cosmos Club."

"Here's Briggs!" the cry went up, and in came Dr. Lyman J. Briggs, eighty-seven, director emeritus of the National Bureau of Standards and a life trustee of the Society.

"Dr. Briggs soldered the atom," Dr. Grosvenor said. "When I was president of the club, he very kindly agreed to be chairman of the house committee. He was soon confronted with a serious problem. One very learned member, who lived at the club, habitually broke a house rule: he insisted on having breakfast in bed. Briggs dealt with this ably. He recommended that the offender be suspended for one day; he had to take all his things out. The violation was not repeated."

Presently, we gained the dining room, where seventy-five guests assembled and where we were seated at the dais table, between Dr. Briggs and Dr. Melville Grosvenor. "Mentally, Father's clear as a bell," the latter said. "He still gives me hell. On the other hand, when we changed our cover for the first time in forty-nine years a couple of years ago—we gave it a little identification by putting a picture and a key to the articles on it—you know what my father said? He said, 'Why didn't we think of that years ago?'"

A large man with a commanding profile and enormous mustaches approached the head table, shook the guest of honor's hand, and said, "How's the skin diver?"