

DRAMA-LOGUE

ISSUE NO. 8

HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA

FEB. 24 - MARCH 2, 1983

'Sam Bobrick, Is That You?' 'Are You Sure?'

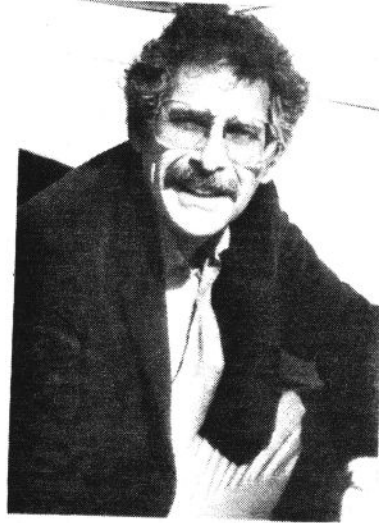
BY T. H. McCULLOH

You know, if our plane goes down east of the Mississippi we're playwrights," Sam Bobrick said to frequent collaborator Ron Clark, "But if it goes down west of the Mississippi we're gagwriters." The conversation took place on a New York-Los Angeles flight following their last less than triumphant opening on Broadway. Most of their New York openings have been less than triumphant, but that hasn't kept the gelt from rolling in from productions of their plays worldwide. For starters, *Norman, Is That You?* pops up numerous times a year at dinner theatres, ran in Los Angeles for seven years at the Ebony Showcase Theatre (Ebony is currently preparing a new production) and the original French production is still running in Paris after almost 12 years. That's not considering frequent showings of their other plays, *No Hard Feelings*, *Murder at the Howard Johnson's* and *Wally's Cafe*.

Sometimes Bobrick writes alone. "I get mixed up in my writing. First of all, I don't have a style. Miller has a style. Williams has a style. Even Ron and I have a style together, but by myself I've written different ways. It depends on how I feel." He has felt like writing a thriller, *Flemming*, and he has felt like writing a rock musical, *Rachinoff*, both of which have premiered regionally in the past two years. He is currently represented in Los Angeles by *Are You Sure?* which opens today at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys.

The comedy/mystery/thriller is a departure even for Sam Bobrick and

of the three plays solely by him "this one is really going to be the most important opening of any because it's here in a big town and it's being reviewed by first string critics. This is the first Equity-waiver play I've done and I think it's the only place this kind of play could start. It isn't a commercial play."



'Sure' playwright Sam Bobrick

Now, Sam. What is commercial? "Almost everything we [Bobrick and Clark] wrote were commercial plays." This one is different. "I love it. It's my favorite play that I've written because it's so bizarre, so different. And I hope it works because Allan Miller is my favorite director. I've worked with the legends and they were awful. Allan is wonderful. I say 'I hope it works' because the critics could come looking for me

(Continued on page 16)

with shotguns this time.

I haven't been in New York in two years because I understand there's a bounty on me now. They won't let me cross the Mississippi. But I think I've been a very good sport about the reviews in New York. I can't be angry about the theatre because it's been nice to us. We've done very well and our plays are always doing well. But we still want that one *hit*. I don't care what a playwright says, the goal is to have a Broadway hit. That is the Big Apple. While I don't think the good plays always start in New York, you hope they'll finish there because once a play gets to New York it has a chance to go all over the country and all over the world."

One of the problems is the gamble on a "little play" on Broadway. "In New York theatre is expensive and people can't go to as many plays as they used to when they were only 10 or 12 bucks a ticket. So what they

want to see is the hits. First of all, you have to please the audience. I mean, you can snore the audience for just so many months and finally they say, 'No matter what the reviews are, this is a play we don't want to see.' By the same token when I did *The Wiz* [as play doctor] it only got mixed reviews but it was an audience play and they had the money to keep going. There was corporate money, 20th Century-Fox.

"Sometimes you don't have that money to hang in. The economics of Broadway are that if you don't get the *one* paper and you don't have a star to carry you, you're in trouble for six weeks. Usually when we open on Broadway there isn't a penny left in the till. You know how it is with a show, you just barely get by. Something always happens; the star gets sick, the set is wrong, something like that. Suddenly that cushion of money is gone and you just can't hold it in."

Considering the history of trends on the Great White Way, perhaps Sam Bobrick was either 20 years too late or too early. Small comedies are out of style on Times Square. "You know what they now think is a comedy on Broadway?" he asks. "Something like *The Gin Game* is a comedy on Broadway now, something with importance and a few laughs. I think it's not that it's a comedy with something serious but a drama with some comedy in it. That's what they feel they want. We hope there were some serious things in what we wrote, but we disguised them with jokes. That's very tough for Broadway to accept. That's why we do so well in dinner theatre.

"We really dealt at that time with problems of the middle class. There are very few things on Broadway about middle class people. They really like to deal with the Noel Coward type of people or else the Tennessee Williams kind of person. So we kind of didn't fit. Middle America always has trouble fitting in. It took us four plays to realize our reviews were never really bad. They just didn't break right.

"Okay. This is the business and critics are necessary to bring in the business. Because if you don't get those critics and they don't tell people what the play's about, people won't come see it. But you grow up and say, 'This is it. It's the critic's job

to say what he likes or doesn't like. I don't mind when they tell you what they like or don't like. That's a critic. What I hate is when they tell you it's the worst thing they ever saw and don't tell you why. It's like some of the critics—I know Bill Edwards wants to write plays, Rick Talcove wants to write plays, and they do that. I hope it doesn't cloud their minds but I'm sure it does a little bit.

"I really feel you've got to be fair because we're only trying to be entertaining, whether it's a drama or whatever. Broadway is not a case of taking the money and running because there is no money being in the playwrighting business. It is something people do because they want to do it. You could make a lot more money doing something else.

"Like writing for television," he laughs. And well he should. Sam is leaning back on a comfortable sofa in his well-appointed office in the writers' building at Burbank Studios. He not only has made money writing for television, he has won Writers' Guild Awards for Outstanding scripts for the *Andy Griffith Show*, *Get Smart* and *Kraft Music Hall*. He's also written for the Smothers Brothers, Alan King and Mary Tyler Moore. He's produced for television and sold specials. He wrote the story for *The Last Remake of Beau Geste* and a feature he wrote, *Jimmy the Kid* (with Gary Coleman), will be released this year. Why does he do it?

"I don't know. Let me think this over. The money?" He pauses for his laugh like a good comic, then his own laughter fills his office. "Yeah. It's because you get your money up front. You know you're going to get that check when you're doing the work. With a play it's all so speculative. You've got to like to write plays to write plays, because it is *not* a good business. If you have a hit, *that's* a good business. Like they say, to be a television producer you can't make a living but you can get very wealthy if you have a hit, being an independent producer. Same thing with plays. If you can afford to do them it's great. But you've got to be prepared to be wiped out. And that's it.

"Listen, television was my tuition. Ron and I would write enough to make money, save it, then take a year off and write a play. We were fortunate to be able to do that. We both had children and mortgages. If you're single that's great. That's the time to write a play, when you have no responsibilities. When I was struggling in New York, unfortunately I didn't know I wanted to write a play; that would have been a great time for me to get into the theatre. But I was just trying to get into television where it was a living. I wanted to be able to date girls.

"But I like it. If you like it you do it. It's like why does anybody want to become an actor? The rejection an actor takes! If you write a play it takes a year, so you can get rejected once a year. If you're an actor you're going up for parts every day of your life and you're getting rejected. Why does anybody want to do it? Because they love it. If you want to do it and *don't* do it, I think you'll be sorry."

One thing Sam isn't is sorry. He mines the media during the day and is a playwright by night. He has time for little else except his *third* obsession, jogging. Of course he works on scripts while he's running. "I run so slow I think I set records, that's how slow I run. And I love to read t-shirts. This is a bad thing. All the girls, I look at them and they look at me and they think I'm looking at their tits. But I *love* to read t-shirts."

So if one day you're driving through Encino and see a "ruggedly handsome nebbish" slowly jogging and reading t-shirts, call out, "Sam Bobrick, is that you?" He'll probably say, "Sure!" Sam Bobrick *is* sure. ☆