



HONG KONG GIRLS AND REPUBLICAN GIRLS

THIS place is not a brothel, because brothels are illegal by local statute, says a Hong Kong hotelkeeper in "The World of Suzie Wong," a play by Paul Osborn that opened at the Broadhurst last Tuesday. The man is kidding, as Mr. Osborn proceeds to demonstrate. Nowhere but in a brothel in a Broadway play will you find such a concentration of sweetness, light, human decency, and hollow rhetoric as occurs in the Hotel Nam Kok, the scene of most of the action in "The World of Suzie Wong." The Chinese girls who do business in the bar and in the rooms upstairs are as pert, as dainty, and—invariably—as cute as a cageful of canaries; they are also, at heart, as wholesome as a field-hockey team. The male guests—not counting the sailors who line the stage for atmospheric purposes, like books in a law-office set—are almost unfailingly stately and sententious. There is some reason to believe that when the author began writing the play, which is based on the novel of the same name, by Richard Mason, he had his mind on certain comic, not entirely commonplace aspects of the psychology of his heroine—the romantic young prostitute of the title—and of one or two other people in the story. As can be noted in the first act, if you look quickly and listen closely, the possibilities for comedy are there—for instance, in Suzie Wong's rationalizations of her sex life, and in her attitudes toward virginity, which enable her, at different times, to dream of herself as a well-bred maiden and to regard virgins, as a class, as muckers and beasts of prey. So much for Mr. Osborn's good intentions, if he had them. Before long, he yields without struggle to the traditional view of the stage harlot, and Suzie goes downhill artistically—though uphill spiritually—at great speed. Throughout the second, and last, act, she is so tender, true, and saintly that you might expect her, if she were less sturdily built, to do the classic thing, in the end, and die. As it is, Mr. Osborn has made the next most touching arrangement. Her baby dies. To paraphrase a sportswriting expression, this comes as no surprise to the audience. It has long since been made

unmistakably clear that "The World of Suzie Wong" is a trite and sentimental piece of work, in which every potentially valuable insight or point of information leads to a platitude.

The play has, it goes without saying, been gorgeously dressed and brilliantly staged. We live at a time when mechanical excellence in the theatre can be pretty well taken for granted, when miracles of stagecraft are no longer news, and therefore, I suppose, no longer miracles. As one well-known showman said last week, on a television program devoted to celebrating the advent of "The World of Suzie Wong," production mechanics make the play

seem "almost like a motion picture." That's about the size of it, and the effect he spoke of has come, I think, to be considered by a good many Broadway producers the highest aim of their profession. Acting skill is another thing that can usually be depended on these days. Still, the performance of France Nuyen, a Eurasian girl, as Suzie Wong amounts to a remarkably solid achievement for a young, untrained actress. Miss Nuyen shows more faith in Suzie's reality than Mr. Osborn does, and she asserts it to the end. Even in the second act, when she must say things like "I still Suzie, but you not Robert," she gives the impression, against the evidence, of being a wise, practical, and coherent woman, as well as a beautifully shaped one. Ron Randell is fine in another part that begins promisingly but lapses into banality—that of a British businessman who comes to the Hotel Nam Kok to find a substitute for his hobby of dinghy sailing. William Shatner grapples bravely with the role of



"You see, Herb, it isn't quite enough just to know we're a genius and let it go at that. We've got to be a genius at something."

Suzie Wong's most virtuous lover, a spectacularly coy Canadian artist who settles in the brothel to paint and who tortures himself and the audience with morbid oratory because he cannot afford to buy exclusive rights to Suzie's love. Mr. Shatner is an attractive, straightforward kind of actor, and I expect that if he had been given anything believable to do or say, he would have done or said it believably.

The best scenes in the play are big, populous outdoor scenes, into which the director, Joshua Logan, has been able to inject stray touches of humor and character. As I've said, the entire production is a mechanical masterpiece, or miracle. Jo Mielziner's sets are not only brilliant, they are fluid—at any rate, if they don't flow, they spin. They left me groggy with admiration. It's possible, of course, that I've reached a point where these marvels of science are knocking me down too easily. A few weeks ago, I wrote with supine respect about Mr. Mielziner's scenery in another recent play, "Handful of Fire." A letter has just arrived in which a reader says, in part, "The setting for 'Handful of Fire' was the wrong color, the wrong size, the wrong shape, clumsy, and pretentious." In a way, I'd be glad to think that my correspondent knew what he was talking about. It would mean that set designing, like horse racing, could still produce the unexpected.