The Savoy Hotel
London
April 10 1960

Miss Elizabeth Frank, The News Chronicle
Mr. Robert Muller, The Daily Mail
Mr. Bernard Levin, The Daily Express
The Drama Critic of The Times
Mr. Dick Richards, The Daily Mirror
Mr. W.A. Darlington, The Daily Telegraph
Mr. T.C. Worsley, The Financial Times
Mr. Philip Hope-Wallace, The Manchester Guardian
Mr. Felix Barker, The Evening News
Mr. Robert Wraight, The Star
Mr. Milton Shulman, The Evening Standard
The Drama Critic of The Daily Herald
Mr. Jack Lewis, Reynolds News
Mr. J.W. Lambert, The Sunday Times
Mr. Irving Wardle, The Observer

Dear Miss Frank:
and Gentlemen:

I have read with a great deal of interest your reviews of Sam, the Highest Jumper of Them All, or The London Comedy.

I hope you won't mind if I comment on only one aspect of this work in a single letter rather than in fifteen separate ones.

At the same time please permit me to ask permission to reprint each review with the play when it is published, as I believe the reviews of a play are a part of it.

The play failed to win any of you. I would rather it had bowled you over, but I am not displeased that it didn't, for I cherish failure and am wary of success, since failure makes a man interesting, while success only makes him courteous.

I have never had a play that has won all the drama critics of New York, but this is the first time that one of my plays has failed to win at least one or two of the critics. As there are fifteen of you, I am obliged to give this fact the importance it obviously demands.

Easiest of all would be for me to agree with you that the play is bad, or at any rate that it doesn't work, but that's a little too easy, and hardly honest or useful.

I consider this play necessary to the theatre, which to me, to quote from the play itself, "is the last arena in which everything is still possible."

If this is not so, then the theatre, like the gun, "is a toy for idiots."

Because contemporary reality, unlike Shakespeare's, Moliere's, or even Shaw's, contains nuclear (or potentially unlimited) power, the theatre, in order to have any meaning or use at all, must at least <u>try</u> to work from this truth.

Fifteen years ago the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs gave the dramatists of the world (and everybody else) clear instructions, which as far as I know have not been heeded. As a dramatist, "I have tried. It isn't easy."

The basis of drama continues to be emotionality, even though the new reality has made emotionality obsolete. Now, nothing in the world can make even the most righteous emotionality anything more or better than simple hysteria, violence, madness, and crime---because if you carry this emotionality through to its inevitable conclusion you have got to use the new power, and you'd better not. Hence, you'd better not be emotionial either.

The grand tradition of raging against "fate, or something just as bad", or against wrong, or against too much ice cream in one part of the world and too little bread in another, or against one's own limitations, failures, desires or delusions, or against anything, just won't do any more. You may reason but you may not rage.

Now, if art is to have any relation to reality---and I know of no other excuse for it in our time and in our world---it has got to make drama (form, meaning, beauty, truth) out of grace: that is to say, serenity of spirit: intelligence, humor, wit, humility and self-criticism. If there is an enemy, he must be identified as one's self. It is useless to call the other fellow the enemy, while you carry on precisely as he does. This is the fallacy of propaganda, without which war or any other form of hysteria is impossible.

Apparently for the first time, man is in possession of potentially unlimited power. Whether used destructively or constructively, this power is giving us a new identity. Some of us are aware of this, and some of us aren't. When the identity of the whole race changes, as it has several times in several centuries, everything which is man's also changes, especially reality, and more slowly art.

The use of force, even as a threat, is out. If it isn't, we may have to believe that, deliberately or unconsciously, we rejoice in the possibility at last of total self-destruction.

All of this high-falutin stuff is in the play in the form of kindergarten drama and fun, which I staged in a stylized manner in the interest of clarity. The staging is in a straight line. Convolutions are intentionally avoided. There is no razzle-dazzle, no tom-tom beat, no alcoholism, no running, ranting, raving, or other hamming-up. If man is always potentially a fraud, this is quite clear, and therefore no harm is done.

Plays are for people, however. Drama critics are also people, and so you have a perfect right to protest that first and foremost, as they say, a play has got to be something effective in acceptable terms on the boards of a theatre.

Since the play, for you, wasn't, you have me there.

It was, and is, however, for me. I also am people, so where do we go from here? I write plays and you write criticism. There are fifteen of you and one of me. I am seriously considering the materials and themes of my next play---fifteen priests who wear hearing aids with three gear-shifts for volume, and shout about God and man, and shift gears.

I say Sam is a good play. I am sorry you say it isn't. One of us is obviously mistaken. Knowing the paltry little I know, I cannot believe it is me.

Yours truly,

William Saroyan