

by Murray G. Hall

### **La Ronde: A BIT OF HISTORY**

All in all, Kingston's Theatre 5 group presented a commendable performance of *La Ronde* by Arthur Schnitzler (1862–1931) on opening night, Thursday, July 13th, 1972. Schnitzler, born in Vienna in 1862, the son of a physician, was also a doctor by profession and a confrère of Sigmund Freud and quite familiar with the latter's writings in the first decade of the twentieth century. Schnitzler was also a leading figure of the "Jung-Wiener-Kreis", a predominantly Jewish literary circle which frequented Viennese coffee houses around the turn of the century.

The authorized English translation of Schnitzler's *Reigen*, entitled *Bands Around* (not used by Theatre 5), was printed privately in New York in 1929 for members of the Schnitzler Society in a limited printing of only 1475 numbered copies. Similarly, Schnitzler's thoughts on the marketability of *Reigen* in Vienna in 1900 led him to have a mere 200 copies of the manuscript printed at his own expense for distribution to his friends only. While writing the play during the winter of 1896–97, Schnitzler remarked that there had never been anything as impossible to put on the stage. Long before Schnitzler's series of ten dialogues was premiered in Berlin in late 1920, the play was doomed. The published manuscript hit Vienna like a bomb. Book reviewers were extremely hostile, found little artistic merit in it, called Schnitzler immoral and accused him of elevating pornography into the world of art. One review written after the printing of a public edition in 1903 sounded a different note by calling Schnitzler a Jewish exploiter and the play the most disgusting thing ever seen in a theatre. It was, the reviewer continued, the duty of the Viennese Catholics to unite in a strong protest against it.

Two weeks after the premiere in Vienna in 1921 and in the midst of an organized scandal, further performances were forbidden by police in the interest of public law and order. A similar fate was in store for the third public performance of *Reigen* in Berlin several days later. The performance was sabotaged and the presentation led to the trial of the theatre directors and the producer later in the year on the charge of inciting a public scandal. Though the accused were subsequently acquitted, Schnitzler, sceptical of his play ever receiving the artistic discretion necessary for a performance forbade any further presentations. So it has remained since 1922.

As Schnitzler had no control over film versions and no copyright on translations, two French film versions, entitled "*La Ronde*", were made. One of these was produced by Vadim based on a screen play by Jean Anouilh and the other, was made in Paris in 1950 by producer Max Ophuls.

Theatre 5 must be commended for the choice of a playwright whose work stands apart from the popular palate of Shaw and Shakespeare. Costumes and props were well done and skillfully used. The clothing in particular added needed visual effect. The only two disturbing features were the music and the rather creaky revolving stage used to create the carousel nature of the dialogues. The music chosen to create an atmosphere of Vienna in the 1890's – a number of German (Bavarian) beer-drinking songs, including "In

München steht ein Hofbräuhaus" – was unfortunate. Here a better choice would have been either Strauss waltzes or "Wiener Schrammelmusik". The between scene delays were understandable for an opening night, but somewhat disturbing was the noise backstage throughout the play.

As strongest actress in the series of dialogues, I would choose Theresa Sears in the role of the Young Wife. The Little Miss came over rather unbelievably, while the Poet and the Count tended to be overly foppish. The best played scene of the ten was the dialogue between the Young Gentleman and the Young Wife.

Following the black out-cum-sexual act of each scene, more realism in the appearance of the various characters would be in order – for example, dishevelment of hair and clothing. The Theatre 5 reading of Reigen lacked sensuality (though the actors attempted to substitute for this sexuality) and was void of the serious or tragic tone so inherent in Schnitzler's view of "la condition humaine". Numerous references to death, the shortness and emptiness of life (for example, by Whore, the Young Gentleman and the Count got lost in the humour. The interpretation left the viewer with the feeling that the play was based on a modern-day 'carpe diem' theme rather than a pronouncement on the fate individuals who are lonely, isolated by choice and despairing. Not clear from the Theatre 5 performance of La Ronde is the fact that Schnitzler has written psychological depth into his ten characters and that these scenes are representative of the entire life of the individuals. None of the actors on stage at the Grand Theatre portrayed his or her character seriously enough. The net effect of Theatre 5's La Ronde is comedy, though this is precisely what Schnitzler's play is not.

To conclude with a minor point, some of literal translations from the Viennese Schnitzler, such as 'treasure' for 'dear', 'notion' for 'idea' laboured in the English dialogue. In addition, the Count's final remark to the actress at the end of Scene Nine was also rendered incorrectly in the English version: 'Ich küsst die Hand, Fräulein' does not mean 'I kiss your hand, Miss' in Schnitzler's Viennese dialect, but on the contrary is merely an innocuous polite greeting.