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## EDITORS' NOTE

# Man on the Aisle at 4,000 Plays

The first of some 3,500 or 4,000 plays that Tom Prideaux has seen in his prodigious theatergoing life was a performance of *Turn to the Right* in Bay City, Mich. Tom was 7 then and went up from his home town of Hillsdale because his Uncle Jay was touring in the play. "There was a peach orchard scene in it," he recalls, "and when we went backstage to see my uncle, I saw that the dusty old peach trees had their branches stuck into brackets in the trunks. I thought it was a fascinating way to make a world."

Tom is responsible for our lead story this week. He has been LIFE's theater editor and critic over the past 25 years. But going to a play still excites him. He makes a point of scurrying down the aisle and into his seat at the instant when lights are down and before curtain starts up—to get there a few seconds early or late spoils his game. Then he sits with his coat on for 10 or 15 minutes until, warmed by what he sees or remembering that he hasn't taken his coat off, he wriggles out of it and settles into the evening.

The thousands of shows Tom has seen include plays on Broadway, off Broadway, out of town and all over Europe; college, community and amateur plays; and a Christmas pageant at Dalton School because the son of a friend was in it. His Broadway theatergoing began when he visited New York as a youngster and saw *Lightnin'*, in which Uncle Jay was playing (Uncle Jay was Jason Robards Sr., father of the present star).

After graduating from Yale, Tom taught school, did some writing for the theater, then applied for a job on LIFE. The then managing editor, a formidable man of impeccable but unpredictable logic, asked the advice of a friend of Tom's on the magazine. Prideaux is a good writer, said the friend. The M.E. was noncommittal. He knows the theater, the friend went on. M.E. was still noncommittal. And, added the friend, Tom wrote a book about ancient Egypt. "An Egyptologist!" boomed the M.E. "We'll take him." The only Egyptian Tom has ever had to review was a belly dancer, but his book *Never to Die*, written with Josephine Mayer, has just gone into a new edition.

Tom is agitated and crotchety when writing. But most times he is bubbling over with puns and games, displaying a gossamer whimsy that masks his Swedish-steel mind. A walking anthology of popular song lyrics, he likes to challenge friends like Richard Rodgers or Irving Berlin to remember the words of their more obscure numbers. When they falter, Tom jumps triumphantly in. Among the lyrics he remembers down to the last syllable are those he wrote himself when he was the ninth-grade impresario at Lincoln School. He takes pleasure in reciting them and then recalling what he considers the greatest piece of nontypecasting in U.S. theater history. He wrote in a walk-on role of Chief Beggar and gave it to a classmate named Nelson Rockefeller.



TOM PRIDEAUX

*George P. Hunt*

GEORGE P. HUNT  
Managing Editor

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