

BROADWAY NEWCOMER

From Nutty Squirrels To Thurber Show

By JOHN S. WILSON

LAST October Don Elliott, a jazz musician who is strongly motivated by a desire to introduce non-jazz audiences to the pleasures of jazz, was resting in the South, recuperating from the effort of writing "Uh-Oh" and several other jazz-based novelty songs that had been recorded by a pair of shrill-voiced entertainers called the Nutty Squirrels (who, off the disk, are actually Elliott and his song-writing partner, Sascha Burland). His idyl was interrupted by a call from Burgess Meredith asking him if he would write the music for Meredith's projected stage production of a miscellany of James Thurber pieces.

Elliott was stunned by the request—a natural reaction when, as he put it later, "for the first time in your life somebody says, 'I want you to write a Broadway show.'"

Little Experience

Even more stunning, however, was the fact that Elliott's entire experience as a composer at that time consisted of his Squirrel works and several TV commercials. What had led Meredith to Elliott as a source of Thurber music?

"It wasn't anything I'd written," Elliott admitted the other day. "Buzz [Meredith] had heard an LP record I'd made several years ago with Paul Desmond, Dave Brubeck's saxophonist. It became one of his favorite records and he particularly liked some tracks on which I played mellophone. For some reason he associated the music and the sound I got on the mellophone with Thurber. In fact, when he hears me playing it now, he smiles, shakes his head and murmurs, 'Oh, that Thurberphone!'"

The sly, bright, unpretentious music that now underlines and flavors "A Thurber Carnival" at the ANTA Theatre is partially written, partially jazz improvisation by Elliott's Quartet (Jim Raney, guitar; Jack Six, bass; Ronnie Bedford, drums, and Elliott, mellophone and vibraphone), which plays in a gaily decorated little cubicle at the side of the theatre.

Elliott based the written portions on his interpretation of the essential atmosphere of each sketch. For "If Grant Had Been Drinking at Appomattox," he tried for a Civil War sound. But this, he explained, was a swinging Civil War sound—"It's 'bahd-in-deh, bahd-in-deh . . . look away!'" His reaction to Mr. Preble's efforts to lure his wife down into the cellar in "Mr. Preble Gets Rid of His Wife" was that this represented city life. To pin down that feeling, he borrowed a note or two from Richard Rodgers' "Manhattan."

Ad Lib Overture

But as a jazz musician (a winner in Down Beat's annual poll for the last seven years), Elliott would feel stifled if he had to play the same things in the same way night after night, even though they are his own compositions. So the cushioning accompaniment for Tom Ewell's monologue, "The Last Flower," is simply a set of chords the musicians use as the basis for improvisation. And the miniature overtures that precede each act are played largely ad lib.

"It's the only time we can feel relieved," he explained. "It gives us a chance to play something creative."

Elliott's pre-Thurber career was built on an impressive display of versatility. A dozen years ago, fresh out of the University of Miami, he joined the team of Hi, Lo, Jack and the Dame as a singer. After two years he gave up singing to return to the instruments he had played in high school and in the Army. In 1950 and 1951 he was the vibraphonist in the George Shearing Quintet. The following year he played trumpet for Benny Goodman. Since then he has led his own small jazz groups, playing mellophone, vibraphone, trumpet and bongos and singing.

Showmanship

To a greater extent than most jazz musicians, Elliott is concerned about getting across to a wide audience. As one means of doing this, he enlivens his appearances at jazz clubs, concerts and festivals with take-offs of popular jazz singers and vibraphonists. He feels that those he views as "arty" jazz musicians are overlooking the appeal of a little showmanship.

Despite his success with "A Thurber Carnival," Elliott is uncertain about continuing as a composer in the theatre. He has more fun, he says, composing TV commercials.

"Commercials can be fun when you do them with jazz," he explained. "For fizzers—things like Alka-Seltzer—we write hip tension music. And we've done a hosiery commercial which uses the 'squeeze' technique. This makes the characters jump around on the screen. It's a very hip thing and the group really wails."