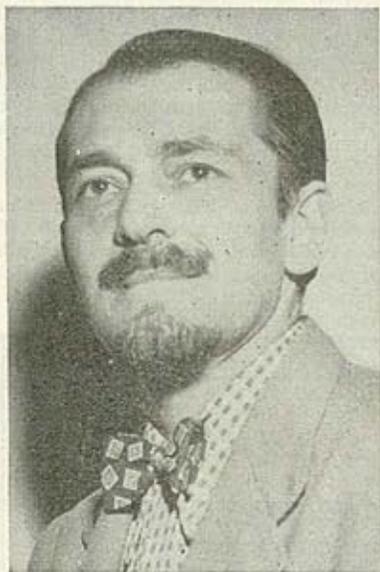


# Locally Yours . . . .

By Ruth Arnfeld

## That Guy In The Beard



Harold V. Cohen

That bearded prophet you may have seen roaming the sidewalks of Grant Street up around the Post-Gazette building is not a super from the Oberammergau Passion Play. Prophet with honor in his own country though he is, Harold V. Cohen nevertheless is more kith and kin of Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi. In fact, the only thing that might make him more third than first cousin to

these shanks of Hollywood ham is his predilection for kitchen tablecloth shirts rather than the funereal calm of black and white.

As drama critic of the Post-Gazette, Cohen's reviews are considered tops in the town, especially when they come out of the sizzling fat of one of his pungent pans. Quick to scent the cheap and mawkish in play or picture, his caustic intolerance comes from the same nest of wit whose well-laid eggs the late Percy Hammond hatched across the drama page of the New York Herald-Tribune. In fact, says Cohen—and there is still a note of respect in his voice even after almost 20 years flashing his own shining light—it was Percy Hammond who first fired his ambition to become a drama critic. That ambition, which dates back to when he was a kid, is the only one he ever had. He remembers reading at a very early age Hammond's theatrical criticisms and worshipping his style of writing.

Cohen's own career had modest beginnings when, as a boy of twelve, he wrote up sports for the New Castle News and was the old Pittsburgh Dispatch's correspondent in Wampum, Pa., where his family lived. At New Castle high school he essayed one of his two attempts at acting when he played Spettigue in the school's production of "Charlie's Aunt."

After graduating from New Castle Cohen went to Penn State where he became editor-in-chief of the campus paper, Collegian. There he really decided on which side of the footlights his wavering footsteps would fall. Penn State put on a mystery play, "The Seventh Guest," and Cohen delegated one of his associate editors to cover the play because he himself was playing one of the roles, that of a detective whose only appearance was in the last act when he appeared to solve the crime. Next morning, when he read his colleague's evaluation of actor Cohen, Cohen decided at once and for all time that "it was better to write about actors than be one."

When it was remarked that his writing ranges from trenchant acidity to lacrimose saccharinity, Cohen quipped, "I'm catastrophic in my enthusiasms." He finds it much easier to write an unfavorable review than one of praise because there are so many nasty things to cook up in neat puns and epigrams, but phrases for praises come out in limited, repetitive notes. When someone once asked him how he could criticize a play when he could not possibly write one, Cohen quoted his paragon, Hammond, who once answered the same question by saying, "I can't lay an egg, but I can smell a bad one."

Come September, 1946 Critic Cohen will celebrate his 20th anniversary at the Post-Gazette. In fact, the PG is the only employer he has ever known. He started there at the copy-desk right after graduation from Penn State. After three years as copyreader, he got the job of movie critic. In those days movie criticism and reviews of whatever "dramma" came to the legitimate stage here were handled in widely separated stalls. The late Harvey Gaul wrote the latter. In 1936 Gaul left the PG and Cohen

was given the opportunity to spread his talent in both pastures. That he has done a good job is attested to by the fact that he is the youngest and highest paid drama critic of the local papers.

He also writes a weekly column for Variety, under the breezier name of Hal Cohen. The more dignified Harold V. Cohen by-line happened into being when Vincent Lopez once told him that his horoscope demanded a V. The middle initial was originally W. Cohen's theatrical news has been sponsored for a weekly broadcast on Saturday evening at 6:30 o'clock over WJAS since July 1944. In May of 1945 another radio stint was added when Sho-Biz-Quiz went on the air for a weekly Tuesday evening sort of drama Information Please with Kaspar Monahan, Karl Krug and Cohen the experts who answer questions hashed out by George Heid.

As for writing plays or anything else besides his columns and broadcasts. Cohen says he does not have the time and then adds, "Which is a good excuse. It keeps me from finding out that I can't do it." He thinks he has been very lucky to have the opportunity of making his living doing the only thing he has ever wanted to do.

For those who think that drama critics have an easy life of free movies and theatre, Cohen's schedule will dispel that idea. He catches the new movies in the morning, eats lunch, goes back to his desk at the paper and starts slugging out two or three columns of copy. The only time he stops is to light up another link in his cigarette chain. Covering Monday night openings at the Nixon leaves him exactly one hour and a half to write his review to meet the deadline for Tuesday morning's paper. The rest of the evenings, except for broadcasts, he makes the rounds of nightspots, review floorshows. This also gives him opportunity to talk to theatre people and collect gossip for his Drama Desk column.

Cohen has the reputation for being completely honest in his opinions and completely impervious to bribe. Someone once summed up Cohen's philosophy by saying of him, "He says what he thinks, thinks what he feels, has the courage to declare what he feels." An exhibitor once said of him, "You can't even buy him a drink."

For the past few years the Post-Gazette has been sending Cohen to Hollywood for a few weeks each year from where he has sent back puckish reports on the movie capital. This year he thinks he will take a "real vacation," something he has not done since 1941. He hopes to spend several weeks with his wife and daughter in Provincetown.

Mrs. Cohen is the former Stephanie Diamond, radio and stage actress. Says Cohen, "We have been married almost ten years. Of course, I swept her off her feet—we went together for seven years before getting married." They disagree violently on all their theatrical criticisms. Mrs. Cohen, affectionately known as Steve, does a weekly radio broadcast on fashion news every Friday for one of the department stores. She also is heard in local radio shows and occasionally appears in Pittsburgh Playhouse productions. Of Daughter Barbara, now four, Cohen says, "She's an unmitigated ham already—she's sweating out her Equity card right now!" As for her looks, papa says, "I'm afraid she looks like me, but on her it looks good."

You have to get behind that beard to find out if she really does look like him. That will be some months hence when Cohen will dispense

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with the underbrush which he grew to cover up scars from a recent automobile accident. A safety zone jumped up and hit his car one smoggy night and the car hit back—with the broken steering wheel shaft in Cohen's chin. He expects to give the plastic surgeon boys a chance to make him pretty again.

Although he really doesn't have to. On him the beard looks good.