

# FIRST NIGHT AT THE THEATRE

## Margaret Sullavan and Joseph Cotten Starred in Samuel Taylor's 'Sabrina Fair'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

"Sabrina Fair," which opened at the National last evening is a humorous, romantic comedy that is acted with style and taste, and ought to be in the neighborhood indefinitely. It is the work of Samuel Taylor, who adapted "The Happy Time" into an entertaining prank in 1950. Although Margaret Sullavan and Joseph Cotten are starred, the rest of the cast is also heavenly.

For everything has fallen gracefully into place in this beguiling comedy—the style of writing, the silken perfection of the direction, the effortless grandeur of Donald Oenslager's Long Island setting and the happy buoyancy of the acting. Like most drawing-room comedies, "Sabrina Fair" is a trifling yarn, but the characters are civilized people who talk English and the actors are literate people, too.

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You do not hear much about comedies of manners nowadays. Not many people have the patience to write them. And one theatre-goer is bound to confess that "The Happy Time" did not suggest that Mr. Taylor would ever write a subtle piece of work. For the humors of "The Happy Time" were broad and bawdy.

"Sabrina Fair" is a modern version of the Cinderella fable. Sabrina is the daughter of the family chauffeur for the Larrabees who are staggeringly rich and impeccably genteel. Fearfully brilliant and educated, she comes home from five years in Paris, where she has done a stunning job in a United States overseas branch. The problem is how to mate her with one of the Larrabees on terms that are honorable to her, her father and his devoted employers.

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Since the conclusion is foreordained to anyone who understands the principles of casting, there is no point in tracing here the vagaries of her romance. Not the plot but the style is the distinction of Mr. Taylor's comedy. Although he is not impervious to the smart crack with sophisticated repercussions, most of his humor is languid and droll. As the lady to the right remarked, it is Noel Coward with a longer sentence structure. Mr. Taylor does not insist on being devastating and spectacular. He does not pound a gag into every line.

And may a theatregoer speak a word of gratitude for characters who observe some of the basic amenities and do not insist on behaving as though they had been educated in a brothel. Here it is necessary to consider the contribu-



Joseph Cotten and Margaret Sullavan in 'Sabrina Fair'

### The Cast

SABRINA FAIR, a romantic comedy in two acts, by Samuel Taylor. Staged by H. C. Potter; setting and lighting by Donald Oenslager; costumes supervised by Bianca Stroock; produced by the Playwrights Company, At the National Theatre.

Maude Larrabee	.....	Cathleen Nesbitt
Julia Ward McKinlock	.....	Luella Gear
Linus Larrabee Jr.	.....	Joseph Cotten
Linus Larrabee	.....	John Cromwell
Margaret	.....	Katharine Raft
David Larrabee	.....	Scott McKay
Gretchen	.....	Ruth Woods
Sabrina Fairchild	.....	Margaret Sullavan
Fairchild	.....	Russell Collins
A Young Woman	.....	Harriette Selby
A Young Man	.....	Gordon Mills
Another Young Woman	.....	Lorraine Grover
Another Young Man	.....	Michael Steele
Paul D'Argenson	.....	Robert Duke

tions of the actors. Under the leisurely tempo of H. C. Potter's direction, the actors are civilized, too. They are not embarrassed by the dry insouciance of Mr. Taylor's literary style.

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Miss Sullavan's unaffected charm and candor and the suppleness of her acting style make Sabrina a modern Cinderella who does not lack personal pride. She draws the fine line between sentiment and sentimentality. And in the opposite part of the hard-headed Larrabee who is afraid of love, Mr. Cotten gives a most attractive performance. It is masculine, gravel-voiced, cynical and romantic, too.

For Mr. Cotten is not limited to one dimension.

They move in a world of their peers. Cathleen Nesbitt plays the rich mother of the Larrabee boys with a graciousness that is never formal and a humor that is kindly and urbane. John Cromwell is immensely entertaining as the Larrabee senior who upholds the old traditions without being stuffy about them.

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There has not been a comedy good enough for Luella Gear for a long time, but now she comes into her own as a professionally bitter, worldly. Russell Collins gives an excellent, fine-grained performance as the chauffeur with a Shavian philosophy about social gradations. As the more wayward of the Larrabee boys, Scott McKay has a part with some substance in it—almost a new experience for him. He plays it with an affable gentleness that is ingratiating.

If the actors are in luck, so is the audience. For "Sabrina Fair" is an unpretentious comedy with genuine quality in the writing and acting. Mr. Taylor does not try to conquer the audience. He wins it by writing with taste and good humor about agreeable people.