


CHICAGO FOOTLIGHTS



by CLARE POWERS

The utter unpredictability of the legitimate theatre long has been its blessing and its curse, depending ordinarily upon what side of the footlights you're on. If you're a wonderfully incurable frequenter of the playhouses (a distinctly different breed from the occasional "hit-buyer") the caprice of the theatre is a provocative element easily worth the gamble of, say, three dollars and eighty cents a throw.

On the other side of the footlights, though, it's a different story, for when your livelihood—or a king-size investment—is at stake, it's something more than just disconcerting to realize there are no "sure things" in the theatre.

This being the case, it's worthy of note when a play comes along owing its very success to that element of unpredictability that is part and parcel, blessing and curse, of the theatre. Such a play is "The Member of the Wedding," Carson McCullers' study in loneliness which, but for the fact that crystal balls don't work so well in show business, might never have reached the stage at all, let alone that of the Erlanger, where it is the opening attraction in the 1951-52 Theatre Guild subscription series.

According to all the early signs and portents, Mrs. McCullers' adaptation of her 1945 novel of the same name just didn't stand a chance for Broadway success. To begin with, the young novelist, though respected in her own field for such works as "The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter" and "Reflections in a Golden Eye," was something less than an experienced playwright when she undertook the task of scripting "The Member of the Wedding." She not only had never written a play, she had not seen more than six—two Broadway productions, the rest school plays—in her entire life!

Either because of these facts or in spite of them, the play manuscript destined to spawn both the New York Drama Critics Circle and Donaldson awards languished for fully three years in producers' offices without finding a taker. (One showman, it's said, suggested the author tear it up and try something else.)

Then, the capricious ways of the theatre began to manifest themselves. A trio of producers actually was found—Messrs. Whitehead, Rau and Martineau—and "The Member of the Wedding" reached the tryout stage—in Philadelphia, to be exact. One look at it, however, was enough to cause Broadway forecasters to set their indicators for "artistic success," a term loosely translatable as "boxoffice visibility, zero."

Sure enough, when "The Member of the Wedding" opened at Manhattan's Empire Theatre Jan. 5, 1950, it received the kind of notices in keeping with this prediction. There was, however, a certain amount of exception-taking apparent, for while the critics, in the main, respected the play's theme and approved its staging and performance, there was some doubt as to the validity of its structure. Roughly, the consensus seemed to be "It's art, but is it a play?"

Inevitably, Mrs. McCullers stated her case. "The Member of the Wedding," she wrote in Theatre Arts Magazine, "is unconventional because it is not a literal kind of play. It is an inward play, and the conflicts are inward conflicts. The antagonist is not personified, but is a human condition of life: the sense of moral isolation . . ."

"The play has other abstract values; it is concerned with the weight of time, the hazard of human existence, bolts of chance. The reactions of the characters to these abstract phenomena project the movement of the play. Some observers who fail to apprehend this modus operandi felt the play to be fragmentary because they did not account for this aesthetic concept."

Apart from the "aesthetic concept," there was something else to consider. "I foresaw," wrote Mrs. McCullers, "that this play had also another problem as a lyric tragi-comedy. The funniness and the grief are often co-existent in a single line, and I did not know how an audience would respond to this." But the performance of Ethel Waters and other cast members in what the author termed their "fugue-like parts" helped turn the trick, she freely admitted.