


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Prince of West End Avenue

Alan Isler

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About the Author

Alan Isler was born in London in 1934 and spent the war years in Harrogate. In 1952, at the age of eighteen, he emigrated to New York, where he now teaches English Literature at Queen's College. His new novel, *Kraven Images*, is published by Jonathan Cape.

ALSO BY ALAN ISLER

The Prince Of West End Avenue
Kraven Images

**FOR ELLEN,
Without Whom Most Assuredly Not**

***The best actors in the world, either for tragedy,
comedy, history, pastoral,
pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-
historical, tragical-comical-
historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem
unlimited.***

Hamlet 2.2

The Prince of West End Avenue

Alan Isler


V I N T A G E

1

THE LAST FEW weeks have not been easy for me. After an absence of sixty years, Magda Damrosch has reentered my life and my system is in turmoil. I cannot sleep and I am troubled by constipation. How ironic that the release of the psychological mechanism should be accompanied by stoppages in the physical! And of course there are the headaches, two points of pain that gather behind the temples and converge at the base of the skull. No cause for alarm, however. I shall not die at the Emma Lazarus for want of a laxative and an aspirin. Not for nothing does Benno Hamburger call our little home the Enema Lazarus. This witticism is still making the rounds. No doubt about it, he is our specialist in coprological humor, a man of unbounded cloacal enthusiasms.

But what sort of a way is this to begin, for heaven's sake? Even to talk of such things! I am ashamed of myself. First I should tell you who I am. My name is Otto Korner. Dropping the umlaut over the *o* was my first concession to America. Yesterday, September 13, 1978, I celebrated my eighty-third birthday at the aforementioned Emma Lazarus, a retirement home on West End Avenue in Manhattan. Eventually you'll find me just south of Mineola, Long Island, where I will be taking up permanent subterranean residence.

Quite a few of my friends are already buried there. Only last week Adolphe Sinsheimer led the motorcade. He was to have been our Hamlet. (Yes, we have our little theatrical society here. Nothing to boast of, I suppose, by the severe standards of Broadway, but good enough.) Adolphe alone of all of us could claim some professional experience. For

reasons now buried with him, he was in Hollywood in the 1930s and, amazingly, found brief employment as a Ruritanian soldier in the movie *The Prisoner of Zenda*. This was, it is true, his sole public offering on the altar of Thespis, but such are the vagaries of fame that this happenstance has granted him a kind of celluloid and ghostly immortality. He always spoke fondly of Ronald Colman, the great English actor, on the anniversary of whose death he would wear a black armband. Well, Sinsheimer is gone, and it would be meanspirited to question the closeness of his friendship with “dear Ronnie,” as he always called him. It appears Adolphe choked upon a lump of sugar he had hidden in his room against a midnight hunger pang, turned purple and died before he could summon help. Thus we can say that Sinsheimer, the first of us to become a supernumerary, discovered at the last how sweet it is to die.

But my subject is not amateur theatricals, it is art—or, more accurately, *anti-art*: in brief, Dada. I want to set the historical record straight. For sixty years I have been harboring the truth, a private possession, whether out of greed or modesty I cannot say. But Magda Damrosch has reappeared, and now the truth must out. It groans for expression. If, as a result, my part on the world’s stage appears inflated, so be it.

I might as well tell you that I have been cast as the Ghost in *Hamlet*. There is an irony in that if one can but sniff it out. We produce only the classics at the Emma Lazarus. Of course, you have to make allowances. Last year, for example, our Juliet was eighty-three and our Romeo seventy-eight. But if you used your imagination, it was a smash hit. True, on opening night; when Romeo killed Tybalt, it was Romeo who fell down and had to be carried on a stretcher from the stage. Look for him now in Mineola.

Meanwhile, we’ve lost our Hamlet. Our little troupe is in disarray. We are to meet formally this afternoon to discuss

what we are to do. But already cliques are forming. You cannot imagine the flutter in our dovecote. Some are talking of canceling the production, as a token of respect. Others say that if the play were a comedy, then yes, cancel it, no question; but since it is a tragedy . . . Tosca Dawidowicz, our Ophelia, flatly refuses to play opposite Freddy Blum, Sinsheimer's understudy, claiming that he lacks "stage presence," and besides, his halitosis would make her forget her lines. Actually, it is an open secret here that Blum wooed her, won her, and rejected her in the course of a single hectic weekend. La Dawidowicz has found an ally in Lottie Grabscheidt, our Gertrude, another Blum reject. As for me, I remain aloof from such childish squabbling and bickering. In principle, I believe that "the show must go on," but I should not be much put out were it called off. Sinsheimer, the cause of the tempest, is, needless to say, beyond caring. In the meantime, I hold my counsel. But at the meeting I intend to reveal that I have already mastered the Prince's role, and should I be asked to take the part, I will of course accept. Under those circumstances, Blum could become Osric, and Hamburger could be shifted from Osric to the Ghost. We shall see. "The readiness is all."

2

FOR REASONS I am not prepared to examine, it is difficult for me to write about Magda. Let me note only that in sixty years Magda Damrosch, miraculously, has not aged by so much as a single white hair. She looks exactly as she looked—unbearably beautiful!—when I last saw her in Zurich, in 1917. She holds herself with the same slender grace, the same quizzical tilt to her head, as then. Even now her smile, accompanied by a slight raising of her left brow, sends arrows directly to the heart. What is she doing here? Tristan Tzara used to say, only half joking, that she was a spy in the service of Franz Josef. But the Emperor is long gone. The only undercover work at the Emma Lazarus has to do with bedpans.

She joined the staff four weeks ago as a physical therapist. Dr. Comyns, who is an even bigger fool than he looks, accompanied her on a round of introductions. We were at rehearsal. Poor Sinsheimer, not yet a resident of Mineola, had just grasped Tosca Dawidowicz by a plump wrist and was saying, with heavy and deliberate sarcasm, “Nymph, in thy orisons be all my sins remember’d.” He was sarcastic, I should explain, not because La Dawidowicz is eighty-two years of age, was wearing a gray Mickey Mouse sweatsuit and large, pink hair curlers, tips the scale at no less than 175 pounds, and has a chin that strains upward to meet an eagerly descending nose. Nor was he sarcastic because he recognized in his words a veiled, punning reference to himself. No, it was Sinsheimer’s belief that Ophelia was a whore. His argument, I must say, was quite convincing. He had backed it up during auditions with

pointed references to the text and a complete Stanislavskian disquisition on hidden motivations. For our little group, of course, there was an additional element of irony to be found in the fact of La Dawidowicz's in-house reputation.

At any rate, he spoke his line, turned from Ophelia with a sneer, and saw Dr. Comyns climb onto the stage with Magda Damrosch in tow. Sinsheimer was not one to miss a trick. "Here's metal more attractive!" he said. Still in character, he waved a regal hand in Magda's direction.

Comyns has a slight frame and is constantly on guard against overweight. His hair and vogueish beard are of a deep, lustrous black. When he smiles, his fleshy lips reveal square white teeth, wantonly gapped. In fact, he is something of a dandy and even wears a silk handkerchief in the pocket of his physician's smock. On formal occasions such as this, he eschews brevity and embarks on serpentine sentences that loop and meander, coil in upon themselves, creep and digress, taking his auditors upon a harrowing journey through the language. "It gives me—how shall I put it? great pleasure?—yes, I am more than happy—in fact, Miss Dattner, I am delighted—to have you meet a gentleman who is not only the director of the Emma Lazarus Old Vic but also, and from this you can get some idea of his many talents, also, in short, the principal actor in the current production, which, as you can see, is even now in rehearsal, and thus he is one of our, if you will, celebrities." He ended triumphantly and mopped his brow with his silk handkerchief. "And how are we today, Adolphe?"

"I humbly thank you, well, well, well." Sinsheimer felt a touch of the antic disposition.

Comyns made the rest of the introductions and chose to express "in behalf of all of us here at the Emma Lazarus a warm welcome to Miss Mandy Dattner, the newest and youngest and—not a word beyond this friendly group!—surely the prettiest member of the staff."

There was polite applause. Magda—my Magda!—smiled and raised her left brow. I almost fell from the stage.

Lottie Grabscheidt, who sucks up to every new acquaintance, broke the silence: “I hope they’ve given you a nice office, darling.” Dressed as always in black, La Grabscheidt was sporting for rehearsals a new pin: in silver filigree, a mask of comedy superimposed upon a mask of tragedy, a botched design that from the slightest distance looks like a grinning skull. This she fingered, as if to demonstrate her thespian credentials.

“Miss Dattner understands how cramped we are here,” said Comyns. “She has agreed to share Mrs. Baum’s office, right next to the staff dining room.” He showed his teeth briefly and narrowed his eyes behind his spectacles: thus he signals that a witticism is on the way. “Next to the dining room, she’ll easily be able to get her just desserts. I ask you, could we treat her better than that?”

“God’s bodkin, man, much better!” said poor Sinsheimer angrily. He held his arms akimbo and stamped a petulant foot. “Use every man after his desert, and who shall ’scape whipping?” Say what you will about Sinsheimer, he knew the play inside and out.

What she said to me personally I was too agitated to take in. But by not so much as a blink did she betray that she knew me.

Later that day I found Comyns relaxing in the library. He was dreamily stimulating his inner ear with a stiff index finger. The pose quite suited him. Quickly I brought the conversation around to the new therapist. “She seems so young for so responsible a position,” I suggested.

“Nonsense. She’s been trained in Europe. All the latest techniques.”

He thinks he knows us “Europophiles,” as he calls us, forgetting what it was that brought so many of us here in the first place. Needless to say, it is Comyns who wags his tail, rolls over, and pants before the idol of Europe. His car,

for example? A Mercedes Benz! “Europe!” I shook my head in wonder. “You don’t say!”

Comyns showed his teeth and narrowed his eyes. “She’s kind of sexy, too, eh? You old devils won’t have any trouble getting your limbs in motion.”

To this sally, of course, I made no reply. Better to suppose he confused me with Blum, the satyr. I nodded frostily and strode away. (No, no, Otto, only the truth: you winked in return and shuffled off.)

But I have other, more reliable sources of information. I waited patiently for two days and then visited Personnel—that is to say, Mrs. Selma Gross. Selma occupies an office that has a bulletproof window looking out into the lobby near the main entrance. Thus she doubles as portress. No wily Orpheus could tootle his Eurydice past her. In brief, we must check with her if we wish to go out. She has the daily list of “solo-ambulants.”

Like Dr. Comyns, she is of native stock. To look at her, one would suppose her a resident rather than a member of the staff. But in fact there is a Mr. Gross: Bernie, a C.P.A., with whom she leads a full and active life far away from us—in Fresh Meadows, to be precise.

At any rate, I waved cheerily to her through the bulletproof glass and pointed at her bell. She buzzed me in.

“I kiss your hand, dear lady,” I said, as breezily as if we had met at the Hotel Sacher. Selma loves such archaic formulations. “Pining for the sight of beauty, I thought immediately of you. And here, dear lady, I am.”

Selma pursed her lips and patted her hair, a piled mass of drab blond whose declivities give off a curious orange tinge. Her face was, as ever, a thick, grotesque mask of makeup, pure Dada. In such a way, no doubt, she keeps alive her Bernie’s guttering flame of passion. “Going out, Mr Korner?” She reached for her list.

“No, I came only to see you. Ah, but I imagine you must be busy, what with new staff appointments, forms to fill out,

red tape, heaven knows what. I must not selfishly keep you from your work.”

“Oh, you mean Mandy Dattner, the new therapist.” Selma patted a file on her desk. “That’s all done.”

“She’s European, I understand.”

Selma snorted. “If Cleveland is in Europe.”

“But she was trained in Europe. Lausanne? Vienna?”

“Two years, Shaker Heights Community College, 1973 to 1975,” Selma began, counting on her fingers. “Two years bumming around Europe, 1975 to ’77; one year, Spenser School of Gymnastic Vigor, Wigan, England, 1976 to ’77, graduated magna cum laude, Ph.Th.D.”

I raised a puzzled brow.

“Physical Therapy Diploma.”

“And now she graces our little community?”

Selma sniffed. “If you ask me, it’s a scandal. But you know Dr. Weisskopf. One look at a body like hers and he’s making a fool of himself. That’s the only credential a woman needs around here.”

Dr. Hugo Weisskopf is director of the Emma Lazarus, which he rules with an iron fist. One shake of his head and we’re out of the play, erased from the list of solo-ambulants, put on a diet of fruit juice and porridge. He is not to be trifled with. Hence I have not as yet reported my insomnia and my constipation. Behind his back we call him the Kommandant: Hamburger, rhyming Teutonically, calls our distinguished director “Dr. Scheisskopf.” For Hamburger, the shift from Weisskopf-Whitehead to Scheisskopf-Shithead was a matter of course.

The conversation, clearly, had taken a dangerous turn. Not wishing to speak words that might later be used against me, I rewarded Selma’s confidence with a sympathetic smile. “I think, dear lady, that perhaps I will go out after all. A little fresh air before lunch.”

Selma reached again for her list of solo-ambulants.

* * *

MANDY DATTNER, MAGDA DAMROSCH: the similarity is evident to the meanest understanding. But what does it mean? No, I am not senile, I am not mad. I know as well as you that this child from Cleveland is not—cannot be—the Magda Damrosch who broke my heart in Zurich all those years ago. *That* Magda Damrosch went up in smoke at Auschwitz in 1943. For this appalling piece of information I am indebted to Egon Selinger, who wrote from Tel Aviv in 1952, finding me heaven knows how. He was looking for other survivors. Not believing myself to be a survivor and having, besides, personal reasons enough for not corresponding with him, I never replied.

But in some sense this Mandy Dattner *is* that Magda Damrosch. Her arrival here cannot be accidental. Not that I think she knows more about her purpose here than I. But that we have been brought together for some purpose, I do not for a second doubt. Richard Huelsenbeck, one of the original gang of Dada nihilists, once mocked me as the typical German poet, “a dope who thinks that everything has to be as it is.” (Years later he enlarged upon this idea of his in print. He had of course expunged any reference to me. They had long ago decided that I was a nonperson.) But one does not have to believe in Order or in Fate or in the God of our Fathers to believe in Purpose. When at a royal ball an aide whispered in Prince Metternich’s ear that the Czar of all the Russias was dead, the Prince is reported to have mused, “I wonder what his purpose could have been.” Sinsheimer, now in Mineola, perhaps knows.

3

WELL, WE'VE HAD our little meeting. The warring factions had apparently met in advance and ironed out their differences. The rest of us were presented with a fait accompli. Nahum Lipschitz was in the chair. He has a small head, thin and alert as a lizard's. "We asked ourselves," he told us, "what Adolphe would have wanted." Sinsheimer, it transpired, would have wanted none other than Lipschitz himself to replace him. But wait, there was more: Lipschitz looked at me and licked his lips. Sinsheimer would also have liked to see Freddy Blum as the Ghost. That left vacant the role formerly assigned to Lipschitz, the Gravedigger. It appeared that Sinsheimer would have wanted me to fill it.

Benno Hamburger, a true friend, came spiritedly to my defense. "What kind of nonsense is this? You think we're in Russia here? A ukase from the Supreme Soviet? To play the ghost of a former king of Denmark, you need talent and a certain natural majesty. To these qualities Korner can lay a decent claim. Let Freddy Blum play a small-town sponger, a schnorrer, which no doubt he is."

Lipschitz's bald head glistened. He blinked rapidly and turned to La Grabscheidt as if for succor. She did not fail him.

"That's some crust you got there, Benno Hamburger, some crust! I don't speak for Blum, God knows. I make no secret what I think of him." (Here Blum winced.) "But a little respect for Adolphe, may he rest in peace, wouldn't hurt. And a little consideration for Nahum wouldn't hurt either. He takes over from poor Adolphe not only the role of Prince but

the role of director also. So maybe you should think twice before you open your mouth.”

Hamburger shot Lottie a look of disgust. He would not deign to reply.

Lipschitz licked his lips. “Let me reason with him, Lottie. An objection is an objection. A director I may be, but a Stalin I’m not.” And he embarked upon an apologia that wound its way like a wounded snake through intractable underbrush.

“Enough!” Hamburger held up his hand. “Dr. Comyns is on duty, Lipschitz. I diagnose an acute case of verbal diarrhea. Go see if he can give you something for it.” He got up and made for the door, pausing only to point a pudgy finger at Lipschitz: “On the day of your birth, you were accurately named!” The door slammed behind him.

I, of course, adhering to my policy of aloofness from the fray, said nothing. Besides, I had experienced a sudden glimmering of understanding, like a small, dull light momentarily glimpsed through swirling mists. True, it was gone before I could locate it. But it left me convinced that there was purpose, too, in all my change of roles. Things were coming together. What things? We would see. I was to be the Gravedigger.

* * *

AS A BOY—a prepubescent, we would unblushingly say today—I was always losing parts of myself. Tonsils, an appendix: those, of course, were normal. But I also lost a little toe, my left earlobe, the tip of a finger. Nothing essential, you understand. And I can’t say I remember any pain associated with “Otto’s accidents,” no lasting traumata. “He’ll grow out of it, Frieda, don’t make such a fuss,” Manya, my maiden aunt, told my mother firmly. “I only hope,” moaned my mother, “there’ll still be something left of him.”

I was reminded of these boyhood misfortunes by a devastating discovery this morning: my letter from Rilke has

disappeared! Rilke, the most sublime of German poets! I've looked everywhere, turned my room upside down. Lost and Found knows nothing of it. The maids, if in fact they understand my rusty Castilian, claim not to have seen it. Naturally, for so important a loss—a theft?—I went to the Kommandant's office, pushing my way past his receptionist. In vain. The Kommandant was unmoved, impenetrable, a Philistine. Why was I making such a brouhaha? He was sure the letter would turn up. I grew incoherent. To my shame, I wept, I could not stop myself. The Kommandant grew severe. If I allowed myself to become so upset over nothing—*nothing!*—I would soon be unable to continue in rehearsals. He gave me a sedative and ordered me to go and lie down. He would look in on me later.

The pill seems to have worked.

* * *

TWO WEEKS HAVE PASSED since I wrote that last sentence. I have been ill, bedridden. The headaches persisted and the constipation gave way to painful stomach cramps. There were other complications: for example, a heavy numbness in my left arm. But all that is over, and I am happy to report that I am now convalescent. What remains is a slight dizziness and a new weakness in the legs.

Hamburger has been in to see me. Also Lipschitz. He was very decent, assuring me that the role of the Gravedigger remains mine. Ordinarily, removal from the list of solo-ambulants means automatic removal from the play. But he had spoken on my behalf, he said, with the Kommandant and had managed to secure my place. He brought with him a bouquet of flowers and the good wishes of the cast.

My letter has still not "turned up."

What a catastrophe of a life! To have started at the pinnacle, an established man of letters before one's career had properly begun, at nineteen a book of poems already

published, *Days of Darkness, Nights of Light*, an article in the cultural section of the *Nürnberger Freie Presse!*

I came across an English translation of one of my poems in a secondhand bookshop some years ago. It was in a volume with the doomed title *Silver Poets of Germany, 1870-1914: A Pre-War Anthology* (London, 1922). Obviously I had scrambled through just under the wire. The book was thick with dust and falling apart; for twenty-five cents it was mine. Here is a sample of what a German Silver Poet sounds like in translation:

The roots dig deep,
Thrust through the shattered skull,
Drink water from the rock,
Embrace the shards of lost millennia. . . .

“But what does it mean, Otto?” I hear my father, the bourgeois literalist, asking doubtfully. To be honest, I’m not sure I myself knew; certainly I’ve no idea today what it meant. My poems were the vague gropings and premonitions of a very young man, expressions of feeling and thought utterly divorced from experience in the world.

But I tell you I can still feel something of the Wunderkind’s exultation as I held tremulously my first published offspring, buckram the color of dark moss, and gold-stamped. Its crisp freshness is still in my nostrils, the ruffle of its pages in my ears.

The reviewers were generous. A bright future was forecast for me. Kapsreiter proclaimed me a “bold new voice in a sluggish season”; Drobil welcomed me to the Groves of Parnassus—something of a witticism since this was the name of a coffee shop in Berlin frequented by writers and poets, where he himself held a regular table. But to me most exciting of all was the letter from Rilke, a poet of infinite subtlety and sensibility, offering warm praise for my “precocious talent.” No, I did not lack for encouragement.

Even so, to have immediately submitted an article on poetry to the cultural editor of the *Nürnbergischer Freie Presse* required a wayward impudence, a youthful hubris, a chutzpah that still leaves me breathless! The *NFP*, after all, spoke with an authority in Europe in those days matched only by the *Times* of London. To appear in the cultural section was to etch one's words in adamant rock. Max Frankenthaler, the editor then, was a man of colossal energy and integrity, and of extraordinary intellectual rigor. His contributors were the giant voices of Europe: Zola, yes, but also Shaw, Gide, Ibsen. In the *NFP* my parents' generation found those opinions they could with confidence adopt as their own: liberal enlightenment in the van, comfortably supported by the massed troops of conservatism in the rear. A young writer of quite exceptional talent might reasonably hope to appear in the literary pages at the back of the *NFP*, but in the cultural section, the feuilleton, the bottom half of the front page, separated from the ephemeral political twaddle of the day by a thick black line that ran from margin to margin? And yet Frankenthaler accepted my article. I was nineteen, for heaven's sake!

The moment in the breakfast room that morning was surely the happiest of my life. We sit around the table, Mother, Aunt Manya, my sister Lola, my father, chatting of this and that. Polished wood, white linen, gleaming silverware, a warm breeze fluttering the curtains at the window. The breakfast smells mingle with the aroma of my father's cigar. In comes the maid with the morning's letters and the *NFP*; she places them on the table at my father's left hand. I feel my knees begin to tremble. "A little more coffee, Käti, if you please," says Mother. Aunt Manya tells Lola that she will meet her after school for a visit to the dentist. Lola makes a face. Father glances at the front page of his paper. Consternation! I laugh out loud. There before him is the name of his own son, a boy whose opinions until this moment have been automatically dismissed. The phone

begins to ring: our friends and relatives have also been looking at the *NFP*. For months my mother was to carry that article with her in her purse, showing it to anyone she could buttonhole.

The descent from the heights was almost immediate. There were to be no more volumes of poetry, no more articles in the *NFP*. The feuilleton that had emblazoned my name among the worthies appeared on the edge of the abyss, a bare fortnight before the events of Sarajevo hurled us all into the darkness. My fate too, it seems, was bound up with that of the Austrian archduke.

The letter from Rilke, retained under glass first in my father's study and then in my own, miraculously preserved even in the concentration camps, yellowed and almost indecipherable along its creases, a spot of warmth between my bones and my rags, that letter is now gone, swallowed up in the maw of the Emma Lazarus.

4

NEWS FROM THE outside occasionally reaches the convalescent. For example, the “Perlmutter Seminar” has had another of its ad hoc meetings in the residents’ lounge. This is a loose grouping with only Hermione Perlmutter and Hamburger as its constants. It is otherwise made up of whoever cannot escape in time. La Perlmutter seizes her moments cunningly, usually after dinner, when a somnolence descends and no one has yet poked the television into life. The chatter grows desultory, then ceases altogether, and suddenly, with girlish insouciance, she drops a question like a small explosive among us. “What *is* ethnicity?” “What *is* a pseudointellectual?” “What is a *Jewish* artist?” Then she looks around with the eager air of a bright child hoping for new knowledge. Of course, her opinion has already been formed. At any rate, somebody offers an answer. Someone else refines it, Hamburger weighs in—and the seminar is already launched. “Why don’t we draw our chairs into a circle,” says La Perlmutter winningly, “and really thrash this one out.”

Blum, who came to see me in my illness and brought with him a small box of chocolates (which, incidentally, he consumed during his visit), reported on last night’s seminar, “What is the role of the poet in a time of national strife?” He stayed, he told me, only because Hermione has “great boobs.” He is talking, please understand, about a short, dumpy woman with the little arms and hands of a chipmunk, who dresses like Shirley Temple, in waistless frocks cinctured with satin sashes, shiny-black Mary Janes and cotton anklets. Her long, frizzy hair she ties back from her