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**Brock Pemberton:
Broadway Producer**

BY

CHARLES R. HILL

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FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In conducting this study, I have imposed certain limitations on the material since the primary purpose is to discuss Brock Pemberton, the producer. Therefore, I have included only those personal character traits and habits which affected his work professionally. For example, his relationships with people are reported only from the standpoint of the way they reflect his thinking and his work. Undeniably, a kind of love relationship existed between Pemberton and Antoinette Perry, his director for many years; however, the nature of this love is not germane to Pemberton's theatrical techniques and his activities in the American theatre. The major sources were personal interviews conducted with a tape recorder and letters from people who knew Pemberton at different times in his life and in various capacities. I was fortunate enough to contact his brother, Murdock, and his scene designer, press agent, stage manager, playreader, and secretary; one of his playwrights, the two daughters of Antoinette Perry, various actors and actresses who had worked with him, and many other friends and acquaintances. Unfortunately, Pemberton's widow was unavailable for interviewing because of ill health, and she died during the process of this study. Other valuable sources were scrapbooks, press books, and various memorabilia repositied in libraries in Emporia, Kansas, and New York City. Reviews of Pemberton's productions written for the New York newspapers were the major sources for commentary upon the success of his plays since these collective criticisms are most often the immediate reflection of a play's commercial worth. For background material and for understanding the problems which Pemberton faced during his career, I surveyed isolated articles from newspapers, periodicals, and books concerning the theatre and the period of time involved in this study. The reliability and validity of this study, then, is based upon the above mentioned criteria and is intended to present the facts only as objectively as this information allows.

I am deeply grateful to the following people for their help: Hamilton Brooks, Mary Coyle Chase, Margaret Perry Fanning, Paul A. Foley, Ruth Green, Thomas Kilpatrick, Calvin Lambert, Alf Landon, Esther Larkin, Fredric March, Elsie McCoy, Murdock Pemberton, Elaine Perry, Tom Rea, Cesar Romero, John and Margaret Root, Oscar Stauffer, Harold Trusler, Vivian Vance, Benay Venutta, Jesse White, W. L. White, Peggy Wood, and many others. A note of thanks goes to Paul Myers, Betty Wharton, and the rest of the staff of the Theatre Collection at

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C.R.H. May, 1975
Emporia, Kansas



Brock Pemberton: Broadway Producer

by

Charles R. Hill *

I

THE MAN AND HIS TIMES

Theatre historians tend to agree that the era between the World Wars was the period of the greatest growth in the American theatre. During this time our country attained recognition as a leading contributor to world drama by producing a larger number and finer quality of theatre artists than it had in its entire previous history. Creativity in the theatre prior to World War I was handicapped by a system wherein the sole arbiter of success was the box-office receipts. And too, the Theatre Syndicate at the turn of the century compromised both playwrights and production artists into providing mass entertainment according to a preconceived formula. Thus, playwrights had little choice if they hoped to see a professional production of their work. While the New York theatre, synonymous with the term "Broadway," was the center of American theatrical activity, touring companies produced about 75 per cent of the profits. Consequently, the kind of production that appealed to a mass audience flourished; and theatrical empires of a few entrepreneurs such as the Shuberts and the Frohmans grew powerful and wealthy. Before World War I when productions were free from labor problems because theatre artists had no unions or other organizations with any bargaining power, the manager was the omnipotent force in the theatre. The manager supervised all the details of production, and a few colorful personalities such as David Belasco created some lasting impressions with their stagecraft wizardry. Independent directors who sought to achieve a unified interpretation of a play by concentrating on an ensemble effect simply did not exist at that time. Instead, the "star" performer attracted customers to the theatre, and the individual actor's box-office appeal was the justification for many productions. The dazzling personality of George M. Cohan, otherwise known as "Mr. Broadway," whose statue resides today in Times Square in the heart of the theatrical district, epitomizes the stellar position enjoyed by many actors of this time. Morton Eustis summed up the situation in his book, *B'Way, Inc.*:

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The average manager used then to "produce" his own plays, giving the actors general instruction in their duties — not the least of which was to interfere as little as possible with the star — and supervising the whole *mise en scene*. The director, as a man who moulds the playwright's script into a playable form, who coaches the actors so that they are good singly and as a collective pattern, and who is responsible for the whole form and interpretation of a production, did not come into maturity until after the war.¹

World War I caused disillusionment with the old ways of life, and artists sought new answers and new forms of expression.

By the 1920's the movies began to take over the star system and to offer strong competition to the theatre as a form of mass entertainment. The theatre slowly felt the need of a new approach or a new artistic concept if it were to survive. Fortunately much of the needed inspiration evolved from the amateur theatre movement originating in the colleges and universities and in the small independent community and art theatres throughout the country. One of the major forces in this movement was Professor George Pierce Baker, whose classes in English 47 at Harvard spawned a whole new generation of playwrights, critics, and theatre artists. These amateurs were striving for a new freedom of expression; and new ideas from the Continent's independent theatres were encouraging America's young artists to be creative and to experiment in their own non-commercial theatres. The most outstanding of these small art theatres was the Provincetown Players, which gave opportunities to the talents of George Cram Cook, director; Eugene O'Neill, playwright; and Robert Edmond Jones, designer, to name only a few. Other amateur groups such as the Washington Square Players, which ultimately became the Theatre Guild, emerged and added immeasurably to the experimental fervor of this new movement in the American theatre. Beginning with O'Neill, new techniques and themes in playwriting shaped a new kind of American dramatic fare giving reformers the right to believe that a new American drama had at last arrived. And, as Edmond Gagey stated, "To their delight he was joined before long by Maxwell Anderson, Sidney Howard, Robert Sherwood and a dozen others."²

These new plays called for new acting styles. Star performers were no longer the keys to success, but rather ensemble acting was now desirable. Beginning in 1912, New Yorkers witnessed periodic visits by the Irish Abbey Theatre and the productions of other European troupes such as Jacques Copeau's *Vieux Colombier* in 1917. But it was not until the advent of Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre performances in America in 1924 that the techniques for ensemble acting were adopted by some Americans. Whereas experience itself had been the

¹ Morton Eustis, *B'Way, Inc.: The Theatre as a Business*, p. 29.

² Edmond M. Gagey, *Revolution in American Drama*, p. 38.

teacher of the older stars, who had few schools for training, the new movement brought a major change to the profession by emphasizing ensemble acting. Actors were now being cast because of their abilities to create roles, rather than because they were stars. Consequently, the guarantee of a box-office success regardless of the quality of the script, scenery, or other elements of the production was no longer placed solely on the star.

The arts of directing and producing plays, too, matured in the period following World War I through innumerable contributions of new directors and producers. Resolving the problems of script selection, casting, directing, providing resources, staging, and promoting the productions were tasks which demanded the utmost dedication, skill, and talent if the producer were to survive. Bernard Sobel remarked on the significant role the producer/director has played in the American theatre:

Yet the stage has been influenced importantly through personal activities of men and women who have taken on those double responsibilities of acting and managing or managing and directing Similarly interesting would be a volume on prominent play producing directors of the past and present: David Belasco, Brock Pemberton, Arthur Hopkins, Guthrie McClintoc [*sic*], Jed Harris, George M. Cohan, and George S. Kaufman.³

Although theatre management did not become a highly complicated art until the latter part of the 1920's, the theatre artists and craftsmen began early to organize themselves into groups for their own individual protection against the mercenary producers and empire builders of the past. Thus, the Authors' League was formed in 1911, although it did not have a great deal of power until the 1920's when it became the Dramatists' Guild; and Actors' Equity was formed in May, 1913. Eustis pointed out that "this new society was destined to become a milestone in the economic history of the American theatre, marking the beginning of the organization of the theatre into the intricate pattern of the present day."⁴ From 1920 on, then, the American theatre as an art was controlled more and more by organized labor, and, as a consequence, play production became an expensive and complicated business. Even the producers were finally forced to organize into the League of New York Theatres during the Thirties in order to defend themselves against the many threats to the success of their profession. Managers began to find, as a result of organized labor, that costs rose and only plays which were "big hits" made money professionally. The day of the "long-run" became important for backers to recoup their initial investments and to receive any financial gains. Abe Laufe's research determines that five hundred

³ Bernard Sobel, "Double Role of Director Advantageous," p. 57.

⁴ Eustis, *B'Way, Inc.*, p. 10.

performances of a play were necessary for it to be considered a "smash hit" in the Broadway vernacular. Further, ninety-nine shows met these qualifications between 1900 and 1966, but only eight of them were performed before 1920. And, he finds that the majority of these successes came between 1920 and 1950 when fifty-eight plays reached this particular distinction.⁵

Thus, as the dramatists and the theatre artists sought to find a new voice, the critics followed giving suggestions and commenting upon the worth and the success of their efforts. Walter Meserve summarizes the situation: "As the American theatre became a more creative and imaginative institution and American drama became intellectually and emotionally challenging as well as enjoyable, the status of the drama critic improved and his number increased."⁶

By 1920 the art and amateur theatre movements shifted uptown to Times Square and Broadway. Many of the new artists realized their need for the professional theatre's resources, facilities, and image. The Washington Square Players reorganized into the Theatre Guild and accepted jobs on Broadway where they at times became indistinguishable from their rival producers. Managers welcomed the new talents because they were good for business enterprise. Gagey described the situation succinctly: "The art theatre that had conquered Broadway was thus itself swallowed by the victim."⁷ Now the American theatre was a fusion of the efforts of both the amateurs and the professionals from which both were to profit.

Obviously, the American theatre was changing rapidly, and it needed new talents and fresh ideas to sustain its new-found vitality. Into this milieu came many new artists; and one, a young man from Emporia, Kansas, became one of the theatre's major producers for a period of thirty years.

Brock Pemberton followed a simple route in becoming a producer in the American commercial theatre. He was born in the Midwest, graduated from college, worked as a newspaperman, wrote dramatic criticisms, and finally became an associate producer in New York. Pemberton's career as a successful, independent New York producer spanned the years from 1920 to 1950 during which time the American theatre attained recognition as a leading contributor to world drama. Although Pemberton once remarked that he had no particular idea of leaving "his footprints on the sands of theatrical history," his very involvement and eminence in the theatrical profession mark him as a representative of his particular art during his time.⁸ Whereas he was a more conservative and less venturesome producer than many of his

⁵ Abe Laufe, *Anatomy of a Hit: Long-Run Plays on Broadway from 1900 to the Present Day*, pp. 333-337.

⁶ Walter Meserve, *An Outline History of American Drama*, p. 315.

⁷ Gagey, *Revolution in American Drama*, p. 38.

⁸ John R. Franchey, "Picture of a Producer: Brock Pemberton," *Town and Country*, p. 36.

colleagues such as Arthur Hopkins, Winthrop Ames, and other popular New York producers, Pemberton was dedicated to his profession; and his lifetime commitment to the theatre signifies him as an important contributor to American theatrical growth. His professional accomplishments included producing several financially successful and critically popular plays, introducing numerous new playwrights and actors to American audiences, revising or "doctoring" scripts as a silent collaborator on several well-known plays, creating the popular "Tony" awards for Broadway performers, and serving as a spokesman for various reforms in the increasingly complex structure of play producing. Also Pemberton was a member of the board of directors of the American Theatre Wing War Service, an organizer of USO camp shows, and an originator of the popular Stage Door Canteens during World War II. He held executive posts in the New York League of Theatres, the Stage Relief Fund, and the American Theatre Council. In 1930 Pemberton's image as a force in the theatre inspired columnist O. O. McIntyre to title Pemberton, "Public Producer No. 1," paraphrasing a current saying: "Public Enemy No. 1."⁹ Pemberton was a popular master of ceremonies at theatrical events and a frequent guest contributor to the various news media concerning the state of the American commercial theatre. And final evidence of his prominence in the theatre is his funeral service on March 14, 1950, at Christ's Methodist Church in New York City. This occasion resembled a pageant in the theatre itself when the famous and near-famous gathered to pay tribute to their colleague. Approximately fifty celebrities in the theatrical world were honorary pallbearers, Lawrence Tibbett of the Metropolitan Opera Company sang, actor Bert Lytell delivered a memorial address, and tributes came from all over the world.¹⁰

Certainly Pemberton's funeral did not attract so much attention because of the glamour of the man being eulogized, since neither Pemberton's looks nor his personality were of the calibre the public associated with the world of "show business" in 1950. People who remember Pemberton are quick to establish that he was, first of all, a gentleman in every sense of the word, rather than a flamboyant personality. Actress Margaret Mullen Root, a long time friend of Pemberton's, recalled the way theatre people characterized his face as looking like that of a new baby, "all bald and screwed-up into a frown."¹¹ However, Pemberton was courteous and kind in his relationships with people although his countenance often created the impression he was frowning. Columnist John Anderson once remarked that Pemberton's many acts of kindness to newcomers in the theatre reveal his "grouch is only skin deep."¹² And, actress Benay Venuta aptly described Pem-

⁹ O. O. McIntyre, "Day by Day," *New York American*, p. 24.

¹⁰ W. L. White, "Brock Pemberton Dead," p. 1.

¹¹ Interview with Margaret Mullen Root, Solesbury, Pennsylvania, March 27, 1969.

¹² John Anderson, "First Nights Plunge Pemberton into Gloom," *New York American*, p. 119.

berton's personality as being "sweet-sour."¹³ Writer Constance O'Hara observes that Pemberton's facial features were undistinguished except for a rather long nose, a bald head, and "a pair of amazing blue eyes."¹⁴ He was about six feet tall, had square shoulders, and moved with catlike grace. Miss O'Hara describes his disturbing way of looking at women as "intensely male."¹⁵ Although he was not a handsome man, Pemberton was noted for his good taste in dress, habits, manners, and daily living. He was always immaculately groomed in carefully matched color schemes, preferably maroons and browns; and his offices were neat and coordinated in their decor. The Pemberton apartment on East 67th Street was a showplace of fashionable appointments, and an invitation to call was the equivalent of a command in the theatrical world. The Pembertons were gracious hosts; and although they were prominent members of New York society, Pemberton himself was not a "social lion" or party-goer in the extreme sense, but rather a cultured gentleman whom W. L. White characterized as a "one martini man."¹⁶ Pemberton's daily habits were simple: he rose about 7:30 each morning, read the papers, and oftentimes walked to work arriving at his office about 11:00 A.M. for a day of reading scripts, interviewing people, writing, or attending rehearsals. Luncheon at Sardi's restaurant or at the Algonquin Hotel with his professional colleagues, mostly other producers and writers, was a regular habit. Among his few close friends were producer John Golden, writer Sam Zolotov of the *New York Times*, and restaurateur Vincent Sardi. He had very few interests outside the theatre except for occasionally attending a football game. An educated and intelligent man, Pemberton was bored only by boring people. He possessed a good sense of humor, a trait which he sought in others. His daily conversations with people were limited and terse because he was a man of few words, and Miss O'Hara notes that he mumbled his dialogue in a soft voice with a drawl as "flat as the Kansas prairies."¹⁷ On the other hand, he was articulate and outspoken whenever he was called upon to perform or to present his ideas on the theatrical profession. As a public speaker, Pemberton made remarks that were "sparse but witty," according to one news reporter.¹⁸

At first glance, Pemberton's life, his looks, and his habits appear to be rather routine. But, a closer look at his accomplishments reveals his undeniable contribution to the growth of the American theatre through his employment of various techniques. A study of Brook Pemberton, which shows who he was, what he did, and why he was successful adds to the existing chronicles of the American theatre.

¹³ Interview with Benay Venuta, Springfield, Missouri, February 13, 1969.

¹⁴ Constance O'Hara, *Heaven Was not Enough*, p. 232.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Interview with W. L. White, Emporia, Kansas, November 14, 1968.

¹⁷ O'Hara, *Heaven Was not Enough*, p. 232.

¹⁸ "Pemberton's Speeches Are Sparse but Witty," *St. Paul Dispatch*, p. 76.

II

BROCK PEMBERTON'S EARLY YEARS

The family joke was that "Puss" Pemberton named her first son after Dr. Brock, who attended the birth, in order to avoid paying him the usual \$5.00 fee. The truth of the matter is unimportant, but the story illustrates two of the strong Pemberton family traits: wit and thriftiness.

Regardless of how he arrived, Ralph Brock Pemberton was born in Leavenworth, Kansas, on December 14, 1885, to Albert and Ella Murdock Pemberton. The stock was sturdy. The Murdocks were pioneers who traveled from Morgantown, West Virginia, by boat down the Ohio River, and then by covered wagon finishing their journey in Kansas in 1857. Grandfather Thomas Murdock and his wife, the former Catherine Pierpont, a cousin of the first governor of West Virginia, and two daughters, Ella and Levera, arrived in Kansas with a few household goods and some rose bushes. After their four sons, Benton, Marcellus, Marshall, and Roland, joined them in 1859, the Murdocks moved from an area near Topeka to their new homesite in Emporia. They built their home with bricks made of clay, which was taken from the banks of the Cottonwood River and dried in the hot Kansas sun, and of hand-hewed black walnut. This pioneer home later became the childhood home of Albert and Ella Pemberton's four children, and it was kept in the family until 1925.

Brock Pemberton might well have inherited a flair for the dramatic and a streak of generosity from his grandfather, the Reverend Thomas Murdock. Grandfather Murdock was a colorful circuit rider for the Methodist church, who had once tried to join forces with John Brown because he believed so deeply in Brown's crusade for freedom. But, being unable to affiliate with Brown and being fifty-seven years of age, Reverend Murdock enlisted in the army as a chaplain. Then after four years, he retired from the service as a full sergeant receiving a small pension of \$12.00 a month. Each month he met the postman before anyone else, and he bought groceries with his pension money taking the food to Stringtown where poor blacks lived. "He did not feel that the colored race received a square deal from the great conflict," Murdock Pemberton recalled.¹⁹

Albert Pemberton and Ella Murdock were married in Emporia, Kansas, in the home of her brother and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Murdock. Four children were born of this union: Ruth in 1883, Brock in 1885, Murdock in 1888, and Irene in 1890. Albert Pemberton was a Kentuckian who came to Kansas to establish a mercantile shoe busi-

¹⁹ Letter from Murdock Pemberton to Charles Hill, January 26, 1969.

ness — a trade he followed throughout his lifetime. Albert had learned the shoe business from a Cincinnati bootmaker; and after a brief period of time in Leavenworth, Kansas, where Brock was born, the family returned to settle permanently in Emporia. He was able to provide a simple, yet adequate living for his family. And, according to W. L. White, "Uncle Albert" was a handsome man, who just happened to be one of the few Democrats in all Lyon County.²⁰ Albert Pemberton died in 1924, and Ella and her daughter, Ruth, moved to a home at 1403 Neosho Street in the spring of 1925.

Ella Pemberton, better known as "Puss," was the strong influence in building the characters and forming the ideas of her four children. Her personality was so vital and her religious and moral convictions so deep that her children carried these principles into their adult lives and their business dealings. She had a "keen appreciation of literature and art," and "no one in her time bestowed a closer attention on current events."²¹ Also, the four Pemberton children inherited from their mother a love for beauty and an awareness of the world in which they lived. Ruth became an interior decorator, Murdock a writer and art critic, Irene a language and literature teacher, and Brock a professional play producer.

Education was a "must" in the Pemberton family. Ella Murdock was one of the first women in Kansas to earn a college degree, and she saw to it that her children received equal opportunities. "We were scooted to Union Elementary School, sometimes with a broom at our backs," Murdock Pemberton recalled.²² Ruth was unable to attend public school because she suffered from curvature of the spine, and the unthinking cruelty of other children made school attendance impossible for her. Nevertheless, Ruth later attended Parsons School of Design in New York for four years, and then returned to Emporia to set up her interior decorating business in the home on Neosho Street. She stayed with her mother until Mrs. Pemberton's death in 1937. Ruth died in 1948.

Irene finished high school and graduated from the College of Emporia, a small Presbyterian school. She taught in Salina, Kansas, until she was dismissed for playing cards on Sunday; and then she accepted a job in Washington, D. C., procured for her by Senator Victor Murdock, a cousin. But, upon returning home from a trip to Europe in 1929, Irene became ill and died of cancer on November 2. The loyalty and love that each Pemberton offspring felt for the others was firmly rooted within Brock by Ella Pemberton. This devotion is reflected in Margaret Perry Fanning's remembrance of Brock's grief at the time of Irene's death: "It was the only time I ever saw Uncle Brock cry; I mean, scream-cry."²³

²³ Interview with Margaret Perry Fanning, Pueblo, Colorado, March 14, 1969.

²⁰ Interview with W. L. White, Emporia, Kansas, November 14, 1968.

²¹ W. L. White, "Brock Pemberton Dead," p. 2.

²² Letter from Murdock Pemberton to Charles Hill, January 26, 1969.

Loyalty was a character trait of the Pembertons discernible in their love for their home state of Kansas. Although Brock, Murdock, and Irene eventually left Emporia, each remained a champion of his grass roots heritage. Brock Pemberton brought his successful plays to Emporia, organized a group of displaced Kansans in New York, supported the Kansas Presidential candidate in 1936, and was generally known among his colleagues as a "Kansan on Broadway." He apparently never lost his Kansas drawl or even tried to; and W. L. White, editor of the *Emporia Gazette* and a family friend, wrote: "In all of the almost 40 years he has spent on Broadway he remained unshakably a Kansan and an Emporian."²⁴

Both Pemberton brothers, Brock and Murdock, attended the College of Emporia. Brock, who was given to pranks and practical jokes, was dismissed several times and finally was expelled for setting off alarm clocks in Latin class. He then journeyed to Philadelphia to enroll in the University of Pennsylvania, only to be dismissed one week later when the deans discovered he had been expelled from the Emporia school. He enjoyed reminding Philadelphians in later years that he had attended their university, oftentimes saying, "That reminds me of my old college days at the University of Pennsylvania . . . all seven of them."²⁵ Brock Pemberton returned to Kansas and successfully enrolled at the University of Kansas, where he finally managed to distinguish himself with passing grades, writing articles for the school paper, and even singing in a fair tenor voice in a production of *The Girl with Green Eyes*. As a member of Phi Delta Theta fraternity, he met several friends who later became distinguished gentlemen. Among them were Alf Landon, 1936 Presidential candidate; Oscar Stauffer, president of Stauffer publications in Topeka; and Roy Roberts, editor of the *Kansas City Star* and *Times*. Brock Pemberton's education and friends served him well. As a Broadway producer during the 1920's and 1930's, he was one of the few men performing in this capacity who had earned a college degree.²⁶

Ella Pemberton also instilled several other character traits in her children. Since she was a devout member of the Methodist church, honesty, kindness, charity, and Christian love, plus a strong backbone were virtues she ascribed to. The Pembertons were unflinchingly honest throughout their lives. Interviews with Brock Pemberton's friends, acquaintances, and business associates indicated that his most outstanding character trait was honesty. "He was one of the few remaining producers at the end of his life who didn't have to be bonded," stated Elaine Perry.²⁷ And, Mary Chase, the author of *Harvey*, wrote that "his word, as actors will tell you, was as good as gold. They didn't

²⁴ White, "Brock Pemberton Dead," p. 1.

²⁵ "Pemberton's Speeches Are Sparse but Witty," p. 76.

²⁶ O. O. McIntyre, "Day by Day," p. 24.

²⁷ Interview with Elaine Perry, Hartsell, Colorado, March 16, 1969.

have to see the contract. He was hated and feared by some, adored by others — respected by all.”²⁸

Pemberton's extreme sense of honesty was not always endearing; at times it must have seemed tactless and blunt. This quality earned him another adjective frequently used by people to describe him — sardonic. This characteristic coupled with a stinging wit became a devastating weapon to use throughout a lifetime. Calvin Lambert recalled the way Pemberton's columns in the *Gazette* between 1908 and 1910 always stirred up controversy on the street. They were brilliantly written and very provocative, but some people took his wit too seriously, particularly in his reviews of theatrical and musical productions. Lambert remembered an incident at the Mit-Way Hotel in which one fellow punched Pemberton in the nose because of one of his “sardonic” remarks.²⁹

If there were a sardonic exterior, it served only to mask an interior of charity and generosity. Ella Pemberton did her best to help all of those who came to her in need. According to Murdock Pemberton, “Tramps had marked X X X on the fence which meant free food, no work, no dog.”³⁰ Brock Pemberton apparently learned the lesson well, and he was known for his many acts of kindness to those in need during his years in the theatre. Jesse White, one of the actors in Pemberton's production of *Harvey*, recalled being ill for several days; and yet, Pemberton sent the stage manager to him with his full salary, which was not the usual practice in those days.³¹ Mary Chase reflected that “he shared what he had learned with you — generously and bravely.”³² His acts of charity and his helping hand to many newcomers in the theatre were legion and are often remembered by his many friends.

Pemberton's love of beautiful things carried over into his habits of dress. “He once wore a pink shirt to the *Gazette* office, which was unheard of at the time,” Lambert laughed as he remembered the incident and the way everyone thought of Pemberton as a “dandy.”³³ And, he developed quite an eye for the pretty young girls around town. “He was a dude and quite a ladies' man,” said Esther Larkin, a friend of Pemberton's during his early years in Emporia.³⁴ W. L. White wrote that Pemberton was

. . . the best-dressed man that either Emporia or New York has since produced, with a pleasantly sardonic sense of humor, and so alarmingly good looking (this he got from Uncle Albert) that no prudent Fourth Ward mother would allow her daughter out with him unchaperoned. A deal was consequently worked out between

²⁸ Letter from Mary Chase to Charles Hill, February 28, 1969.

²⁹ Interview with Calvin Lambert, Emporia, Kansas, November 29, 1968.

³⁰ Letter from Murdock Pemberton to Charles Hill, February 6, 1969.

³¹ Interview with Jesse White, New York City, May 31, 1969.

³² Letter from Mary Chase to Charles Hill, February 28, 1969.

³³ Interview with Calvin Lambert, Emporia, Kansas, November 29, 1968.

³⁴ Interview with Esther Larkin, Emporia, Kansas, November 15, 1968.

the White and Pemberton families whereby I would be sent along as moral ballast.³⁵

Even the World War I uniform that Pemberton proudly wore was custom tailored for a perfect fit. Although he was not eligible to serve in the war, Pemberton spent time as a volunteer apprentice in the Military Intelligence Bureau of the Army.

Because Albert Pemberton's trade of shoemaking was not a particularly lucrative one, the family was aware of thrift. There was always enough of everything, but every penny was accounted for. This duality of thriftiness and generosity had a seemingly paradoxical effect upon Pemberton's life and career: generosity was germane to his character, but so was thriftiness. This trait was valuable to him as a producer in developing a strong business sense necessary for his survival in the commercial theatre. He knew the value of a dollar, and he knew the way to spend it wisely for his productions. His thriftiness and his wit are epitomized in an incident related by Margaret Perry Fanning which occurred during the rehearsals for *Love Me Long*, one of Pemberton's last productions. The stage manager, who had been cast in the small role to save money, was to appear in a clerical collar. After failing to achieve the desired effect for him by reversing regular shirt collars, stuffing tissue paper around his neck and various other devices, Pemberton begrudgingly sent a man to rent a real clerical collar for a nominal fee. As the man reached the door of the theatre on his way out, however, Pemberton shouted, "Hey wait! Does anybody know where Belasco is buried?"³⁶

The theatre was not looked upon with favor in the Pemberton household when Brock was a child; rather, it was rated along with card playing and dancing, according to the religious conventions of the time. In later years, Pemberton reminisced, "I was always crazy about the circus and the theatre. . . but my family were strict Methodists. As a child I couldn't even go to the theatre. Later they outgrew this."³⁷ The circus, however, was the major form of entertainment for the young Pembertons. Murdock Pemberton recalled the way the boys rose at 4:00 a.m., slid down the oak tree outside the bedroom window, and met the circus train at the junction just outside of town. Then, by helping set up the circus, the boys would have free passes.³⁸

Although the theatre was not on the Pemberton's approved list of activities, this fact did not deter the children from satisfying their natural theatrical bents. According to Margaret Perry Fanning, a favorite story Pemberton used to tell about himself concerned the statue game the children played in the back yard. This story serves to illustrate

³⁵ White, "Brock Pemberton Dead," p. 2.

³⁶ Interview with Margaret Perry Fanning, Pueblo, Colorado, March 14, 1969. David Belasco, noted producer, always wore a clerical collar and frock coat.

³⁷ White, "Brock Pemberton Dead," p. 2.

³⁸ Letter from Murdock Pemberton to Charles Hill, January 26, 1969.

the early wit, flair, and theatrical style of the young boy. The children held hands, swung each other around, let go, and froze into the positions in which they landed. Then, they guessed what each one represented. On one occasion, Brock Pemberton, who had a toothpick in his mouth, was unceremoniously hurled upon the nearby manure pile. He refused to let this disturb him, however, and he struck a pose in the manner of a dressmaker's mannequin, toothpick and all. When the others asked what he was posing as, he replied, "A stylish lady on a mountain."³⁹

Minstrel shows in the barn were another part of the Pemberton childhood theatricals. A starch company printed jokes on its packages which the Pemberton brothers carefully saved, and they wrote to the company in Kansas City asking for supplements to their collection. Murdock Pemberton recreated one of these minstrel show performances in a letter:

Then there were the minstrels, in the days before it was not racism to imitate the colored folk. We wrote to Kansas City to people who made Faultless starch and put a coupon in their package and were sent a book of jokes. Burnt cork we could supply ourselves. We learned the jokes, charged ten pins, the going admission price in those days, and gave the show in the hayloft of the old barn. Once, I recall, copying a stunt we had seen, I came sliding down to the stage on a wire riding on a pulley. Not only had I blackened my face and hands but wore the conventional long black stockings of the day. But I had snagged a hole in my descent. Brock spotted the hole, halted the performance until I could scrape some of the burnt cork from my face and remedy the terrible breach of dramatic integrity.⁴⁰

Because the Murdocks were successful publishers, controlling five different Kansas newspapers at one time, the Pembertons were naturally drawn to this type of work. Brock Pemberton worked part-time during his high school days on the *Emporia Gazette* for William Allen White, who once had worked for a Murdock newspaper, the *El Dorado Republican*. At eighteen years of age, Pemberton became editor, for a short time, of the *Coffeyville Record*, another Murdock paper. Then, he returned home to attend college. In 1903 one of his feature stories in the *Gazette*, "The Floods of the Neosho Valley," won him the offer of a reporter's job on the *Philadelphia Bulletin*. Since he had been dismissed from the College of Emporia, Pemberton went to Philadelphia remaining in that city for ten months and working as a police reporter for the *Bulletin*. Then he returned home and enrolled at the University of Kansas. After his graduation from the University of Kansas in 1908, Pemberton spent the next two years working full-time at the *Gazette*.

³⁹ Interview with Margaret Perry Fanning, Pueblo, Colorado, March 14, 1969.

⁴⁰ Letter from Murdock Pemberton to Charles Hill, January 26, 1969.

His natural curiosity and "nose for news," which he inherited from his mother, coupled with his wit and creative style of writing, made him an excellent reporter. White noted that his columns "still are remembered as some of the brightest writing Emporia has seen."⁴¹ His remarks were inclined to be "sharp" and frequently sarcastic, but no Emporia subscriber failed to read Pemberton's third page paragraphs — the localettes of their day — if he wanted to keep up on Emporia's activities.⁴² His stories were edited by Miss Laura French, a tough taskmaster who literally "hacked the copy to chunks" in order to teach the cub reporters some style and discipline in their writing, according to Lambert.⁴³ On the other hand, White encouraged creativity in writing, and he recognized the streak of originality and the flair for the dramatic in using Pemberton's writing. Oscar Stauffer, another cub reporter on the *Gazette*, always felt that Pemberton was quite theatrical in his style of writing and in his deportment around the office and around town.⁴⁴ Apparently, the Pemberton wit and sense of humor never failed to provide some lively moments for members of the *Gazette* staff. Lambert remembered his own cub reporter days when White gave him an old double deck Smith typewriter for his use at the *Gazette*. In all seriousness Pemberton told Lambert that it was a fine machine and that he should take special care of it by chaining and padlocking it to the desk each day. Wanting to do the right thing to please White, Lambert took the older reporter's advice while the office staff secretly laughed for months until he finally caught on that he was the victim of a Pemberton practical joke.⁴⁵

Naturally Pemberton's assignment on the *Gazette* included reviewing all of the performances at the Whitley Opera House between 1908 and 1910. Fred Corbett, the manager of the theatre, was usually angry with the reporter because many of his reviews were unfavorable criticisms. The Pemberton standards for quality theatrical productions had been growing since he was a child lingering at the Whitley's stage door, where he became hopelessly and forever stage-struck. Once, as a lad of six years, he had been promised a free pass to the Whitley's production of *The Great Train Robbery* for carrying in coal. But later, when he returned all cleaned up, the touring manager tore up the pass saying he could not possibly be the same little boy.⁴⁶

In 1913 when the Whitley Opera House burned to the ground, White saw Pemberton, just home from New York for a visit, standing in the crowd watching the fire. White asked his former reporter if he would like to write the news story of the fire, and, of course, Pemberton accepted. Naturally the report was written with a dramatic and imag-

⁴¹ White, "Brock Pemberton Dead," p. 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Interview with Calvin Lambert, Emporia, Kansas, November 29, 1968.

⁴⁴ Interview with Oscar Stauffer, Topeka, Kansas, June 15, 1969.

⁴⁵ Interview with Calvin Lambert, Emporia, Kansas, November 29, 1968.

⁴⁶ *Detroit News*, p. 47.

inative style appropriate to both the nature of the building and the man who was writing the story. Parts of that account read:

He whose aesthetic eye was not satisfied with the pyrotechnics of the volcanic opera house, in the reflected glare of the flames could contemplate wonders as fearful For the fire, bursting into fullest radiance at the time when Emporia was taking down its back hair and locking screen doors, laid bare the secret construction of the townsfolk even as the flames disclosed the inner processes of the Opera House. In the bright light of the burning building Emporia stood forth unadorned and unashamed And so they gathered sans coats, sans vests, sans switches, sans conformers, sans almost everything. Never has Emporia exposed so carelessly the secrets of her boudoir, never has the human form divine received such a wallop. Up and down Merchant Street and across Sixth Avenue stood a corsetless, suspended human letter T. Feminine faces shone beneath layers of cold cream and freckle eradicator; masculine ones bristled with luxuriant beards nurtured by the mid-summer's heat. Flowered kimonos, slimpsy dressing gowns, yea, even bath robes dotted the thoroughfares accustomed only to the daylight habiliments of the flower of the town's manhood and womanhood. Heads usually crowned with waved coiffures displayed skimpy strands of hair plastered back or in unattractive disarray. . . . The \$40,000 loss is a regrettable thing, but it is to be doubted whether this mere monetary feature was the fire's most tragic aftermath. Who can say in that nocturnal phantasmagoria what dreams were shattered, what souls torn apart?⁴⁷

The article shows the influence of White's approach to writing about the people in a small town coupled with Pemberton's sense of the dramatic as he witnessed the fire in terms of a theatrical spectacle. By this time he was deeply involved in New York's newspaper and theatrical worlds and was writing dramatic critiques of Broadway productions. His daily associations were with people from both worlds, and the little boy from Emporia, Kansas, had a free press pass to all the plays in town.

Armed with letters of introduction from William Allen White, Pemberton descended on the city of New York to gain writing experience on the "dailies." His most prized letter was addressed to Chester Lord, then managing editor of the *New York Sun*, the newspaperman's "dream journal." Pemberton stated, "I went East expecting to hang up my hat and go to work, but apparently Mr. Lord wasn't in on my plans. He was courteous — also very cool."⁴⁸ None of the doors opened very easily, and Pemberton was down to his last letter which was addressed

⁴⁷ *Emporia Gazette*, June 19, 1913, p. 3; p. 6.

⁴⁸ John R. Franchey, "Picture of a Producer: Brock Pemberton," *Town and Country*, p. 36.

to Franklin P. Adams of the *Evening Mail*. Adams was wearing a gigantic cowboy hat, and he looked at the letter, disappeared, and returned with the managing editor, who hired Pemberton at \$25.00 a week. His first job was to report shipping news, but a short time later the job of drama editor became vacant, and Pemberton happily took that position. The job as drama critic meant so little at the time, however, that he was asked to help at the copy desk in the mornings. Three of his colleagues on the *Evening Mail* were each to achieve an amount of attention in their own fields: Grantland Rice, the sports writer; Rube Goldberg, the cartoonist; and O. O. McIntyre, the columnist, who always remained a staunch supporter of Pemberton's work on Broadway. One of Pemberton's first jobs as drama critic was to review a production of the morality play, *Every Woman*. He reviewed this play using the approach and criteria he had developed in analyzing the productions at the old Opera House in Emporia, Kansas. This review brought loud guffaws from his colleagues because of its naïveté, and it became somewhat of a collector's item later among critics. Pemberton was able to outlive his *faux pas*, and he learned his trade rapidly and well. During this time his theatrical career really began to take root. "In just a little while," he said, "I found myself becoming completely engrossed in my work. I began to get an insight into the theatre and to learn why some good plays are failures, and why some bad plays are successes."⁴⁹

Pemberton's forceful and vivid style of writing was soon recognized about town, and by 1914 he had attracted the attention of the *Times* critic, Alexander Woollcott. Woollcott took Pemberton under his aegis as an assistant critic on the *Times*. Since at this time openings of new plays were scheduled at random and oftentimes fell on the same days, a second critic was needed to cover all the new plays. Pemberton became Woollcott's roommate and his friend. Their mutual love for the theatre, their newspaper work, and their sharp wits made them perfect sparring partners able to cope with any producers or stars who might be outraged at their reviews. Rennold Wolf said, "They blew through Broadway like a fresh wind, and you can take that 'fresh' whichever way you like."⁵⁰ The theatre was maturing, and so were its critics. Undoubtedly, both Pemberton and Woollcott were learning and growing along with the new theatrical concepts being presented at the time. Although their friendship unhappily dissolved in later years, these times together must have been profitable for both. They toured Europe in 1914, which was the first trip abroad for Pemberton. The European theatre and the work of the independent theatres were revelations for Pemberton, whose ideas about the theatre had enlarged from the early days in Emporia, Kansas.

As a critic for the *Times*, Pemberton wrote a review about the Washington Square Players and the good work they were doing, there-

⁴⁹ Elita Wilson, "Brock Pemberton, Critic Turned Producer," *Cue*, p. 8.

⁵⁰ Samuel Hopkins Adams, *A. Woollcott: His Life and His World*, p. 70.

by helping this struggling amateur group to gain some attention in the city. His brother Murdock wrote a one-act play by the title of *My Lady's Honor*, which the group produced on their second bill in 1916.⁵¹ These players were dedicated to giving new dramatists a hearing; and in 1919, they became the Theatre Guild, an organization which Pemberton admired in its early days.

Murdock Pemberton followed his brother to New York about a year later to do newspaper work, also. He was hired by the *Globe* at \$15.00 a week. Murdock wrote about their early days in New York:

So Brock and I did a "Box and Cox." About the time he got home from reviewing a play he'd yank me out of bed and I'd go down to an old office, over a barn where they kept horses for the garbage trucks, and sit out the police shift. One week in town and sent out at 2 a.m. to strange streets to report a murder or suicide. At the frat one day a brother said to me: "Ned just pulled a funny one -- he said that he couldn't make that Pemberton guy out, one time he seemed so sarcastic and hard and next time, a gentle scared rabbit." Ned had been on summer vacation and had not known of my intrusion: he thought there was only one of us.⁵²

Always having had an eye for the ladies, Brock Pemberton soon fell in love with a girl in the city. He was twenty-five years of age, and this romance was a serious one for him. He always remembered this affair with a touch of sadness, in moments when he chose to tell the story to someone. When he first came to town, Pemberton met a wealthy family by the name of Hutton who belonged to the New York social register. He fell in love with Katherine Hutton, the daughter, much to her grandmother's chagrin. According to Murdock Pemberton, "Brock had come to tea wearing a blue serge suit and yellow shoes, but love got over that and they were to be married."⁵³ Then, Katherine went to the hospital to have her appendix removed. Afterwards, she broke their engagement. "Later Brock told me mournfully that the doctors not only took out her appendix, but her love," Murdock Pemberton continued.⁵⁴ Margaret Perry Fanning repeated the same story and felt that "Uncle Brock" never really quite recovered from the shock of this lost love.⁵⁵ But, as Murdock Pemberton attested, "He was a courting man as anyone who knew him will tell you. As a youth he grabbed the prettiest girl that came a visiting in the summers."⁵⁶ Once when Murdock's date did not appeal to his big brother, the older one advised,

⁵¹ Letter from Murdock Pemberton to Charles Hill, February 1, 1969.

⁵² Letter from Murdock Pemberton to Charles Hill, February 1, 1969.

⁵³ Letter from Murdock Pemberton to Charles Hill, February 5, 1969.

⁵⁴ Letter from Murdock Pemberton to Charles Hill, February 5, 1969.

⁵⁵ Interview with Margaret Perry Fanning, Pueblo, Colorado, March 14, 1969.

⁵⁶ Letter from Murdock Pemberton to Charles Hill, February 5, 1969.

"Wait awhile. That one doesn't look so hot. They got to have money or beauty."⁵⁷

Margaret McCoy entered Pemberton's life in 1915. Miss McCoy was from a relatively prominent family in New Jersey. She had studied opera in Berlin and Paris and had performed as a singer there. Rumors indicated that she had once been engaged to a count. Her years of training as an opera singer and her family background had given Miss McCoy a certain aura of sophistication, which later helped her achieve high status in the social world. In fact, O. O. McIntyre remarked that she reminded him of a countess.⁵⁸ These experiences also developed her talent and good taste for *haute couture*. Her sense of beauty in decor and clothing was excellent; and although she was not necessarily a pretty woman, she was small, dark, chic, and always exquisitely dressed.

There was always a touch of snobbism in Pemberton. As a young boy from Kansas, he was extremely limited both economically and socially, but his love for beautiful things motivated him into becoming a well-dressed young man when he was able to earn his own living. Life in New York provided opportunities for indulging himself in the arts, fine living, and a trip to Europe — all the things he had only dreamed of as a youth in Kansas. Margaret McCoy epitomized the kind of things Pemberton admired most, and she was a lady of culture and class. They met at a studio party given for Margaret McCoy by Greta Tordardie, the singer. Pemberton was attracted to her at first sight because of her "pleasant voice and pretty dress."⁵⁹ He had always loved music, and he appreciated artistic clothes as much as she did. She gave up a trip to the far East, and they were married on December 10, 1915, within two months of their first meeting.

Margaret "Mat" Pemberton was eleven years her husband's senior, and at the time of their marriage Pemberton was thirty years old and an established writer for the *Times*. Their relationship was a "mature" one. Professionally, Margaret Pemberton kept the doors open socially for the household, and she became a prominent costumier on Broadway and a fashion consultant for the movies at a later time. She dressed not only her husband's shows but also many other Broadway productions. Her wit was as biting as Pemberton's, and together they made a formidable team against would-be critics on opening nights of Pemberton productions. The marriage lasted a lifetime, and it was as "compatible as many marriages."⁶⁰ Their one child died at birth, so the marriage remained childless. The Pembertons were genuinely interested in their nieces and nephews, and Pemberton became especially fond of the two daughters of Antoinette Perry, Margaret and Elaine. The Perry and Pemberton families spent a great deal of time together through the

⁵⁷ Letter from Murdock Pemberton to Charles Hill, February 5, 1969.

⁵⁸ O. O. McIntyre, "Day by Day," p. 24.

⁵⁹ *United Press*, p. 68.

⁶⁰ Letter from Murdock Pemberton to Charles Hill, February 5, 1969.

years, and the Pembertons were always known as "Uncle Brock" and "Aunt Mat" to the Perry girls. Margaret Perry Fanning recalled an occasion when the families were together, and as the two small girls came wandering through where the adults were visiting, Miss Perry said, "Say hello to Uncle Brock, girls."⁶¹ Both girls mumbled a hasty, obedient utterance faintly resembling a greeting to which Pemberton wittily retorted, "You have such lovely daughters; they're just like gardenias – touch them and they turn brown."⁶² Murdock Pemberton observed that since his brother was childless, "Brock always took a fatherly interest in those people he helped in the theatre."⁶³ Margaret Pemberton retired after her husband's death in 1950, and she lived in New Jersey with a sister-in-law until her own death on February 13, 1969.

By 1917 Pemberton's work as a newspaperman ended. For the rest of his life, however, he was a frequent contributor to both newspapers and magazines, and his relationship with the news media always remained good. He knew the values of publicity; and, having been a newspaperman for many years, he knew how to make any item seem newsworthy – knowledge that worked greatly to his advantage as a theatrical producer. He later remarked about the values of journalism with regard to his career in the theatre: "I think journalism helps anyone because it teaches you to be observant, and above all, that is necessary in the theatre, for it changes so rapidly that if you are not watchful and wide awake you will lose out."⁶⁴

During his tenure on the *Times*, Pemberton wrote some articles praising the work of producer Arthur Hopkins. The producer liked the articles, and he summoned Pemberton to work for him as press representative and business manager. Pemberton also acted as house manager at the Plymouth Theatre, where Hopkins produced most of his plays. This position greatly furthered Pemberton's working knowledge of the theatre. As press representative, he learned to take advantage of press releases and to sharpen his techniques of "selling" performances. As house manager of the Plymouth, he became aware of audiences, their needs, reactions, comforts, likes, and dislikes. He developed his "show business" acumen and formed attitudes about the business management aspects of the Broadway theatre. This knowledge and feeling for the business part of the theatre aided him immeasurably when he later began to produce his own plays.

From Hopkins himself, Pemberton learned even more. At this time, Hopkins was entering into one of the most exciting phases of his career. He had seen the work of Max Reinhardt in Germany, and under this influence he produced the play, *Evangeline*, which helped to intro-

⁶¹ Interview with Margaret Perry Fanning, Pueblo, Colorado, March 14, 1969.

⁶² Interview with Margaret Perry Fanning, Pueblo, Colorado, March 14, 1969.

⁶³ Letter from Murdock Pemberton to Charles Hill, January 26, 1969.

⁶⁴ Virginia Cuning, "Brock Pemberton Is a Successful Producer of New York Shows," *Shortridge High School Echo*, p. 37.

duce the new scenic art in America. Robert Edmond Jones joined forces with Hopkins two years later, and together with the Barrymores as well as a young actress named Gilda Varesi, they produced several successful plays including *The Jest* in 1919. The production electrified American audiences with its imaginative design, acting, and production. It remained one of Pemberton's favorite shows, and in his critical opinion, one of America's finest productions.⁶⁵ The Hopkins techniques, which Pemberton admired, were not particularly complicated; instead, the Hopkins approach was a simple departure from the conventional Broadway production methods. He had a great feeling for simplicity, particularly in story line. Pemberton said that he learned from Hopkins that "a story must be reducible to one sentence or it is too complicated for the stage."⁶⁶ Hopkins' appreciation for simplicity came from his disenchantment with the artificiality of the melodramatic theatre. Vaudeville intrigued Hopkins because here the actor created and submerged himself in the character; let-down was unknown to this kind of actor, he felt. So, Hopkins developed a sharp eye for casting; and, as a director, his instructions were minimal. After viewing numerous productions by Hopkins over the years, Hamilton Brooks concluded that much of Hopkins' success as a director resulted from his excellent casting abilities.⁶⁷ Hopkins felt that "no creative work can express the person who is afraid to stand alone. The one great right the creative person has is the right to be wrong."⁶⁸ In his production of *Good Gracious Annabelle*, Hopkins was soundly criticized for letting actors play scenes with their backs to the audience, but a few foresighted critics, such as Woolcott, hailed the freshness and treatment of the script.⁶⁹ Hopkins preferred to let the actor create; he never criticized an actor in rehearsal in front of others, but rather he discussed problems with each actor individually.

Many writers, artists, and producers of this era were intrigued by principles of human psychology proposed by Sigmund Freud, and so was Hopkins. These ideas, Hopkins felt, could supply the necessary motivation for believability for doing interpretative work in the theatre.⁷⁰ When Pemberton became a producer and was widely known for his good taste in producing "sex comedies," he often credited Hopkins with helping to form his concept for this particular genre. Hopkins advised him never to let the lovers touch each other until almost the very end of the play, and this was a technique that Pemberton successfully adapted to his own use.⁷¹

Hopkins had been a newspaperman, also. He once stated that

⁶⁵ Brock Pemberton, "My Ten Favorite Plays," *Variety*, p. 3.

⁶⁶ Franchey, "Picture of a Producer," p. 36.

⁶⁷ Interview with Hamilton Brooks, New York City, May 28, 1969.

⁶⁸ Arthur Hopkins, *To a Lonely Boy*, p. 8.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Hopkins, *Lonely Boy*, p. 39.

⁷¹ Franchey, "Picture of a Producer," p. 98.

"there is no better training for dramatic writing than newspaper work. The good reporter is a natural dramatist; he sees life, and writes of it in playing terms."⁷² Newspapermen were easy to work with, Hopkins believed, because they were accustomed to editorial expression, and they did not look upon their words as holy. As a result, a good newspaperman could edit a script and help re-write with the author better than most other producers. These lessons he learned from Hopkins helped Pemberton to become one of the best "play doctors" in the theatre. Pemberton once said that "being in close association with Arthur Hopkins was equivalent to a post-graduate course in the commercial theatre."⁷³

Pemberton's association with Hopkins was not only a profitable one but also a strange one in many ways. Hopkins was as monosyllabic in his conversation as Pemberton: both men were soft-spoken and short on dialogue. According to one reporter, Pemberton's medium was "the clipped, acid sentence, and his reputation for subtlety is such that people mull over his remarks for hours searching for buried meanings."⁷⁴ Along these lines, Margaret Perry Fanning conjectured that "they [Hopkins and Pemberton] must have communicated in grunts."⁷⁵ Even so, Pemberton and Hopkins worked on many projects together for the betterment of the commercial theatre in the years to come. For reasons that both men were to "amazingly disremember" later on, Hopkins fired Pemberton.⁷⁶ In an effort to hide his unemployment and with a typical crusading spirit, Pemberton told his friends that he left Hopkins to become a producer. Fortunately, he had a script by Gilda Varesi, and he was able to make good his claim. And so, in 1920, script in hand, Pemberton left Hopkins to produce his first play on Broadway, and to create a reputation and technique that would distinguish both the theatre and his name.

III

THE PEMBERTON TECHNIQUE

When Pemberton sought financial backers for his production of *Harvey* in 1944, a ticket seller named Harold Staley offered his savings of \$3,000 to the producer. Pemberton was reluctant to accept the money, but Staley was insistent. "Staley admired the Pemberton

⁷² Hopkins, *Lonely Boy*, p. 284.

⁷³ Franchey, "Picture of a Producer," p. 100.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁷⁵ Interview with Margaret Perry Fanning, Pueblo, Colorado, March 14, 1969.

⁷⁶ Franchey, "Picture of a Producer," p. 36.

technique," Richard Maney reports, "and Staley went on to a fortune."⁷⁷ Certainly Staley had every reason to believe the odds were in his favor, for in a highly competitive and commercial system of theatrical enterprise, Pemberton had achieved an unusually high percentage of financially rewarding productions. "I figure hit plays come along about once every seven years," Pemberton told reporter Bill Doll.⁷⁸ But, based upon critic Burns Mantle's concept of a New York run of one hundred performances being considered necessary to show a return profit or to be declared a popular success, Pemberton's hits occurred more frequently than he figured.⁷⁹ Of his thirty-seven productions which reached New York, six were major financial successes: *Enter Madame* (1920), 350 performances; *Strictly Dishonorable* (1929), 557 performances; *Personal Appearance* (1934), 501 performances; *Kiss the Boys Goodbye* (1938), 826 performances; *Janie* (1942), 642 performances; and *Harvey* (1944) 1,775 performances. Four were moderate successes: *Miss Lulu Bett* (1920), 176 performances; *Loose Ankles* (1926), 168 performances; *Ceiling Zero* (1935), 102 performances; and *Cuckoos on the Hearth* (1940), 129 performances. Two other productions rated high on Mantle's success-measuring device: *Mr. Pitt* (1924), 87 performances and *Lady in Waiting* (1940), 84 performances. And, of course, his production of *The Ladder* (1926) attached Pemberton's name to that legendary piece of theatre and its infamous run of 789 performances. Including his productions of the Pirandello plays and *The Ladder* as ventures which did not lose money for him, Pemberton's box-office average figured approximately 40 per cent success. Considering that one in every four or five productions was financially successful during his years as a producer, this achievement created an impressive and formidable record for Pemberton as a producer of popular plays.

Yet, excluding the Pirandello and Zona Gale plays, and possibly *Harvey*, none of these popular success has contributed significantly to the permanent collection of important productions in the American theatre. Although some of Pemberton's productions which failed early in his career proved noteworthy in shaping the American drama, his distinction as a successful producer is relegated mainly to the commercial theatre. In answer to the question of why Pemberton was a successful producer on Broadway, the examination of his career has revealed that behind the man's success was, first of all, a burning love for the theatre; he was hopelessly stage-struck from childhood until his death. The theatre was a natural career for him to pursue, which he did via a logical sequence of jobs leading to his work as a producer in New York. Interestingly, from an historical standpoint, his work as a

⁷⁷ Richard Maney, "To Err Is Human," *The Passionate Play-Goer: A Personal Scrapbook*, p. 374.

⁷⁸ Bill Doll, "Producer Pemberton's Progress," sec. II, p. 11.

⁷⁹ Burns Mantle, *Best Plays of 1925-26*, p. 4. After 1940, nothing less than 240 performances was considered successful because of the high cost conditions.

producer coincided with the period between the World Wars in which America experienced vast societal and economic changes greatly affecting the course of the theatre. As a profession, the theatre found it necessary to adapt to these ever-changing demands created by the shifting ways of American life. Flexibility and adjustment became the keys to survival in the theatre; and Pemberton's abilities to conform to the demands of the profession and his awareness of the theatre's many problems were other major reasons for his success: he was a man of his times.

In the beginning, Pemberton was a member of the old Arthur Hopkins school of play production. "In that tradition, the producer was also press agent, front man, stage director, accountant, financier and everything else all rolled into one," Pemberton recalled.⁸⁰ The evolution from the simple one-man operation required to produce *Enter Madame* in 1920 to the more complex and highly organized staff needed to produce *Harvey* in 1944 reflected Pemberton's ability to adjust to his times. It was easy for him to be an idealistic young producer in the Twenties because the economics of the theatre, as well as the free style of American living, permitted experimentation. In the first decade of his career, Pemberton chose a play for production because he liked some particular quality in the work although he felt the production was not likely to capture the public's fancy. As he said, he produced plays then primarily for the enjoyment it gave him with only incidental trust in the profits.⁸¹ And, in so doing, he afforded many opportunities for important new artists in the theatre. As times changed with the economic crisis in 1929 and the ensuing great Depression of the Thirties, Pemberton felt impelled to modify his approach to the theatre and, accordingly, his philosophy of the art of the theatre. Recognizing that many of his earlier productions were categorized as "artistic failures," Pemberton remarked, "I devoted too many years of my life to this type of production before I realized that a good play is a successful play,"⁸² And, in his attempt to cater to the ever-changing whims of the theatre-going public, Pemberton concluded that the theatre is a "business as well as an art."⁸³ He believed the successful independent producer in the American system as it evolved in the Thirties was forced to place the accent on commerce because self-preservation and pride combined to put it there. "Not to succeed in the theatre is the unforgivable sin," Pemberton remarked.⁸⁴ The independent producer could not experiment or fail too often because he could not afford the loss in either money or reputation. "A serpent's tooth is a blunt instrument

⁸⁰ Doll, "Producer Pemberton's Progress," p. 1.

⁸¹ "Once a Newspaper Man —," New York *Amusement*, p. 54.

⁸² Doll, "Producer Pemberton's Progress," p. 1.

⁸³ John Anderson, "First Nights Plunge Pemberton into Gloom," p. 119.

⁸⁴ Lucius Beebe, "Brock Pemberton and His Associates," New York *Herald-Tribune*, p. 64.

compared to an unsuccessful play," he paraphrased.⁸⁵ While Pemberton often admitted he would like to ignore the box-office and choose plays solely for their literary merit, he simply could not afford to take the chance. Many of the best plays, he reasoned, were unsalable to a large audience because of their themes such as rape, incest, or poverty. And, a play to succeed must be bought by the public and approved by the critics. Therefore, Pemberton tried to create productions which he believed would stand on their own merits. Even if he were less commercial-minded, Pemberton's sense of economy and his basic honesty would not allow him freely to risk other people's money as play producing grew more and more dependent upon a greater number of financial backers. Whereas in the Twenties an "artistic failure" might be considered a good investment and only the producer and a few friends lost money, later practices prohibited Pemberton from following this policy. "Odds against success and income surtaxes have mounted simultaneously till most producers while still contributing a part of the capital are glad to share profits as well as losses," he observed in 1942.⁸⁶ Pemberton compared the producer's business to that of a gambling game, and part of the producer's skill was knowing when to play his hand. "Every play is a risk," he said, "and if the point at which the risk and cost lines cross is too far from the earth the average non-subsidized manager must decline with thanks."⁸⁷ While Pemberton always remained concerned with the theatre as an art form, he concluded that only the group theatres with a subscription plan such as the Theatre Guild, or independently wealthy producers such as Winthrop Ames, could survive the growing economic problems of the professional theatre. He, therefore, confined his concern to speaking and writing about the theatre and to encouraging amateurs and young aspirants. As a producer, Pemberton's lot was cast into the commercial theatre by an increasingly complex financial system; one which he could not avoid. In order to survive the competition, he found it necessary to develop sound, workable techniques of production which, in turn, assured him of financial success, thereby allowing him to remain active in his chosen profession.

The Pemberton technique, as Staley called it, consisted mainly of the regular responsibilities of selecting the script, casting it, supervising the production, and promoting it — much like that of any other independent manager on Broadway. What Staley referred to, however, was the unique talent and distinctive skill Pemberton brought to these duties. In developing his particular production techniques, Pemberton created his own special art in the theatre. The high degree of craftsmanship Pemberton brought to his role as producer was finally realized by his scene designer, John Root, after they had worked together for many

⁸⁵ Brock Pemberton, "The Tough Task of Picking a Hit," sec. VII, p. 37.

⁸⁶ Brock Pemberton, "The Tough Task of Picking a Hit," p. 37.

⁸⁷ Brock Pemberton, "The Way of the Producer Who Walks Broadway," p. 222.

years. "It was Brock who was responsible for the fabulous success of *Harvey*," Root said.⁸⁸ Frank Fay, Mary Chase, and Antoinette Perry all were fine talents, but Pemberton was the one who brought them together and guided them to success, according to Root. In a more general way, Margaret Perry Fanning assessed Pemberton's talent as a producer by saying, "He regarded the theatre as a business, and he was a darned good businessman."⁸⁹ And while his approach to the theatre as a business was extremely successful for most of his career, Pemberton's approach to production and his sense of style began to fade after World War II. Today, the Pemberton technique remains interesting historically since it mirrors the successful commercial aspects of the American theatre during its period of greatest growth and change.

The first and most important part of the Pemberton technique was the consideration of the script. To be successful in business, Pemberton felt he needed a product in demand by the public. Thus, his search for the right script was based primarily on the kind of play current audiences were seeking. In 1930 he remarked:

The theatre-going public can "smell" a bad show the minute it is produced, "nor all your piety nor all your wit" can make that public have one bit of it. But give the people the kind of play they want, and they'll do everything but break down the doors to get inside.⁹⁰

The producer's greatest problem then was deciding what to present. In 1930 he pronounced also that "long-winded drama has had its day," and he sought scripts which related directly to the economic and social conditions of his potential audience members.⁹¹ Pemberton looked for short, fast, pithy plays, basically escapist in nature, which would capture the play-goer's attention and then allow him to leave the theatre pleasantly entertained. Regarding the literary qualifications of the script, he remarked, "You can't act intellect."⁹² If the play contained a social message, Pemberton accepted this factor as a strengthening agent of the drama; however, he sought plays which brought relief from the ugliness of existence. The poverty and the breadlines of the Thirties and the war years of the Forties caused the producer to agree with a patron he overheard complaining, "You see enough of life without going to the theatre and paying for it."⁹³ So, based on his concern for audience approval, Pemberton arrived at the following play-selecting technique:

⁸⁸ Interview with John Root, Solesbury, Pennsylvania, March 27, 1969.

⁸⁹ Interview with Margaret Perry Fanning, Pueblo, Colorado, March 14, 1969.

⁹⁰ *Denver Post*, p. 33.

⁹¹ *Denver Post*, p. 33.

⁹² Brock Pemberton, "Public Fed Up with Life in Raw, Says Producer, Forecasting Trend for John Anderson," p. 4.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

I never do a play until I am tolerably sure of public support. A play without an audience is only half a play, and to perform to empty seats is not "good theatre." If I were to do a play that I didn't like myself, purely for the sake of "box office," I could not give it the necessary sympathetic care. I ask myself two questions: "Do I like the play?" and "Has it a chance of success?"⁸⁴

As a result, most of the scripts Pemberton produced after 1929 were light comedies and fast-moving melodramas. He liked plays with topical references because they caught the spirit of the times for the audience, thereby adding to its immediate pleasure. Pemberton was not concerned that such plays became dated in a few years' time since he felt that the best comedies "always held the mirror up to the present moment."⁸⁵ In his opinion, good comedy was just as difficult to write as good tragedy; and since it brought laughter into the world, it was therefore important. The importance of escapist comedy, according to Pemberton, was the opportunity it gives people to laugh and to get away from their troubles. "That's something most everyone wants to do," he said; and then he added, "Almost every good comedy ever written has catered to that need in one way or another."⁸⁶ He believed also that American audiences still wanted to cheer for a hero and/or heroine against the forces of evil and that the new dramatists found this kind of story difficult to write well. Pemberton's concept of the successful playwright was one who took the age-old situations and twisted them into new shapes.⁸⁷ Along with Hopkins, Pemberton felt the theatre needed to return to beauty because beauty creates happiness in an audience. He recognized that beauty is more elusive than ugliness, and therefore, it is more difficult to capture. And, in reference to plays of beauty with audience appeal, Pemberton remarked, "It may be smart, but it's not thrifty to be hardboiled."⁸⁸ He stated his requirements for successful playwriting by concluding:

I'm not sure there's any formula. I think, however, that to please and amuse any substantial public there must be characters in a play that the audience can like and dislike. They want to take sides and feel for or against the various players. To reach a wide audience a play must have a simple theme, simple lines, and it must move somewhere, be going somewhere.⁸⁹

Finding the kind of plays he wanted to produce was not such an easy task, then, in Pemberton's estimation. His productions required

⁸⁴ *Cue*, p. 65.

⁸⁵ John Hobart, "A Producer in League with a Ouija Board," *San Francisco Chronicle*, p. 117.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ "A Play Producer's View of Hollywood," *New Leader*, p. 44.

⁸⁸ Brock Pemberton, "Public Fed Up," p. 4.

⁸⁹ Beebe, "Brock Pemberton and His Associates," p. 64.

a fresh viewpoint on a standard subject, a fast moving text, topical references, humor, beauty, and above all, pleasant diversion which appealed to current audiences. The search for scripts possessing these qualities occupied most of Pemberton's time. He was once quoted as saying, "My principal hobby is making a living, I guess. All my leisure is taken up reading plays," and then with a touch of characteristic Pemberton humor he added, "mostly bad ones."¹⁰⁰ But, his work was his pleasure. "The nearest I come to a creative kick in life is finding and staging new plays," he said.¹⁰¹

Pemberton read on the average of three scripts a day from the hundreds submitted to his office each week. His office was usually stacked high with manuscripts sent to him from agents and playwrights. In his book *The Fervent Years* director Harold Clurman recalled his visit to Pemberton's office and the decisive impression the stacks of manuscripts made upon him. "I guess this is where I want to work," the young Clurman thought, "in the theatre."¹⁰² The ever-present stack of manuscripts created a problem for Pemberton, however, because he could not read them all; yet, he felt that each one must be examined for its possibilities. His solution was to hire various people to read some of the scripts for him including Hamilton Brooks, a friend from Emporia, Kansas, who came to New York to act in the 1920's. Brooks worked for the producer from 1933 to 1941 pursuing the many manuscripts which came into the office and making a résumé of those potential scripts for Pemberton to read.¹⁰³ If the résumé appealed to the producer, he would then read the script. The majority of the scripts were unfinished works or amateurish in concept. The best ones came from agents since they had been previously read and selected. Pemberton handled most of the contacts with the playwrights through the mail or by appointment. "He was very nice and tried to see as many people as possible," Brooks stated.¹⁰⁴ Pemberton's office did not offer criticisms to the playwright since the producer felt that one reading was not sufficient to give the play a thorough analysis. Pemberton's main concern was whether or not the story appealed to him as a potential production. Although Pemberton gave Brooks no special instructions, the playreader knew from their personal association the producer's likes and dislikes. As early as 1925, Pemberton published a list of plays he did not ever care to produce. The unfavored types included: (1) a Shakespearean play, (2) a play like another hit play, (3) an artistic play labeled "high brow," (4) a script another producer is racing to present, (5) a play the producer would have to make up reasons for its production, (6) a "sure fire box office hit," (7) a play that is good motion picture property, (8) a special audience play unless the audience is large enough and respon-

¹⁰⁰ Newark News, p. 39.

¹⁰¹ Brock Pemberton, "Plays I Will not Produce," New York Sun, p. 16.

¹⁰² Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years*, p. 6.

¹⁰³ "Former Emporian Tells How Broadway Hits Are Picked," p. 4.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Hamilton Brooks, New York, May 28, 1969.

sive enough to promise a fair run, (9) a French farce because they are outmoded here, (10) a biographical play unless the name of Smith can be substituted and the excitement retained, (11) a play simply because it calls for one set, (12) a costume play unless it is exceptionally fine since Americans are chiefly interested in themselves, (13) a foreign play unless the theme is universal and the characters recognizable, (14) a drab play — a Harlem flat is bearable if there's enough humor, and (15) any revival.¹⁰⁵

On the other hand, Pemberton was less definite in his statement of the specific kind of scripts he looked for. When asked what he liked to produce, Pemberton answered, "Any kind — comedy, drama, melodrama, romance, mystery — so long as it is a good one of its kind."¹⁰⁶ One of his personal tests of a script was his own emotional response to the play as he read it. If he laughed aloud, wept, or otherwise became emotionally involved, this response signified that he saw potential in the play and was interested in considering it for production.¹⁰⁷ Pemberton summarized his technique regarding play selection in a 1934 interview:

It is unwise to let your judgment be influenced by another's enthusiasm, that it is better to remain inactive than to produce doubtful material, that when a play can't be cast it is suffering from defective characterization, that the play switches its mood is questionable, that unless the first reading of a play creates a desire to produce it, the play is for some one else.¹⁰⁸

If a script were not accepted by Pemberton, he kindly informed the rejected author that his refusal did not mean the play was not good. The rejection meant only that he was not personally interested in producing the play. Only a few scripts which Pemberton rejected subsequently succeeded in the theatre, as far as his associates remembered. Brooks recalled one play he wanted Pemberton to produce which the producer refused. The play was a comedy called *Enter to Learn*. George Abbott finally produced the play under the title of *What a Life* in 1938 with Ezra Stone playing the Henry Aldrich character. Both the play and the character were big successes in the theatre, movies, and on radio during the early Forties.¹⁰⁹ Pemberton himself remembered his failure to act when William Allen White called his attention to the dramatic possibilities of *Life with Father*. The play, of course, became America's longest running non-musical production of this cen-

¹⁰⁵ Brock Pemberton, "Plays I Will Not Produce," p. 16.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Constance O'Hara, *Heaven Was Not Enough*, p. 234.

¹⁰⁸ Robert Garland, "Moral to Producers in 'Mask and Face'," *New York Telegram*, p. 79.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Hamilton Brooks, New York, May 28, 1969.

ture.¹¹⁰ On a few occasions, Pemberton allowed his option to expire on a script, such as Lewis Galantieri and John Haussman's *Lovers, Happy Lovers* in 1933, only to have it picked up and produced by someone else. Undoubtedly there were other expired options, and, too, some announced productions which did not materialize. Sometimes the script did not fulfill the initial potential Pemberton first saw in it, or the re-writing efforts failed to create the kind of script the producer wanted. At other times, out-of-town trial productions proved to Pemberton that the play was not suitable for a New York production. At least four Pemberton productions met with this last fate: *Seven Year Love* (1929), *Gone Hollywood* (1930), *Nude in Washington Square* (1933), and *The Magnificent Heel* (1946).

Nevertheless, Pemberton developed a keen commercial instinct for selecting plays which had genuine possibilities of succeeding with the theatre-going public. New York columnist Lucius Beebe once stated that Pemberton "has a feeling for play scripts comparable to a wine-taster."¹¹¹ Regarding his ability to choose scripts, Pemberton admitted, "I know instinctively what will play, but I don't always know what will sell; I mean to the public."¹¹²

Certainly Pemberton's background as a writer and his own highly developed comedic sense were partially responsible for his instinct in selecting scripts. However, his conscientious awareness of current trends in play-making undoubtedly contributed even more to this success. Pemberton was one of the most frequent and regular theatre-goers of all the Broadway producers. In 1934 a column in the *New York Times* carried this announcement: "The showman who does the most theatre-going is either Lee Shubert or Brock Pemberton."¹¹³ Attending the new plays was a regular practice throughout Pemberton's career; he always saw as many productions as possible in both the professional and the amateur theatre. His theatre-going made him aware of the ever-changing ideas in the plays themselves and in production techniques. Margaret Perry Fanning recalled her own enthusiasm for the freshness and originality of Saroyan's *Time of Your Life* (1939) saying, "Uncle Brock agreed with the fresh treatment, but then he informed me it was just another version of Belasco's *The Third Floor Back*."¹¹⁴ The freshness of treatment and the audience's reactions to it were the producer's concern. He felt writers needed to study the market more carefully before they began to write. Immediacy and currency appealed to audiences, and topical material was a prime ingredient for a successful play. In her book, *Heaven Was not Enough*, Constance O'Hara relates in detail her experiences with Pemberton and Miss Perry in successfully revising her script *The Magnificent Heel*. The end of World War II

¹¹⁰ Cecil Howes, "Homage in Their Smiles," p. 64.

¹¹¹ Beebe, "Brock Pemberton and His Associates," p. 64.

¹¹² Lawrence Perry, "Pemberton Anxiously Seeking New Comedy," p. 16.

¹¹³ *New York Times*, p. 58.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Margaret Perry Fanning, Pueblo, Colorado, March 14, 1969.

destroyed the draft-dodging incident vital to the play's theme of political favoritism. Pemberton immediately substituted another current political issue — suspicion of Communistic tendencies — thereby saving the play from being discarded by Miss O'Hara.¹¹⁵ At the same time, a review of Pemberton's most successful plays reveals that they dealt with timely and current subjects: *Miss Lulu Bett* (1920) and *Mr. Pitt* (1924) were based on popular novels by Zona Gale; *Loose Ankles* (1926) dealt with gigolos of the "jazz age;" *Strictly Dishonorable* (1929) reflected the prohibition era; *Personal Appearance* (1934) burlesqued a type of current movie sex queen; *Ceiling Zero* (1935) depicted the recent developments in commercial aviation; *Kiss the Boys Goodbye* (1938) satirized Hollywood's search for a star to play the leading role in a famous new novel; *Janie* (1942) concerned wartime romances; and *Harvey* (1944) discussed modern psychiatry. Although each play had a more universal theme in addition to its timely situation, only *Harvey* remains relatively undated and modern enough for today's audiences. The other plays are interesting mainly as historical representatives of the styles and topics of their own particular eras.

Pemberton and Miss Perry accepted a script only if the playwright agreed to submit to their judgments concerning any revisions necessary to make the play producible. Pemberton and Miss Perry were, therefore, noted for their "play doctoring." "There'll come a time," Pemberton said, "when there'll be a charge for collaboration or re-writing. We don't want to re-work plays, but very few come to us in perfect order."¹¹⁶ In most cases the playwright worked with them in preparing the script before the play went into rehearsals. Miss Perry preferred having a completed, working script before she planned her direction. In a few instances such as Margery Sharp's *Lady in Waiting* (1940), the playwright contributed nothing to the revisions and granted the producing team freedom to do as they wished. Other writers, Clare Boothe for example, attended rehearsals daily and wrote new material at the moment as the needs arose.

The contributions Miss Perry and Pemberton brought to the revisions of a script resulted from their knowledge and experiences in the theatre. Pemberton's skill as a writer and Miss Perry's talent as an actress enabled them to fashion a script into a form they believed would have the best chance for success. Elaine Perry described their teamwork by saying, "He'd tear down, and she'd build up."¹¹⁷ Each developed a particular flair for comedy. Pemberton's sharp wit and editorial skills enabled him to discover the weaknesses in the humor and the improbabilities in the story. Once the weakness was uncovered, Miss Perry replaced the flaw with material they both agreed upon. Pemberton's wit also fostered much of the humor in his productions, and he carefully checked his comedies to see if the "jokes" were properly

¹¹⁵ O'Hara, *Heaven Was not Enough*, p. 252.

¹¹⁶ "Gotham Life," p. 68.

¹¹⁷ Interview with Elaine Perry, Hartsell, Colorado, March 16, 1969.

scattered throughout the length of the play to sustain the humor. In this respect, his technique in "play doctoring" was almost mechanical. He often mentioned "stuffing a play with gags" to enliven certain scenes as he did with Preston Sturges' *Strictly Dishonorable*.¹¹⁸ Being a witty man himself, the producer sought wit and cleverness in all of his work, even in the plays dealing with serious subjects. "He wouldn't allow a play to get too soupy or sentimental," Paul Foley said.¹¹⁹ Pemberton attended rehearsals at some time during each day where he sat quietly in the darkened theatre. Foley explained Pemberton's technique for handling what he considered a poor piece of dialogue. "If a line had escaped him earlier, you'd hear this big raspberry sound from out front. 'I don't believe it,' he'd say. Then, Miss Perry would pick up the pieces and go on. The two would confer usually with the writer during the lunch break at Sardi's."¹²⁰ Pemberton's main function, however, was advising writers on how to restructure the story. Although Miss Perry also had a keen sense of dramatic construction, she concentrated on the acting potential of each scene. Pemberton remarked about Miss Perry's abilities in devising a scene, "She has a neat talent for pinning a dramatic idea down to actuality with an incident." Also, Miss Perry was concerned with the logic and continuity of the characters, or "the character line," as she called it, according to Paul Foley.¹²¹ She looked for the development and the consistency of each character's actions and the way they related to each other and to the story. She believed each character had a distinct rhythm and a movement pattern which needed appropriate writing for her to convey this feeling to the actors and to the audience. She analyzed a script thoroughly from both the actor's and a director's points of view, and she replaced its weaknesses with her own suggestions. "Lucky the playwright who falls into her hands for he learns much he never forgets, even if his plays are not produced," Pemberton observed.¹²² Other than aiding with the revisions Pemberton thought the playwright's work ended with writing the script. The production of a play was a separate art, and the playwright was often too close to his work to have a true perspective. Most author-produced plays failed, and Pemberton did not often allow the playwrights to attend rehearsals.

Pemberton did not produce a script until he felt it was ready for rehearsals. The financial risk of production caused him to proceed with caution and not rush into rehearsals unless he was relatively certain of a play's chances for success. As a result of his caution, Pemberton became known on Broadway as one of the careful "time-bidders," who made "few false starts," according to McIntyre.¹²³ Since Pemberton believed

¹¹⁸ Brock Pemberton, "No False Modesty about Playwright Who Predicted Success That Actually Came," p. 31.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Paul Foley, Brooklyn, April 2, 1969.

¹²⁰ Interview with Paul Foley, Brooklyn, April 2, 1969.

¹²¹ Interview with Paul Foley, Brooklyn, April 2, 1969.

¹²² "Pemberton's Speeches Are Sparse but Witty," p. 76.

¹²³ O. O. McIntyre, "Day by Day," p. 11.

that timing is an important element in play production, he felt authors needed to be more painstaking and producers needed to "make haste slowly" in order to get better results.¹²⁴ Yet, producers must arrive at a point where they are ready to take a chance because if they wait too long until the script is finely polished, they will never do plays. And, Pemberton believed that nothing aged so fast as an unproduced play and remarked that "it is almost as fleeting as a newspaper so rapidly do thoughts, customs, interests, and idioms change."¹²⁵ Keeping a fresh viewpoint as styles in plays changed was an important art of the producer and one in which many producers met with failure, Pemberton observed. A producer must sense in advance what both the critics and the public like at the moment, which was a difficult task since a shift in mood often came without warning. Pemberton cited his production of Warden Lawes' *Chalked Out* as a play produced at the wrong time. The public was not ready for it. What the critics and the public liked yesterday in style and form was often a box-office and critical failure tomorrow; and if the audience did not like it, Pemberton admitted failure. "A play is written to be acted before an audience," he said, "and if it fails in this to whom is it important?"¹²⁶

When the play was ready for rehearsals to begin, Pemberton searched carefully for actors he considered right for each role. Although Pemberton himself usually assumed this responsibility, Miss Perry, of course, gave her consent to his choice. In her article entitled "So You Want to Go on the Stage," Miss Perry stated the qualifications she deemed necessary for success in the acting profession; and thus she revealed the standards she demanded of her own performers, and vicariously, Pemberton's requirements. The first of these standards is an honest desire and dedication to the profession of acting. Talent, which she defined as the power to create the illusion you are someone else, is the second essential characteristic in a good actor. Beauty or personality, good health, discipline, teamwork, wide educational background, study, understanding human nature, confidence, and spirit are also admirable qualities Miss Perry observed in most good actors. She believed also that a flexible voice and body are vital to the actor's art; thus, training of the voice and body are essential for success. Above all, the actor must be willing to learn. On these bases, Miss Perry judged the actors with whom she worked.¹²⁷ However, the problem of casting was one of Pemberton's tasks. He enjoyed this duty, and he prided himself on the success of his judgment in creating new names. "Somehow . . . I have a faculty for associating actors and actresses with parts," he stated.¹²⁸ He became known as the producer who was the friend of new talent. There is one producer on Broadway of whom

¹²⁴ Philadelphia *Enquirer*, p. 66.

¹²⁵ Brock Pemberton, "The Way of a Producer," p. 222.

¹²⁶ Brock Pemberton, "The Personal Appearance of Mr. Pemberton," p. 9.

¹²⁷ Antoinette Perry, "So You Want to Go on the Stage," pp. 862-864.

¹²⁸ Lawrence Perry, "Pemberton Anxiously Seeking New Comedy," p. 16.

it is said he takes more long chances than any other manager," one journalist wrote, "and that producer is Brock Pemberton, recognized as the friend of newcomers to the theatre."¹²⁹ Pemberton became dedicated to finding the right actor for each role, a technique which, along with his talent for selecting play scripts, contained the essence of his skills as a producer. He rejected any script which demanded the attraction of a particular actor or actress saying, "I have no interest in the play which needs a star to put it over."¹³⁰ The only actor Pemberton truly admired was John Barrymore, who he thought had genius as a performer. But, Pemberton hired very few famous stars, and instead, he attended as many performances as possible to appraise the talents of each actor in the productions. He became an expert at casting. McIntyre wrote that Pemberton was "one of the theatre's shrewdest and most studious observers, his castings have shown uncanny judgment. The majority of his successes are brought about by his selection of obscure players."¹³¹ Pemberton had an excellent memory for those actors who impressed him. Actor Jesse White recalled a personal experience which occurred when he was acting in a play for George Abbott. The production, *Mrs. Kimball Presents*, was a failure, and one Saturday matinee there were only twelve people in the audience including Pemberton and John Golden. White performed to the best of his ability regardless of the small audience, and Pemberton was impressed with his performance. The producer called agent Sara Enright to locate the actor, and then he cast White in *Harvey* before the other actors were selected. Sara Enright served as an agent for Pemberton in locating and sending prospective new talent to him.¹³² Pemberton tried to interview and test as many new people as possible, and oftentimes, he acted all the other roles while the prospective actor read the specific character in question. Pemberton talked with most aspirants in his office, and sometimes he interviewed actors in the alleyway between his office and Sardi's restaurant, or virtually anywhere. His keen interest in these new people is testified by one writer: "No matter if you have never set foot on any professional stage, if Brock Pemberton feels you have what it takes, he will give you a chance to prove it."¹³³ On one occasion Pemberton even stopped a young lady on the street and asked her if she were in the theatre to which she replied, "No." The producer told her that she should be, and then he cast her in a small role in his production of *Christopher Comes Across*. An amusing casting incident occurred when Pemberton interviewed a young actress named Vivian Vance. During the audition, the producer asked Miss Vance to lift her skirt to show her legs. She refused and hurriedly left the office before Pemberton had the opportunity to explain. He contacted Miss Vance's

¹²⁹ "New York's Great Producers: Brock Pemberton," p. 60.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ O. O. McIntyre, "Day by Day," p. 63.

¹³² Interview with Jesse White, New York, May 31, 1969.

¹³³ "New York's Great Producers: Brock Pemberton," p. 60.

agent and asked that she return because he was impressed with her acting ability. He further explained that the role Miss Vance was seeking required the actress to wear a bathing suit. Since this production was going on tour, Pemberton wanted to avoid the mistake he had made in the original production by casting an actress with unattractive legs, which detracted from the image of the role. So, Pemberton apologized to Miss Vance, and she was awarded the role. She succeeded so well that the producer hired her again to originate a role for him in a later production.¹³⁴

Once the script was basically acceptable and the cast was ready for rehearsals, Miss Perry took over the responsibilities for the direction. Although Pemberton often conferred with her about his observations, he rarely interrupted rehearsals. Miss Perry, a dominant, strong director, was in complete control of rehearsals. She usually began them at eleven o'clock each morning, and worked seven or eight hours each day for periods of three to four weeks depending upon the complexity of the play. The initial rehearsals took place in Miss Perry's apartment at 510 Park Avenue in her huge living room, which was 45 feet long and contained three grand pianos. Then, three to five days before dress rehearsals, the cast moved into the theatre and onto the set. Miss Perry remained onstage with the actors to give directions until the last few rehearsals when she sat in the audience and took notes. She was an energetic and seemingly tireless director who retained her enthusiasm for the script once she began rehearsals. At first, actors were terrified of her "sphinx-like" appearance, commanding voice, and grand manner.¹³⁵ But, those who worked for her such as Vivian Vance testified to her kindness and her patience. "She was a loving and generous woman with a great deal of patience as a director," Miss Vance remarked.¹³⁶ Miss Perry's directorial approach to men, however, differed from that which she used with women. Paul Foley quoted Miss Perry as saying to male actors, "It seems foolish for a woman to tell a grown man how to act, but dear, would you mind . . . it's only a suggestion."¹³⁷ On the other hand, Miss Perry used less tact with actresses, and her remarks were often more specific: "No, darling, don't do that. Put your hand . . . no, dear, your left hand behind your head. Lift the elbow higher so that it is a pretty line."¹³⁸ Also, she did not allow actors to cross their legs onstage because it looked relaxed, and she felt the audience relaxed along with the performers. A relaxed atmosphere onstage was not good, Miss Perry thought, because each scene must keep up a certain tension to be theatrically alive. Prior to the first rehearsal, she carefully planned each movement and gesture of the performers to achieve the desired effect. She once explained, "I see the

¹³⁴ Interview with Vivian Vance, New York, May 30, 1969.

¹³⁵ Interview with Benay Venuta, Springfield, Missouri, February 13, 1969.

¹³⁶ Interview with Vivian Vance, New York, May 30, 1969.

¹³⁷ Interview with Paul Foley, Brooklyn, April 2, 1969.

¹³⁸ Interview with Paul Foley, Brooklyn, April 2, 1969.

whole thing from the beginning. I don't read words. I see scenes as I go through a script. I see every actor on stage — and I see every gesture made by every actor. I know how I want a play done before I start rehearsals."¹³⁰ Her first concern, then, was blocking the movements of the actors using an exact floor plan of the scene designer's set. Her direction was so meticulous in detail that her actors could go from one company to another of the same show without further rehearsals. Foley recalled an incident involving Gladys George's role in the New York run of *Personal Appearance*. Miss George suddenly became indisposed and unable to perform, but her understudy was unavailable. Pemberton contacted the understudy in the Philadelphia company who caught the late afternoon train to New York and played the evening performance there without a rehearsal. The understudy successfully performed the role because she had been directed by Miss Perry with the same precise detail as the other actresses playing the character.¹⁴⁰ Most actors liked this attention to detail and found her meticulous, methodical style the mark of a good director; but others found this approach confining and difficult.

Miss Perry also demanded clear vocalization from her actors. She trained them to breathe and to develop their voice production by applying a theory which she learned from Enrico Caruso, the opera singer. This technique, which Miss Perry called the "pinch bottom technique," called for the actor to contract the muscles of his buttocks creating a tension. Once the tension was lost, the voice often lacked the strength and force it needed.¹⁴¹ Her knowledge of the use of the voice and her own vocal control enabled Miss Perry to train actors for the vocal clarity she insisted upon in the theatre. Using this skill, she even taught actor Millard Mitchell to belch on cue as a part of the unsavory character he portrayed in *Kiss the Boys Goodbye*. Miss Perry worked for clear diction and flexibility in actors' voices. She herself won an award from Columbia University as the American actress with the best speech; and Constance O'Hara remarks Miss Perry had "the most beautiful voice I had ever heard in my life."¹⁴² She could not abide phony speech patterns or mannerisms, and she was adamant about finding the "true meaning" of a line. A "true meaning," Miss Perry believed, was found from listening to the preceding lines, which then allowed the actor to discover the correct emphasis and vocal inflections to give his lines.¹⁴³

Finally, Miss Perry worked for pace, tempo, and rhythm. Actors who worked under her direction accounted her sense of timing as one of her major strengths as a director. Both instinct and experience gave Miss Perry an acute sense of rhythm, which she applied to her directing

¹³⁰ "Kiss the Boys Goodbye," p. 62.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Paul Foley, Brooklyn, April 2, 1969.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Elaine Perry, Hartsell, Colorado, March 16, 1969.

¹⁴² Constance O'Hara, *Heaven Was not Enough*, p. 234.

¹⁴³ Interview with Paul Foley, Brooklyn, April 2, 1969.

techniques. For example, one scene in *Kiss the Boys Goodbye* required a waiter to descend the stairs and serve drinks to a large number of people finishing the sequence by the end of a certain piece of dialogue. Miss Perry avoided the six or seven pages of the script which contained this action, until she learned the rhythmic patterns of the actors involved in this scene. After several rehearsals with the actors, Miss Perry directed the scene by telling the servant character precisely when to serve each drink in order to end the sequence properly on time. Her timing was precise, and the scene played perfectly as she had planned it.¹⁴⁴ This sense of timing worked especially well in directing the many Pemberton comedies. "Her judgment in comedy was superb," Jesse White said.¹⁴⁵ White credited Miss Perry's direction for extracting all the comedic nuances from the script for *Harvey*. Frank Fay often argued with Miss Perry over the comic validity of a line of dialogue and begged her to take it out. White quoted Miss Perry as telling Fay, "It will work; just trust me." And, inevitably she was right, according to White.¹⁴⁶ Miss Perry also insisted that actors learn the lines exactly as they were written in order to achieve accurate timing; she did not allow actors to improvise dialogue. "She was an angel of a woman, and her ability to keep a show moving was one of her major talents," White concluded.¹⁴⁷

Highly polished performances, brightly paced physical activity, and smartly delivered dialogue were all characteristics of Miss Perry's contributions to the Pemberton productions. And despite her definitive method, Miss Perry directed on the theory that these techniques merely aided the actors in correctly speaking for the playwright. Her direction was meant to be unobtrusive, and she sought to keep her techniques unnoticeable in the productions. "If the scene designer and the director received the good reviews, they [Pemberton and Perry] thought the play was a failure," Elaine Perry said.¹⁴⁸ Miss Perry's direction was largely successful in achieving the comedic effects and the intense conflicts that most Pemberton scripts required. One of Pemberton's wisest choices as a producer was his professional liaison with Miss Perry because she was technically important in bringing his plays from script to audience. Their relationship throughout their years together was described by actor Fredric March as "beautiful," and he added, "They had great respect for each other."¹⁴⁹ Conversely, Constance O'Hara felt that Pemberton and Miss Perry were not a good combination because Miss Perry warred against his taste and judgment, and he battled against her intensity and creativeness.¹⁵⁰ Regardless of these conflicting opinions,

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Paul Foley, Brooklyn, April 2, 1969.

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Jesse White, New York, May 31, 1969.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Jesse White, New York, May 31, 1969.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Jesse White, New York, May 31, 1969.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Elaine Perry, Hartsell, Colorado, March 16, 1969.

¹⁴⁹ Letter from Fredric March to Charles Hill, March 4, 1969.

¹⁵⁰ Constance O'Hara, *Heaven Was not Enough*, p. 235.

the fact remains that their teamwork was responsible for several successful productions. Certainly Pemberton did not have any particular talent as a director, and his career without Miss Perry's assistance might have been very different. Pemberton himself in later years remarked about his lack of skill as a director: "I was a lazy director. I'd let the actors do what they pleased. . . . It never seemed to work right."¹⁵¹ Pemberton was aware that Miss Perry had a mind for detail in directing which he did not have. By 1939 his concept of a director's contribution to play production was formulated and included in a book on the theatre by Herschel L. Bricker.¹⁵² In this report entitled "The Director," Pemberton recalled how only two decades ago the director was more of a graduate stage manager since the routine of performance was more stylized. With the new drama it became the "director's task to fuse play, players, settings, properties, and costumes into a homogenous whole, to perfect a microcosm from intellectual, spiritual, and physical elements."¹⁵³ Pemberton believed the director must have complete supervision over the script from the time the author delivers it until the first curtain. The good director knows when a script is ready to be acted, and he contributes to any necessary revision. The concept that a play can be fixed at rehearsals was a false one, according to Pemberton's experiences. Although each director is a law unto himself, Pemberton categorized directors into two basic types: one who visualizes every detail in advance (as Miss Perry did), and one who lets performances develop at rehearsals (as Pemberton did). Either type of director, however, must avoid the pitfall of relinquishing his authority by allowing points to be debated or his decisions to be argued. Since the second type of director does little more homework than the actors, he functions mainly as a referee and editor of the actors' performances. This director gives a general geography, and the actors find their way by means of instinct or inspiration. On the other hand, the director who pre-plans a production follows a more specific pattern of rehearsals. Allowing three weeks as adequate rehearsal time, Pemberton recorded the standard rehearsal pattern (undoubtedly based upon Miss Perry's habits) as follows: 1) The reading rehearsal consists of one or more periods wherein the actors read their parts aloud. During this time minor script changes and word repetitions are corrected, pronunciation and diction problems are standardized, and readings and inflections are set; 2) the blocking rehearsals consist of giving actors their movement patterns in relation to the size of the set, the placement of furniture, and the grouping patterns of actors. Also, business is developed and set at this time; 3) the memorization rehearsals consist of playing the first act from memory, and then working out the other acts by the same process; 4) the characterization rehearsals consist of discovering and developing the fine points of the roles. The director deserts the stage during this period

¹⁵¹ Beebe, "Brock Pemberton and His Associates," p. 64.

¹⁵² Brock Pemberton, "The Director," pp. 187-195.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

and takes notes at the back of the theatre; 5) the rehearsal of the entire play emphasizes pacing and flow of performance; 6) the polishing rehearsals consist of the actors moving onto the set and using the hand properties. If time is limited on the actual set, a "jump through" rehearsal where only those lines involving action or cues are used. For coordinating lights, stand-in performers are used; 8) the dress parade rehearsal consists of all actors rehearsing in costume and make-up on the set under the lighting to be used during performance; 9) the dress rehearsal runs as a performance without interruption. Notes are taken, huddles are formed, and pep talks are given during this time; and 10) the performance is the time when everyone hopes for the best.¹⁵⁴ In addition to conducting these rehearsals, the director must know how to work with designers. Pemberton stated:

Since drama is conflict, conflict is action, and action is movement, the placing of physical objects must be such as to allow visibility, freedom of movement, variety of grouping. The practicality of swift scene changes must be provided for in these cinematic days when tedious waits are apt to kill a play¹⁵⁵

Pemberton felt also that directors must carefully consider color as it visually reflects the mood of the play and that costumes reconcile line and color to personality, mood, and setting. Above all, though, he believed that the director must contribute endless amounts of energy, patience, enthusiasm, and imagination to the production. In summing up his evaluations of the director's contributions to the theatre, Pemberton remarked, "It is a fact that few people not in the theatre can unscramble characterization, personality, performance, direction."¹⁵⁶ Fortunately, Pemberton could tell the difference, thereby recognizing his weaknesses as a director. Therefore, he wisely handed over the directorial reins to Antoinette Perry.

Although Miss Perry was in complete charge of the actors, Pemberton acted in a supervisory capacity throughout the rehearsal period. He was always careful to see that his productions were executed with a sense of high style and good taste; and Pemberton productions were noted for their professional polish and touch of elegance. This care began with the text of the script and followed through to the performances. Even his sex-comedies were handled with delicacy so as not to offend the most discriminating audiences. When he returned to his hometown with his production of *Personal Appearance*, Pemberton remarked to his friend, Calvin Lambert, that he hoped the local citizenry would not be offended by the somewhat risqué portions of the play.¹⁵⁷ And, in a curtain speech before the opening of the play, Pemberton told

¹⁵⁴ Brock Pemberton, "The Director," pp. 187-195.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹⁵⁶ Brock Pemberton, "The Director," p. 199.

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Calvin Lambert, Emporia, Kansas, November 29, 1968.

the audience about the nature of the comedy and that the actors were instructed to perform it as directed. The *Emporia Gazette* reviewer wrote that the audience responded with enthusiasm and did not appear offended.¹⁵⁸ Pemberton's gauge for judging taste was again dependent upon his awareness of the likes and dislikes of audiences. He said, "It is safe to lay down the general precept that taste in the theatre in any period pretty accurately reflects the taste of the public, since plays cannot exist without patronage."¹⁵⁹ Thus, Pemberton reasoned that a producer succeeded or failed in the commercial theatre according to what he chose to present, how he presented it, and who came to see it.

The beauty of a Pemberton production was also discernible in the careful integration of the script and its interpretation with the visual arts. Pemberton's interest in stagecraft stemmed from his early association with Robert Edmond Jones, whom he admired. The experimental nature of his productions from 1920 to 1929 permitted him to explore a variety of staging techniques. Several designers created sets, lights, and costumes for Pemberton including Jones, Jo Meilziner, Dale Stetson, and Raymond Sovey. But, when Pemberton ceased to experiment with new forms, he found John Root, whose style and approach to design proved successful in maintaining Pemberton's reputation for handsome scenery and appropriate technical effects. Root became a permanent member of Pemberton's staff after 1934 and designed the remaining productions for the producer. Their methods of working together were quite simple, according to Root's evaluation of their relationship. Pemberton and Miss Perry met with Root to discuss the floor plan and movement patterns required by the action in the play. Then, Root was given complete freedom to create whatever he pleased in terms of scenery. Pemberton believed that design was Root's business; therefore, he gave the designer no specific instructions although he regularly checked with him to follow the development of the design. Pemberton had no particular idiosyncrasies or superstitions in terms of colors, props, or other visual factors. Economy was his major concern, and he often used his own, Miss Perry's, or Root's furniture and properties in his sets. When Pemberton engaged Root to design *Personal Appearance*, the designer learned that he was expected to use some old scenic units from previous Pemberton productions. The popularity of *Personal Appearance* made it necessary to reproduce these old units five different times for the various touring companies of that play. An incident when Pemberton's love for economy backfired occurred when he presented Root with a check for his fee. This certified check was made out for the sum of \$1,000,000 instead of Root's usual \$1,000 payment. The designer returned the check expecting a good laugh over the error, but Pemberton failed to see the humor of the situation because his concern for money was not a laughing matter.¹⁶⁰ However, Pem-

¹⁵⁸ "Brock's Show Clicks Here," p. 1.

¹⁵⁹ *New York Tribune*, p. 58.

¹⁶⁰ Interview with John Root, Solesbury, Pennsylvania, March 27, 1969.

berton was impressed with Root's facility and his willingness to economize. When they were mentioned, Root's settings received excellent comments in most reviews. A few of the designer's innovations became popular in the home furnishings market, particularly a revolving cocktail bar he created for *Kiss the Boys Goodbye* in 1938. Root's designs for Pemberton's productions were often featured in periodicals as examples of good taste in current interior decorating trends.¹⁶¹

While Pemberton considered design Root's province, Miss Perry demanded certain requirements from the designer. As an actress, Miss Perry learned from David Belasco that an actor should not be comfortable on stage. Therefore, she insisted that all furniture be firm so the actors did not look too relaxed. All seats in Miss Perry's settings were 19 inches from the floor, rather than the standard 18 inches, because she believed that actors could move in and out of them more freely from that level. And, she requested that Root darken the upper portions of the sets, a technique which lowered the focus to the actors where it belonged. Both Pemberton and Miss Perry believed that scenery should not dominate the script, but it should provide the proper atmosphere and background for the story being presented. Root practiced these ideas in his work with the producer, and in so doing, established himself as a popular designer on Broadway working for several other producers as well. Then, when Pemberton died in 1950, Root designed primarily for major network television shows until his early retirement from the theatre in 1963 to sell real estate in Pennsylvania. Whereas Root achieved no lasting fame as a designer, the success of his sets in Pemberton's productions, his good taste in smart decor, and his willingness to adapt and economize made him the ideal designer for Pemberton.

Along with Root's smartly decorated sets, Margaret Pemberton's selection of wardrobes became a part of the Pemberton trademark. Mrs. Pemberton's approach to dressing a show and her concepts of theatrical fashion became integral elements in Pemberton's production techniques. Since she had no desire to dress choruses, musicals, or other shows requiring period or special costume, Mrs. Pemberton did not design the clothes, but rather she chose and coordinated the visual effects of the ensemble. She explained her method of costuming a play in this way:

I first read the script or scenario, and then confer with the scenic artist to learn his color scheme. Then I study the taste and appearance of the actress and try to dress her with regard not only to line and color but the quality of her scenes.¹⁶²

In her salon at Saks Fifth Avenue department store and in her own shop in later years where she had arranged a small stage rigged with

¹⁶¹ Interview with John Root, Solesbury, Pennsylvania, March 27, 1969.

¹⁶² Mrs. Brock Pemberton, "Styling the Shows," p. 60.

spotlights, Mr. Pemberton paraded the actresses under colored lighting similar to that of the planned production. She was knowledgeable and good at her job, according to those who knew her, although her artistic temperament and her dominant personality oftentimes made her unpopular with others. Benay Venuta recalled that actresses sometimes fled from the dressing room in tears after a costume session with Mrs. Pemberton.¹⁶³ Mrs. Pemberton's taste was impeccable. She herself was one of the most fashionably dressed ladies in New York, and she spared no expense in maintaining this image. Murdock Pemberton remembered, for example, that when mutation mink was first developed, the first one sold in New York for \$18,000 was to Mrs. Brock Pemberton.¹⁶⁴ Audiences, therefore, expected a touch of elegance both onstage and offstage at Pemberton's productions, and they usually were not disappointed. "We have never costumed a successful play which hasn't created a vogue for some article of apparel," Mrs. Pemberton stated.¹⁶⁵ And, her contacts with the glamorous and sophisticated people of the theatrical and film societies helped to make each opening performance of a Pemberton production a gala and exciting affair. Undoubtedly, Mrs. Pemberton's contributions to her husband's productions were important to his image as a producer.

Correlated with an audience's pleasure of the happenings onstage was its comfort offstage. In other words, going to the theatre itself must be a pleasing experience, according to Pemberton, and he supervised the control of the house as carefully as he did the production. Obviously Pemberton knew the values of keeping a comfortable temperature in the theatre by his continuous attempts to cool theatres in the hot New York summers. Also, he refused to sell standing room for *Enter Madame* and some of his other productions because he wanted his audience to enjoy the play. He liked nicely decorated theatres, and once stated that "a plush carpet never ruffles the feelings of the most democratic patron."¹⁶⁶ Proper temperature and pleasant surroundings created a receptive mood in an audience waiting to be entertained. And, because he loved music, he always had an orchestra for his productions until the practice had to be discontinued. "No economy is as false as that of doing without entr'acte music," he stated.¹⁶⁷ Essentially, Pemberton regarded the theatre as a social gathering and the producer as the host of the party. Early in 1930, he stated:

The glamor of an audience, light sparkling on faces, and the glow of a social gathering are the special province of the theatre. Light up the theatres, decorate them, keep good music going between acts so

¹⁶³ Interview with Benay Venuta, Springfield, Missouri, February 13, 1969.

¹⁶⁴ Letter from Murdock Pemberton to Charles Hill, February 5, 1969.

¹⁶⁵ Mrs. Brock Pemberton, "Styling the Shows," p. 60.

¹⁶⁶ W. E. Oliver, "Theatre Has Chosen Its Weapons," p. 69.

¹⁶⁷ *Billboard*, p. 69.

that people might talk and be stimulated, serve coffee or tea — anything to keep the ball of entertainment rolling.¹⁶⁸

Once the play was ready to be performed for an audience, Pemberton continued to promote his product. The correct principles of merchandizing were necessary to underwrite success in the theatre, and part of Pemberton's technique was to promote his productions faithfully until the final curtain. Finding the right date for opening a new production was a major problem. For a time in 1931, Pemberton was hailed as the inheritor of Belasco's mantle, whose privilege it was to open each new theatrical season in New York. Although he declined the honor, Pemberton believed in early openings in the new season each fall because they gave the production a better chance for success. The same piece at a later date might succeed less well because, as Pemberton noticed, people coming back from vacations were ready to be entertained and they were more favorably disposed to view the new shows.¹⁶⁹ However, only eight of the Pemberton productions opened in August or September, and Belasco's tradition perished with him.

More important than the opening date was the correct amount of publicity to give a new production. The successful producer, Pemberton observed, "must be able to gauge the amount of preliminary ballyhoo an event may absorb without anti-climax."¹⁷⁰ In this respect, Pemberton's experience as a newspaper man and his tenure as Hopkins' press agent gave him a distinct advantage over many of his peers. He carefully calculated the amount and kind of information to be released from the first announcement that he contracted the rights for a play until opening night. Even the opening was planned to give the production the touch Pemberton desired: "For the premiere just the right amount of ermine to impress the critics and not depress the actors must be determined."¹⁷¹ Pemberton viewed the opening performance from his customary fifth row, aisle seat where he checked audience response. If a play achieved a favorable audience reaction, but received a "split press" in which some critics endorsed the play and others rejected it, Pemberton continued to promote the production full scale, recognizing the influence of public opinion. *Kiss the Boys Goodbye* was a case in point where the producer exhibited his promotional skills by overcoming a "split press" with both a word-of-mouth campaign and continued publicity. The play went on to accumulate an impressive record of 286 performances. Early in Pemberton's career when he yielded to public opinion by revising the last act of *Miss Lulu Bett* and continued his promotion to the point of the play's winning the Pulitzer Prize, he learned the possibilities a good play has of overcoming a poor beginning. He learned another valuable lesson with *Goin' Home* in 1928 when he lost

¹⁶⁸ Oliver, "Theatre Has Chosen Its Weapons," p. 69.

¹⁶⁹ Lucius Beebe, "Brock Pemberton Discusses a New Venture," p. 124.

¹⁷⁰ Brock Pemberton, "The Way of the Producer," p. 228.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

\$40,000 to keep the play running simply because he liked it. During his 1937 production of Mary Chase's *Now You've Done It*, the producer acknowledged the power of the press by concluding that Mrs. Chase's play would not have failed with better reviews. He believed that if all the press reviews are unfavorable, a play could not succeed even if the audience liked it.¹⁷² However, he wisely withdrew the production after forty-three performances when he realized it could not be salvaged.

Pemberton also realized that as a businessman he could not fail to meet the competition provided by the movies in their promotional sales. During the time when motion picture theatre owners were offering raffles, money games, and free merchandise to attract customers, Pemberton did not ignore this threat to his potential box-office receipts. Margaret Perry Fanning recounted the time that she and a date attended a new opening of a Pemberton production. "And here were Mother and Uncle Brock actually raffling dishes in the lobby, much to my horror," she said.¹⁷³ The producer also worked throughout his career to keep the price of the theatre ticket within a competitive or medium range. When a production began lagging at the box-office, Pemberton often offered his shows on a "twofer" policy, or two tickets for the price of one, as he did with *Janie* in 1942. *Janie* suffered in the competition with a similar play, *Junior Miss*, which found greater favor with the public and the critics. After a few months, Pemberton's play even lost its theatre to a new production. But Pemberton found a new theatre, took out one of the sets in the play, and continued the run. The new play replacing *Janie* closed, and the manager begged Pemberton to return with *Janie*, to which the producer replied, "If you pay the moving bill."¹⁷⁴ Pemberton continued to promote *Janie*, finally placing it on "twofers," and achieving a phenomenal record of 642 performances, which was not far behind the 710 performances of *Junior Miss*.

Another special aspect of Pemberton's promotional technique was his personal care and concern for a production until it closed. He rarely had more than one play performing in New York at a time, particularly in the Thirties and Forties, and he made it a point to attend parts of the performances regularly. His regular attendance at his own plays not only served as an incentive for the actors to keep their performances sharp but also acted as a device for Pemberton to gauge audience attendance and reaction. The producer, therefore, was able to judge when a show completed its run and was not worth spending more money on. Mention has been made of Pemberton's care in mounting his touring companies. He also attended these performances as often as possible. Accounts indicate that he toured with some of the companies of *Strictly Dishonorable* and *Personal Appearance*, and even accompanied *Strictly Dishonorable*, *Harvey*, and *Janie* to London for their premieres. Occasionally, Pemberton flew for short visits to the various groups per-

¹⁷² *Variety*, p. 115.

¹⁷³ Interview with Margaret Perry Fanning, Pueblo, Colorado, March 14, 1969.

¹⁷⁴ Maney, "To Err Is Human," p. 374.

forming *Kiss the Boys Goodbye* and *Harvey* to check on the quality of the production and their receptions.

As a final touch to Pemberton's abilities as a producer, he took advantage of his popularity as a writer, speaker, and committeeman in the theatre. The many theatrical activities in which he engaged kept the Pemberton name in the public eye, usually in a favorable light, and along with his name was the mention of his current production. His reputation in the theatre was summarized by writer John Franchey: "In a profession in which showmanship is often confounded with dramatic instinct and bad taste with genius, Pemberton is a man apart."¹⁷⁵

What did Pemberton himself believe a producer was? In his article for Bernard Sobel entitled "The Producer," Pemberton generalized about the many tasks which come under this title. A synopsis of this article reveals the essence of the Pemberton technique. First of all, the producer is not just a "fifth wheel," Pemberton joked, but he is the man responsible for coordinating all of the elements which bring a dramatic work interpreted by actors before an audience. He first decides that a play should be produced, provides the capital for the "highly costly experiment," engages a director (or directs it himself), actors, scene and costume designers, and other technicians. The producer also provides for a business staff and secures a theatre for the performance. Added to his skill in these other departments, the producer's final measure of success is his ability to procure an audience. His chief problem is finding a worthy script amid all the competition for the attention of American audiences. There is a constant shortage of material. Financing a production, which is highly speculative, provides another difficult task for the producer. Being a successful producer, then, requires the highly specialized skill of judging manuscripts. He must be able to find weak spots in the script and in the production as it emerges in order to correct them before performances. The good producer is still concerned about the quality of the show when it is five hundred times old, and he knows it is as important to get the curtain down with dignity as it is to get it up. Anyone can be a producer, and if he causes a play to be performed, he is indeed a producer. His value varies according to what he brings to the production. Pemberton concluded his essay by saying, "Whether or not he continues to be one will depend on how much instinct, knowledge, and love backed by determination he brings to his job."¹⁷⁶ Pemberton was skilled enough in applying these techniques to become a successful producer who contributed to the activities of the American theatre from 1920 to 1950.

Any list of Pemberton's activities would be redundant. Whereas the degree of importance of his accomplishments is debatable since they were neither particularly innovative nor revolutionary, Pemberton's work in the New York theatre is significant simply because he took an active

¹⁷⁵ John R. Franchey, "Picture of a Producer: Brock Pemberton," p. 87.

¹⁷⁶ Brock Pemberton, "The Producer," pp. 638-39.

and productive part in it as a producer and spokesman. What such credits oftentimes fail to include is the heart of the man; yet, his warmth as a human being was evident in his unselfish work for the Stage Relief Fund and the Stage Door Canteens. Also, any evaluation of Pemberton's credits must include the countless hours of encouragement and fatherly advice he gave to young theatre artists. Constance O'Hara tells of a telephone call to her in which Pemberton took all the blame for the failure of her play and insisted she keep on writing. Miss O'Hara writes, "Who would not love the memory of a man like that?"¹⁷⁷ And in his memory, messages of condolence came from Mayor William O'Dwyer of New York City; actor James Stewart; Dean Burton W. Marvin of the University of Kansas; Alfred M. Landon; Preston Sturges; George S. Kaufman; Arthur Hopkins; Rachel Crothers; Gertrude Lawrence; Sir Francis Evans, the British Consul General; and countless others. His friend, Congressman John Davis Lodge of Connecticut, even eulogized Pemberton in Congress, on March 13, 1950, in which he quoted an editorial from the *Washington Evening Star* of March 14 [sic]: "If only for *Harvey*, he will have a permanent place in the annals of the American theater."¹⁷⁸ Actor Bert Lytell was more inclusive as he sentimentalized at Pemberton's funeral services:

We actors were his people. I say what I know to be a simple, honest truth that Brock was a kind, considerate and honorable gentleman We actors have lost a kind and considerate employer. The theatre has lost a valued producer. And those of use who were close to him have lost a valued possession — a true friend.¹⁷⁹

Who was Brock Pemberton? *Cue* magazine idealistically described his particular niche in the American theatre as that of "a brave gentleman who produces intelligent plays for intelligent people."¹⁸⁰ Realistically, Pemberton was a survivor in a theatrical system which required skill and talent as a merchandiser of a product he had to sell. But more simply, Brock Pemberton was a stage-struck boy from Kansas who made good.

¹⁷⁷ Constance O'Hara, *Heaven Was Not Enough*, p. 362.

¹⁷⁸ United States, *Congressional Record*, pp. 1449-2862.

¹⁷⁹ "Broadway Mourns Brock Pemberton," p. 30.

¹⁸⁰ *Cue*, p. 65.

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