

# ON STAGE

BY BILL O'CONNELL

► **PRETTY FACES**, a new musical by Robert W. Cabell, concerns itself in a novel and potentially diverting way with the world of beauty contests. The twist is that these contestants are "large and lovely," those cautious words that are being applied to men and women today who are everything from chunky to humongous. The subject matter is dealt with in a direct and appealingly forthright way, with some inoffensive music along the way. The performers all shine, and the production was directed with energy and speed by former Bob Fosse dance Gene Foote. But "Pretty Faces" remains an intriguing idea in need of further probing. Among the missed opportunities was a number combining the knockout body of Charles Mandracchia, as the vacant hunk of a contest host, with the spunky, sexually voracious contestants. It would have further underscored Cabell's engaging (if unoriginal) premise that beauty can exist on many levels. Somehow this genial show doesn't quite hit the mark yet, but with some retooling it could be a novel entertainment, maybe even a "Nun-sense" waiting to be born.

► **XMAS A GO GO**: The Playwrights Horizon Theatre School sponsored a Holiday Festival of new one-acts at the Samuel Beckett Theatre recently, and the only discouraging aspect of this worthy enterprise was the quality of the material presented. Surely the distinguished auspices of Playwright's Horizons could mount one-acts on a par with those seen at the Theatre for the New City and the Ensemble Studio Theatre. Such plays as "On The Edge" by Dona Auman and a monologue by a woman jailer were interesting mainly because of the creative ways some of the actors involved tried to breathe life into them. Instead of an ear for theatrical dialogue, these playwrights have one-track minds, and go about their tasks with all the relish of post-graduate chemistry students. The one glaring exception is playwright Larry Myers, whose "Xmas A Go Go" was the hit of the festival, a scathingly funny duet for two kindred spirits—a man who's just been fired as an elf in a department store's Santaland, and a pungently life-affirming woman who tangles with him. After an energetically verbal tussle, they both end up more than ready to face their setbacks with an onslaught of biting wit and a heaping

measure of tenderness.

"Xmas A Go Go" reverberates with the artistry of a first-class sensibility. With a striking mastery of stage dialogue, Myers not only delivers the laughs on the surface but shades and textures his characters, deepening the effect of his drama. He has received a first-class mounting of the play from director Mike Wills, who keeps the action flowing with a steady hand, and bravura performances from Richard Thompson, as the hapless and discouraged man, and Susan Aston, who delivers another of her first-rate characterizations. Truly, this event salvaged the Holiday Festival. I'm sure the future will bode better.

► **ALICE IN WONDERLAND**: One of the joys of this holiday season is the return of Bil Baird's Marionettes, a New York institution which is being carried on by Baird's son, Peter B. Baird. As presented by Arthur Cantor, who has long been associated with the Bairds, "Alice in Wonderland" provided wonder and enchantment for a theater packed with young and old alike. In an age of computer games and video, this kind of intimate, masterful entertainment should be supported and encouraged. The production's only sticking point was the initial portrayal of Alice by a woman who not only did not look the role, but had the nasal assertiveness of a native New Yorker—with a vengeance. With a city full of young, blonde girls dying to get Alice of their resumé, there was no excuse for this. Happily, the woman was soon replaced by a puppet, who did a much better job with the role. The music and lyrics by Joe Raposo and Sheldon Harnick are third rate, but the inventiveness of Baird's puppets and scenery keep the audience rivetted. "Alice" was followed by a short variety show featuring some of Baird's most popular creations.

This is the kind of entertainment that should find a permanent showcase in Manhattan, perhaps with the help of the City's Department of Cultural Affairs. Then maybe we could look forward to the return of "Davy Jones' Locker," Slugger Ryan, and Baird's dazzling enactment of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, featured in the Broadway musical "Baker Street." Until then, rush to "Alice in Wonderland," which is only here for a limited engagement through early January at the John Houseman Theatre.