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No man sensitive enough to be worth his salt as a critic could for years wield a pen which, from the nature of his occupation, is scratching somebody's nerves at every stroke, without becoming conscious of how monstrously indefensible the superhuman attitude of impartiality is for him . . . We cannot get away from the critic's tempers, his impatiences, his sorenesses, his friendships, his spite, his enthusiasms (amatory and other), nay, his very politics and religion if they are touched by what he criticizes. They are all there hard at work; and it should be his point of honor—as it is certainly his interest if he wishes to avoid being dull—not to attempt to conceal them or offer their product as the dispassionate dictum of infallible omniscience.

BERNARD SHAW, music critic,
in *The World,* 1894

ALSO BY ERIC BENTLEY

A Century of Hero-Worship

The Playwright as Thinker

Bernard Shaw

In Search of Theatre

THE DRAMATIC EVENT

an American chronicle

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FOR ROBERT RICHMAN

Literary Editor of *The New Republic*

from 1952 to 1954

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THE DRAMATIC EVENT

1

PROFESSIONAL PLAYGOING

George Jean Nathan long ago established the right of the drama critic to leave after the first act. The time has now come for the critic to claim the right to stay away altogether. Deciding what we can do without is, after all, one of the great tasks of living, and, unlike some of the others, it can be performed rather efficiently. Having noted the way John Steinbeck is going—or Aldous Huxley—pick a name—I have decided not to read his next book. My decision may turn out to be mistaken. The next book may be a masterpiece. If it is, I shall hear about it, though; obviously I don't have time to read everything on the off-chance of stumbling on a masterpiece . . .

Few of the playwrights whose work is performed on Broadway have names one already knows. I decide whether to see their plays after reading the reviews of Brooks Atkinson, Walter Kerr, Richard Watts, William Hawkins, and whoever else is on sale at the nearest newsstand. When I've seen a play, I may realize I don't agree with any of these gentlemen. But I can figure out from what they say whether I *would* agree with them. I know, for example, what kind of play strikes me as sentimental and strikes Mr. X as charming, wholesome, heartwarming, beautiful, and morally inspiring. I know what kind of play strikes me as boringly trivial and strikes Mr. Y as quite splendid because it illus-

trates the view that the age of Ibsen is over, that drama should be free of preaching, that . . .

Still, if they all like it, I go; if they are divided in their opinions, I go; it is only when they all—or nearly all—*dis*like it that I deliberately stay away. The critics' rejections are far less misleading than their enthusiasms. And anyway it is better to be misled a few times than to go to the theatre too often. It is important that a theatre critic see as few shows as possible: the habit of regular attendance on complimentary tickets distorts the whole experience of theatre-going and can even kill the pleasure of it. For the man who is dragged almost nightly to a show that begins forty minutes too early and which he must "write up" by midnight, what is left of the pleasure he had as a boy in Cleveland when he wrote to New York two months ahead for a dollar-twenty ticket at a single show? Some of my senior colleagues at the business tell me they try to atone for the boredom they feel by writing up an ecstasy they do not feel. That would explain pretty well the style in which theatre reportage is couched. I prefer to leave when I am bored, to stay at home when I think I *would* be bored, and in either event not to go into print. That is why I am surprised when, having taken issue with a play or a performance, I am told: "You must have been bored." I take issue only when I am *not* bored. Dissent, surely, is a proof of interest. If you were the playwright, wouldn't you rather have a critic take issue with your play than be so ecstatic that you can tell he's making it up?

Of the many Broadway shows, 1952-1954, that are totally ignored in this book, only a certain number belong to the category, just defined, of plays I deliberately did not see. Accident or illness kept me from others. There were some I saw and found without sufficient interest to write on. There were a few which would have drawn from me a mere repetition of what everyone else has said about them: why

bother? There were several cases in which some personal involvement interfered too much; I could have written a notice that would, *in my opinion,* have been honest; but I didn't always wish to have my motives questioned by others; even though I might in turn have questioned the motives of the questioners. After all, a critic's motives are seldom questioned except by the criticized and their friends; and to impute bad motives to a critic is the standard way of refusing to take criticism. "No, no, so-and-so's criticism of my performance didn't hurt me in the least, don't you know he wanted his wife to play the part?" In general, the critic has to try to take this sort of thing, just as the artist has to try to take criticism. I have sought to avoid eliciting such comments only in cases where my personal involvement was unusually delicate. In those circumstances, the critic can avoid the wildest calumny only by keeping silent; perhaps not even then.

I should not pretend that a critic's motives couldn't be bad; I merely observe that one imputation of motives leads to another. We are all sinners: it would be better to discuss the points at issue. Assume, if you like, that everyone's motives are perfectly vile.

I should not pretend, either, that the criticized artist can avoid being hurt and angry; I have been a criticized artist. But the critic cannot do his work without hurting; he resembles the dentist. Even to say that artist A is very good is to spread the rumor that artist B is not so good. Motive mongers will say the critic has a grudge against B's wife.

We are forever being disappointed because we insist on cherishing absurd expectations. We expect purity of motive in all mankind and from critics absolute justice into the bargain; and we howl like children when we don't get them; it is all a great waste of time. Nor are we much more sensible if we proceed from a tardy recognition of general fallibility to a demand for extreme reserve in public utterance.

That we are tentative and skeptical in our philosophy is not to say that we have to be cagey and non-committal in discussion; that is the road, not to truth and joy, but to evasion and respectability. The critic is uncompromising, not because he regards himself as infallible, nor even because he feels very sure of himself, but because it is his job to be so. It is true, he enjoys this job; he enjoys a fight; his writing embodies his zest for living. Yet he doesn't enjoy all of the job. The constant infliction of pain is a burden to him, the price he has to pay for the right to practice his profession. For the journalist-critic, the only alternative to a sharp tongue is a mealy mouth.

I look nostalgically back to the nineteenth century, a more liberal time than ours, when dissent was decent, and an adverse criticism didn't have to be explained away by the imputation of jealous hostility or the sly whisper that the critic fell on his head at the age of two. Let us hope the day will again come when one man can say to another: "I think you are utterly wrong; I think your book—play—performance—is a hopeless failure; I am going to give you my reasons for thinking so; you may retort that it is I who am completely mistaken; let us dine together on Tuesday."

What can the critic do? As I see it, his job is to use the verb *to be,* the adjectives *good* and *bad,* and the conjunctions *and* and *but.* He tells you what the show *is,* argues the *pros* and *cons* of it in a series of observations and counter-observations, and announces if, in his opinion, the whole thing is any *good.* He will withstand the temptation to omit the *ands,* because he is interested in the additional fact that tips the scale. He will insist on the *buts,* because his mind is dialectical: he likes to see the other side of every coin. Since he cannot draw back from the act of appraisal, he will not substitute modish verbiage, scientific or belle-lettristic, for plain *bads* and *goods.*

The theatre critic's concern is *theatre*: playwright and

actor, director, scene designer, musician. But since all these work together to interpret *life*, the critic's approach will not be merely formal. Being a journalist, the drama critic will report the news. And we can judge him by the standards we apply to other journalists. Does he spot the essential things? Has he a nose for a new trend? At any rate we can't grumble at the recurrence of the word New. It is the critic's job to identify and describe the New Actress, the New Playwright, the New Rococo, the New Estheticism, the New Conformism, the New Conservatism—before they grow old.

As long as a critic has the qualities of his defects, no merely human being has the right to complain that he has the defects of his qualities. Even the limitations of the art he practices are not faults, provided he recognizes them and makes allowances. The limits of theatre criticism are soon reached. Here we have no lofty form of meditation conceived in solitude, recollected in tranquillity, and incorporated in large art-form or voluminous treatise. We have only a man's immediate response immediately recorded in the briefest bit of prose. Too often the *and* or *but* that would make the statement complete and comprehensive are missing; for *bad* we must read *good*; for *is, is not*. Practice the art of journalism, and even your remarks of a few months ago will surprise you. "Did I say that?" Reading reviews (including my own) of shows I have seen, I am given pause by many, all too many, distortions of the truth. The chief cause, I think, is *classification*. The New This and the New That are classes. The critic is all the time putting artists and works of art in categories. That is bad enough. The journalist critic goes one worse: rashly consigning his victims to this pigeonhole and that, he has to improvise even the pigeonholes. The critic of new art is all the time, says posterity, making mistaken judgments. The journalist-critic of new art goes one worse and maximizes his chances of error by rushing into print with his first hasty impression.

He finds it interesting; that is his chief justification.* As the world goes, it is not a bad one: how little there is to be said for posterity's kind of wisdom! Nonetheless, I have been dismayed to see how often my snap categories have proved a bed of Procrustes for my poor authors and actors. I can only advise the reader in advance: our new actresses are often better than The New Actress or different, our new playwrights are better than The New Playwright or different . . . and so on.

After *classification* or *generality,* the chief source of error is something very like its opposite. Call it *immediacy.* What I have in mind is that the drama critic has blinkers on. He sees only what he sees; it is not very much; and he records it without asking questions such as: is this what I ought to have seen? Is it consistent with what I said I saw last week? When a dramatic critic looks back through a couple of dozen notices he has written, he is surprised not only by this remark or that but at totally unforeseen relationships between one remark and another. For example, the reader of the present volume might conclude that its author considers M. Anouilh flatly a better dramatist than Giraudoux. That is the impression given by separate reviews of *Colombe* and *Ondine.* Several factors are involved. First, the author had no such comparison in mind. Second, he saw the plays not in Platonic purity but in particular productions. Third, there is the dual translation problem: does an author trans-

* In his important book *Buzz Buzz,* James Agate quotes C. E. Montague to the following effect: "And yet for old theatre notices there may be a kind of excuse. You wrote them in haste, it is true, with few books about you or moments to look a thing up; hot air and the dust of the playhouse were still in your lungs; you were sure to say things that would seem sorry gush or rant if you saw them again in the morning. How bad it all was for measure, containment, or balance! But that heat of the playhouse is not wholly harmful. Like sherris sack in the system of Falstaff, it hath a two-fold operation; 'it ascends me into the brain . . . makes it apprehensive, quick, forgetive, full of nimble, fiery and delectable shapes.' At least it sometimes gives you that illusion; below yourself in certain ways, you hope you are above yourself in others."

late well? and: has he found the best possible translator? The reader is free to ask what questions he chooses; but in fairness he too should make allowances. Journalism is journalism. And there are times when consistency isn't worth a rap.

Something a critic says that is "wildly inconsistent with his whole theory" may be an inspiration. A drama critic must dare to say the things that don't fit if only because he is a reporter. He writes down what he in fact saw or what he in fact felt. For a dramatic critic the primary—I do not say the ultimate—experience is live contact with the actor.

I should be sorry, however, if the chronicle that follows is a mass of contradictions. I should like to think that if the phenomena reviewed are various, and my attitude to them subject both to chance variation and deliberate revision, the classifications have nevertheless some general validity and the judgments are the coherent product of a single, though limited, mind. Pirandello thought we were totally out of touch with other people and also with ourselves at all moments but the present one. We are each a hundred thousand moments and states of mind that are unrelated to each other.

I am hoping—and indeed assuming—that Pirandello was wrong.

2

PITY HIS SIMPLICITY

"The few times I tried to read Truman Capote, I had to give up . . . His literature makes me nervous."
—William Faulkner

At first blush Mr. Capote's play *The Grass Harp* is simply ridiculous: it is about living in trees. But it is saved from the ridiculous by the trite when, late in the evening, the conclusion is announced: "we can't live in trees, maybe some of us would like to, but none of us can."

It is true that the arboreal fable of *The Grass Harp* is meant to symbolize an escape from humdrum reality, that Mr. Capote's theme is the search for one's real self, and that such a theme is not to be stigmatized as trite merely because it is traditional. It has the effect of triteness in this play because it is in no way rendered active by Mr. Capote's art: when he has finished it still belongs to tradition; he has in no way made it his own; we hear only other voices echoing in other rooms. On occasion this may be partly blamed on the actors. In the large part of the bad but subsequently repentant sister, Ruth Nelson makes Mr. Capote's spreadeagle prose sound even more improbable than it need; as the Wise Southern Judge, Russell Collins seems to add an actor's unctuousness to an author's. Yet the one performer who contrives to remain real (by remaining herself) is forced to call attention to ham writing by making us feel she only speaks

the lines because she has to. This is Mildred Natwick, without whom the play would have no adult existence.

The triteness is in the conclusions and at the core; in the premises and at the periphery all is ridiculous. Since the ridiculous is acceptable when it is funny and unpretentious, one can readily accept such minor characters as (in order of merit?) Buster the goldfish, the daft, if somewhat overacted, barber of Sterling Holloway, the headlong cosmetician of that superb zany Alice Pearce, and several other villagers who might be described as *by* Robert Lewis *out of* Charlie Chaplin. On the level of wise-cracking Broadway farce—on which the whole large part of the servant is played by Georgia Burke—Mr. Capote reveals a surprising talent. (The part itself is stolen from *Member of the Wedding*; Mr. Capote knows a good thing when he sees it.)

If only he would stay on the wise-cracking level! Instead, he follows what seems to be a new school of theatre and pursues the ridiculous high into the intense inane. Negatively described, this school is the latest revulsion against realism. It is usually presented in positive terms as a rebirth of poetic drama or at least as an assertion of fantasy and charm and theatricality over brute facts. Disparate authors come together to produce a somewhat coherent total result. The Eliot of *The Cocktail Party* joins hands with the Huxley of *The Gioconda Smile* to relieve the rich of their sexual guilt by appealing to a Higher Reality. Eliot and Huxley keep the framework of the drawing-room play; Anouilh and Fry, even when they present a drawing room, make sure that the place is filled with the fauna of a rococo fancy even if it is not actually decked with the flora of the new school in stage design. The new school in stage design is the counterpart of the new school in dramaturgy: elegant, dandified, and, it must be said, effeminate. The father of the school is the late Christian Bérard, a great designer though a highly specialized one. His specialty was costumes; his sets ap-

peared to be costumes for the stage itself; the stage was a lovely woman.

This brings us back to *The Grass Harp* which has sets by Cecil Beaton, the English Bérard, who is, quite literally, a costumier turned stage designer. His work dominates the evening at the Martin Beck Theatre largely because it quite simply is what it is. It "is" the new style. It is what Mr. Capote and, I should judge, Robert Lewis aspire to and only partially, ambiguously, half-heartedly achieve. For example: there is nothing of the spirit of the South in Mr. Beaton's work, and why should there be? Art is a holiday, is itself, is silk shawls and luscious colors, is chintz and upholstery. He is happy in the realm that I have called the ridiculous; he does not need the trite. But Mr. Capote has to use words, can't get by with color and form, can't help being involved with life even if he is incapable of shaping it. It is almost as if he started with a realistic play and later—too much later—tried to transform it into a fantasy. In combination the realistic and fantastic elements became the trite and the ridiculous, respectively.

Had Mr. Lewis hewed to either line, realistic or fantastic, he might have made something of the play in actual production. As it is, the directing is non-committal and unsure without being discreet and unobtrusive. Mr. Lewis tries to cover up the ambiguity of the play, or his own ambiguous feelings about it, with apparatus: Cecil Beaton's costumes and decor, Virgil Thomson's music, and his own directorial gimmicks. Of the gimmicks the showiest is the shining of flashlights in Miss Nelson's face when she wishes to make a pronouncement to the tree-dwellers: a shot is fired, everyone wonders who is hit, and the flashlights pick out the wounded man with magical unanimity. One could perhaps be rather amused by this sort of thing had not the simpler scenes been so neglected by comparison. I suppose the opening and closing scenes of the play could never be

wholly convincing, yet they might have been at least interesting had Mr. Lewis helped the actors to bring a reality from themselves which the author had not managed to give them in his script. As things are, the domestic scenes are as wooden as the table they revolve around. Where something human might have been shaped and defined, Mr. Lewis fled into triviality and ostentation.

Admittedly no one would wish to banish triviality and ostentation from the theatre, their traditional home. What one protests against in the trivial, ostentatious work of today is its intellectual pretentiousness. Not long ago two very showy plays opened in New York, one from each of the principal schools of current practice, the Kazanian-realistic and the Beatonian-gorgeous: *Flight Into Egypt* and *The Grass Harp*. In both cases the showiness would be in order were it not that we are meant to take both plays so very seriously. And in both cases the "bigness" of the production operates, not as delightful showmanship, but as a portentous frame for a very small picture. A mountain of production makes the squeal of the mouse that emerges the more plaintive and feeble.

Flight Into Egypt might have had an identity had it been either a social drama by George Tabori or a psychological melodrama by Elia Kazan; it fell between the author's and the director's stools. The reason why *The Grass Harp* is so far out of tune is more fundamental. The play seems to me decadent—not, it is true, in the life depicted, but in the spirit of the depiction.

Although in *The Grass Harp* there is none of the scandalous subject-matter for which writers like Mr. Capote are known, and we are, on the contrary, in the company of virginal old ladies, innocent schoolgirls, and wistful widowers, this author's interest in innocence is in fact more extravagant than his interest in vice. His is a form of sentimentality—known and praised in the trade as Warmth and/or

Humanity—which is the reverse side of unpleasant sophistication. Ostensibly, we are presented with purity, with simplicity. Yet when we try to describe these qualities in Mr. Capote's play, the word we feel the need of is *off;* for everything is slightly off color, off center, off key. What is Mr. Capote after? Is he fooling? It would be a relief to write him down the last bewilderer of the bourgeoisie. But Mr. Capote aims to please. He wants to be Warm and Human. I imagine him on his knees at that crossroads where *Harper's Bazaar* and Culture meet, addressing a prayer to Brooks Atkinson: "Gentle Critic Warm and Human / Look upon a Little Truman . . ."

3

MERCHANT OF VENICE,

LONG ISLAND

It began with a phone call some weeks ahead. I picked up the receiver, and a voice said it was Mike Todd's office and asked did I intend to see Mr. Todd's show at Jones Beach. Before I could hesitate, the voice added: "There'll be supper at the Stork Club before we drive you out there." The bait was irresistible. I would see Organization and Showmanship. I would see how the other half live.

There was something fishy about it from the start, only one is never warned. Two days before the show my tickets had not arrived, and when I phoned the Todd office I learned that on the second night (when weekly reviewers normally attend) there was no supper and no transportation. I was transferred to the first night when I said that otherwise I wouldn't go at all.

The streetdoor of the Stork Club opens just like any other door, we found, but as soon as we were inside it we found ourselves cornered by a close semicircle of severe gentlemen, one of whom snapped: "Yes?" and stared as if we had offered him an affront. We looked down to make sure we had clothes on. Or was it just that they weren't the right sort of clothes? I had been instructed to "look for Mr. G— in the Joquelin Room." But Mr. G—'s status was as unknown and therefore as non-existent to the snappy man at the door as our own. Had we not thought of the password MIKE

TODD we might still be sweating on the sidewalk of 53rd Street.

The other half must have been in some other part of the club: the crowd in the Joquelin Room was not perceptibly of a different species from our own. Many of them looked up as we entered and quickly looked away again when they saw we weren't Aly Khan and Rita Hayworth. It was barely 5.30 but already the martinis were warm and watery. We could have had a nice time on lox canapés had not discretion prompted us to save our appetites for the kind of meal you see in the movies. By 6.25 we had plucked up courage to ask if perhaps supper was to be served in some other room—there being no signs of it within short range—and were dismayed to be told by a smiling waiter: "This party is leaving by bus at 6.30." No announcement was made, but at 6.30 an inner voice seemed to speak to many people at once. There was a general movement towards the elevator. As they passed one of the last tables each nudged his neighbor and pointed at a heavy-checked shirt beneath a moustache and whispered: "That's Brooks Atkinson—and he's eating!" People discussed whether he'd had to pay for his frankfurter or whether Mr. Todd had ordered supper for one.

I suppose the heat couldn't be blamed on our impresario; the weatherman is incorruptible. Still, many of us had visions of sleek, fast limousines and air-conditioned railway coaches. But no, we were assigned to buses, and they were fetid and slow.

Optimists in our party had heard that now at last food would be served: was there not a waiter aboard with a white tie and black sash? Unhappily, the man was a chronic deprecator. He disowned the whole enterprise and professed a preference for working on planes and trains. What had been done about food he really had no idea. To his surprise some ice-cream sticks—Good Humors, no less—were found and he consented to hand them round "as far as they'll go"—which

was about two-thirds of the way down the bus. After dessert, the main course. Some sandwiches turned up, and husbands were asked if they'd mind sharing one with their wives. The coca cola without which no banquet is complete was found in the aisle, none the worse for having been walked on. After most of it had been consumed warm, ice was unearthed. *Tout le confort américain.* Anyhow, man shall not live by bread alone. On every seat in the bus was a copy of the program. It contained several photographs of Mr. Todd, one of them occupying a full page (8⅓ by 11) on gold paper. "Mr. Todd is Mr. Showman," it said.

But is he? In the days of Johann Strauss (mentioned in the program, though in smaller type than Mr. Todd) it was fashionable to miss the first act. Is that why this opening of his *Night in Venice* was scheduled for eight while the press buses were driven in at nine? It can be interesting to figure out a story when you arrive in the middle—provided you can see and hear what happens after your arrival. At Jones Beach, the grand canal that flows between stage and auditorium remains, both physically and psychologically, an unbridged gap. You can't see faces and you don't feel part of the occasion. The public address system only makes matters worse. Being loud and tinny, it spoils the music. Being indistinct, it does not communicate the words. One is also very disturbed to see lips moving in one place and to hear the sound issue from quite another place. That is, one would be —if one could see lips. More often, one heard a great bellow from center stage and some seconds later discovered the singer on the outskirts.

I don't doubt that Strauss's *Night in Venice* could be pretty swish open-air entertainment if tricked out by theatre artists of the current Gorgeous School (Peter Brook, Oliver Messel *et al.*); it would be fancy but it would be fun. Yet we are letting Mr. Todd off much too lightly if we complain that he has no taste or sophistication: who ever said he had?

A Night in Venice suffers more from helpless incomprehension, empty awe in the face of culture, than from philistine opposition to it. The dully obvious dancing, the anti-climactic glamor of the lighting, the cheap colors of the costumes, the tawdriness of the sets, the ham of the acting, all unmistakably belong to the tradition of "high" art. One has nothing against the idea of grandiose showmanship; one will even pay the price of a certain amount of vulgarity. *A Night in Venice* is not grandiose enough. The first act peters out in a disordered fizzing of quite ordinary rockets. At the première, the water ballet never took place at all; instead there were apologies on the microphone. Where is the showmanship of yesteryear? No one was entranced for a minute by all the awkward, mechanical approaches to romance in turrets and gondolas. There was a hopeful moment when the tumblers went to work—acrobatics, athletics, *something* physically thrilling was what the show needed—but they were hustled off stage before they got started. Mr. Todd was doing a highbrow show for lowbrows, and nobody seemed to like it. If he would do a lowbrow show well, even highbrows would like it.

Many of my journalist colleagues had had enough by intermission but there was no extracting the buses from the parking lots. My friend and I crept down from our high stadium seat to a point where the stage was a little less invisible, though we now had to stand. The chapter of mishaps continued on the return journey. The police proved as incorruptible as the weatherman and made our driver leave the parkway and find Manhattan by what looked to me like an Indian trail. It was two o'clock by the time we reached mid-town. During the ride, a newspaperman from New Jersey remarked: "And my wife said, '*I* have to stay home and put the baby to bed while *you* go gallivantin' off to the Stork Club!' " "Mike Todd had the right idea," was

another comment, "supper at the Stork Club'll put 'em in the mood."

Are the critics more corruptible than the weatherman and the police? Mr. Todd might consider the case of the servant in *A Night in Venice.* Though he accepts a bribe of twenty scudi, he is scandalized at the idea of accepting five, ten, or fifteen. Now, suppose he had been offered twenty and not paid. Wouldn't he have been more scandalized still?

4

EUGENE O'NEILL'S PIETÀ

Back to the farm. The New England farm of *Desire Under the Elms* and *Beyond the Horizon.* The issue is ownership. The villain of the piece tries to wrest it from the heroine and her father. He even gets the hero on his side. So heroine and father plot our hero's ruin: he is to be disgraced by being found in our heroine's bed. I am telling the story of Eugene O'Neill's *A Moon for the Misbegotten,** and have come to the end of the second act. In Act Three comes a surprise. Our heroine has the opportunity of carrying out her revenge but she discovers that our hero is not on the villain's side after all, has not betrayed her. The occasion turns into a moonlit love scene, poetic and bedless. In Act Four, a second surprise follows. The heroine's father does not arrive with gun and witnesses as he had promised. We find he had known our hero's probity all along. He wanted to get the young couple into bed and couldn't think of a less unusual way to manage it. He knew heroes marry the girls they make love to, and he wanted to trap our hero into marriage. The play doesn't end with marriage, though. It ends with the heroine's wishing the hero an early, if painless, death. It doesn't have a happy ending, it has a happy middle. It is built round—written for the sake of—

* Destined to be the last play O'Neill published. Still unproduced in New York (Summer, 1954).

its third act, in which we see our hero as "a damned soul coming . . . in the moonlight to confess and be forgiven and find peace for a night."

A well-made melodrama in which the expectations of melodrama are deliberately disappointed: Bernard Shaw has familiarized us with the pattern and convinced us that the disappointment may be more apparent and formal than substantial and real. And O'Neill touches upon the central substances and realities of modern life and drama. In his preoccupation with death-in-life—modern man a living corpse—he reminds us of Ibsen. Like Strindberg, he shows people torturing each other with words; like Pirandello, he shows them torturing *themselves* with words. Stylistically, there is a kinship with O'Casey: especially in his climactic third act he attempts to transfigure his naturalistic prose into high poetry. And in stating his main theme—guilt—he seeks to place his play in the main stream of modern literature. (In the theatre its popularity, like that of *The Cocktail Party,* would depend on the degree to which it arouses and appeases the public's sense of guilt.)

Perhaps I've already made it apparent how close *A Moon for the Misbegotten* is to other work by O'Neill himself. It is closest to the last play he published, *The Iceman Cometh,* not only in style and lay-out but in having at its core a confession of guilt from a man who has wronged a woman. The "inner" climax which O'Neill substitutes for the expected melodramatic climax is his hero's confession that he was drunk when his dying mother last set eyes on him and that he slept with a whore in the train that carried his mother's corpse. Second to *The Iceman Cometh,* the most obvious and significant tie is with *Anna Christie.* In all three plays drinking and whoring are presented as the principal human pursuits, while above all three there hover the ideas of virginity and motherhood, associated in every case with Catholicism and Ireland.

Why not? The material is magnificent. If it appears ridiculous in O'Neill's plays it is because he has not succeeded in molding it. That his language, for example, is unequal to the tasks he assigns to it is generally admitted, though his admirers shrug the fact off with the observation that you can't blame him for not being Shakespeare. One might, however, expect so ambitious a writer to stand comparison with our more talented novelists. O'Neill has attempted the poetry of colloquial American speech, the poetry of the underworld, yet has never written a page to compare with *The Killers* or *A Clean, Well Lighted Place.* The tough talk of *A Moon for the Misbegotten* may be closer to the talk of 1923 (the date of the action) than I am equipped to say but anyone can see that the words have less vitality than even the worst of Hemingway. (Assignment for a linguist: how much of O'Neill's dialect and slang comes from life, how much from stage tradition and personal hunch?) Style is meaning. Hemingway's style has often succeeded in reaching in a few lines much the same sort of pessimism that O'Neill will circumnavigate for hundreds of pages.

What Europeans call the "American" style—i.e. the "tough" style—operates chiefly as an ironical mask for sensitivity. Undoubtedly O'Neill realized—with his brain, that is—how much of American life there is in this contrast. The hero of *A Moon for the Misbegotten* "only acts [and, we may add, talks] like he's hard and shameless to get back at life when it's tormenting him—and who doesn't?" Unhappily, O'Neill himself shows that embarrassment in the face of life, that shame in the presence of the spirit, which is the source of the "American" way of talking. He is afraid to have anyone mention sin without having them add "Nuts with that sin bunk" or to quote a poem without at once denouncing "the old poetic bull."

The prime symptom—or perhaps prime cause—of this embarrassment is fear of sex—fear of woman as woman, longing

for her as mother or as virgin. There was a moment (that of *Days Without End*) when O'Neill seemed to have settled for the Virgin Mother, like his Irish antecedents. In *A Moon for the Misbegotten,* he finds an equivalent in the terms of his own naturalistic mysticism, describing his heroine as "a virgin who bears a dead child in the night," and adding: "the dawn finds her still a virgin." The grandiosity here is that of adolescent poetry: corny words for corny conceptions. The heroine of *A Moon for the Misbegotten* is 5′ 11″ tall (to the hero's 5′ 9″) and weighs a hundred and eighty pounds. On the side of the comical-grotesque such a phenomenon has possibilities which are partly realized in one bravura scene in which she and her father bawl the villain out. Beyond that we inescapably have the impression of neurotic fantasy unorganized into art. In place of organization, clichés and formulae: Anna Christie was the whore with the heart of a virgin, this new heroine is the virgin-who-seems-to-be-a-whore-till-the-truth-comes-out. (Assignment for a director: cast this part. Having done so, cast the same actress in any other play.)

A Moon for the Misbegotten will change no one's opinion of Eugene O'Neill. It is neither his worst work nor his best. If it is more serious, and in some ways more meritorious, than most recent plays, so much the worse for most recent plays. I rather think its central image—that of a giant virgin holding in her arms a dipsomaniac lecher with a heart of gold—may stand in all minds as O'Neill's monument; for admirers will find it characteristic in grandeur and poetry, while others will find in it, clinically speaking, neurotic fantasy indulged rather than exploited and, critically speaking, poetry strained after rather than achieved.

5

MAIMING THE BARD

Some readers felt that although, in my essay "Doing Shakespeare Wrong," * I provided clear enough examples of the under- and over-interpretation of Shakespeare's plays by modern stage directors, I gave no adequate definition of the happy medium.

The shoe pinches—but not only me. When not crying down all interpretation (and thus in practice under-interpreting) or crying up over-simple interpretation (and thus in practice over-interpreting), the theatrical profession acquiesces in Orson Welles' view: "Every single way of playing and staging Shakespeare—as long as the way is effective—is right." Now, unless it would always be "ineffective" to change an author's meaning, Mr. Welles is here accusing Shakespeare of having no meaning to change. If I thought that, I'd prefer Eugene O'Neill.

It must be the assumption of serious direction that Shakespeare meant something and did not mean something else. His meanings can be rejected only if one of the following three conditions obtains: (A) that they are unacceptable to a modern audience, (B) that they cannot be communicated to a modern audience, (C) that they are uninteresting to a modern audience. Total rejection means not producing a

* In *In Search of Theater.*

play at all; and there is a case for not producing *The Merchant of Venice* on grounds A and B or for not producing *Henry V* on grounds A, B, and C. Total rejection is simple. Difficulty arises when we reject a play in part, that is, when we produce it with cuts. If we may cut the whole, it would be reasonable to deduce that we could cut the parts—also on grounds of being unacceptable, incommunicable, or uninteresting—were not masterpieces organic and integrated structures. A passage may be "cuttable" on grounds A, B, or C, and yet necessary to the rhythm. Obviously there is a limit to the number of such enfeebled passages that any production can stand. It is when that limit is reached that the idea of production should be cancelled.

I think we must require that some ninety per cent of Shakespeare's meaning (the figure is arbitrary) come through. And here I intend the meaning the play had when first written, not any subsequent increment, and certainly not any separate "modern" meaning. The modernities I demand are not those which the director imposes on Shakespeare but those which he finds in Shakespeare. All he can impose is, at need, a modern frame to the picture, and even the modernity of the frame may often be only a more authentic historicity. *Finding* what is the positive significance in material which has passed the somewhat negative tests A, B, and C is the job. Here some have thought that I am "hedging." Again, it is granted that I have defined Scylla (the Germany and Russian left-wing Shakespeare) and Charybdis (the genteel British approach) without explaining how to steer in between.

What happens in *Hamlet*? What does a given play mean? Opinion on these matters has in our time been changed from top to bottom by reference to historical lore which our audiences know nothing about. It is implied that even the most popular and perennial of Shakespeare's plays can be rightly understood only in the light of Elizabethan history,

psychology, physiology, demonology; the understanding of Shakespeare is limited to scholars, often in fact to the one scholar with the theory. Though at this extreme point our sense of humor rebels, we certainly wonder if ninety per cent is not much more of the original meaning than comes down to us. We are disposed either to give up production altogether—or to jump to the other extreme, make larger cuts, believe that anything goes. Bertolt Brecht works through an Elizabethan play not only subtracting but adding as freely as did the Elizabethans themselves. He and Marlowe are, as it were, joint authors of the German *Edward II.* Judging by the fragment in the anthology *Theaterarbeit,* I'd say that he and Shakespeare are joint authors of the new *Coriolan.* This is legitimate but is a matter of playwriting, not directing, a matter of changing Shakespeare, not interpreting him. I maintain that the bulk of Shakespeare remains viable unchanged, if the responsibilities of interpretation are not shirked.

People tell me they were not shirked in the Stratford productions of the histories and appeal from my strictures to an official apologia, *Shakespeare's Histories at Stratford 1951,* by J. Dover Wilson and T. C. Worsley. In this lavishly illustrated, if expensive, 100-page pamphlet, Mr. Worsley and the many colleagues he quotes assume that the Stratford productions were guided by an adequate "conception" and that it only remains to discuss whether the conception confirms, or conflicts with, their established ideas of the characters. The argumentation is so urbane, the writing so sprightly, it may seem churlish to complain that the whole discussion stays comfortably within the boundaries of current British gentility—the same boundaries as those of the performances under review. The goldfish are agile and their fins flicker prettily, but the bowl, even if none of them know it exists, narrows their horizon. In an admirable introduction, Dover Wilson throws out suggestions that, had they

been made in advance, might have driven the Stratford producers further along the road of interpretation. Looking back to the medieval tradition, he describes *Richard II* as a miracle, *Henry IV* as a morality. Looking forward to the present, he observes: "Never was non-moral statecraft more rampant . . . the Nazis and Stalinites have brought back to Europe the technique of Italian renaissance politics." Here to be sure is a basis for a modern production of the histories. In applying this idea we are not fitting Shakespeare with modern false limbs; on the contrary, we may accuse our genteel colleagues, for all their love of the bard, of maiming him.

6

PICKWICK IN LOVE

In the theatre, if we are amused, all else is forgiven and no questions are asked: amusement itself is a rare enough bird. We would not complain that a play is inferior to the novel it's based on if at least it provide us with a modicum of the special pleasure of theatre-going.

But why should we be lenient when we are not amused? Stanley Young's *Mr. Pickwick* at the Plymouth is a bad play badly performed. Since indeed it is so bad a play that it would probably not be performed at all but for certain circumstances outside its own boundaries, it is less pertinent to define the badness than the circumstances. The chief of these is that the play is "drawn from" a novel by Charles Dickens. It is Dickens' name, in fact, that brings the audience to the theatre. It is because his name is in the program that they laugh at many a line which would be greeted by stony silence if signed by me, you, or Stanley Young.

It should be superfluous to say that many lines in *The Pickwick Papers* are genuinely funny, that the book abounds in incidents and characters seen and provided with precise stage directions by one of the greatest dramatic geniuses in English history. Our complaint must not be that Mr. Young is so dependent on Dickens but that he is not dependent enough. Or, more precisely, that he draws on Dickens' prestige without drawing sufficiently on Dickens' work. The

program tells us Mr. Young drew "freely" from Dickens, which turns out to mean not only that he adds things of his own but that even when he is merely "translating" he translates inaccurately and misses the force of the original. It is not Dickens he gives us but a dim and distorted image of Dickens which, having in mind that every great teacher is reduced by his disciples to an ism, we might call Dickensianism. The Dickensianism of the Dickens cult. The idea of a Dickens who is all warm sentiment and coy humor. A genteel Dickens in fact; the British director John Burrell has attached an American playwright to that same genteel tradition which I have accused of handicapping British Shakespeare production. The tradition that maims the bard positively decapitates Dickens. The attempt to make a gentleman of Shakespeare can never quite succeed, but the attempt to make a lower-middle-class sentimentalist of Dickens has succeeded before it starts, for that, among other things, is what he is. It is of course for the "other things" that he has value; yet adaptors, directors, and actors can reduce him to nothing by reducing him to the only one of his dozen *personae* which is alternately uninteresting and objectionable. This is what has been done.

A man of sentiment, Mr. Pickwick is not a sentimental conception, though with a touch less of salt he would be so. (This of course is an unjustly negative way of putting it. Dickens' achievement is not that he avoided sentimentality but that he rendered sentiment with so special a delicacy; later he was to do bigger things; he never again did this thing.) Mr. Young has replaced Dickens' salt with the sugar of Dickensianism. If Dickens can transfigure a cliché, Mr. Young can reduce it to a cliché again; the coach of Cinderella turns back into a pumpkin.

Dickens' Pickwick has become a legendary figure, a piece of furniture in the mansion of the western mind. By dint of poetic imagination Dickens contrived to create one of those

rare characters who have not only features and an identity but also a shimmering glamor; he hasn't only a face, one might say, he has an aureole too. Without his aureole, a character so poetically conceived, a character rendered by nuance and aroma, and wrought in gossamer, is little more than an old fool. On the stage, Mr. Pickwick (and with him Mr. Young) might possibly be saved by genius in the actor—which can have the same shimmer and insubstantiality. George Howe, who plays the part, is a fine performer. His Polonius was good when I first saw it eighteen years ago and it is still good, it is quite unchanged in fact, now that it is mis-named Pickwick. It has no aureole. It is not legendary.

Mr. Pickwick without his Pickwickian radiance is a poor forked animal indeed, yet Mr. Young adds insult to injury, imposition to deprivation, by also changing the animal's features. Transferring a piece of action, Hollywood-fashion, from one character to another he presents us with the only violent sensation of the evening: dismay at the discovery that his Pickwick is in love. He has been saddled with the egregious Mr. Tupman's passion for Rachel Wardle. Pickwick in Love! Queen Victoria might have asked for this as Queen Elizabeth is said to have asked for the similar degradation of Falstaff. She didn't, though; the Playwrights Company rushes in where an empress feared to tread.

That isn't all. The idea of Pickwick in love could only occur to someone who has rejected the idea of Pickwick. And someone who has rejected Pickwick need not stop at mere rejection. He can then take Pickwick and throw him into the Thames in a basket of soiled linen. The soiled linen in this case is the lady herself, and the Thames is the inanity of the whole relationship. True, Pickwick emerges from his bath of vapid sentimentality before he is done—but only because the lady has given up collecting moths (!) and instead has collected (!!) Stiggins.

One's quarrel with the Dickensians is not that they admire

Dickens too much but that they don't admire him at all; they admire Dickensianism. They profess admiration for Dickens, yet, admiring him for little qualities, and being unable to think little of themselves, they cannot help taking a superior attitude to the supposed object of their veneration. So it is that what is meant for homage is really an affront. In the Young-Burrell production, for example, there is scarcely a walk, a gesture, an intonation, that is not an insult to the memory of a great artist. It's all meant to be charming, of course. But if you really believed Dickens to be charming you wouldn't strain like that to make him so. Anyway, Mr. Burrell should know that charm cannot be acted. It can only emanate from good acting as the aroma emanates from good brandy.

Would *Pickwick Papers* make a good play in any case? It seems doubtful. The dramatic nature of Dickens' genius is a lure to the theatrical adaptor—and a trap. Dramatic characters and incidents are not in themselves a play. In acknowledging that Dickens could have been a great dramatist one mustn't forget that what he did make of himself was—a great novelist. If I have implied that his dialogue often requires only a faithful copyist for adaptation to the stage, it is also true that none of his novels could become a great play without the collaboration of a great playwright.

7

THE CASE OF O'CASEY

They say that the critic
of *The New York Times*
is the dictator of serious drama on Broadway yet when he takes the unprecedented step of repeatedly writing articles to ask that Sean O'Casey be performed he doesn't get his way. Why is this?

The latest explanation to come to my ears is: "you can't raise the money, O'Casey is too close to communism." "Too close" is a very delicate expression, implying that some degree of closeness is permitted, or maybe some kind of closeness, or maybe closeness under certain conditions. Bernard Shaw is regularly performed though he never missed any opportunity of praising Stalin or calling himself a communist outright; he lived to support Wallace in '48 and to deplore American intervention in Korea. Charlie Chaplin, on the other hand, who does not call himself a communist is called one by other people; and his film *Monsieur Verdoux* was ostracized in most parts of the country. Bertolt Brecht (to complete the list of the four leading comic talents of our time) has caused one potential Broadway backer to say: "his play is a masterpiece but I wouldn't produce it even if I knew it'd make a million." The long and short of it is that Shaw is given a hearing unreservedly, that Mr. Chaplin is given a hearing with reservations (*Monsieur Verdoux* was not kosher, but *City Lights* was), and that Mr. Brecht and Mr. O'Casey are not given a hearing at all.

The reason I've heard suggested for the approval of Shaw and Mr. Chaplin is that they've been in the business longer, they were established in public esteem long before Parnell Thomas and Joseph McCarthy were heard of. Mr. Brecht and Mr. O'Casey, however, were also in the field before intolerance entered its present phase. Why didn't they find an audience in the twenties and thirties?

Mr. O'Casey tells his part of the story in *Inishfallen Fare Thee Well* and *Rose and Crown* (the fourth and fifth volumes of his autobiography). His three plays of the mid-twenties made enemies but they made powerful and numerous friends. They gave O'Casey an identity; and this proved precisely to be the problem when, a little later, he proceeded to write a little differently. To quote *Rose and Crown*:

> There was no importance in trying to do the same thing again . . . He wanted a change from what the Irish critics had called burlesque, photographic realism, or slices of life, though the manner and method of two of the plays were as realistic as the scents stealing from a gaudy bunch of blossoms.

Here, as so often in dramatic criticism, the word *realism* is ambiguous. Mr. O'Casey rightly implies that there is a sense in which even his early plays are not realistic. Conversely there is a sense in which it was the realism of the later plays that offended an influential section of the public. *The Silver Tassie* gave offence for not being *Journey's End*—that is, for exposing wounds instead of filming them over with gentility. *Within the Gates* gave offence for giving a close-up of a bishop instead of hiding him in a cloud of incense. *The Star Turns Red* gave offence for turning red—when the palette of a Cecil Beaton or an Oliver Messel had so many other colors to offer. It was opposed in England not for its brand of politics but for being political at all.

The point of view is familiar to readers of Mr. O'Casey's arch-antagonist, James Agate, who, for example, complaining of J. B. Priestley, not that he wrote badly, but that he wrote politically, had clearly no means of distinguishing the Yorkshireman's defects from the Irishman's qualities.

One of the harshest terms of abuse in the metropolitan drama critic's vocabulary is expressionism, and James Agate was one of many who applied it to Mr. O'Casey. The word damaged him in the theatre world by hinting that he read books by foreign authors or spent his holidays beyond the Rhine. It damaged him by intimating that his later style was not his own. It furthered mystification by getting people to assume that there had been an obvious break in Mr. O'Casey's creative life—a gap, with his genius and his past on one side while his reading and his future were on the other. Mr. O'Casey observes plaintively that his residence in England was held accountable for the faults of a work which was conceived and begun before he left Ireland.

One cannot study this man's career without convicting the world around him of jealous meanness. First, they shelved his early works as "classics"; second, they took a stand which explained and dismissed his later works before they appeared. Between these two phases, there was one crucial and receptive moment, a moment when the O'Casey story, as Hollywood would call it, could have been given another turn, and by a single man. This was the moment when W. B. Yeats was reading *The Silver Tassie* for the Abbey Theatre. Not understanding the crucial nature of this moment, we are likely to misread large portions of the autobiography as megalomania. Actually, we should be less surprised at Mr. O'Casey's continual return to the crisis of *The Silver Tassie* than at the fact that his attitude to Yeats even after it was one of filial love.

Yeats was under no obligation to make a success story of Mr. O'Casey's career; he was under no obligation to like

The Silver Tassie. But, all other questions aside, we may judge his famous rejection of it in terms of the consequences. Yeats did more than any other man to deflect from the theatre one of its two or three best playwrights. I am not sure that Mr. O'Casey's later plays are as good as his earlier ones; I am sure they would be better than they are had Yeats and Agate and the rest kept the playwright in the theatre. Though diffuse, and blemished by self-pity and proletarian snobbery, the autobiography, half the time, is as good as the blurbs say it is; one shakes one's head, not over what O'Casey has written, but over what he has been sidetracked from writing; the autobiography is *ersatz*; the best passages are scenes from plays that will never be written; scenes by a playwright without a theatre. If the plays Mr. O'Casey has been printing are increasingly "unproducable" the reason (if I may be allowed an Irishism) is that they've been increasingly unproduced; a playwright without a theatre is far too free. And yet we don't really know whether *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* is good theatre, bad, or indifferent, because we haven't tried it. There is also the question how good the theatre is in which it would be tried. A creative ensemble would be more interested in tackling a work that is not tied down by the habits of past performances, a work which demands, and will help to form, a new kind of performance. Where are the actors who will give us, not repetitions, nor even revivals, but discoveries? Do we reject O'Casey because as a communist he is beneath us or because as an artist he is beyond us?

8

HITCH YOUR STAR TO A WAGON

Dr. Johnson said marriage wasn't unhappy except as life was unhappy, and we may add that the theatre isn't dead except as our culture in general is dead. I shall not follow the Sunday papers and call the theatre a fabulous invalid, because the phrase suggests debility without death; whereas there is a good deal in theatre now that is quite, quite dead; and, contrariwise, what is more fabulous than its usual debility is its occasional strength. Along with much mortality there is not a little vitality, and in the midst of death we are in life.

The recognized eras of theatrical greatness are those of the great playwrights; yet a theatre is not dead when there are no playwrights; it is dead only when there are no actors. In an age without playwrights the actors can still give us theatre, and that in at least three sorts of composition: revivals, vaudeville, and star vehicles. Of the three, revivals have had the highest prestige, because the tradition of "serious" acting since Betterton has largely been the tradition of acting Shakespeare. Shaw is now becoming as safe a standby as Shakespeare. What could be more symptomatic of our situation than the fact that the best performance of the 1951-2 season was a reading of a single Shavian scene, ("Don Juan in Hell") or that the best play on Broadway as I write is Shaw's very first effort at playwriting (*Widowers' Houses*)?

For lack of another term, I am using the word vaudeville to include cabaret, revues, variety, music hall, and, above all, musicals. In all of these the individual item is traditionally more important than the composition, if any, of which it is a part; and, within the individual item, the individual performance easily transcends the script and the score. Ideally, a vaudeville show should present one first-rate number after another. As a rule, however, even a musical is a desert of mediocrity with a single oasis.

> Fair as a star when only one
> Is shining in the sky.

Except for the star, everything else in the show is sheerest night. The remedy is to present the oasis without the desert; the star without the black sky; in short, Beatrice Lillie as she appears in her "Evening" without featured players, bit players, chorus, and orchestra.

The show without Beatrice Lillie would be nothing, Beatrice Lillie without the show is everything. It is the live part of contemporary theatre with the dead part cut away. Touching the very quick of theatrical art in Miss Lillie's work we realize how dead is not only the kind of show she herself has often been condemned to appear in but (more important) the kind of show that is thought to have higher status. The realization is forced upon us that standards of theatrical craftsmanship get lower as the intellectual pretensions of theatre people increase: it is an exact inverse ratio. In general, therefore, visitors to this country have to be advised against revivals and sent to nightclubs and musicals. Visiting directors will often find the talent they need for drama among the non-dramatic actors of this "lower" echelon.

Doubtless the speakers at a recent New York debate were right in saying that talent abounds and is being blocked; but it is being blocked at the source; it is not yet available; because it is untrained. Most actors are unem-

ployed, yet the fact remains that it is hard to find a first-rate cast for any play. The only large group of actors who know how to do anything is the "hoofer" group. It is with this in mind that I am using so smiling a subject as Miss Lillie as theme for a sermon. *She can do things;* and the concept of the actor as one who does things is unhappily receding before the concept of the actor as folk hero (film-star, covergirl) and the actor as common man (who doesn't know how to speak, sit, stand, or walk, let alone sing, dance, and turn cartwheels). Miss Lillie is an edifice of control and agility upon a foundation of humor.

As for "star vehicles," Uta Hagen is appearing in something called *In Any Language* by two authors whose names I feel no urge to look up. I hasten to add that I have nothing against "vehicles" as such, and I grant that the genre is to be judged by criteria less exacting than those of drama proper. A vehicle serves its purpose if you can ride in it; and, far from hitching my wagon to a star, I am eager to attach a star to any wagon that will carry her. In representing that this vehicle drops Uta Hagen rudely in the roadway, I had better drop the metaphor.

The writer of a vehicle play can fall short of drama only where it is possible for the actor to make the deficiency good. Actors have been known to suggest to audiences a depth of emotion and even a profundity of thought of which no trace is to be found in the script. If such cases are examined, however, it will be found, first, that at least the script didn't put too many obstacles in their way and, second, that it prompted and initiated what they realized and completed. The actor can make a moderately witty line sound very witty; with an unwitty line he is powerless. He can make a statement sound significant if the author has at least made clear *what* he is stating. In short he can make the purse if the writer provide him with silk and not a sow's ear.

The first minutes of *In Any Language,* as well as the ad-

vance publicity, give us the impression that we are in for a satirical treatment of Ingrid Bergman and Roberto Rossellini. It would have been perfectly legitimate for the authors to disappoint this expectation later; it would have been legitimate for them to depart, as they did, from satire itself, had they found any other path to comedy. Instead the evening is tense with the fight waged by actors and director against the play. I think George Abbott's directing as far above most directing of the "serious" variety as Beatrice Lillie's acting is above our Shakespeareonics. But if there's anything that cannot be forced it is light comedy. I am told that Uta Hagen's role is good in that it "frees" her from the straitjacket of classic austerity and/or neurotic intensity in which she is supposed to have been constricted. Let's hope it frees people of the illusion that she ever wore such a jacket. An actress of her accomplishment has no need to prove her versatility. Unversatile actors aren't actors, they are at best personalities.* We not only knew Uta Hagen could act. Her non-comic work couldn't possibly have been so good if she hadn't had the comedienne in her. As to bringing the comedienne out of her and placing it before the public, Miss Hagen wanted to do it and the authors of *In Any Language* couldn't entirely stop her; yet they do very seriously hamper her. After this, if she can't find a real play, she should, if possible, make sure that a vehicle is a vehicle is a vehicle.

* But see pp. 81, 122, 179, 214.

9

WHAT IS ACTING?

What is acting? If it is tossing your head, arching your back, sawing the air with your arms, sitting in grotesque positions, stamping across the stage, moving in rapid rotation from one chair to another, throwing yourself on the floor, falling off your seat, knocking people downstairs, Katharine Hepburn may be said to be acting the title role in Shaw's *Millionairess*. What is virtuosity in acting? If it is roaring instead of speaking, whining instead of whispering, if it embraces the abuse as well as the use of voice and gesture, if it permits the constant repetition of a single rhythmic and tonal pattern, Miss Hepburn is a virtuoso. What is the interpretation of a role? If it is not to discover what is in a role but to impose yourself upon it, if it is not to impose your true self upon it but a self you vamp up for the occasion, if it is not to find the accents and climaxes but to accent everything and make a climax of every speech, if it is not to establish relationships with other characters and other actors but to inhibit all relationship with other characters and other actors, if it is not to seek the author's meaning but to smother all meaning in rapid activity that is too mechanical or too neurasthenic to deserve the name of energy, Miss Hepburn is a great interpreter.

If London liked the show, London cannot distinguish between vital energy and the galvanic activity of a headless

hen. Nor can one think so highly of those in London who, though perceptive enough to sense that something was wrong somewhere, deduced, without examining the facts of the case, that it must be because the octogenarian author's life was ebbing and even American monkey glands could not revive him. The performance does indeed give the impression that the play is uninteresting. "All this effort and the script still doesn't come to life!" say those who do not realize that all the effort has gone into killing it. The fact that Shaw so often succeeds with our public should not blind us to the fact that he succeeds at a price and sometimes does not succeed at all. Applying an artistic rather than a commercial criterion, we should have to say that the success is seldom more than partial—one actor in a dozen will have the tone and rhythm without which Shavian comedy does not properly exist. The memory of a Shavian playgoer is studded—not, unhappily, with great productions—but with individuals who transcended a general competence or incompetence: Stephen Haggard as Marchbanks, Claude Rains as Caesar, John Buckmaster as the Dauphin, Charles Laughton as the Devil. Mere competence is not enough for Shaw, though it is preferable to super-production by Michael Benthall. No one who saw the merely competent, rather down-at-heel Paris production of *The Millionairess* in 1938 left the theatre disliking the play. Competent production is only incomplete; super-production means perversion.

Now you can pervert a Shakespeare play and no one will notice, since no one knew what to make of the play in the first place, but in perverting Shaw you are perverting an author who has frequently been criticized for making his meaning all too clear in prefaces and stage-directions, not to mention dialogue. Well, our producers are forever proving that he is not too clear for *them*. He can explain his view that Joan's voices are real to her and to her only, and this won't stop Margaret Webster broadcasting angel voices

to the whole audience over the PA system. He can spend half a lifetime explaining his view of leaders and can sum it up in the preface to this very play *The Millionairess*, and that won't stop Mr. Benthall and Miss Hepburn presenting their own view—or non-view—of the subject. Shaw believed in getting rid of rich and poor alike by socialism. Economic equality would permit those few of the ex-paupers and ex-millionaires who have ruling talent to come forward and rule. Our inequality provides no legitimate outlet for them. The millionairess is a frustrated ruler. Her frustrations are ugly, her nature is not; the cardinal error of Miss Hepburn's "interpretation" is to make Epifania absurd and repulsive. True, an effort is made in the last couple of minutes of the play to reverse all that has previously been said and done. It is too late. And in Shaw's script there is no reversal, nor could Shaw ever have countenanced the means by which Miss Hepburn tries to bring one about: feverishly and erotically acting against the lines and endeavoring to subordinate a whole paragraph of Shavian eloquence to her own false emphasis on one word ("nice"). This is not the only way in which the final, summing-up speeches of the play are confused in the Benthall-Hepburn production. Shaw printed two endings: one for the capitalist west, the other for communist countries where, in his view, the problem posed by the play has been solved. In the current production, *both* endings are drawn upon! America is the stronghold of capitalism, yet there are still those, no doubt, who think the communists may take over at any minute.

Sometime this play could be done right. Shaw gave the best hint in his prefatory mention of Ben Jonson. In merit *The Millionairess* is comparable neither to the best Jonson nor the best Shaw, yet in kind it is an attempt, like Pirandello's *Man, Beast, and Virtue*, to revive the Jonsonian kind of farce, which is both ferocious and meaningful. As such it requires a special kind of performance. Even Cyril Ritch-

ard—the only actor in the present production with a style—is not right for it. Mr. Ritchard plays comedy of manners. What we have here is an intellectual Punch and Judy show. Miss Hepburn fails by going all out at the Punch-and-Judy *motif* and hoping that intellect will be added unto her. Robert Helpmann fails by ignoring the principal tip Shaw gives to the actor playing the Egyptian Doctor, namely, not to use a stagy, foreign accent; he speaks English, says Shaw, "too well to be mistaken for a native." Then there are two average, British drawing-room actors, and one, below average, who is sometimes heard to say "yahs" for "years" and "jahray" for "jury" but is in general inaudible because he tries to speak with tongue and teeth without recourse to his lungs and vocal chords.

After seeing half a dozen recent Broadway plays you might well wonder if you'll ever see anything but children and old maids on the stage any more. Though *The New York Times* singled out the word "mature" to describe one of the latest exhibitions of immaturity, and "senile" to describe *The Millionairess*, there are theatregoers who'd be glad to turn from today's version of maturity to the brains and verve of even minor Shaw, just as they'd be glad to turn from Miss Hepburn's St. Vitus Dance to a genuine Shavian vitality.

10

CHARLIE CHAPLIN'S MEA CULPA

It is more than thirty years since Charlie Chaplin established himself as the master of a craft. For more than twenty years he has been faced with the question: where do I go from here? A question with two aspects. Technically, it is: how am I to adapt myself to the talkies? Spiritually, it is: how am I to adapt myself to a new age? For the classic silents are pre-1914 in mentality if not in date.

If we understand how special these questions are in the life of a film actor we are in a position to see how special everything about Mr. Chaplain is. The very fact that such questions arise for him betokens a consciousness of talent that is a far rarer phenomenon than talent itself. Adaptation to the talkies would have been no Herculean task except on his terms: that the talkies be a mold for greatness. Adaptation to a new age would only mean acquiescence in it if Mr. Chaplain had not been full of a desire to interpret and to lead. Just as special was the range of his mastery: he wasn't just a great actor, he made his name as the creator of a symbolic role with which he and half the world identified themselves, and so he was a sort of dramatist. The muse of history favored him: as soon as his education in pantomime was complete, the silent screen stood waiting to record and broadcast his prowess. Charlie not only accepted the screen's services. He enslaved it, exploited it, taught it to do things it had never done before.

All this happened naturally, rapidly, and in a very short time. He didn't have to think about it—until people told him what he had done and how great it was, until the movie industry went over to sound, until the bitch History —history personal and world-wide—inflicted a series of wounds. It is easy to say that, since then, he has done too much thinking, that he now uses all too many words and is over-intellectual, pretentious. It is harder to know what he should have done, what he should do. The inept thing is to wish he would "just stick to the Tramp" for this is to forget that an artist must develop—one cannot say he must improve, let alone that he must repeat himself. Critics, of course, cannot tell him where his future development lies. All they can do is discriminate between advancing and backtracking, between exploring and merely getting lost. It seems to me that Mr. Chaplin's two latest films represent a triumph and a failure, respectively.

In *Monsieur Verdoux* we found for the first time that Mr. Chaplin could use the sound film for all it is worth. And, granted that he probably cannot throw the Tramp off altogether, he brilliantly contrived to turn him upside down to suit the topsy-turvy world of the fascist epoch. If *City Lights,* for example, says all that the Chaplin of the early period had to say, *Monsieur Verdoux* sums up the Chaplin of the later period, the period when he had begun to think and to lose popularity, when his love of women, laughed at in the twenties, had come to be linked, by the logic of the intellectual underworld, with his political leanings. Coming after *Monsieur Verdoux, Limelight* is as much a *mea culpa* as any Soviet artist's return to the bosom of Stalin. It is a return to the bosom of the bourgeoisie, and it is expressed in the quintessentially bourgeois form of entertainment: sentimental domestic drama. This form doesn't stop an artist being pretentious—as students of Chaplin's late father-in-law know to their cost. And in *Limelight,* the high-

flown sentimentality of Mr. Chaplin's drama has a lethal partner in the academicism of an Eglevsky ballet.

I saw *Monsieur Verdoux* half a dozen times and was still discovering fine details the last time. At a second viewing of *Limelight* I found myself chafing at the length of every "serious" passage. The film has neither the richness nor the precision of detail that we have learnt to expect from this great artist. Even the editing is faulty: if the heavy scenes are too long, the light ones are too short. Nor is the story at all points well told. When the prim landlady comes in rollicking drunk we feel that some preparatory scene must be missing. Occasionally—as in a lengthy passage about whores and syphilis—one wonders if different versions of the story are here jumbled as in some Elizabethan bad quarto. More certain is the fact that the real vitality of Mr. Chaplin is absent from most of the film and that instead we have at best a dazzle of dexterity, at worst a blur of sentiment—he can't see for crocodile tears. The sentimentality affects Mr. Chaplin's portrayal of bad people as well as good: instead of the big, lively villain of old we get the Hollywood cliché of a dear old bozo (well played by Nigel Bruce). The *mea culpa* attitude is not only morally repugnant; it is artistically deleterious.

All this is to judge of course by the incredibly high standard which Mr. Chaplin himself has set. The film is not only better than 999 out of 1000 films, it has passages of the real Chaplin. Outstanding among these, naturally, are the music-hall turns: the appetite whetted by the song in *Modern Times* is here richly fed if by no means sated. It is worth sitting through the "serious" scenes with the Girl not only for Claire Bloom's remarkable beauty but because Charlie interrupts them to flirt briefly with the landlady across a banister. There are many (if not enough) characteristic details which illustrate Charlie's vivacity as a comedian and his intelligence as a dramatic realist. When a pungent smell of-

fends his nostrils he quickly examines the sole of his shoe. He pulls out his pants—pressed!—from under the mattress. He makes his room seem a matter of habit and habitation by always knowing (as most actors don't) where the furniture is. By the way he sits in a particular chair he can tell you he is used to sitting in it and how.

The good things in *Limelight* are exceptional and peripheral. The film is a glorious failure about a glorious failure. The name of the protagonist is Calvero, but the portrait on his mantelpiece is that of Mr. Chaplin, young. Symbolic autobiography! What an amazing conception for a movie man! And in *Monsieur Verdoux* it was executed with genius. The picture had a sharp focus in the middle, even if it was fuzzy on the edges. In *Limelight* the fuzziness is all at the center. What analogy is there between a rich and famous movie star threatened by an Attorney General * and an impoverished old music hall singer begging in pubs? There wouldn't have to be one, of course—if Mr. Chaplin himself hadn't planted the biographical reference and fostered it with tears of self-pity. I don't claim to know in what direction Charlie should proceed. But we can all see various directions in which he should not proceed. One is that of a conciliation which can be no true conciliation. Charlie must follow his own star even if he lose the Attorney General's forty-eight.

* At the time these words were written, Mr. Chaplin was threatened with investigation by the Attorney General's office should he apply for re-entry to the U.S. He has now settled in Switzerland (1954).

11

THE POET IN NEW YORK

The old world and the new have often met dramatically in New York. It is curious to think of Lorenzo Da Ponte, Mozart's librettist, teaching at Columbia University. Another European, Garcia Lorca, also on the Columbia campus for a while, found it curious to think of himself—the Spanish *poeta en Nueva York.* And now we have Jean-Louis Barrault producing *The False Secrets* at the Ziegfeld. Marivaux in the home of Billy Rose! King Arthur, as it were, at the court of a Yankee! Yet why not? Was Marivaux any less of a duck out of water in eighteenth-century France? No more than in the pictures of his contemporary Watteau can we look in Marivaux for the outer facts of life. Both men lived in a dream.

Grimm and Voltaire tried to dismiss Marivaux two hundred years ago; *The New York Times* reports today that his masterpiece "does not appear to be remarkably distinguished"; but the dream lives on. It is a dream, though, of reality—inner reality. Marivaux has a subject: the awakening of love, the recognition of its awakening, and, to some extent, the results of such recognition. The title of his first success—*Harlequin Refined by Love*—indicates the kind of result that interested him; whatever did not interest him he excluded with the ruthlessness and precision of a surgeon. His people may not have the various characteristics

which a different tradition has led us to expect; they have what is essential to the drama on hand. Nothing in English is very close to him; our closest analogues, perhaps, are Jane Austen and Henry James. French writers in this tradition to whom we have granted the "distinction" Brooks Atkinson refuses to Marivaux include Musset and Giraudoux.

Marivaux' approach to theatre may be just as strange to us as his approach to human character. He was oddly placed. Though Adrienne Lecouvreur once played a part for him, he had success almost exclusively with Italian actors who at first didn't know French. Even total speechlessness may be a resource. The new Harlequin, Thomassin, made his debut in a scene without words. And, because his predecessor in the role had been a great acrobat, while he himself had been a tragedian, Thomassin created a new character: a quiet, quasi-naïve harlequin, spiritual, touching. One Autereau wrote him a couple of scripts in which he enacted the awakening of love in an innocent heart. This was where Marivaux took over, and where our thoughts leap forward to Debureau, Mr. Chaplin, and M. Barrault.

In *Harlequin Refined by Love* at the Comédie Française you can see the once new harlequin in the spry impersonation of that fine comedian Jacques Charon. For New York, M. Barrault has modestly chosen a piece in which the clowns are neither melancholy nor conspicuous: *The False Secrets* rests principally on the shoulders of Madeleine Renaud and Jean Desailly. The work of these two superb artists suffers a little from the size of the Ziegfeld, from the audience's ignorance of French, and possibly, I suppose, from the prevalence of Mr. Atkinson's view of Marivaux. It remains for the connoisseur of literature the perfect embodiment of Marivaux' humanity, and for the student of acting a lesson in the handling of a script which offers none of the levers that the modern actor is taught to look for. (In self-defense, the latter calls this French work "stylized," the truth being

that it has a style to which he has not found the clues. He finds it "unreal," thus unconsciously revealing both a narrow notion of reality and a failure to recognize the "unreality" of all technique, all art.)

We see Thomassin's new Harlequin—or is it Pierrot, and do historians derive him from Brighella?—in the second item on the program: *Baptiste.* Here we are in the nineteenth century, and almost ready for one of Charlie Chaplin's dream sequences. Pierrot dreams that the status of Columbine has come to life and that Harlequin has run off with her. In order to follow the pair to the ball, Pierrot robs and murders an old-clothes-man. Since the ghost of the latter rises up to demand vengeance, Pierrot would be in a fix—if he didn't wake up. The best bits in the narrative are those that have Chaplinesque charm and point: for example, the rope Pierrot prepares to hang himself with he inadvertently lends to a little girl to skip with. Seeing *Baptiste* for the third time, I was surprised how well it wears. M. Barrault's own performance is perhaps less inventive and less dazzlingly comic than the Bip series of Marcel Marceau, the great mime whom America has yet to see. The reconstruction of a Debureau pantomime (for that is what *Baptiste* is) by M. Barrault and Jacques Prévert is less authentic without being more exciting than one I saw in Rome by another very gifted mime, Jacques Lecoq. M. Barrault is no specialist. If he has disappointed the apostles of pure mime, it is because he has exploited their specialty for the general good of theatre. It is his mission, not to do one thing supremely, but to do everything splendidly. If as Pierrot he lacks some final quality equivalent, say, to the profound dignity of Chaplin, he has created a fey sprite compact of energy and wit. M. Barrault's exemplary achievement is not in a single role, nor yet in all his roles: it is that he is the complete man of the theatre: actor of all types of roles, director of all

types of plays (and non-plays), creator of a repertoire, builder and educator of a company.

A sense of all this makes each evening at the Ziegfeld a curiously festive one. I find in the audiences a relaxed joy and warm exhilaration quite unlike anything I have witnessed in a New York theatre before. The source of this delight may be partly the fascination of the unknown—there are gasps of pleasure at every move M. Barrault makes—yet it is even more the shock of recognition: recognition of the art of theatre in its many-sidedness, its fullness. Here is no exotic dish to give us a *nouveau frisson*; it is the wholesome food we have forgotten the taste of. As far as exoticism goes, New York—"the most sophisticated city in the world"—"the modern Babylon"—is well-enough provided. What Paris has brought us is a good old-fashioned evening of poetry, the poetry of words and the poetry of bodily movement: in sum, the poetry of the theatre.

12

IT'S ALL GREEK TO ME

The simultaneous appearance in New York of M. Barrault's French company and the Greek National Theatre has raised some nice problems of theory. The critic who said that he disliked *Electra* in all the English versions but liked it in modern Greek which he does not understand was making pretty bold assumptions about the nature of language—and of drama.

What do you like in language you do not understand? The answer is generally held to be "the music," but for me the musical theory was refuted once for all by I. A. Richards some years ago when he showed that English has no music that is detachable from its sense by imitating the sounds of a Miltonic strophe in a piece of nonsense. The "music" of an unknown tongue is illusory. The fact that one invents such a phenomenon and then proceeds to enjoy the invention must be attributed to naïve awe, snobbish xenophilia, or, more likely, to certain romantic associations clustered around literature and summer vacations. *Omne ignotum pro magnifico.* The zeal of many people for opera "in the Italian original" is in direct proportion to their ignorance of Italian, for while they readily notice crudites of English, they take all the Italian librettist's geese for swans.

To prefer incomprehensible Greek to comprehensible English is also to assume that words in drama don't much

matter anyway. Some New York critics begin by apologizin for their lack of languages and end by judging the sho Greek or French, precisely as if they had missed nothin One of them said he didn't know French but was sure Mar vaux couldn't interest even those who did. Others we cautious in their remarks about writers but under no inhib tions when discussing acting.

Now can you discuss the acting of a performer whose wor you don't follow? You can say you were moved or were n moved, but this is not criticism, it is data for your fev chart. A critic has to know *what* moved him, and whethe it is related to the *intention* of a performance. If you co sider what one of our own actors does with a line—of Shak speare or Odets, it makes no difference—you can figure fo yourself how little that is relevant a foreigner could make o it. Why do we assume that we know what Greek actors o Russians do with their lines? True, the actor's work is n confined to the handling of lines but, except when there a no lines at all, even the non-verbal "business" is apt to hav a relation to the dialogue; not understanding the dialogu you will misinterpret the business. What is over-acting What is under-acting? You cannot spot either of them a sight. It is a case of too much or too little for the matter-i hand, and the matter-in-hand includes the words. In Gree tragedy, it is generally agreed, the dialogue is more than ha the play.

A type of art which, in Aristotle's phrase, "reveals i power by mere reading," cannot reveal its power b mere seeing. The question is: to what extent are w helped out by knowing *Electra* or *Oedipus*—the two pla our guests brought us—in translation? The answer is that yo have to know the English almost by heart so that you ca follow line by line without fear of getting lost, and that eve then the English version you memorize must have a line-t line correspondence with the Greek (which, at the Ma

Hellinger, would have meant with a modern Greek translation). I found that to know the English in outline was not enough. In the middle of many a two-page oration, I had no idea what was being said, and, since nothing was being done, I repeatedly found my mind wandering.

A friend said that if I'd been moved by Katina Paxinou's Electra I would have been convinced it was great acting and I'd have left it at that. I was not moved. But I know I am not entitled to blame this on the actress. On the contrary, the experience makes me skeptical of all those critical pieces on Duse that were written in entire innocence of the Italian language. There are many things a woman can put across without words; dramatic literature is not one of them; and unintelligible words are not better than no words at all.

I do not mean that the evening was one of uninterrupted boredom. My boredom was interrupted by Dmitri Mitropoulos' music which I rather liked, by the movements of the chorus which I often enjoyed, by an occasional "stage picture" which a knowledge of the story enabled me to interpret, perhaps also by the aura of the occasion, the psychological effect of thinking, "I am in the presence of Greek tragedy in Greek played by Greeks." But no: this last can't be counted: what is expected of you can never be equated with what you really feel. In any case, boredom with interludes is not the experience we ask of theatre; incomprehension with lucid moments is no basis for criticism.

I have been told that, to be consistent, I should regret the French and Greek visits altogether. Obviously not. For one thing there are crucial differences between the two enterprises. Modern Greek is a language known to even fewer of us than ancient Greek; whereas M. Barrault's audience at the Ziegfeld responded to jokes that depend on a very thorough knowledge of French. Even if this were not so, few or none of the French plays currently offered are as dependent on language as the two Greek tragedies, the special art of Bar-

rault being pantomime. Surely all the foreign companies that have had success in New York have offered much more to the eyes than the Greeks are doing. If I have regrets, the chief is over my own ignorance of Greek. I should like to check my impression, at present ill-founded, that Alexis Minotis, Miss Paxinou, and their company are far from first-rate.

A man once told me he liked symphonic music because it started a chain of free associations in his mind—after the first minute it was no more than the accompaniment to a day-dream. Conceivably the "music" of the Greek language could serve a similar purpose; and there would be a use for the ancient tragedy in Brave New World.

13

THE PINK AND THE BLACK

It often happens that a married man falls in love with a young girl, and that the wife intervenes and the girl goes away. There are many easy ways of "setting up" the story; to have the wife arrange for the girl to be seduced by the husband's best friend might be described as the hard way. It is the way either of a sensation-monger straining after effect or of an artist whose complex mind requires a complex vehicle, like Jean Anouilh who tells the story in *The Rehearsal or Love Punished* (the only new work in the Barrault repertory at the Ziegfeld).

M. Anouilh is complex in that his real interest doesn't lie where we expect it to lie but somewhere else instead—or somewhere else as well. He was first introduced to New York as a playwright of the Resistance with a play allegedly written to defend a partisan Antigone against a collaborationist Creon. The allegation was not flatly erroneous; it was half true—and wholly misleading. The politics of the play are by no means so unambiguous; and the play is not, in the first instance, political. Admittedly, its real purport was not easy to grasp in isolation from the French background and particularly from the other works of M. Anouilh.

By the time you've seen three or four Anouilh plays, things begin to fall into place in your mind. They are all the

same play, or perhaps it would be fairer to say they are one of two plays. The first we have seen under the title of *Antigone, Legend of Lovers, Cry of the Peacock.* The second we have seen under the title of *Ring Round the Moon* or read under the title *Leocadia.* Anouilh had completed both plays when he himself was little over twenty. Their titles then were *Ermine* and *Thieves' Ball.* The event "Anouilh" occurred in 1932 with the opening of *Ermine* in Paris. *Thieves' Ball* was not produced for six years, but other plays were; and by 1942 Anouilh could publish all versions of both plays, one set under the title *Pièces Noires,* the other under the title *Pièces Roses.* Since the war Anouilh has become (I am told) the most popular playwright on the continent. He cannot really be said to have reached New York, however, till 1952, twenty years after the event; the unhappy affairs that took place under his name were simply not Anouilh.

The Rehearsal is the latest *pièce noire.** Like *Ermine,* the first one, it is about two states of being: poverty and purity. Each state is brought into conflict with its opposite—poverty with wealth, purity with corruption—and the two conflicts are one because it is the poor who are pure, the wealthy who are corrupt.

> She was poor but she was honest.
> Victim of a rich man's crime . . .

the lines of the old song sum up the heroine of *The Rehearsal.* Reverse the sexes, and they go some way towards summing up Anouilh's other recent play *Colombe*: in both plays we see a virgin disillusioned and destroyed. Anouilh's virgins stand alone in a world of debauchees. They yearn for the absolute in the morass of the relative. His Antigone stands, not for virtue, but for extremity. "We are people,"

* Since this review was written there has arrived from Paris a volume indicating that M. Anouilh is dissatisfied with his dichotomy and has put *Ring Round the Moon, The Rehearsal,* and *Colombe* in a third category: *Pièces Brillantes* (1954).

she says, "who push questions to the limit." Creon asks: "If it isn't for other people, or for your brother, for whom then?" And this unorthodox revolutionary replies: "For no one. For myself." The unvirginal Medea also longs for purity —and finds it in destructive energy; it is the more virtuous Jason who surrenders to the "relative," and decides he must build a wall between him and nothingness *(le néant)*. . . .

In *The Rehearsal* we see the closed circle of rich, corrupt society broken by a poor, pure teacher of orphans. The protagonist is neither the girl nor a representative of the other side but Tigre, a man belonging to the other side, yet lured by the absolute, by poverty and purity. When his wife goes into action against him, she is actuated less by sexual jealousy than by social snobbery, and less by social snobbery than by fear of purity. His best friend Héro can be talked into deflowering the young teacher because he too hates nothing so much as the absolute. Héro repeatedly tells us "I like breaking things." He is near enough to the villain of melodrama to tell us "I have to be rather disgusting, it's in my part" yet it is a melodrama colored by psychology—he is revenging himself on the world for the failure of the great romance of his life—and salted with Gallic sophistication and "existentialist" philosophy.

So much for the intellectual complexity of *The Rehearsal.* The play is also complex as dramaturgy. It is a complication of melodrama, and it is an inversion of a Marivaux comedy. M. Anouilh's use of Marivaux is the most audacious technical device of the play. All the characters are rehearsing Marivaux' *Double Inconstancy* (the title of which is suggestive enough). Many of Marivaux' words are found to express the real sentiments of our protagonist and the girl. More remarkable is the way M. Anouilh stands Marivaux on his head, turns a *pièce rose* into a *pièce noire.* Here, love is not active and beneficent, it is passive and disastrous. (Subject for a

treatise: "From *Harlequin poli par l'amour* to *l'Amour puni:* a chapter in French cultural history.")

Marivaux on his head is still Marivaux. As theatre, *The Rehearsal* is of the great French tradition, that is to say, the Italian one. I hesitate to mention *commedia dell'arte*—the term is used by drama critics to suggest any style they're sure is wonderful though they haven't a notion what it's like. By his ideas M. Anouilh is related to the existentialists, but perhaps the most important affiliation here is not M. Sartre (whom M. Anouilh antedates) but that Italian existentialist, Luigi Pirandello. The idea of M. Anouilh's *Traveler without Luggage* comes from Pirandello's *Late Mattia Pascal,* perhaps via Giraudoux' *Siegfried.* To join yourself to Pirandello is, luckily, to join yourself not only to his ideas but to the great tradition of comic Latin theatre which reaches back to the *commedia.* M. Anouilh will stand or fall in the degree to which he belongs to this tradition. I would not say his ideas are uninteresting—as yet. I would only record the impression that his special gift is an imagination that is histrionic, scenic, and musical. In a word, M. Anouilh is theatrical; and that is why—whether his is our preferred type of drama or not—we cannot do without him.

14

I HAVE A BRIGHT IDEA

There's a game children love, or used to, that begins with the exclamation "I have a bright idea!" I forget exactly how it goes but I recall that whoever is on hand has to ask whether the idea is animal, vegetable, or mineral, and that when the answer is found it is rather an anti-climax. I wonder if the "ideas" of contemporary culture are prompted by any less childish impulse or can, when identified, be greeted with any greater satisfaction. To begin with, they are not really ideas. Ours is the age of substitutes: instead of language, we have jargon; instead of principles, slogans; and, instead of genuine ideas, Bright Ideas. Bright Ideas win elections, and a cluster of them constituted a "theory" which justified the slaughter of six million Jews. A Bright Idea is an invalid idea which has more appeal to the semi-literate mind than a valid one; a phenomenon of some importance in a culture whose diagnostic is semi-literacy. It is a thought which can't bear thinking about; but which is all the more influential on that account; it surprises or re-assures, it flatters or inflames; if it cannot earn the simple epithet "true" it frequently receives the more characteristically modern eulogy of "intriguing" or at least "interesting." At the very worst it is praised as "cute." The modern person, engaged in that search for meaning in life which formerly was known as the religious and philosophic quest, marries one Bright Idea

after another, divorce being as frequent in the ideal as in the real world. "I can't *tell* you what this book will do for you," a Los Angeles lady once sighed into my ear, "it's *so* semantic!" She had a Bright Idea.

Nearly sixty years ago, Shaw wrote: "If the world had no more ideas than the theatre has, how long would society hold together?" Today, one is tempted to retort, society teems with ideas but is holding together only by the skin of its teeth, while the theatre teems with the same ideas and, far from holding together, is losing out to films, fiction, and TV. The retort would be unjust because when Shaw said "ideas" he meant it, whereas what our theatre and our society teem with are the fads, or Bright Ideas, which he spent seven decades denouncing. There is a miniature, but perfect, example in Shaw's correspondence with Mrs. Patrick Campbell. After seeing the actress in *Macbeth,* Shaw wrote her: "I couldn't understand the sleepwalking until D.D. [unidentified] told me someone had told you that Lady Macbeth should be seen through a sheet of glass. I wish I had been there with a few bricks. . . ." That sheet of glass is the very archetype of theatrical Bright Ideas, and for every window-breaker, there are half a dozen glaziers, calling themselves directors or teachers of acting. Indeed, a director hesitates to stage Shakespeare today *unless* he has a Bright Idea. One of the simpler Bright Ideas is transferring your play to another period for no sufficient reason. *The Taming of the Shrew* is more "intriguing" as a Regency farce. This particular transfer (not an invented one) is arbitrary. We have recently witnessed some that are not, and they are even worse. Chekhov's Russia and Verdi's Africa have been transferred to the U. S. South, the idea being that domestic affairs are more real to an audience than foreign affairs. It may be a true idea: all that's wrong is that it doesn't apply to matter in hand. In context it is only a Bright Idea.

Marx and Freud had ideas; the theatre has Bright Ideas. Counsel for playwrights accused of Marxism should plead the *a priori* impossibility of guilt: a playwright with *no* ideas cannot be found to have Marxist ideas. What the "social" playwrights took up in the 'Thirties was a set of Bright Ideas whose purpose was to give us the feeling of heroism without enjoining on us the duty of being heroic. Such playwrights could be sincere in retreating when a feeling of heroism gave place to a feeling of fear. Today it is not Marx but Freud who turns in his grave every time a Drama of Ideas opens on Broadway or in the West End. The theatre which Shaw berated for its hedonism now lectures us on the sex problems of adolescents and the complexes of old maids. The "masterdrama" of this generation is *A Streetcar Named Desire.* When a series of young actors auditioned for me not long ago I had the impression of seeing Blanche Dubois and Stanley Kowalsky over and over again, though my records indicated I had witnessed scenes from a dozen different plays. More than one of the young men even dressed like Stanley. Marlon Brando's T-shirt has attained the dignity of a Bright Idea.

Can't a man improve his plays by filling them with Improving Ideas? Can't he make them profounder by referring to profound subjects? That seems to be the logic of Messrs. Moss Hart and John van Druten in their latest offerings. Ideology is a great temptation. You imagine that all you need to do is refer to "schizophrenia" and you are exempt from the onerous duty of *creating* a schizoid character. You imagine that all you need to do is refer to religion many, many times and you have dramatized faith. On the first night of Mr. van Druten's *I've Got Sixpence* it was God who turned in His grave. The play is "religious" in the same sense as that Californian lady's book was "semantic." Salvation here is just as mechanically contrived as in any prole-

tarian drama of the older generation. In the theatre it seems hard for a god not to come *ex machina.*

"Going Serious" has been, perhaps, the commonest Bright Idea of them all. In the thirties it meant communism or the Buchmanite movement. To Mr. van Druten today it means Californian religion. In nearly all instances it has entailed an artistic decline. Nor need we accept the moral earnestness of the gesture at face value. Among the people one has known most intimately, those who have gone serious have not always gone best. Most of us too easily admire the sudden dive into a Cause, *any* cause; there is sickness in our admiration; causes are Bright Ideas. In soberer moods we grant that *The Climate of Eden* is a bad play, *Once in a Lifetime* a good one. Better no ideas than Bright Ideas. Yet, to be sure, a cult of anti-intellectualism—"the peasants in Mexico are happier illiterate"—would be the ultimate Bright Idea. The corrective to Bright Ideas lies not in No Ideas (that is, in the idea of no ideas) but in—ideas.

15

LILLIAN HELLMAN'S INDIGNATION

Nobody asked her to be Shakespeare. The genre to which *The Children's Hour* belongs is an honorable, if not a major, one. Call it the publicist's drama, the drama of indignation. In such drama we shall not expect to feel the emotion of characters as strongly as the author's animus. We shan't ask what such a dramatist has created, we ask who is the enemy this time, and how the dramatist has made us see his importance.

The material from which *A Children's Hour* is made suggests two stories. The first is a story of heterosexual teachers accused of Lesbianism; the enemy is a society which punishes the innocent. The second is a story of Lesbian teachers accused of Lesbianism; the enemy is a society which punishes Lesbians. Now, since either one of these stories could make an acceptable indignant play, one could scarcely be surprised if a playwright tried to tell them both at once. This is not quite what Miss Hellman does. She spends the greater part of the evening on the first story. In fact the indignation she arouses in us has but one source—our impression that the charge of Lesbianism is unfounded, an impression reinforced by everyone's holy horror whenever the subject comes up. Then, in the last few minutes, we learn that one of the teachers *is* Lesbian. But it is too late for Miss Hellman to tell Story Two and spell out its moral. The "guilty" teacher kills

herself, and the curtain comes down. Taking the play as a technical exercise, we could praise this ending as clever, or damn it as clumsy, but if we are interested in Miss Hellman's indignation, and especially if during the evening she has induced us to share it, we are bound to feel cheated. We are told that the play has been revived because of the current red scare. Now suppose it had been about teachers accused of communism, that for over two acts we had been asked to boil with indignation at the wrongness of the accusation, only to find, towards the close of Act Three, that one of the pair *did* harbor communist sympathies? Of course, a play can favor communism; a non-communist play can favor the toleration of communists; but these very different plays cannot be squeezed into the last ten minutes of a play protesting at the incrimination of non-communists. Or can they? The political analogy suggests not only the logical weakness of Miss Hellman's position but also the historical and psychological path along which she reached it. Is it not in politics, rather than the theatre, that we have witnessed this drama before? Mr. A would say it was infantile to accuse Mr. B of communism—"after all you're accused of communism nowadays if your hair is red"—and yet, later, when Mr. B did come out with communist views, Mr. A was neither displeased nor surprised. In the thirties, Mr. A would have said that of course an Alger Hiss was not a spy and then, if the espionage had been proved, he would have said, well, the Soviet Union was a special case. *The Children's Hour* has nothing directly to do with communism, but it was written in the thirties, and is the product of the dubious idealism of that time. Commenting on the play, Miss Hellman wrote: "I am a moral writer, often too moral a writer." As our feeling of being moral increases, our awareness of moral issues declines. The "too moral" writer takes everything for granted.

For example, her antagonists. In *The Children's Hour*

there are three: cowardice (Mrs. Mortar), credulity (Mrs. Tilford), and sheer evil (Mary). In each case, Miss Hellman counts on our having our response ready. Our hatred of cowardice is to put the flesh and blood on the skeleton from Broadway farce which is all the author provides. Our understanding of credulity is relied on to make plausible an old lady's believing the villain's implausible accusations: no character is created of whom we must say, "*she* of course would have believed." Finally, our being against sin is supposed to assure our hatred of a villain's unexplained villainy. I for one would not insist on a psychological explanation of evil (though such an explanation would be in place in drama of this sort) but if you don't explain it psychologically, you must either explain it some other way or *create* it as the Elizabethans did, making it live moment by moment in language that sprang from poetic vision and moral imagination. Miss Hellman's villain is a *diabolus ex machina* not simply lowered on stage at the end but smuggled in at the outset. What a playwright might fairly ask us to accept at the close we have to concede at the very beginning.

This villain is a child. Instead of the sweet little chee-ild done to death by the tyrannical teacher we have the sweet little teacher done to death by the tyrannical child—an inversion of orthodox melodrama which would be all very well if the values of melodrama, as well as the roles, were inverted. But Miss Hellman is a melodramatist, first, in seeing life as a melodrama insofar as she sees it at all and, second, in being less concerned to see life than to manipulate it. Her chief device is the purely mechanical inversion of stock melodramatic characters. A child is wicked, a grandmother (in *Autumn Garden,* say) cynical. The effect is one of sophistication—melodrama for a smart set. The pleasure in seeing such things resides in the titillation of cruelty twice removed from our own backs—once by the proscenium arch, a second time by the sophisticated style. . . . Admittedly, the audi-

ence at the Coronet was not concerned with the moral ambiguities I find inherent in *The Children's Hour.* As far as I could observe, they were busy being delightedly shocked at two phenomena: Lesbianism and wickedness in a child.

Sometimes in the course of the evening one has the impression of an author let down by a director. The actors seem lost. Two of our leading realistic actresses (Patricia Neal and Kim Hunter) are on stage but have not been given anything to play. The whole apparatus of naturalistic stage-design is also there but it remains a background. You'd think the old lady (Katherine Emmet) was in a hotel rather than her own home; she doesn't care which chair she sits in or how much she marches around. One of the younger ladies agrees it's terribly cold but sits as far as possible from the stove. . . . The director was Miss Hellman herself, and the chief fault of the direction is that it shares the faults of the script instead of correcting them. Everything on stage seems unreal, inorganic, unrelated to everything else. To make matters worse, the director seems to know it, seems to be striving to galvanize a mechanical monster into life. Hence there is an absence of genuine passion not only in the individual characters but in the whole production, and nothing in its place but the hard humorless drive of the authoress's will-power. Since indignation is a genuine passion, I adjudge *The Children's Hour,* on its own terms, a failure.

16

ACTING: NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL

Trying, some time ago, to discover how Shakespeare was acted in his own time, I found that scholars classify acting as either *natural* or *artificial* and put Shakespeare into whichever category they prefer: Shakespeare's own principal utterance on the subject—Hamlet's advice to the players—lends itself equally well to either interpretation. Though my first impulse was to reject these categories altogether, I soon caught myself reintroducing them in disguise: *natural* reappeared as *realistic, artificial* reappeared as *stylized* when I disliked it and as *the grand manner* when I approved. And looking back over the history of theatre, I realized that critics have fallen into two classes: those who say acting has become so natural it lacks beauty and those who say it has become so fancy it lacks naturalness. The critic's plea is either for a return to the grand manner or for a return to reality. But this is not to say that we all stand either for one style or the other, simple or grand, natural or artificial. On the contrary, so soon as we think about it, we recognize that dramatic, like all other, art necessarily involves both imitation and selection, nature and artifice, truth and beauty. We want the right balance, so we put our own weight on the side which contemporary theatre is neglecting. To interpret Hamlet's advice correctly we would need to know whether Shakespeare's contemporaries were leaning too far toward the

natural or toward the artificial; Hamlet was against the unbalance, whichever it was. *Natural* and *artificial* are not names of rival styles in acting; they are names for lack of style in acting. Acting is both natural and artificial, yet to the extent that it comes off, to the extent that it is *good* acting, it is not notably either. At this point, we seek more laudatory words. We replace *naturalness* with *reality, artifice* with *style,* nor would we grant that a performance had *reality* till we felt it had *style,* or *style* till we felt it had *reality.* Hence, though we can divide bad actors into two widely different schools—natural and artificial—we shall find that good actors have a great deal in common with each other. We must not be misled at finding a great actor of the past assigned by critics to the natural or to the artificial category. This, if it means anything, and if the actor was really great, means that he corrected the balance, was *natural* in counteracting excessive artifice, or *artificial* in counteracting excessive naturalness. The terms are relative. Forbes Robertson is often cited in pleas for the grand manner; he has also been called the most natural of actors. Much the same is true of Duse. Henry Irving has become a byword for rant and artifice, yet he shocked his Victorian public with his harsh, abrupt "realism." Betterton and Garrick were congratulated on their naturalness, but just compare their portraits with performances by actors of our current nose-picking school! To say that their naturalness had its limits is only to reiterate that they were actors.

Have good actors so much in common that we should not readily notice stylistic differences between them? Differences that can partly be described by words like *natural* and *artificial*? These are rhetorical questions, and I agree with the implied answer but think it less important than the fact that even the minimum requirements of good acting are so considerable that Burbage, Betterton, Garrick, Kean, and Forbes Robertson *must* have had more in common with each other

than any one of them had with a defective, one-sided actor, natural or artificial. When a critic contrasts one actor's style with another's he is almost invariably saying that one is right, the other wrong, one a good actor, the other a bad. Thus, Leigh Hunt does not present Kemble and Kean as great actors who have little in common; he is telling us that Kemble is not great. So with Shaw on Bernhardt and Duse; he finds Bernhardt's acting faulty; those who think him prejudiced in favor of Duse's greater naturalness should read his good-natured demolition of one of the better natural actors of the time, John Hart. If you grant that good acting is neither "natural" nor "artificial" you will not find it very profitable to describe one good actor as "more natural" or "more artificial" than another: this will only be to say that good actors are not *wholly* good. Again, if you compare the relative "naturalness" of eighteenth and twentieth century acting, you will have to discuss what the two periods consider natural. Which in turn involves what *is* natural in the two periods. And naturalness is relative to place as well as time: a gesture that is natural to an Italian is unnatural to an Englishman. . . . In short, though the word *natural* may lead us into interesting speculations, it leads away from the subject of acting; it is not a convenience but a distraction. It follows that the same is true of *artificial*, its antithesis. In a given period, the tendency of bad acting (thus of the acting profession as a whole) is "natural" or "artificial"; and the critic will be busy deploring the tendency. As for good acting, its being both or neither forces the critic, if he is to come to grips with it at all, to more specific description. For, though in transcending the natural and artificial, good actors have a technique in common, what interests us is what they do with their technique. Having come out into the clear, where do they go? Classifications a good deal more helpful than natural and artificial are no doubt possible. But more interesting for the student of theatre than the

generalities are the particulars. For once an actor has his technique (i.e. *is* an actor), his individuality shows itself. He has shed everything that passed for his personality in the days when personality meant the part of him that was accessible to his conscious mind and to the minds of fans and publicity men. He now has his personality * as an artist. The one *persona* is an obstacle, the other an instrument. The critic, for his part, if he has put bad acting in its place, and knows a false *persona* when he sees it, is free to forget about styles and talk of actors' personalities. The best recorded writing about acting is sheer description of performance, and amounts in each case—I am thinking of certain pages in Cibber and Lichtenberg, Hazlitt and Montague—to a portrait of the actor.

* See pp. 49, 122, 179, 214.

17

ACTING VS. RECITING

Praising the Drama Quartet, people are saying how nice it is to do without scenery. I do not share their implied disdain for stage design, but I am not surprised at it. What surprises me is the assumption that, when a play is read to us, nothing is missing but decor. Or does the fact that readers use gesture make them actors?

You can say yes to this, and cite the sages. Dr. Johnson wrote that we go to the theatre to "hear a certain number of lines recited with just gesture and elegant modulation." Dryden seems not to have demanded much more: "All passions may be lively represented on the stage if to the well-writing of them the actor supplies a good commanded voice and limbs that move easily and without stiffness." And when Johnson says: "A dramatic exhibition is a book recited with concomitants that increase or diminish its effect," we know where we are. This is the notorious "literary" view of theatre, bluntly re-stated by a Shakespearean scholar only the other day: "In the theatre, as in the study, the poet's words are all that count." Of more interest than the untruth of this statement (whatever can be so flatly asserted can, I presume, be as flatly denied) is its motivation and background: it has its origin in the study of a theatre where the words did in fact play a much larger role. Of this theatre Bernard Shaw once wrote: "In Shakespeare's time the acting of plays was

imperfectly differentiated from the declamation of verses; and description or narrative recitation did what is now done by scenery, furniture, and stage business." Anxious to restore the long speech and the "rhetorical" way of delivering it, Shaw preferred what he thought of as the older method to the newer. And his special perspective gave him special insights: his insistence that Shakespeare's lines not be broken by "business" is still called for today. But as usual—one should rather say, on principle—Shaw overstates the case. A fair amount of "business" is to be inferred from Elizabethan scripts, and the scantiness of stage directions cannot be taken to mean that the Elizabethans did not insert "business" even where the scripts do not infer it. Nor was the Elizabethan stage as bare of furniture and scenery as scholars' in Shaw's early days thought. As for acting, we know nothing, really, of the style which Alleyn or Burbage practiced, though the praise accorded these men in the roles we know they played certainly suggests that they did more (for example, with *character*) than a mere reader would. And this is to speak of tragic acting only. The comedians, we know, were acrobats and dancers; speaking was but one of their several accomplishments. (For that matter, the wary Dr. Johnson admits that the "literary" view of the stage is inapplicable to comedy: "Familiar comedy is often more powerful on the theatre, than in the page; imperial tragedy is always less. The humour of Petruchio may be heightened by grimace; but what voice or what gesture can hope to add dignity or force to the soliloquy of Cato?") To these empirical remarks I would even venture to add a syllogism: all good acting has more to it than recitation, Alleyn and Burbage were good actors, therefore Alleyn and Burbage did more than recite.

The man who best helps us to see this is Constantin Stanislavsky. Many think of him primarily as the bringer of the new style—the style that works with scenery, furniture, and stage business, rather than with language; for a time, unde-

niably, a particular form of this style—naturalism—*was* what he stood for. What he stands for in the long run, however, will not be this style or any other. It will be his approach to acting—in any style. It will be what he has to teach *anyone* who wishes to act. He understood the minimum requirements of good acting, one of which is to put words in their place. This is not necessarily to make words less important; it is, rather, to make them more effective. The "place" of words is in the mouth of the speaker—and, beyond the mouth, in his body and mind. A stage director has to "sink" his author's words into the actors, and then help the actors, as it were, to hoist them out again. In short, words are, for actors, not statements but responses to stimuli, like gestures. We, the spectators, should not have the words simply handed to us—we should see them springing from a situation, from a character, from a query, a blow, or a snort. A minimum requirement for an actor is that he enable us to see them in this way. William Gillette called it giving "the illusion of the first time." I am not happy with this phrase, for it seems to me that much more is involved and that an actor should on occasion give the impression that a thing *has* been said before. But that the "gesture" of real speech is always necessary is certainly true. And with it goes gesture in the literal sense. Describing gesture as a "concomitant" of "recitation" may be accurate enough from an outsider's viewpoint, but anyone who learnt to act would, I think, have to approach it differently. Stanislavsky said this when it much needed saying. But actors, and teachers who trained actors, must surely have known it at all times. For the actor, it is more practical to consider the "book" as the "concomitant" and the "gesture" as the main thing, if we can a little stretch the meaning of the word "gesture" to include "posture," and the word "posture" to include the posture of the mind as well as the body. That we have to stretch the meaning of words is of course no accident. The art of theatre is poor in precise

terminology; that must be one reason for confusion. But it surely makes sense to differentiate between the working actor's attitude to words and the spectator's. For the latter, the words will be predominant—if the play is of the type where words predominate. But, even with such a play, the words must become secondary for the actor as he works. He must subordinate them to the context from which they spring, or they will never gain the importance which their author wishes them to have.

Another element of confusion comes in because reciting is not the opposite of acting, it is half-way to acting. The Drama Quartet half-acted their play. Radio actors half-act their plays, as anyone knows who has watched them in the studio. Now half-acting is only successful when practiced by whole actors: what enables Charles Laughton to portray Shaw's devil is not his practice in reciting but his practice in acting. A generation trained in reciting would not recite well. It is therefore a mistake to regard the method of the Drama Quartet as a solution to our problems. We can settle for nothing less than acting, as it was, is, and ever shall be.

18

GUILDING THE LILLI

The Love of Four Colonels by Peter Ustinov, produced by the Theatre Guild, is either too serious or not serious enough, too frivolous or not frivolous enough. And since the consistency with which it misses the mark is too great to be fortuitous, it may not be impertinent to discuss how such things can be.

We inherit from what might be called the puritan-philistine tradition a fatal separation of the funny and the serious; we are predisposed to believe that if a statement is amusing it probably isn't true and certainly isn't important; conversely, we admire gravity, and are slow to see the stupidity it usually conceals. To rebel against this tradition has seldom been to question the fatal separation itself. It has only been to champion the other side, to be the spokesman of unseriousness, to deny the importance of being earnest. This partial rebellion has become vocal again since the war, especially in England, where one of the younger dramatic critics has written: "I believe in superficiality, I believe in shallowness." * Today such a declaration is so uninteresting, one wonders how it could have rung with challenge when Wilde made it half a century ago. The main reason, I suppose, is precisely that *Wilde* made it: it's all right to say you're su-

* I am glad to record that, today, Kenneth Tynan disowns his earlier dictum (1954).

perficial if you're not. Then again, for a mere pose, fifty years is a ripe old age. But bad habits die hard, and it remains easier to get a reputation for sincerity if you have no sense of humor, just as it remains easier to "shine in the high esthetic line" if you have no sincerity. Our theatre—playwrights, directors, and designers—tends towards the extremes of the sordidly naturalistic and the vacuously esthetic. An increasing number of actors gravitates toward one of these poles or the other. You notice it in their dress and conversation: this one, dirty and unshaven, in T-shirt leather jacket, and jeans, discourses about the new play he is in, all alcohol and abortion; that one, clean and dainty, in colored waistcoat, carrying an umbrella, talks of the eighteenth-century vases he has just seen in the antiquary's window.

Since Peter Ustinov has not moved irrevocably to one pole or the other, you may at first be tempted to hope that he will keep away from both. What he actually does is to oscillate disconcertingly between the two, finding no resting place anywhere in between, and furthermore finding himself much more at home at one pole than the other. This is the pole of frivolity. As a man has in the end to be himself or nothing, one cannot but recommend that Mr. Ustinov accept his destiny by embracing frivolity and sending seriousness on her way. In *The Love of Four Colonels,* every shred of explicit edification could be cut without loss. Phrases like a "man hypnotized by his own mediocrity" might pass in many plays; here there is no context to support them. The same is true of apophthegms like: "The French genius is the genius of mistrust." As for: "Then would I taste of that better thing they call reality . . ." Why not: *then I would* or: *then I'd like to*? The word *reality* here, like the words *charity* and *perfection,* in the play's peroration, must go. Having got rid of the ballast of dull moralizing, Mr. Ustinov's ship of humor must fare as it

can with whatever cargo of moral implication the humor carries with it. And here some really pleasant qualities emerge. Or rather they would emerge if the Theatre Guild production let them. Under the paraphernalia of production lies an agreeable jest about our disunited United Nations. At a Saturday night party—or perhaps at a cozy, old-fashioned London matinée where tea and cakes are brought in at intermission—this play, stripped of its generalizings, might be very funny; it would undoubtedly be relaxing. But not only is this production no joke; it is tense with effort. I suppose everyone knows how a play is prepared for Broadway, the prolonged agony of doctoring it goes through. All I am saying is that agony has after-effects. It shows. Whereas art, including theatre art, seems effortless.

You may say that a little play is lucky to get so big a production; in that case, the more gilt on the lily, the better. This show is neither lovely to look at, nor well acted. Rolf Gerard's sets are elaborate without beauty; if over-production was the aim, surely so gifted an artist could have made sure the show was gorgeous. Among the actors, there were no untalented people. It was all the more galling to see bad performances. Larry Gates and Robert Coote as the American and English colonels respectively are exceptions: lucky in having the humorous and not the philosophical lines, they provide most of the evening's fun. The reality these characters have, though on a "low" plane, is far preferable to the unreality of the Frenchman and the Russian who are seen on the "high" plane of ideology: inevitably perhaps, George Voskovec and Stefan Schnabel come to grief in these parts. I was curious to see Leueen McGrath for the first time; her role of good fairy let me see precisely nothing. Reginald Mason's name I knew as that of the first American to play Pirandello's Laudisi; his director in *Love of Four Colonels* let him run the small small gamut of clichés for the stage Old Man . . .

The director is also the leading man: Rex Harrison. I once saw a production in which a whole cast was kept stationary in a close circle throughout an act while the actor-manager, with complete freedom of movement, described a larger circle around them, doubled back, and darted between them. Mr. Harrison's directing is not quite like this, and even if it were one would forgive it—provided that he brought what all this pomp and circumstance leads us to expect: a great performance. Instead we have the shadow of a star without the substance; a manner, not a style. He breezes on, his role of bad fairy entitles him (perhaps) to a phony voice and a phony walk, he lies languidly on the table (trust actors to find uncomfortable places to lie in), and proceeds to manipulate a flexible wrist. Well, the audience knows who it is, the *mana* of kingship is in our midst, and when this our tribal monarch walks in later with a false beard on, the lady next to me says: "Isn't he marvellous?" Lilli Palmer does a version of eighteenth-century comedy that would do credit to a dramatic academy's best student of the year and one of an American floozy that she can improve by learning an American accent . . .

Mr. Harrison and Miss Palmer have both given first-rate performances in their time. But in what sort of drama? What sort of production? The best work of Mr. Harrison's that I've seen was in the film of *Major Barbara.* In those days his face was not that of a mere public figure or Man of Distinction; it had the vastly more heartening lineaments of a real man. Miss Palmer's best work over here is generally held to be her Cleopatra in Shaw's play: another part that requires only one sort of distinction, that of simplicity. What is the incentive that drives an actor from the art of acting, in its living simplicity, to sophisticaton without grace, bigness without grandeur, and death without dignity? Ambition should be made of sterner stuff.

19

THE INNOCENCE OF ARTHUR MILLER

The theatre is provincial. Few events on Broadway have any importance whatsoever except to that small section of the community—neither an élite nor a cross section—that sees Broadway plays. A play by an Arthur Miller or a Tennessee Williams is an exception. Such a play is not only better than the majority; it belongs in the mainstream of our culture. Such an author has something to say about America that is worth discussing. In *The Crucible,* Mr. Miller says something that *has* to be discussed. Nor am I limiting my interest to the intellectual sphere. One sits before this play with anything but intellectual detachment. At a moment when we are all being "investigated," or imagining that we shall be, it is vastly disturbing to see indignant images of investigation on the other side of the footlights. Why, one wonders, aren't there dozens of plays each season offering such a critical account of the state of the nation—critical and *engagé*? The appearance of one such play by an author, like Mr. Miller, who is neither an infant, a fool, or a swindler, is enough to bring tears to the eyes.

"Great stones they lay upon his chest until he plead aye or nay. They say he give them but two words. 'More weight,' he says, and died." Mr. Miller's material is magnificent for narrative, poetry, drama. The fact that we sense its magnificence suggests that either he or his actors have in part real-

ized it, yet our moments of emotion only make us the more aware of half-hours of indifference or dissatisfaction. For this is a story not quite told, a drama not quite realized. Pygmalion has labored hard at his statue and it has not come to life. There is a terrible inertness about the play. The individual characters, like the individual lines, lack fluidity and grace. There is an O'Neill-like striving after a poetry and an eloquence which the author does not achieve. "From Aeschylus to Arthur Miller," say the textbooks. The world has made this author important before he has made himself great; perhaps the reversal of the natural order of things weighs heavily upon him. It would be all too easy, script in hand, to point to weak spots. The inadequacy of particular lines, and characters, is of less interest, however, than the mentality from which they come. It is the mentality of the unreconstructed liberal.

There has been some debate as to whether this story of seventeenth-century Salem "really" refers to our current "witch hunt" yet since no one is interested in anything *but* this reference, I pass on to the real point at issue, which is: the validity of the parallel. It is true in that people today are being persecuted on quite chimerical grounds. It is untrue in that communism is not, to put it mildly, merely a chimera. The word communism is used to cover, first, the politics of Marx, second, the politics of the Soviet Union, and, third, the activities of all liberals as they seem to illiberal illiterates. Since Mr. Miller's argument bears only on the third use of the word, its scope is limited. Indeed, the analogy between "red-baiting" and witch hunting can seem complete only to communists, for only to them is the menace of communism as fictitious as the menace of witches. The non-communist will look for certain reservations and provisos. In *The Crucible*, there are none.

To accuse Mr. Miller of communism would of course be to fall into the trap of over-simplification which he himself

has set. For all I know he may hate the Soviet state with all the ardor of Eisenhower. What I am maintaining is that his view of life is dictated by assumptions which liberals have to unlearn and which many liberals have rather publicly unlearned. Chief among these assumptions is that of general innocence. In Hebrew mythology, innocence was lost at the very beginning of things; in liberal, especially American liberal, folklore, it has not been lost yet; Arthur Miller is the playwright of American liberal folklore. It is as if the merely negative, and legal, definition of innocence were extended to the rest of life: you are innocent until proved guilty, you are innocent if you "didn't do it." Writers have a sort of double innocence: not only can they create innocent characters, they can also write from the viewpoint of innocence—we can speak today not only of the "omniscient" author but of the "guiltless" one.

Such indeed is the viewpoint of the dramatist of indignation, like Miss Hellman or Mr. Miller. And it follows that their plays are melodrama—a conflict between the wholly guilty and the wholly innocent. For a long time liberals were afraid to criticize the mentality behind this melodrama because they feared association with the guilty ("harboring reactionary sympathies"). But, though a more enlightened view would enjoin association with the guilty in the admission of a common humanity, it does not ask us to underestimate the guilt or to refuse to see "who done it." The guilty men are as black with guilt as Mr. Miller says—what we must ask is whether the innocent are as white with innocence. The drama of indignation is melodramatic not so much because it paints its villains too black as because it paints its heroes too white. *Othello* is not a melodrama, because, though its villain is wholly evil, its hero is not wholly virtuous. *The Crucible* is a melodrama because, though the hero has weaknesses, he has no faults. His innocence is unreal because it is total. His author has equipped

him with what we might call Super-innocence, for the crime he is accused of not only hasn't been committed by him, it isn't even a possibility: it is the fiction of traffic with the devil. It goes without saying that the hero has all the minor accoutrements of innocence too: he belongs to the right social class (yeoman farmer), does the right kind of work (manual), and, somewhat contrary to historical probability, has the right philosophy (a distinct leaning towards skeptical empiricism) . . .

The innocence of his author is known to us from life as well as art. Elia Kazan made a public confession of having been a communist and, while doing so, mentioned the names of several of his former comrades. Mr. Miller then brought out a play about an accused man who refuses to name comrades (who indeed dies rather than make a confession at all), and of course decided to end his collaboration with the director who did so much to make him famous. The play has been directed by Jed Harris.

I think there is as much drama in this bit of history as in any Salem witch hunt. The "guilty" director was rejected. An "innocent" one was chosen in his place. There are two stories in this. The first derives from the fact that the better fellow (assuming, for the purpose of argument, that Mr. Harris is the better fellow) is not always the better worker. The awkwardness I find in Mr. Miller's script is duplicated in Mr. Harris's directing. Mr. Kazan would have taken this script up like clay and re-molded it. He would have struck fire from the individual actor, and he would have brought one actor into much livelier relationship with another. (Arthur Kennedy is not used up to half his full strength in this production; E. G. Marshall and Walter Hampden give fine performances but each in his own way, Mr. Hampden's way being a little too English, genteel and nineteenth century; the most successful performance, perhaps, is that of Beatrice Straight because here a certain rigid-

ity belongs to the character and is in any case delicately checked by the performer's fine sensibility.) The second story is that of the interpenetration of good and evil. I am afraid that Mr. Miller needs a Kazan not merely at some superficial technical level. He needs not only the craftsmanship of a Kazan but also—his sense of guilt. Innocence is, for a mere human being, and especially for an artist, insufficient baggage. When we say that Mr. Kazan "added" to *Death of a Salesman,* we mean—if I am not saying more than I know—that he infused into this drama of social forces the pressure of what Freud called "the family romance," the pressure of guilt. *The Crucible* is *about* guilt yet nowhere in it is there any *sense* of guilt because the author and director have joined forces to dissociate themselves and their hero from evil. This is the theatre of two Dr. Jekylls. Mr. Miller and Mr. Kazan were Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

20

HANS ANDERSEN'S BOOMERANG

The Emperor's Clothes, by George Tabori, is not a very good play but the labors of Harold Clurman and Lee J. Cobb made the evening at the Barrymore a tense one. The acting of the Group Theatre tradition is probably, aside from musicals, the best kind of American theatre work, and it is a kind not, to my knowledge, found in Europe, despite its origin in Stanislavsky's "method." When Americans attempt an English manner (say for Shakespeare, Shaw, or Wilde), they most often come a cropper; in *The Emperor's Clothes* it is the one English actor (Esmond Knight) who seems gauche and helpless.

Lee J. Cobb is perhaps the leading exponent of this American way of acting; what is more important, he is one of our finest actors. I do not mean we have no misgivings about him. His besetting temptation is sentimentality. When in doubt, he thumps the table, screams his head off, or wallows in a fit of weeping. Like most actors of his school, he sometimes seems to mistake the jitters for creative energy. In *The Emperor's Clothes,* however, Mr. Cobb gives of his best. The degree of control and craftsmanship in his performance is so great that those who wish to see actors "being" their parts and not acting them begin to talk of overconscious actors, artifice, and excessive intellectuality; Stanislavskyites themselves begin to wonder if Mr. Cobb has

stayed in line. For though he does carry you away with the violence of his emotions, and this to a degree very seldom known in the theatre today, he also engages your intellect and arouses your admiration of his skill. His performance has a double action: it draws you in and it holds you away. In the jargon of theatre esthetics, there is *empathy*, and there is *alienation*. I submit that this is the paradox—or, better, the dialectic—of first-rate acting.

Mr. Clurman is also a master of his craft. The plasticity of his scenes is in broad contrast with the ghastly stiffness of other directing jobs of the 1952-3 season—Miss Hellman's or even Jed Harris's. The Group Theatre's stress on the organic, the spontaneous, the inward, the "real", pays off. This is a production in which one can sit back and enjoy apt moves and groupings, smooth transitions, accurate punctuation, distinct articulation, well-built climaxes, well-timed anti-climaxes, lulls, and pauses. If there is anything in the direction to complain of, it is a certain softness of texture. In this play, as in *Time of the Cuckoo*, we find Mr. Clurman making too easy an appeal to sweet background music. To my mind, the heroic ending of *The Emperor's Clothes* is softened by over-much sentiment in the performance. The weakest scenes of all are those where Maureen Stapleton speaks some pseudo-Chekhov with piano accompaniment.

Perhaps this last weakness is partly the actress's fault. If Mr. Cobb might be the cue for a eulogy of the Group tradition, Miss Stapleton forces us to see certain dangers in it. Already in *The Rose Tattoo* one wondered if, for all her fine talent, she mistook neurasthenia for vitality. Still, in that play, one at least took the fluttery, feathery movements as belonging to, and springing from, the part and the occasion. It is when Miss Stapleton repeats them all in so different a play as *The Emperor's Clothes* that they come to seem mere mannerism. Yesterday's inventions are today's clichés; syncopation can be as mechanical as a regular beat.

Is the actress herself to blame, or the director—or the author? Mr. Tabori is a controversial figure. *Flight Into Egypt* had a cold reception here, and the reviews of *The Emperor's Clothes* are also unfavorable; yet on both occasions the theatre was much more highly charged with thought and feeling, particularly the latter, than I have found it to be when much more highly praised plays were brought before us. The theatre is always and rightly in search of a play for the times, a play that is a luminous theatrical image of our permanent crisis, a play which at the very least would be stirring journalism—in the way that Koestler's or Orwell's novels are stirring journalism. The theatre of George Tabori engages our attention because it is an earnest effort in this direction. If it fails for reasons other than sheer inadequacy, it is because Mr. Tabori's journalism is full of literary affectation and pretension. When he reaches after elegance (as in the portrayal of a baron) he is just corny.

If it is hard to apportion credit and blame as between actor and director, it is even harder, these days, to apportion it as between a script and a production. *Flight into Egypt* petered out in utter ambiguity of plot. One didn't know whether Mr. Tabori's people decided to stick to Europe or become refugees in America, though this was (as far as I could make out) the main point at issue. In *The Emperor's Clothes* there is also a broken link in the narrative chain. A Hungarian professor, as of 1930, has gone off to be investigated by the political police. His wife has every reason to believe he will crumple under their pressure. When an old wooer of hers offers to get her out of the country, she has every inducement to go. At this point, the dialogue has her say, No, "another name or place will not help us;" yet the action seems, on the contrary, to sweep her offstage to pack her bags . . . No doubt this short passage could be clarified. I mention it, however, as typical of the blot or blur

that characterizes Mr. Tabori's two plays in the form in which they have been brought before us. I don't know if Mr. Tabori's friends blame the flaws in *The Emperor's Clothes* on Mr. Clurman; they did blame the flaws in *Flight into Egypt* on Mr. Kazan. No mere spectator could unravel this tangled skein, but a sense of theatre would suggest that Messrs. Kazan and Clurman gave much more to these plays than they took away. When you listen to Mr. Tabori's lines in isolation from the actors and the stage they sound either very flat or very fancy; it takes production to raise such writing above banal fiction and florid melodrama. It takes acting of the very highest order to give these people reality. Without Lee Cobb and Anthony Ross, the Hungarian professor and his doctor brother are the stereotypes of the anti-fascist literature of twenty years ago. This is a play we would only wish to see clothed in all the regalia of theatrical illusion. As a mere script, it puts us uncomfortably in mind of the emperor's new clothes.

21

ON THE SUBLIME

The management of *John Brown's Body* said there were no available seats at the opening and that anyway they would want to talk matters over before admitting me to their show as they thought there was a danger of my reviewing it unfavorably. They were wrong about the seats. I had no difficulty in buying tickets for the opening at the box office. And I was willing to do so because of my long-standing admiration for Charles Laughton, director of the presentation.

Though they were right about the unfavorable review, they were wrong about the grounds of it. Apparently a quotation from my piece on acting and reciting* had been circulated in *Theatre Digest*. I had said that the Drama Quartet's readings were not a solution to our principal problems in the theatre: that is all. Does the management feel that a favorable review is unsure unless a critic believes that reading *is* a solution to our principal problems? Strange, if they do: for in *John Brown's Body* the issue of acting vs. reading does not arise. Here is a poem to be read, not a play to be produced. One might claim that there is too much acting in the performance rather than too little. But this is to anticipate.

We all enjoy the reading aloud of poetry. What we find

* See above, pp. 82-85.

at the Century Theatre however, is poetry that seldom manages to be poetry and reading that is seldom content to be reading.

In respect of Stephen Vincent Benét's poem, I can claim to have entered the theatre with that complete freedom from prejudice which total ignorance alone can confer. I have always postponed the task of tackling so long a piece of verse. If I shall now postpone it in perpetuity, it is because hardly a line I heard at the Century Theatre struck me as better than pleasant, straightforward, mildly amusing, or moderately forceful. Those whose knowledge of dramatic verse is limited to the dramas of Maxwell Anderson may find Benét sublime; any whose ears are attuned to the melody of Yeats or Eliot (to mention no greater names) will find it pedestrian. And though Benét is more successful with longer units than the line, and the cumulative effect of a page of narrative or character-revealing monologue is fairly considerable, he is excelled here by a dozen contemporary writers of prose fiction. Even so, this poetry might be accepted for what it is—if it did not pretend to be so much more. What might have been an entertainment proves an embarrassment because of the epic pretensions of form and content. Having looked back to Homer, Benét looks forward to Norman Corwin. It is not only with a Tolstoy's that his historical imagination cannot be compared. It cannot be compared with any good historical novel—say, Robert Penn Warren's *Night Rider* where some of the same problems are much more profoundly imaged.

Accompanied by a singing, speaking, and sound-effecting choir, Raymond Massey, Judith Anderson, and Tyrone Power speak what I assume to be a series of the better passages from Benét's poem. Miss Anderson has power; Mr. Massey and Mr. Power have real enough gifts of a smaller sort; individually and collectively the chorus functions with beautiful precision; Mr. Laughton's keen eye and yet keener

ear have exercised a degree of control for which one cannot but feel a vast admiration. If our admiration remains abstract, and we do not enjoy ourselves, it is, as much as anything, because the actors assume a manner that tells us what attitude we are to take. Explicitly in the program and Mr. Power's introductory speech, implicitly in the style of the performance, we are told how to respond. A modern phenomenon! Our concert programs tell us that the symphony we are about to hear will "carry us away," lest otherwise we fail to be carried away; and the result is we do fail to be carried away; because we are thinking *about* being carried away. When a performance tells us what our response should be it thereby prevents us from having that response.

Now *John Brown's Body* is presented with such an air of sublimity as even a poem that deserved it could not support. The three speakers spend the evening posing for an imaginary photographer seated rather high in the balcony; when speaking they gaze misty-eyed at the camera; when silent, they gaze misty-eyed at their speaking colleague. In "Acting vs. Reciting," I described reciting as half-acting. Our Drama Trio inhabits a weird no-man's-land between acting and non-acting. As non-actors they come before us in evening dress. As actors they proceed to impersonate soldiers in uniform or maidens in distress. This is in itself an exciting feature, a tribute to the actor's true art. What is awkward is the transition back into non-acting—or, more precisely, the way Mr. Laughton has the trio act while not acting, kissing a hand, encircling a neck, sitting in pictorial attitudes under romantic lighting. Why, there is more artifice in this simplicity than in the complexities of regular theatre which it affects to eschew! No scenery, no action, just three speakers and a poem: yet Mr. Laughton so complicates the formula with lighting, grouping, and movement, that I again end wishing that this fine artist would accept the everyday complication of regular theatre. I know

that one cannot dismiss experiments merely on grounds of *mélange des genres.* It would matter nothing that reciting is half-acting, half-reading, if its possibilities were as vast as those of the elements unmixed. It matters nothing that Mr. Laughton's work cannot be defined as good drama or good theatre—provided it be good something. My real complaint is that it is, for this artist, not good enough, and my hunch is that it is an evasion. An evasion of theatre. Mr. Laughton walks round and round theatre like a dog that cannot make up its mind to sit down. He tries the movies. He reads aloud in hospitals. He recites the Bible to schools. Or on TV. He invents the Drama Quartet. He trains a Drama Trio. Meanwhile he falls in love with literature and therefore with Thomas Wolfe. It is all an evasion.

One of the great moments in all my theatre going was the moment when in a hotel room in Paris Charles Laughton read Bottom's first scene in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* We write about jaws dropping, but that is the only time I actually saw a jaw drop for sheer surprise and delight; it was the jaw of Charles Dullin. The portrayal of Bottom, like certain passages in the *Galileo* of 1947, was sublime; and not just sublime reciting but sublime acting, sublime theatre.

22

PATHETIC PHALLUSES

On the face of it you'd think a playwright would make an effort to conceal his borrowings. That William Inge parades them is not, however, a sign of naiveté, it is a declaration of allegiance. The torn shirt of Stanley Kowalski is no mere fact in another author's story, it is a symbol, a banner, an oriflamme. It stands for the new phallus worship.

There is of course no denying that a hero has a body and that it is a male body. What is remarkable in certain plays of Tennessee Williams and William Inge is that so much is made of the hero's body and that he has so little else. The rose that, for Mr. Eliot, is rooted in so deeply and broadly human a garden blooms, for Mr. Williams, on the bared chest of quasi-primitive man.

Admittedly, it may be impossible nowadays to sustain the attitude of the phallus worshipper in its purity. Kowalski is an impure phenomenon: if he is the full-blooded husband that every woman craves, he is also destructive and evil. In fact it is the cunning mixture of good and evil, health and sickness, that, for millions of spectators, has proved a fascination.

William Inge's *Picnic* may prove an equally effective piece of synthetic folklore—a folklore that is created, not *by*, but *for* the folk, the folklore of the age of mechanized mass

media. Mr. Inge, too, gives his Priapus a bad character, but he is careful to stipulate that the badness is the kind the public sympathizes with: this Priapus is pathetic. To offer pity to the kind of man upon whom contemporary civilization has showered its praises might seem, from the utilitarian point of view, unnecessary: why stack cards that are already stacked? But from the point of view of synthetic folklore, it may well be a stroke of (synthetic) genius.

On the lowest estimate, it is a very happy accident. On the one hand, we have our alienated, homeless author, on the other our comfortable public, very much at home. How can the two meet to their mutual advantage? Well, for one thing, the indelicate public can decide it likes its authors delicate. For another, the authors can prove they aren't as delicate as all that, they can concede that indelicacy is a mighty fine thing. They can yearn for their opposite, they can indulge in orgies of overcompensation, they can flirt with the common man. A generation has passed since a movie star earned the title of the world's sweetheart. The Broadway public is not the world, nor is it composed of common men, but it is prepared to play the lover to any playwright-sweetheart who offers the right combination of coyness and compliance.

Second only in importance to the polarity of playwright and public is that of playwright and director. Until recently it seems to have been assumed that a director would merely re-inforce an author's effects, accenting what was already accented, to A adding more A. Our more sophisticated theatre prefers to give a play "the treatment"—adding to quality A a directorial temperament or idea of quality B. If a script A is deficient, and B is precisely what was needed to make good the deficiency, the partnership of author and director is a triumph. Though one can criticize Mr. Kazan's directing on various grounds, there is no denying that he brought to *Death of a Salesman* something that Jed Harris

failed to bring to *The Crucible,* notably the tension of personal, not to say neurotic, relations. To *Mister Roberts* it was the author, Thomas Heggen, who brought the guilt, the director, Joshua Logan, who brought the innocence. Reviewing the play several years ago, I defended Mr. Heggen at the expense of Mr. Logan; in retrospect, it seems only charitable to acknowledge that, without Mr. Logan, Mr. Heggen would probably not have been able to give us an evening of theatre at all.

Picnic, also, is directed by Joshua Logan, and those who find Mr. Inge a self-sufficient playwright have understandably complained of the B which the director adds to the author's A. For my part, I am not so sure that it is the writing which gives the evening its undoubted interest. Mr. Inge's main story seems to me tiresome in the extreme: that is why my comment on it has had to be solely sociological. I can accept it only as a libretto for Mr. Logan's directorial music and (what is closely connected) as material for his admirable actors. It is very lucky for Mr. Inge that his hero and heroine are not type cast. Mr. Logan was shrewd enough to allow for the fact that the phallus is much too featureless for drama. Ralph Meeker may have played Stanley Kowalski but (like Mr. Brando for that matter) he could never be *taken* for Stanley Kowalski: an actor can bring B to a character that is all A. With Mr. Inge's phallic hero goes a heroine of equal crudity and equal appeal: the dumbest and loveliest girl in town. Though, in a sense, it is her dumbness that makes her beauty irresistible (gives it "mass appeal," assures that it is "democratic"), I personally was glad that the actress (Janice Rule) did not humiliate herself that much but intruded a pleasantly human intelligence. Kim Stanley contrived to make the most brilliant performance of the evening out of one of those Hollywood-Broadway adolescents who are bookish because they are not beautiful.

The subplot of *Picnic* is quite a different matter. It is

another of those rather patronizing tales of amorous old maids, yet I feel patronizing in calling it patronizing, for certainly I found myself drawn into the joke and thoroughly enjoying it. Here too the acting and directing are first rate. Eileen Heckart and Arthur O'Connell manage to be both very funny and very real in parts that encourage the actor to be simply one or the other. But, in this section of the play, the acting is strongly underpinned by a script. One cannot help asking why an author who can create the schoolteacher Miss Rosemary Sidney and her cheery colleagues who have seen life in New York (at Teachers' College and elsewhere) need reach after literature and ideas? Why can't he see through the fallacies of the new cult of Priapus and give himself to his own impulse for genuine domestic comedy?

(Answers: if he did *not* reach out after ideas, Bright, Literary, and Edifying, he would lose that middle-brow approval without which there can be no "rave reviews" in the tonier press; and if he were not a priapist, there could have been no such poster on Times Square—showing a young man in his underwear carnally gazing at a girl—as stood over the movie theatre where *Come Back, Little Sheba* played, that is, there could be no "mass" interest in his work. In short, he would be a failure.)

23

CAMINO UNREAL

The strange experience of seeing *Camino Real* divides itself into three: things you like, things you dislike, and things you are held by without knowing whether you like them or not. The script, when I read it some time ago, I disliked—partly because it belongs to the current deliquescent-rococo type of theatre and even more because it seemed far from a brilliant example of the type. The genuine element in Tennessee Williams had always seemed to me to reside in his realism: his ability to make eloquent and expressive dialogue out of the real speech of men and his gift for portraiture, especially the portraiture of unhappy women. There is also a spurious element. Sometimes it's his style that is spurious, for when he is poetic he is often luscious and high-falutin'. Sometimes it's his thought; one day a critic will explain what Mr. Williams has made of D. H. Lawrence. Nor are Mr. Williams' reflections on art more convincing than his pseudo-Lawrentian hymns to life; and when he tells you his theory of the Awful, he is awful. Sometimes the trouble is with Mr. Williams' material: surely it would take more than a theory to justify the subject-matter of his novel or of, say, the short story of the man who likes being beaten and is finally *eaten* by a negro masseur. . . . The spurious element seemed to me notably large in the script of *Camino Real.*

It would perhaps be an oversimplification to say I dislike the script and like the production. Mr. Williams may have contributed more to the production than a reader of his script would guess. Though the solemn speeches remain lifeless in the performance, the funny ones gain a good deal. Again, the reader is aware of very little besides dialogue; he is insufficiently aware of the scenario. Mr. Williams has argued in *The New York Times* that an action like throwing a bag out of a window may say more than words. True. And it may be the writer who thinks of such an action. Nevertheless, to think if it is very little. The action has of itself next to no meaning. It has meaning only as created by actor and director. In *Camino Real,* Mr. Williams is not a dramatist but a scenario writer.

To me the evening was of interest chiefly as the latest essay of Elia. We are told that Mr. Kazan was virtually co-author of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Death of a Salesman* even to the extent of changing the character of the leading persons; it is arguable that both plays would have failed without his changes. Still, in these cases, he had to regard a play as a mold into which his ideas could be poured. In *Camino Real* it all looks the other way round. The production seems to be the mold, the script to be fluid. At any rate, it is Mr. Kazan's presence we feel most strongly, Mr. Kazan's methods whose results we witness.

It is a disturbing presence, as of a man (if I may exaggerate) with an ego rather than an identity, a man with more notions than convictions, a man of tremors and palpitations rather than profound feelings. Mr. Kazan goes to work on the actors' nerves like an egg beater. His orgasmic organization of scenes has become a mannerism: time after time, the slow to-and-fro of dialogue works itself up to the frenetic climax. Yet it's no use knowing he is not a good director unless you can also see that he is almost a great one.

Mr. Kazan's most commendable quality is a simple one:

he is a showman. This is partly a matter of sheer efficiency; in his productions, everything is taken care of, second by second. (The layman would think this would be true of all professional theatre; actually, the theatre is second only to international politics as a breeding ground for amateurism, stupidity, and sabotage.) But Mr. Kazan's showmanship goes beyond efficiency into legerdemain. He is a wizard. Even if I knew I was to witness a hateful interpretation of a hateful play, I would await any Kazan production with considerable eagerness. For Mr. Kazan's name in the program guarantees an evening of—at the very least—brilliant theatre work at a high emotional temperature.

Perhaps the most memorable things in *Camino Real* are choreographic, and yet they could not have been done for Mr. Kazan by a choreographer because they are worked out in the terms of acting, not dance. One of these things is just a presentation of people rushing to catch a plane. Mr. Williams made the episode symbolic by calling the plane *il fugitivo,* and having Marguerite Gautier and Jacques Casanova try to get aboard, but Mr. Kazan makes it symbolic in much finer fashion—by simple intensification of the event as we all know it. If we have sometimes to complain of neurasthenics and hysteria, there is no doubt that Mr. Kazan has found his own way of lifting a performance above the trivial and naturalistic. Conversely, when the action tends towards the artifice of dance or ceremony, he knows how to keep it anchored in everyday reality. When the others dance, Eli Wallach as Kilroy mixes dancing and boxing and embarrassed awkwardness quite magnificently. Crowned king of cuckolds, Joseph Anthony exploits the rite of coronation for an actor's purposes, and something beautiful is also something horrible.

Of the cast of *Camino Real* it is not enough to say it is a strong one; rather one should say in hushed tones that it is almost that un-American thing, an ensemble. Most of the

performers are from the Actors' Studio,* and bring with them the happy results of five years' work together. An actor of the "British," elocutionary sort (like Hurd Hatfield) seems rather out of place among them. On the other hand, there are two "outsiders"—Jennie Goldstein and Ronne Aul —whose different flavor is a welcome addition. They remind us that there is a whole world of theatre outside the rather enervating regions of the Stanislavsky method as that is at present interpreted. Bringing Miss Goldstein to Broadway was a very happy idea. Ronne Aul, one of the liveliest presences on the American stage today, cannot be left to languish in the half-light of modern dance. If Mr. Kazan can enlarge his "company" with such astutely-chosen performers as these two he will always be able to procure twice as good a production for his author as anyone else in town.

Though *Camino Real* gives Mr. Kazan more power, I cannot agree with those who say it exacted from him a different style because it is a fantasy. Even when confronted with "realistic" plays like *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Death of a Salesman,* he gave us a phantasmagoria. Blanche Dubois' background was diaphanous walls and voices disembodied as Saint Joan's. Willie Loman's life was shrouded in shadow and woodwinds and ghosts from Alaska. The only difference is that *Camino Real* doesn't even pretend to realism. The unreal which formerly crept up on us here meets us head on. Whether New York will prefer this I do not know. Possibly the escape into unreality was welcome in the former plays only because it was disguised as its opposite; and now that it is overt the public will either reject it or declare it unintelligible; in which case the play is done for. Possibly, on the other hand, there are many besides myself who cannot resist the wicked fascination of Elia Kazan.

* See below, pp. 172-175.

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A MAJOR MUSICAL

To prefer *The Rake's Progress* to *Wonderful Town* is in my view snobbery; yet the opposite preference could easily be the merest inverted snobbery. For, in the age of the common man, we have, socially, the snobbery of the proletariat and culturally, the snobbery of the lowbrows. Sound critical grounds for approving musicals have not yet been established. The public accepts them *un*critically. Critics who like them give wildly irrelevant reasons for doing so, the chief one being patriotism. I came at one time to detest the very mention of *Oklahoma!*, amusing as the evening had been in the theatre, because of the solemn pronouncements it brought forth. The term Grass Roots was always used—as if Messrs. Rodgers and Hammerstein were cowboys. Invited to accept *Oklahoma!* as an American, or rather Amurrican, *Magic Flute* some of us could not resist the temptation to reject it as that and as anything else it might pretend to be. We would have done better to accept it as a major achievement in a minor genre. This is what *Wonderful Town* is. Whereas *The Rake's Progress* is a minor achievement in a major genre: it invites, if it does not easily survive, comparison with Mozart.

Distinctions of genre, and of major and minor, are "purely verbal," if you will. But they make a lot of difference. We all agree that *Porgy and Bess* is a great musical. What do we all

mean? We cannot mean it is an opera—for that would be to say it is not a musical at all. It is curious that love of this work should lead critics to put it in a small niche beside Mozart and Wagner rather than a large one beside Sullivan and Johann Strauss. On what Olympian heights do we think we stand that we can pretend to look down on everything but the highest? One of Arthur Mizener's early essays demonstrated that we fail to know what are the first-rate qualities of Beaumont & Fletcher because we will only see in them second-rate Shakespeare. The point has application over the whole field of culture.

George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* is major work in a minor genre. For an example of minor work in a major genre we need go no further afield than the novel it is based on, DuBose Heyward's *Porgy*. The bigness of Heyward's intentions is shown not merely in his choice of the novel form but even more in his style. The reader feels the presence of a mist of fancy words between him and the subject. For fog lights, the author offers him no moral vision but only a shy fascination with the sordid and exotic that is at best juvenile and at worst smug. Heyward's view of the Negro, for example, may be kindly; it is certainly close to the traditional and dangerous image of the negro as primitive and the primitive as savage. In this image we can find the reason *why* Heyward can be kindly: it's "father forgive them, they know not what they do." When Porgy commits murder, Heyward is not shocked. As a work of American popular culture, his book is amazing in the indifference shown to the accepted code of poetic justice. And it is not that Heyward is capable of "French" cynicism, it is simply that his people are not quite human beings—they are likable, if not housebroken, animals, among whom killing is not murder.

In folk-tale, pastoral, and idyll, we are familiar with conceptions of this sort. The primary contribution of Gershwin to Heyward's libretto was that he raised it to the legendary

level. Which means, for example, that what was unconvincing in prose became convincing through music. Take the ending. Heywood's aspiration to myth is shown in the changes he made when he went from novel to play. (He wrote three versions in all: novel, play, libretto.) At the end of the novel, Porgy simply looks older; he stays where he was. It is at the end of the play that he sets out for New York, from Charleston, in a go-cart, 3 x 4, drawn by a goat. In a naturalistic setting the incident is absurd; only with Gershwin's aid does it acquire the other reality of myth.

I don't mean to define the reality either of myth or Gershwin's music as "other." There is a good deal of everyday reality in the novel which is also present in the musical. There is not a little everyday reality in the musical which had not been present in the novel: Sportin' Life, enlarged in the play, is both intensified and diversified by Gershwin's music. But Gershwin's most original act was to take Heyward's unreal picture of negro life and give it the reality of fantasy. This is not Charleston, it is a modern Arcadia, a negro never-never-land. Within this dream, murder can be passed over like a child's tantrums.

One of the critics described this tale of homicides, fornicators, and dope addicts as a story of "admirable people." The fact that he could think so is a tribute in the first place to the mythopoeic gift of Gershwin, but in the second to power of musical comedy as a convention. "Material seeks a form, as man woman." I envisage the Porgy material seeking not only the personal forms dictated by George Gershwin but also an established framework with established associations for its audience. It is worth stressing that *Porgy and Bess* is a musical, not an opera: the work of Heyward was to be salvaged by exploitation for "lower" not "higher" purposes. A musical is, *per se*, a kind of fairy tale (good or bad). Only in a musical could the Arcadia of Heyward's imagination find adequate and unpretentious realization.

I do not want to carry my inverted snobbery (if that's what it is) too far, and pretend that *Porgy and Bess* is beyond criticism. Heywood and Gershwin created a world, not an action; an idyll, not a drama; a series of numbers, not a tragic or comic whole. The tradition of the musical is not that of music drama, it is that of operetta, vaudeville, and revue; it has the defects of its qualities, and towards the end of *Porgy and Bess*—as I judge from three different productions —the cumulative effect is not more impressive than it is exhausting and benumbing.

If the production at the Ziegfeld is the most exhausting and benumbing of the three, that is partly because it is also the best; talent can be tiring. I found Mr. Breen's directing satisfactory; if the above speculations are true, I should acknowledge that their truth was revealed to me by his production.

I do not know what racial characteristics negroes have. Seeing them on the stage it is tempting to believe that they have more vitality than the rest of us, and that this vitality shows itself in superior rhythm, agility, and litheness. At any rate, that is my impression, seeing this production at the Ziegfeld after the production by white actors in black face at the Zurich opera house.

When, in addition, a colored player—like Cab Calloway—has talent, the result is an astonishing combination of fantasy and force. Mr. Calloway imposes himself on the imagination. At any moment one can recall to the mind's eye the picture of the quick body bending, the furtive eyes dancing, and the big mouth wide, wide open.

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FROM LEO X TO PIUS XII

Possibly the contribution of the Group Theatre was not a particular production, nor even the sum of its productions; it was a contribution to the theory and practice of theatrical education. As a result, some of the most interesting theatre work of today is done in the classrooms and studios of ex-Groupers like Elia Kazan, Lee Strasberg, Robert Lewis, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner.

I was recently privileged to see Mr. Meisner's production of *Mandragola* at the Neighborhood Playhouse. I say "privileged" not only to acknowledge the school's hospitality but because Machiavelli's masterpiece is so seldom seen. Though Pope Leo X thought it worth while to build a theatre expressly to exhibit this play in, his successors have found its anti-clericalism less congenial. I came upon a small production of it in Florence in 1948, but three years later—on April Fools' Day—the Demo-Christian government stamped it Non Approvato.

Mandragola seems not to have been translated into English till Stark Young published his version in 1927. So far as I know it has still not had a professional production in our language. What passed for its "first appearance on the English stage" (in 1939) was actually the appearance of another play under the same name. Machiavelli's salty dish had been changed by Ashley Dukes into one of those nondescript

desserts, only slightly obscene, that they serve in English hotels. It was synthetic Sheridan—or perhaps a compound of Bowdler and some minor disciple of Pinero. Nahum Tate's sentimentalization of *Lear* is tact itself in comparison. There is one consolation: Dukes' changes work out so badly that after reading him our love of Machiavelli's original is greatly increased: if Dukes is always wrong, Machiavelli is always right.

The action of the play consists simply in the accomplishing of adultery. How will our "hero" get into the (married) "heroine's" bed? The husband believes his wife to be sterile, but is persuaded she will become fertile if she partakes of the magic herb mandragola. Yet the first man she sleeps with after doing so will die. The husband must kidnap some lusty young fellow, thrust him into his wife's bed, and discard him. The truth, of course, is that the wife is not sterile, the herb is not magical, and the man is not "some lusty young fellow" but the same person who told the husband about mandragola and who at the end of the play is rewarded for his counsel by the present of a key to the married couple's house: namely, our hero. Not that he was clever enough to hatch the whole plot himself. His contribution is, not brains, but money, and he pays it out to three accomplices: an idea man to draft the plan of campaign and convince the husband, and a couple of moralists to win the cooperation of the wife. Who better for this last function than—her mother and her confessor? The cutting edge of Machiavelli's irony was never sharper than in the confessor's use of Catholic sophistry to justify adultery; Roman farce is transfigured to great drama by a fantastic intellect, an intellectual fantasy.

The crowning event of the plot is the crowning irony of the play: not merely that the hero arrives in the heroine's bed but that he is pushed into it by her husband, not merely that the heroine has a lover but that she has never seen him before he enters her bed, that she is fully reconciled to the

situation and, after the first union, determined to perpetuate it. The limitations of modern gentility were never more manifest than in Ashley Dukes' inability to "take" Machiavelli's climax—and with it his view of his characters, his whole criticism of life. Mr. Dukes had hero and heroine meet and establish a romantic relationship *before* adultery took place.

It would not be worth harping on such misunderstandings except that they illustrate (if at an extreme) the kind of difficulty we all have as moderns, and as non-Italians, with such a play, a difficulty worth overcoming not only because *Mandragola* is a masterpiece but also because it belongs to a school of drama that we do ill to forget. In what probably remains the best essay on Machiavelli in English, Macaulay said that "tragedy is corrupted by eloquence and comedy by wit" and that *Mandragola* is a prime instance of uncorrupted comedy—a comedy in which character is defined, not by clever or graceful talk, but by plot. In short Macaulay uses Machiavelli as a stick to beat Congreve and Sheridan with—today we might be tempted to beat Wilde and Giraudoux with it. Whether or no it is fair to describe these four as corrupt, it is certainly salutary to look back at the classic—and could we not say realistic?—comedy of the Italian Renaissance, at Calmo, at Ruzzante, and, above all, at Machiavelli.

Many of the things that Machiavelli does well, Molière, it is true, does better. One realized that Mr. Meisner's students had seen Barrault in *Les Fourberies de Scapin* and had learnt how so crude a thing as farce could be exploited by so subtle a poet as Molière; the "diabolical" rhythm of farce is a fine instrument for the "diabolical" mind of Machiavelli. What distinguishes Machiavelli from Molière is a certain fanaticism.

Sheer fanaticism, to be sure, would never yield comedy. We know from *The Prince* that Machiavelli pretends to be the polar opposite of a fanatic—a cynic. Yet (a) he is fanatical

in his advocacy of cynicism and (b) his cynicism is contradicted, modified, or transformed by certain ideal allegiances, notably patriotism; and his patriotism is part of a profound and revolutionary humanism.

More important than these *isms* is the spirit of Machiavelli. A clerical government, given a certain sophistication, might tolerate his cynicism and, given a certain liberalism, might tolerate his ideals; what it could never be happy with, unless it were positively stupid, is his restless and questing spirit. I should not wish to deny that his mind was full of ambiguities. Yet I should place him not with second-rate logicians but with first-rate poet-philosophers like Voltaire and Nietzsche—one might almost say: like Swift. In the realm of pure thought, ambiguity may be simply a fault, the fault of indecision or inconsistency. In the realm of the imagination, ambiguities, though not good in themselves, may be put to work. In *Mandragola* they function as comic tensions. The complexity of Machiavelli's personality is in this play, even though, under the control of his genius, complexity takes the form of an unexampled simplicity.

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PERSONALITY

The physique and technique of Martha Graham have been brilliantly described by Robert Horan, Agnes De Mille, and other experts on the dance. If a theatre critic can add anything to the understanding of her work, it will not be because he knows more, or as much, about it, but because he sees it in another way. He sees it as theatre. He sees the dancer as actress and, yes, as dramatist.

The statement that the two best American dramatists are Charlie Chaplin and Martha Graham is not to be dismissed with the observation that one of them is English and neither is a dramatist, for the fact remains that this pair have worked for decades with American materials on American soil and that they have excelled in dramatic composition. It is true that this excellence has been overshadowed by the acknowledged originality of their performing; but I don't think anyone who took a second look at any of the major works would fail to see it; *City Lights* and *The Gold Rush, Letter to the World* and *Night Journey,* are among the finest dramas ever produced in this country.

In the nineteenth century, drama became too exclusively dramatic—that is, too exclusive of epic and lyric. In the twentieth century the movies reminded us of the value of the epic element in dramatic entertainment, and the best movies were Mr. Chaplin's. The lyrical element was also

farmed out to another medium—not the movies but opera and ballet. Of the poets who essayed drama, even the greatest were less dramatic in their plays than in their poems. It was an inspired idea of Martha Graham's to exploit the dramatic quality of non-dramatic modern verse as she does in *Letter to the World,* revived for Bethsabe de Rothschild's Festival of American Dance.

A double inspiration, for Emily Dickinson's phrases seem —if not a description of Martha Graham—at any rate a verbal equivalent of her dancing. Eat evanescence slowly, the postponeless creature, cornets of paradise, gay ghastly holiday, looking at death is dying—these are among the phrases which Martha Graham weaves into a pattern of action. Skilful patterning is the least of it. If I understand what has usually been meant by a tragic sense of life, it is something that our playwrights do not have and which Miss Graham does. She can express anguish and she can make it the companion of joy. She can put the elemental emotions to work like a symphonic composer. She opens wide sluices which our torpor and sophistication had shut. "The birth of tragedy from the spirit of music" is Nietzsche's fine formula: Martha Graham seems to lead us back to that musical beginning, a realm of Jungian archetypes, Goethean mothers, feelings purged of trivial and accidental contacts.

She can express anguish. "There is a pain so utter it swallows being up." She has shifted the dancer's center of gravity in order to seize and define pain. Her favorite arm-position is the elbow flexed, the fore-arm upright, the hand back and horizontal, almost clutching. The "pain" sequence of *Letter to the World* is the grandest and deepest, but

> After great pain a formal feeling comes
> The nerves sit ceremonious like tombs
> The feet mechanical go round a wooden way
> This is the hour of lead.

Modern dance often has lines as straight as Mondrian. It is especially good at giving an impression of weight—weight pressing downwards into the earth.

She can make sorrow the companion of joy. "Mirth is the mail (?male) of anguish." The humor of Martha Graham is not abundant and all-embracing like Mr. Chaplin's, it is the other face of her gloom, and that is *all* it is. So soon as Miss Graham ventures out into pure humor she becomes a little coy. To be true, her humor must remain tied to her solemnity—if only by the rope of parody, as in the sequence with March at the love seat. Her humor belongs to the dialectic of her personality.

Which is integrated. She has two eyes but one vision. "Life is a spell so exquisite that everything conspires to break it." The universal conspiracy provides the antagonist, the conflict, without which victory could not be exquisite. "Glory is that bright tragic thing that for an instant means dominion." Here Emily Dickinson's words soar so high they suggest what must be an artist's ideal rather than his attainment; yet the bright tragic thing is seldom far away when Miss Graham dances.

About *Night Journey*—Miss Graham's version of the Oedipus story—I should like to be more prosaic. When the Greek National Theatre was here, I was disappointed to find them presenting their Chorus in the staid, white neo-classic tradition that goes back through Reinhardt to Winckelmann and perhaps no further. I believe we should have a more modern version of Greek tragedy if we had a more ancient one, and I hear that a living Greek director, Charles Konn, has actually been trying a pre-classical style. For myself, the only time I have felt that *this* must be what the Greeks meant by a chorus was in *Night Journey*. The reason may be largely that there is nothing literary, nothing of the Victorian nightshirt tradition about it. This chorus dances with an absolute modernity; we enjoy the twentieth century in them

and at the same time we feel swept back two and a half thousand years.

The individual performances in it are also very striking (especially Stuart Hodes' staccato leaps as Tiresias). And, in general, not the least attraction of a Graham production is in the realm of sheer stage personality. Even a dancer with very small roles like Patricia Birsh is given the chance to project personality and, like several of her colleagues, seems to have as much to project as a whole cast of actors. I should not speak of mere quantity. The personality projected (this time I am thinking of Natanya Neumann) is of a lofty and subtle beauty not seen in a minor role since the Barraults were with us.

Graham is of course a supreme personality. The opposite of what generally passes for such in theatre circles. That is: Graham is not an ingratiating person without art but an austere, unprepossessing, forbidding person transfigured by art. Her personality is a creation. And it continues to be created during each performance: when we say it holds us, we mean we are in the grip of a concentrated will. Graham does not have to dance in order to win us. She doesn't even have to move. Such is concentration—otherwise known as personality. What I mean is: she is great.

27

ON BEING READ TO

Our new habit of being read to is good and bad. t is good insofar as it indicates an interest in the spoken anguage. It is bad insofar as it indicates our inability to ead for ourselves, our fear of being alone, our lack of con-entration, our preoccupation with that part of an author's ›ersonality that reveals itself less in his works than in his ›latform appearances.

I am referring to the less defensible of the two current ypes of reading aloud: reading by authors. Reading by ctors seems to me more proper because reading is part of he actor's craft; a bad reader is (to that extent) a bad actor. Though authors may have an especially accurate knowledge f the tone and rhythm of their own work, they do not, as uthors, have the ability to communicate that tone and hythm to others by means of the voice. As to their personali-ies being right for the job, that will make no difference xcept insofar as they are actors and can externalize their ›ersonalities in performance. Until the art of presentation ıas been perfected in a man, his personality can only func-ion in his performances as an interference. It is true that uch an interference may be of interest; of more interest than ome literature; to many people, of more interest than any iterature. But this is not to say it is good performing, good eading. When we hear a poet read and call him terrific, we

mean that we are impressed by him as a person and that we are amazed to learn he has so loud and enthusiastic (or soft and mellow) a vocal organ. When we want his poems read to us, we send for an actor.

There are two current types of actor-readers: the reader of a single role, whether on the radio or in a "drama quartet," and the reader of many roles—the latter being half-way to the one man—or woman—theatre of Ruth Draper. Emlyn Williams has perfected this second type. Insofar as he stands at his little table and reads a narrative in the third person, he is a pure reader. But when he comes to dialogue, he reads the speeches with full characterization in the voice and approximate characterization of posture, gesture, and facial expression. Not that the text can be chopped in two quite so cleanly. Mr. Williams will begin to take on a character's tone of voice when he is described in the narrative. He will also embellish the narrative passages with any noises and gestures that may be intimated in them. The diagnostic of Mr. Williams, as of Mr. Laughton, the reader, is that he has a complete actor's technique to draw on. Where the amateur would use gestures of mere emphasis, Mr. Williams will choose an action with a reference: a quick movement of the hand to the face will tell us someone has been splashed in the eye. Or he will build a whole scene by a repeated turn of the head—to see if the speaker's companion is listening. Abstract gestures can be added at more solemn moments: at the end of a chapter he will "freeze" under the dimming lights with one arm outstretched.

To read fiction in this manner asks more of an actor than taking a part in a play, and it is largely for his virtuosity that Mr. Williams was praised; the public was asked to see in him a brilliant freak. But since the New York public declined the invitation, I want to urge that there was a better reason for seeing either of Mr. Williams' programs, namely, that he was presenting the work of Charles Dickens, and this

with such intensity as to make us see the novelist's work freshly, as after reading a great critic. Like a great critic, Mr. Williams can only bring certain qualities out at the expense of others. Two hours of reading from a novel that would take sixty hours to read entire cannot but be misleading and "unfair"; Dickens not only needs many words for certain of his best effects, bulk is with him an essential quality; one would not offer a friend a thimbleful of beer, and Dickens never offered us a thimbleful of fiction. On the other hand, to isolate certain portions of Dickens is to find unsuspected felicities. What one appreciates in Mr. Williams' Mixed Bill is, first, the mastery of the individual scene and, second, the force of the individual word and phrase. By scene I intend, as it were, a scene from a play, with its regular dramatic structure—the setting of the stage, the warming up, the climax, the cooling off. Such are the episodes Mr. Williams offers from *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Pickwick Papers.* As for phrases and particular words, it is only when we see Williams that the comedy of Dickens' lines is released —or at least, only then do we fully realize how much fun and meaning a particular verb or adjective conceals. Or how much fancy goes into a statement of fact: it is from hearing Mr. Williams, not from reading for ourselves, that we remember that Podsnap's face was like a face in a tablespoon or that Chadband looked like a bear trying to stand on its hind legs.

Which brings me to *Bleak House.* In trying to present this novel as a whole Mr. Williams was undertaking something much more risky than the selections on his Mixed Bill. Here anyone who knows the book notes what is missing from the reading, and the others regret trailing up hill and down dale with a single, not always fascinating, story instead of jumping from peak to peak of novel after novel. Mr. Williams cuts the last two hundred pages of the book, ending with the murder of Tulkinghorn. In three "acts" he tells the story of

Lady Dedlock's secret with as many comical digressions as he has time for. Some of the episodes have the same kind of merit as the items on the Mixed Bill. There is the perfectly theatrical use of the hand-screen by Lady Dedlock in the "scene" where Guppy starts revealing her past. There are scenes of Mrs. Jellyby at home (though her thoughts are never nearer than Africa) and Mrs. Pardiggle inflicting her ferocious philanthropy on the poor. There are characteristically devastating deflations of Chadband, the Turveydrops, the Badgers. . . . Other features are peculiar to *Bleak House.* Mr. Williams' editing (particularly his elimination of Esther as narrator) sharpens the satire and underscores Dickens' powers of sheer narration. I surely am not alone in having rather neglected Dickens' plots for his scenes and characters. When stripped of some of the moralistic rhetoric, the Gothic narrative in *Bleak House* comes to seem pretty impressive. And within our idea of narrative we must include not only the bare roster of incidents but the connection, as made by Dickens, between one set of events and another, between events and society, between society and the cosmos. One is impressed in Mr. Williams' reading with the way in which Dickens will let his story broaden out at the end of a chapter into the lament of a Greco-Victorian chorus or will start a chapter with the natural or social world to which the new group of characters belongs. "The town awakes: the great teetotum is set up for its daily spin and whirl. . . ." Though Bleak House remains a little vague for all that either Dickens or Williams can do, one had a strong sense at the reading of both London, "the great confused city," with its "mud and wheels, horses, whips, and umbrellas," and of Chesney Wold in the swamps of Lincolnshire; the two places are twin poles of the action. . . .

The points Mr. Williams managed to make are far too many to mention in a review. I hope my few examples suffice to indicate that he makes them, and that his perform-

ance is the fruit, not of dexterity only, but also of intelligence; not of intelligence only, but also of love. This might explain why some people aren't sinking their teeth in it. Perhaps *fruit* is an unhappy metaphor. Mouths have been dropping open readily enough. My complaint is that people haven't let Mr. Williams open their eyes.

28

WITHIN THIS WOODEN O

Since theatre is a visual, not to say a spectacular, art, nothing is more remarkable than the way the appearance of a play changes from age to age. We are shocked to see Garrick (on the famous print) performing *Richard III* in eighteenth-century breeches and hose, yet we may ask whether Shakespeare would be less shocked to see Richard, as we nowadays do, in his habit as he lived. Would he not be shocked at the baroque stage of the eighteenth, the naturalistic stage of the nineteenth, centuries? Would he prefer the modest curtains and cut-outs of Granville Barker?

I do not mean these rhetorical questions to suggest that presenting Shakespeare on a non-Elizabethan stage is always a mistake. The theatre's responsibilities are to the present, not the past. Garrick was right. And we shall be right when we have found a theatre that belongs as fully to our time as his did to his. Who can say we *have* found it? What we must complain of in current Shakespeare productions is not that they are in a style we don't like but that they have no style at all—and any ideas and interpretations they may embody are only the bright ideas and cute interpretations of our subintelligentsia.

We have to go back and look at the Elizabethan stage because it is the beginning and we have to go back to the beginning. At the very least we can re-learn from productions

on an Elizabethan stage the ABC of Shakespearean stagecraft. And when we know what Shakespeare brought to the eyes of his public, we can decide to what extent the same things should be brought to the eyes of ours. Such innovations as are then resolved upon will be made deliberately. We shall have restored Shakespeare, and we shall have worked out step by step the problem of adapting him to our time. Our Shakespeare theatre will be a precision tool.

It was with all this in mind that I went out to Long Island on Shakespeare's birthday to see *Macbeth* on a replica of the Globe stage at Hofstra College. It was a most revealing production, and suggested even more than it revealed. I had seen the play several times before; each time the production had conformed pretty much with the visual image I had of it in my mind's eye; yet each time the play failed. It failed because, as I learned at Hofstra, the image we have of it is one the play as written will not support. The *Macbeth* of our imaginations could perhaps be written by Monk Lewis, staged by Gordon Craig, or filmed in the manner of *Caligari*; the *Macbeth* of Shakespeare demands, not murky corridors and pinpoints of moonshine, but diffused light and a large block of visible space embracing some seven playing areas. Someone said that the Hofstra production lacked suspense, and it occurred to me that suspense is the mess of pottage for which the Shakespearean birthright has been sold. Suspense drives everything else out of the mind and that's why it's so sorely needed by playwrights who have nothing else to offer. If our minds are occupied with other matters, the need for suspense is not felt. On the Elizabethan stage the intricate things Macbeth says can be actually presented to the audience instead of being swallowed up in darkness. Passages that in modern productions seem long-winded interruption and obscure irrelevance take their place on this stage as the drama itself. We forego the superficial excitements of the thriller to discover that, as we sit mildly

watching, we are being more profoundly excited. Why is it that your ordinary modern *Macbeth* "falls off in the second part"? Because the crime story is over. The only kind of curiosity that has been aroused in us is satisfied as soon as Duncan is dead. The evening's play has been sacrificed in order that for thirty minutes or so Shakespeare might prove the equal of Agatha Christie.

We know a good deal about the Elizabethan stage from books. It is gratifying to find that its impact on the senses is even greater than the most informed student expects. We have read of the depth of this stage; it is actually less deep than many other stages; our *impression* of depth is the result of its shape and its relation to the auditorium. This deep-seeming stage is not only good to look at but useful in permitting the easy separation of one group of actors from another; the grouping of many a Shakespeare scene becomes both more pleasing and more plausible. We have read of inner stage and balcony, but I for one was not prepared for the effect they have. It is not true that the Elizabethans lacked a peepshow stage. They had two of them: study (or inner stage) and chamber (the inner portion of the balcony). Each is a complete "modern" stage with three walls and a ceiling and as much claustrophobic tension as you please. We had known that the apron lends itself to outdoor scenes, as no theatre since seems to have done, but we have to see the Globe stage in action to be convinced that it equals the modern stage in its presentation of interiors too.

So much for this stage as a static picture; it is still more wonderful—and still harder to judge from books—as that moving picture which is the action of a play. The force even of the various tableaux derives in large part from the sudden movement of their unveiling; they are framed not only in space (by the rest of the stage) but in time (by the scenes that precede and follow). While study and chamber give a very firm impression of locality (contrary to much that we

have been told about abstract and unlocalized space) the most brilliant effect is that of movement from one locality to another; Shakespeare's scenic progressions have partly the character of medieval staging, partly that of cinematic montage. On his stage, even the soliloquy is seen in terms of space and movement. To speak an aside or a monologue, the actor can simply walk across to a pillar or down to the rail (often seeming as he does so to move from one reality to another).

It was lucky, since he had Macbeth's soliloquies to handle, that Ian Keith was the boldest of the Hofstra actors in his use of the space at his disposal. The others, though obviously helped by their capable director Bernard Beckerman, sometimes seemed afraid of departing from the usage of the modern stage.

It should be added that Mr. Keith has few equals in this country as a speaker of Shakespearean verse; he does not yield to Maurice Evans in his eagerness to render the music but he succeeds also in delivering the sense. Voice and carriage take us back to the days of heroic acting.

29

ON STAGING YEATS

The only plays of Yeats I have ever staged are *The Player Queen, The Words upon the Window Pane,* and *Purgatory,* but that's enough to start a discussion with. And they are very different, one from another.

Studying *The Player Queen,* you ask yourself, not how you can stage it well, but whether you can stage it at all. It contains much prose that is bad by any standard and especially bad as material for speaking and projecting from a stage. Its story is not well-articulated and might not be very interesting even if it were. As for meaning, you realize that your audience won't even know if there's supposed to be any. If you go ahead, it is partly from sheer faith—you feel that Yeats couldn't have put in years of work to absolutely no avail—partly from some quality in the writing that is rather hard to define, though not, I believe, to feel: a sort of zany vitality. Anyone who considers the play a masterpiece would no doubt be shocked at a production that suggested Punch and Judy and Christmas Pantomime, yet I confess my own assumption that, if the show didn't have the rough, fantastic life of these humble forms, it would have none at all. I also formed the opinion that Yeats had deceived himself when he thought he had got away from the local setting and had done well to do so. I sought to keep the play close to earth by emphatically Irish accents, props, costumes, and music. I

even ventured to frame the play in a narration sung to an accordion by a beggar. He sat at the side of the stage and provided harp accompaniment to the songs. The tunes were taken from Irish folksongs, particularly street ballads. The narration, for example, was all sung to the air of *Finnegan's Wake*, which proved an admirable tune for a dance at the end.

I suppose Yeats' plays stand outside ordinary categories, but, if *The Player Queen* can loosely be termed an extravaganza, *Words upon the Window Pane* could be called a conversation piece, a drawing-room drama, even a naturalistic tragedy. Yeats disliked naturalism and was no good at it. Yet after a creakingly conversational opening, the play becomes effectively, even showily, theatrical. It is perhaps the only play in which the austere Yeats invites the actor to virtuosity. It is also the only one that has its own virtuosity—of structure. The emotional center is a flash-back to the eighteenth-century in the original form of voices speaking through a medium in the twentieth. The primary dramatic contrast is between the medium's vision and the outlook of a modern skeptic, but the twist that makes the action ironic and effective is that the medium *is* a venal fake—and is destroyed by the voices from the past, which are not. Once you have done some bold cutting in the early part of the play and have found an actress capable of speaking not only as a spiritualist but as Swift and as Stella, your production problem is solved. One part, that of Corney Patterson, is so dismal a joke it should be cut. The others lend themselves to standard modern performance. The darkness, the hymn-singing, the trance, the presence of spirits are sure-fire melodrama.

As, in the setting of a seance, Yeats had inserted the drama of Swift and Stella, and had related it to the history of modern intellect, so, in the setting of a haunted house, Yeats inserts a domestic tragedy which represents the decline of Ireland and perhaps the modern world generally. In both

cases, *Words upon the Window Pane* and *Purgatory*, the *donnée* is magic, and the general effect in the theatre that of a Gothic thriller. The drama of the director's position is that while he will *need* to exploit the thrilling element (to hold his audience), he will *want* to anchor the thrills in the sea of history, (not only to get some of Yeats' meaning across, but, stylistically, to balance the Gothic with the realistic, sensibility with sense). Inevitably, the necessity wins out over the wish. And the success the two plays had with audiences was never satisfying; it seemed to have been won on false pretenses. I suppose it could satisfy those who think, with Mr. Eliot, that audiences, generally and legitimately, miss the main purport of great plays. Anyone else is bound to be worried at the way Yeats assumes that theatre can, generally and legitimately, be a private, not a public, art. Write on this assumption, and you will not get an audience of supermen—merely one of snobs, bluestockings, and bohemians. Which is precisely the audience Sean O'Casey found at Yeats' house on Merrion Square when he went to see *At the Hawk's Well.* The moral he drew was fair enough: "A play poetical to be worthy of the theatre," he wrote in *Inishfallen Fare Thee Well,* "must be able to withstand the terror of Ta Ra Ra Boom Dee Ay, as a blue sky, or an apple tree in bloom, withstand any ugliness around or beneath them." I was always relieved when the applause after our Yeats' one-acter died down, and the curtain rose on a "regular play" by Mr. O'Casey or J. M. Synge.

It is also fair to add that the moral Mr. O'Casey drew he presumably learnt from Yeats, from whom the idea of a national theatre, close to the soil and the people, stems. The esotericism of his later plays is not the cause of his unpopularity in the theatre but the result; and the result of the general failure of the Abbey Theatre, not merely of the cold welcome it always accorded the plays of Yeats. "In the midst of the fume, the fighting, the stench, the shouting,

Yeats, as mad as the maddest there, pranced on the stage, shouting out his scorn, his contempt, his anger making him an aged Cuchulain . . ." O'Casey's words record Yeats' anger at the Abbey's reception, not of any of his own plays, but of *The Plough and the Stars.* Purists will say that instead of trying to convert the theatre into a private institution he should have given it up altogether. Life is impure. Yeats' anti-popular works contain more vitally "popular" elements than the plays he intended for a national theatre. The plays he wrote for drawing rooms have more theatre in them than the plays he wrote for the Abbey. They are not theatrical through and through. And their omissions suggest a dramatist dead on one side. (Where is the plot? Where are the characters?) But this is an age, as Francis Fergusson has reminded us, of partial perspectives. A dramatist who is *alive* on one side is a rare enough phenomenon. In *Purgatory,* his last play (if we take *The Death of Cuchulain* as an epilogue to the Cuchulain plays), whatever he does *not* do, Yeats has arrived at a style of dramatic utterance superior to anything he had written in his life before and therefore inferior to nothing in modern English drama. If, from some viewpoints, it is anti-theatrical, from the professional viewpoint it is pure theatre,—a play, not to produce, but to act. And it calls for pure acting—not the burlesque technique that is required for *The Player Queen* or the virtuosity demanded of the leading role in *Words upon the Window Pane* but the speaking of great words and the discovery of the positions, moves, and gestures that go with them.

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GIVE MY REGARDS TO BROADWAY

When Walter Kerr, the drama critic of *The New York Herald Tribune*, wrote that Broadway was not for me and implied that I preferred coteries and cults, in short that I was a snob, I was tempted to retort that the Broadway public is itself a coterie of snobs and that Mr. Kerr belongs to that cult of pseudo-democracy—democracy as an applause-producing noise—which is one of the major swindles of modern culture. Had I done so, I would have forfeited the right to make a better point, namely, that the matter of popularity cannot rationally be discussed so long as each of us is busy insinuating that his opponent is an enemy of the people. When more intent on analyzing the situation than on winning the argument, Mr. Kerr, I am sure, would admit the deficiencies of our "popular" Broadway theatre, and I, for my part, would admit those of the theatre off Broadway.

I am even eager to do so—as, whenever an Off Broadway theatre is drowning, I (or so it seems to me) am the straw it clutches at. Now the idea that the theatre off Broadway is better than theatre on it is an illusion that will not stand the test of a single season's theatre-going. If the professional theatre fails because it is commercial, the non-commercial theatre fails because it is non-professional. A professional, by definition, has a trained talent; amateurs have ideals; which

are much less entertaining. Nor, for all the claptrap about simplicity and the dangers of too much scenery, is lack of money a recommendation.

Perhaps I am unduly under the influence of disappointment, but I will record, for what it is worth, the impression that the Off Broadway theatre, as most of us have up to now conceived it, is finished. Our conception followed the model of the Provincetown Playhouse in its early days: a theatre of young people coming forward with something of their own to offer. Today, the Greenwich Village theatre offers plays by established authors in productions that are barely competent, let alone interesting. The few new plays they have put on have not (with an exception or so) whetted the appetite for more. It's not just that they aren't works of genius, which they don't have to be, but that they have no real identity. True, the homoerotic element is rather insistent; yet such a recurrent theme doesn't give an intellectual identity to a generation, even to the extent that, say, proletarianism did in the thirties. An epidemic is not a movement.

I would not set down these melancholy facts, even as a concession to Mr. Kerr, were it not that a recent enterprise in Greenwich Village permits one to hope for—or at least dream of—better things. This is Terese Hayden's season at the Theatre de Lys on Christopher Street. Not that Miss Hayden has avoided all the pitfalls.

The first two shows were *Maya* by Simon Gantillon and *The Scarecrow* by Percy MacKaye. *Maya* is a pretty good play. I happened to see it in Paris a couple of years ago directed by Gaston Baty and starring Marguerite Jamois; and I recall leaving the theatre dazed by their virtuosity. The evening at the de Lys seemed undirected, and the leading part was miscast. I question whether *Maya* was a good choice in the first place—it is not a great play, and it has no interesting relation to this place and time—but certainly it was a

bad choice if the leading lady (or her director) would not accept the spirit in which it was written. What saves the play from pretentiousness is the light, French irony; we should never find out if the author is serious; Helen Craig's way of insisting on pathos dramatized only our Anglo-Saxon attitude to prostitutes, not Gantillon's. And Miss Hayden must learn to reject inadequate translations. Not long ago she used the ruinous Ashley Dukes version of *Parisienne* when, with Jacques Barzun's far superior version, she might have put the play across. With *Maya* she wrongly assumed she could turn the trick by leaving the translator's name out of the program and making unauthorized cuts.

The Scarecrow is a more defensible choice for a producer with the ambition of filling a niche in American theatrical history. Its author is a venerable figure who has devoted a long life to idealistic service of theatre. The play itself presents a far-reaching idea and, what is more remarkable, presents it in a peculiarly theatrical image—that of an automaton or doll learning to be human. Miss Hayden's program tells us that Louis Jouvet planned to produce the play; it seems right that he should have; one can think of no American play which would commend itself more strongly to an actor schooled in French classical theatre; perhaps the only actor now living who could squeeze all the juice from the leading role is Jean Louis Barrault.

The Scarecrow was worth writing if only to place this single moving image before an audience, but one can't help regretting that Mr. MacKaye hedged it around with the kind of verbiage that theatre people call literature. As a poet, Mr. MacKaye combines the pretensions of Goethe with the capabilities of Bayard Taylor. Miss Hayden would have been mistaken to choose such bad writing for exhibition if American dramatic literature abounded in great poetry or if her principal interest had to lie in plays. But her principal interest, I should judge, is in acting. This is

her contribution and my reason for hopefulness. Even *Maya* is a justifiable choice: done right, it is a play for actors, if not for an (American) audience, a play in which every scene is a challenge to the performer—nine scenes, nine *études.* What finally bore down my resistance to the tedium of Mr. MacKaye's writing was the opportunity his story offers to director and actors. And here it should be said that perhaps Miss Hayden's great practical achievement was the rounding up of a good young director (Frank Corsaro) and many good young actors. The opportunities of the script were not missed. Except at Circle in the Square, I don't know that the Village has seen such careful work before. Essential to Miss Hayden's new version of Off Broadway is the complete avoidance of amateurism. Which means the abandonment of the merely philanthropic notion of using an actor because no one else wants to use him. Yet when Miss Hayden uses established actors she gives them new tasks. Patricia Neal and Eli Wallach have been good before; if they could have a year at this kind of experience they would be better. And I should like to credit that muggy evening of *Maya* with one bright discovery: Susan Strasberg who with a little more training could be the first American properly to play the great part of Isabel in *The Enchanted* ("Intermezzo") of Giraudoux.

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SIR LAURENCE MACHEATH

The least of my worries, seeing the film of *The Beggar's Opera,* is that Sir Laurence can't really sing. A worse singer could have done the part of Macheath greater justice. Olivier's singing is not only feeble but phony: he slows down the tempo and vainly attempts *bel canto* where a brisk, semi-musical "acting" would have been not only acceptable but preferable to a good, purely musical rendition. And it is his limitations as an actor which this film brings sharply to our attention.

Looking back over Sir Laurence's career, or on that part of it which I personally have witnessed, I recall that he has almost as often been bad as good. Among the failures I would list Hamlet, Romeo, Shaw's Caesar, and Fry's Duke of Altair; among the triumphs Henry V, Mercutio, Hotspur, Uncle Vanya, and, more doubtfully, Oedipus and Shallow. I have the impression that Olivier either leaves a character vague or plays a single trait. The vagueness of his Romeo, his Hamlet, and his Antony was fatal, as was the reduction of Shaw's Caesar to the single trait of senescence. On the other hand, the vagueness of Henry V was providential, while a "single trait" is all that Hotspur—or perhaps any character part—possesses. Such parts sound one note apiece. Great major roles sound at least two notes which form a dissonance. Confronted with a great major role an actor needs

more than a handsome physique and charm of personality; and he must be more than a character actor; he must be an actor.

The role of Macheath is a case in point. The dissonance here, to be sure, is not that of modern psychology (Macheath is not "a complicated person"), it is principally a dissonance as between manner and matter: the one is artificial, the other real. The form is that of musical comedy, the substance that of actual villainy. Olivier's failure in the realm of musical comedy would have mattered no more than his failure in the realm of musicianship had it not been redoubled by a failure in the realm of reality. His highwayman is not only no singer, he is not only no musical comedian; he is no highwayman. The lightness of John Gay's manner is in direct, not inverse, ratio to his seriousness as a satirist; if his *Beggar's Opera* says nothing, it *is* nothing.

The nullity of the film cannot be attributed to limitations in either Sir Laurence's technique or his powers of characterization. It must in great part be laid at the door of the adaptor, Christopher Fry, and the director, Peter Brook.

Let us not underestimate the difficulty of revivals. To exhume a work is not to revive it, however prettily you dress up the skeleton; to breathe life into it you must either recapture the spirit of the original or by new insight create new life. A revival should be either a return to the essentials of the original or a new departure on the wings of a new inspiration. To present *The Beggar's Opera* today you could either do a "primitive" production, an imaginative, though not antiquarian, version of the early eighteenth century, or a "modern" production, an imaginative, though not modish, re-casting of the whole story. Either way the procedure is simple and radical.

Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill tried the "modern" method and gave us the best of modern musical comedies, *The Threepenny Opera.* The twentieth-century English stage

has never quite dared either to go forward to any idea of its own or back to the idea of John Gay. We must be glad that Nigel Playfair did the play in 1920 even if he drew its teeth by taking literally the word "opera" in its title. We must be glad that (in 1939) John Gielgud re-directed it, lifted the incubus of opera off it, and handed it back to the actors. It was for the next major artists who should take up the play to demonstrate that it was more than jolly good tunes and a naughty story.

By the standards of current English theatre, Christopher Fry and Peter Brook are certainly major artists, yet it would be foolish to pretend that the result of giving them *The Beggar's Opera* to play with was unpredictable: in these hands the swords of satire would inevitably be turned, not indeed to ploughshares, but to prunes and prisms. True, the naughty story is still there, and so are all the jolly good tunes—except those that are sung exclusively by Sir Laurence—for the other actors' songs are dubbed by real singers. The parts of Polly and Lucy, Peachum and Lockit are well acted; and interpolation, far from being impertinent, almost saves the show when it gives new lines and actions to that great character actress, Athene Seyler. Even translation to the screen is not always, as such, a degradation: there are moments—in Macheath's progress to the gallows, for instance—which are better than any staging could be. And though on the whole it is annoying to have actors singing to each other or to themselves rather than to the audience, there were times in the film when their quasi-naturalistic procedure almost became a style: Peachum and Lockit made an amiable ballet out of eating and passing their plates . . .

If the Brook-and-Fry *Beggar's Opera* were *all* prunes and prisms—were fully assimilated to the New Rococo—it would have a style throughout, though not one that would be congenial to John Gay or his admirers. The trouble with the film is that it is imbued with *no* convictions. Neither "primi-

tive" nor "modern" it nods frequently in both these directions and all possible others. A Ph.D. thesis could, and probably will, be written on the influences that have gone to its making, from the opening à la Hogarth to the closing à la Bruegel, from a dwarf lifted from Cocteau's *Eternal Return* to a discourse on art and life lifted from Pirandello. All this and technicolor too.

The challenge of Gay's masterpiece remains. *The Beggar's Opera* was a historic event in the eighteenth century—not because it made fun of opera but because it was at once a fulfilment of the Restoration idea of comedy and a corrective to it—and in the twentieth it continues to beckon because, alone in our tradition, it shows us the full power of a non-operatic, musical theatre.

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JULIUS CAESAR, 1953

More exclusively than most other artists, the dramatist is concerned with the definition of man. Poet and painter may take a sunset for subject; a playwright's primary job is always to send actors out onto a stage, each actor not only *being* a man, but also *representing* another man. The stage is a pedestal or showcase for the exhibition of *homo sapiens,* and the fact that our greatest playwright portrayed *men* has rightly been stressed by generations of critics. The only danger in such an emphasis would be that it might tempt us to take these magnificent creatures and, as critics or producers, have our own way with them. Which is to forget that Shakespeare—not as philosopher, it is true, but as dramatist—defined his own terms. The query: what is a man? underlies all his works and in some of them comes to the surface.

In no play are the men themselves more impressive and in no play is the definition of man more explicitly urged than in *Julius Caesar.* Both the men and the definition have special value for us today. For when we believe in heroes, we tend to be doctrinaire and hence only half-human (Catholic or Communist), and when we begin to criticize heroes, we tend to reject them out of hand, only to discover that we cannot reconstruct a man from a bundle of motives and drives. Shakespeare steers between the Scylla of doctrinaire

heroism and the Charybdis of naturalistic fatality. You can admire his people but you can also understand them; you can pity but you can also censure. We respect these people even after we discover they are wrong. Brutus after all has been wrong throughout. Shakespeare goes much further than Plutarch in underlining his wrongness—about each problem as it arises—yet "this was the noblest Roman of them all . . . Nature might stand up/ And say to all the world 'This was a man.' " Brutus *is* Shakespeare's definition of manhood. The pertinence of the definition today is that its two sides, the nobility and the wrongness, the strength and the weakness, are, for Shakespeare, equally real. Our actors will destroy the drama for us to the extent that they play up one side at the expense of the other.

In the thirties, Orson Welles tried, I believe, to isolate the politics in *Julius Caesar* and play that alone. He no doubt would have acknowledged that there was a price to be paid in damage to the individual characters—clearly not everyone in the play as written is either a little liberal or else a little conservative. But what perhaps did not interest Mr. Welles at all is the main point today: namely that in Shakespeare, by contrast both with Machiavelli and modern pseudo-liberalism, politics are absolutely continuous with the personal and moral life of man. This means that by Marxist standards, Shakespeare's political studies are hopelessly unpolitical and subjective. It also means that by the anti-Marxist standards fashionable today, they are much too political and objective.

The film *Julius Caesar* is, in the sense just implied, anti-Marxist. It is produced by Orson Welles' ex-partner John Houseman, who has gone back on Welles' famous "anti-fascist" interpretation to the extent of cutting out all the politics except a dull little lesson on the vanity of dictators. I don't primarily mean that he and his director have cut lines or incidents—though the great political scene of Cinna the

poet is missing and the battle of Philippi is reduced to the dimensions of a Western. I mean that the implied definition of man excludes politics, and hence that a great political character like Cassius, so concretely seen by Shakespeare, is reduced to the vulgar abstraction of personal jealousy. That the part is played by the leading Shakespearean actor of our day only confirms the point: had there been any intention of rendering Cassius' political sagacity and the way this sagacity melts in the warmth of his friendship for Brutus, Sir John Gielgud could presumably have rendered them. As it is, we enjoy his superb speaking of individual passages (notably his opening, expository scene), without ever feeling that the separate cells amount to that large organism which is Shakespearean man.

Roles that are compact and soon done with rather naturally fare better: Louis Calhern's Caesar and Edmund O'Brien's Casca are the best performances in these parts one is likely to see. The bigger the part the tougher the problem, and oddly enough the MGM casting has its central weakness in the central role of Brutus. *Julius Caesar* with James Mason in this part, one is tempted to assert, is *Hamlet* without the prince. Here at best is a sphinx without a secret, at worst the wise psychoanalyst of current mythology, a nice man with pipe and spectacles who will end not with a bang but a whimper.

If Mr. Mason is unfit for Brutus, Marlon Brando is unready for Antony. He is the most beautiful young man of the American stage, and in this film like enough to a classic statue. He is also as mettlesome as a race-horse, a magnificent theatrical presence and temperament. And whether or not he has intelligence as it is measured in the schools, he has the right intelligence for an artist, a form of keenness directly visible in his eyes and indirectly visible in all his work: it shows in the very unreadiness of his Antony. For no attempt is made to improvise a glossy and sophisticated

front: Mr. Brando unashamedly struggles with the part before our very eyes. Take his speech, for example. He has not learnt to speak in blank verse. He gets none of his effects in normal, full voice: he must shriek, mutter, distort the tone, break the rhythm. Yet one always listens (as one does not to Mr. Mason) because Mr. Brando's peculiar temperament and keenness are in the lines. And when one approves, it's like saying "Isn't his English wonderful?" of a foreign actor. It's magnificent, but it's not war. For where technique is deficient, characterization cannot but suffer. And while star actors with no technique can get along nicely on personality, Shakespeare demands more; and Mr. Brando has more to give.

In so gallant a performance, one would not even grumble at the actor's unpreparedness were it not that his director (Joseph Mankiewicz) seems rather to welcome than oppose it. In order to give us the unpolitical, "purely human" Shakespeare, a director must ask that each principal in *Julius Caesar* fall short of a complete characterization. It would, for example, be well within Mr. Brando's present range to make the main point about Antony that is made in the early part of the play, namely, that he is a reveller. Instead, we were just shown his handsome body.

Some of the film's limitations stem from the medium as such. The now widespread notion that Shakespeare's plays are cinematic is true only to the extent that they are made up of an unbroken succession of short scenes. The actual filming of Shakespeare never fails to remind us how utterly he belongs to the stage. A Cassius who walks through a real street talking loudly to himself (as in the film) can only seem demented. Even full voice-projection—by which the verse gains in dignity—seems absurd in a movie—like all effects in art when the necessity for them has been removed.

This is not to say that Shakespeare movies should not be made. There is nothing to sneer at in the idea of taking the

poet to a larger audience. Since the studios can afford a finer cast than almost any theatre, the possible advantage to anyone not a resident of Stratford-on-Avon is apparent.

Nor do my strictures on *Julius Caesar* amount to rejection. This is, arguably, the best Shakespeare film to date. It is certainly the least cluttered with irrelevant apparatus. It contains much good narrative, and many striking images. It is informed with intelligence. What I have against its makers I could have against most Shakespeare producers: that they rest content with a divided mentality instead of letting Shakespeare help them toward his own version of man, seen steadily and whole.

33

FOLKLORE ON FORTY-SEVENTH STREET

I have seen two plays within a week about shy boy virgins finding their manhood in the arms of alluring widows. I need not mention the other soulful and problem-full adolescents of recent stage history, or the heartwarming spinsters and benign bachelors; for it is well-enough known by now that the bonnets of the grandmas and the blue-jeans of the bobby-soxers are but tokens of our playwrights' sad and startling incapacity to deal with the love of men and women.

While it took Freud to find "offence" in fairy tales, we should scarcely have needed his genius to spot neurotic fantasy in the folklore of the asphalt jungle around Times Square. Not that the American theatre is guiltier than others. The traditional function of entertainment everywhere has been to feed the appetite for consoling fantasy—exactly as the restaurant in the lucky European theatre addresses itself to the stomach. Dreams, drives, and yearnings dance before the theatre audience's eyes in disguises which may be pleasant or unpleasant in themselves but which at all events console and compensate. The image of an idealized mother caters to our lack of self-reliance. The image of a stage villain provides us with a scapegoat. The image of tenderness appeases our sense of isolation, the image of innocence our sense of guilt.

The great pioneers of modern drama presented these images only to smash them in the name of reality; other masters of the drama have begun by accepting the images and ended by transmuting them into something else. It would be folly to expect anything of either sort from the theatre as such. Great plays are miracles conferred with becoming infrequency, services rendered above and beyond the call of duty. The everyday theatre is nothing more than a day-dream factory. Tenderness, innocence, and the rest have to be mere commodities or they couldn't be produced quickly enough. While the artist transforms neurotic fantasies into a higher reality, the journeyman playwright is doomed simply, like the neurotic himself, to live with them. He does nothing to his fantasies except hand them over to the public. The public is excited by the contact. And the degree of excitement is the criterion of the dramatic critics.

Theatre is an escape, and "realist" theatre is no longer an exception to the rule: it differs from non-realistic theatre only in pretending to be so. For the escape here is into pretended realities like ideologies and psychological notions and scientific fetishes. Or reality, being relative, turns unreal when placed before the Broadway public: *Tobacco Road* was not reality, the play was a very titillating bit of slumming, and one didn't know why those silly people weren't eating cake. In the thirties, realist escapism signalized the flight of the intellectual middle class into the fun-world of proletarian legend. Today it signalizes the flight of that same public into a variety of notions, chiefly psychological. In the thirties you felt the reassuring presence of the "real" at the mention of a Worker. Today you feel it at the mention of a Homosexual.

Tea and Sympathy by Robert Anderson is about a private-school boy who is to lose the feeling that he is a homosexual by proving his potency with the housemaster's wife. The subject matter suggests a whole roster of other plays (*The*

Green Bay Tree, The Children's Hour . . .) but most of all *Tea and Sympathy* strikes me as the 1953 version of *Young Woodley*, not so much for its plot, or even its setting, as for its relation to the public's current view of what is scandalous. The formula for such a work is Daring as Calculated Caution. Or: Audacity, Audacity, But Not Too Much Audacity. Such a play must be "bannable" on grounds of what used to be considered immoral but also defensible on grounds of what is now considered moral. Sweet are the uses of perversity.

Tea and Sympathy is a highly superior specimen of the theatre of "realist" escape. Superior in craftsmanship, superior in its isolation, combination, and manipulation of the relevant impulses and motifs. Its organization of the folklore of current fashion is so skilful, it brings us to the frontier where this sort of theatre ends. But not beyond it. One doesn't ask the questions one would ask of a really serious play. Here, in the cuckoo land of folklore, one doesn't ask how the heroine knows the hero is innocent, one doesn't permit oneself the thought that he may not be innocent, for he has an innocence of a kind the real world never supplies: an innocence complete and certified. One doesn't ask how her husband could be so unloving and yet have got her to love him: one accepts her neat, fairy-tale explanation that, one night in Italy, he needed her. One doesn't ask just how the heroine's motives are mixed—to what extent her favors are kindness, to what extent self-indulgence—for, in this realm, the author enjoys the privilege of dreamer, neurotic, and politician to appeal to whatever motive is most attractive at the moment.

Instead, one drinks the tea of sentiment and eats the opium of sympathy, realizing more and more, as the evening at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre races on, that these memoirs of an opium eater are not so much a play by Mr. Anderson as another essay of Elia, the latest phantasmagoria of Mr.

Kazan, the incarnate spirit of the age; I would call him a human seismograph if there were a seismograph which would not only record tremors but transmit them. At every moment in the evening, one can say: this *has* to be a hit, or men are not feckless dreamers, the theatre is not a fantasy factory, and this is not the age of anxiety.

Technically, the production is perfection: the stage at all times presents a dramatic picture, progression from moment to moment is precisely gauged, every instant has its special value, simultaneous action in three playing areas is beautifully counterpointed. If the craftsmanship is expert, the casting is inspired, for Mr. Kazan goes by what the actors will do under his tutelage, not by what they have done when misled by others. What Deborah Kerr has done in films I have forgotten; what she does in this play I know I shall not forget; if the role scarcely invites greatness, it certainly lets Miss Kerr display a supple naturalness and delicate ardor we did not know were hers. John Kerr, who last year in *Bernardine* was merely brilliant, has been guided into a timing and a subtlety of stance and movement worthy of a veteran. And each minor role is what a minor role should be and rarely is: a type, but alive and concrete enough to come at you with the shock of recognition. Perhaps the greatest single pleasure of this evening of many pleasures was to enjoy so much observation of American life in such minor roles as our hero's roommate at school and our hero's father (both of them confronted with the charge that our hero is a "queer"). Here Mr. Anderson and Mr. Kazan trespass in the realm of the really real.

Day-dreams are of course full of real objects, yet the effect of the realities in *Tea and Sympathy* is strangely dual. At times it lifts the show out of the commodity theatre altogether—and into the theatre of the masters. At other times, Mr. Kazan seems to say, No, day-dream it is, and day-dream it shall remain; and he stylizes the action and has Miss Kerr

stand like impatience on a monument with one hand between her breasts and the other outstretched, waiting for our hero to embrace her. The total impression is of double exposure: two scenes, two realms, blurred, not blended. The confusion is the greater in that, presumably, no one on Forty-seventh Street admitted the material was folklore in the first place, and attempts are made in the course of the evening to tell us it is not so, but that this is a demonstration of real evils and their real cure, heterosexuals shouldn't be accused of homosexuality, no one should be falsely accused of anything, manliness is not just bullying but also tenderness, we are all very lonely, especially at the age of seventeen, and so on.

Anyway, in the calculated caution of its audacity, it is a play for everyone in the family; the script is far better than most; folklore and day-dream are scarcely less interesting than drama; and the work of Elia Kazan means more to the American theatre than that of any current writer whatsoever.

34

HOW DEEP ARE THE ROOTS?

Ladies of the Corridor by Dorothy Parker and Arnaud D'Usseau is a story about the derelict women who live in hotels. A young one, who has a husband that uses a whip and keeps the company of call girls, takes to drink, disgusts herself by sleeping with the desk clerk, and commits suicide. An old one, concealing behind her old lace the arsenic of maternal tyranny, forces her son into spending his life with her by threatening to expose the fact that he had given up his last job under suspicion of homosexuality. A middle-aged one has a pathetic love affair with a younger man. As a kind of chorus commenting on the three principals, there is, on the one side, a successful career woman and, on the other, a couple of hags whose life is death.

However much one might wish that our playwrights would present human beings neither senile nor adolescent, neither in menopause nor in rut, neither psychotic nor impotent nor homosexual, one cannot declare the subject matter of *Ladies of the Corridor* illegitimate. The ladies our authors had in mind are important because they exist. And if there is a scandal in their existence—or their situation—it should by all means be loudly denounced. The trouble with the play lies elsewhere.

One must assume that our authors were attempting the

kind of theatre which "makes you laugh and cry at the same time." Except at rare moments they fail; and when this kind of theatre fails it fails catastrophically. You laugh when you should cry, you cry when you should laugh; or you sit there anaesthetized. The audience at *Ladies of the Corridor* is often in confusion. Betty Field falls on her face, dead drunk. Someone laughs. Others join in. Whereupon an opposing team forms, to hiss: Sh! Both teams are right; neither is happy.

This play by two authors is two plays—and, therefore, by the odd arithmetic of art, less than one. The first consists of traditional cruel jokes like how funny it is to see a woman drunk, or an old bitch who seems sweet as grandma, or an oldster making a fool of herself with a young man. In the second, these things are taken, not seriously—for the word "serious" implies a free and mature moral intelligence—but very, very earnestly. I refer to the dangerous earnestness of those who make a hobby (say, at Sardi's) or a profession (say, in "progressive" politics) of indignation.

Anyway, the two plays trip each other up. If you like the jokes and hate mankind (for the humor is all misanthropic), you will be bored by the titillations of philanthropy which the story is meant to provide. Conversely, if you are one of the indignant, you will be wafted on winds of righteous emotion only, time after time, to be dropped abruptly into the mire of misanthropy. Or you will just be confused. Take the ending of the play. When the love affair with the younger man collapses, the lady is ill. She then has to pick herself up out of bed in order to tell the audience that the future is bright because loneliness is no bogy if you aren't afraid of it, a point which has no organic relation to the drama we have seen, and which is credibly reported to have been added at the last moment when the authors feared the critics and the public might find them morbid. But what is more morbid than meaninglessness? Or bad art?

By "bad" I don't mean "inferior"; it is no crime to write an inferior play; I mean corrupt; and by "corrupt," I mean that human life is handled here without respect—mechanically, unscrupulously, tendentiously. The ending—whether inserted at the last moment or not—is only an extreme example. The stories are handled with no more sincerity. The dipsomaniac is handed a flagellant husband as casually as she might be handed a raincoat. And when the homosexual cries "But I never touched him" we ask, When will there be a homosexual on Broadway who'll say he did? * In short, the character belongs to a certain current chatter and pother, not to the human race.

There would be little point in attacking a play which has already been sufficiently attacked—except for the special character of its badness. *Ladies of the Corridor* is full of cultural history; the title is from an early poem of T. S. Eliot. More to the point, the authors' names symbolize the respective outlooks of two decades that have recently become legends, Miss Parker being a specialist in the misanthropic wit of the twenties, Mr. D'Usseau a loyal adherent of the social theatre of the thirties. One might say Mr. D'Usseau keeps politics out of it, unless the strategy nowdays is just to show the "rottenness of bourgeois civilization" (or something). Many of Miss Parker's sallies are very funny. "Were you in love with your wife?" "We both were, that was the trouble." "Is she any thinner?" "I imagine considerably; she's been dead two years." Even so you have to be a social historian to be more than a little interested in the play as a whole, and you'd have to be a necrophilist to be in love with it.

Harold Clurman and his actors struggle hard against a distasteful script and settings by Ralph Alswang (who has assumed that, to present a drab and boring subject, you have to be drab and boring). Only three of the performers, it

* Answered in "Homosexuality," pp. 205-208 below.

seems to me, manage to snatch some sort of personal victory from the general defeat: Walter Matthau, Betty Field, and Edna Best. Any producer with a sure flop on his hands should hire Mr. Matthau,* for he has the ability to ignore the rubbish around him and establish on stage the fact of his own ingratiating manner and strong personality; he has become Broadway's leading stop-gap. Betty Field may also be said wisely to ignore the play in that she creates, as far as possible, the realistic style which presumably was to have been Mr. D'Usseau's contribution to the dipsomaniacal episode; whatever happens to Miss Field's face and figure in the next thirty years, her future as a dramatic actress is secure.

If Miss Field was supposed to save Mr. D'Usseau's lurid melodrama, Edna Best had the more complex—and indeed impossible—task of playing Parker and D'Usseau at one and the same time. Lulu Ames of Akron seems, in any case, an out-of-date and New Yorkish notion of a wealthy midwestern woman; hazy memories of *Main Street* will not enable a playwright in 1953 to describe the class to which Adlai Stevenson belongs: there is confusion and ignorance here, I suspect, as to both class and chronology. Of course one no more believes that Edna Best comes from Akron than one believed Jessica Tandy came from Louisiana (in *A Streetcar Named Desire*). If the play were a good one, we should have to complain that the leading part is hopelessly miscast. For it isn't just that Miss Best isn't from Akron, but that she never conveys the impression of being the sort of woman who would make a fool of herself and have the Dionysian emotions the authors wish to dramatize. In the circumstances, the complaint must be that Edna Best has not been provided with a part. *New Yorker* jokes and *New Masses* melodrama are no proper fare for one of the very few ac-

* My advice was taken by the Theatre Guild when preparing a flop early in 1954 (Charles Morgan's *The Burning Glass*).

tresses we have left who know how to speak high comedy. It is sufficient comment on the whole evening that the drama, even when clever, never attains as much theatrical life as a walk across the stage by Miss Best, or of one of her grimaces, her saying "ooh" with a little break in the voice, or her making gurgling noises to her dog.

35

THE PERFECT PLAY

Samuel Taylor's *Sabrina Fair* is perfect; the obvious intention is perfectly carried out, the means are perfectly adapted to the ends. *Tea and Sympathy* and *Sabrina Fair* represent respectively the two current forms of proficiency: quasi-realistic drama and quasi-romantic comedy; and the Playwrights Company, which produced them, must be credited as the most accurate students of perfection in the imperfect city of New York.

When I tried to describe the near perfection of *Tea and Sympathy,* some readers thought I did Mr. Anderson too much credit; they said he couldn't have been *aware* of his skill in manipulating, organizing, and balancing the impulses that make up the perfect day-dream. Yet they must grant Mr. Taylor such an awareness, for his calculations are there to be shamelessly enjoyed, as Euclid's are. Like *Tea and Sympathy,* the production at the National Theatre is a recognizable hit. Yes, contrary to general opinion, a hit can be recognized. If it doesn't have a bloom like a fruit, it has something equivalent to icing on a cake or chrome on a Cadillac or neon lights on the corner drugstore. You can see at a glance that all those shows that open in September are not hits; hits are not sleazy and down-at-heel; they are gowned by Adrian and glamorized in the classic tradition of Culver City. The stage management must be efficient (di-

recting is not an absolute necessity), the cast must be studded with stars (preferably from Hollywood), the setting should be gaudy (the usual drawing-room will do), and the writing . . . the writing must be perfect: it must enable the author always to have the best of all possible worlds and reconcile —as imperfect authors have seldom quite managed to do— illusion with reality.

Mr. Taylor chose for his voice (it isn't quite a style) a vein of banter which enables him to claim and disclaim as he pleases. Does he claim that his play means something? If you like, yes: there are edifying passages about the difference between wanting money and wanting power. At moments, the principal love story is made to symbolize the union of the urge to love the world with the urge to conquer it. But, if you don't like this, then no: it is all disowned the next line.

Having it both ways is . . . perfect. Your language may be blunt, your knowledge of the world extensive, but your heart is warm; your conversation may be flippant and sexy, but your views are conventional; you can refer to Freud and Lucretius, but you are not—perish the thought—an intellectual; and though you know all the things to say about the rich, you don't happen to know any of the poor except your chauffeur (and the chauffeur in *Sabrina Fair* is a millionaire).

In nothing is Mr. Taylor more adept at having-it-both-ways than in the matter of money. Many times during the evening you can say: "Hear that? He's making fun of the rich"; yet his hero's discovery is that you get even richer by being less interested in money than power; and this hero not only marries into the chauffeur's million but is the author's idea man, the man of the future.

The two opposing viewpoints could, of course, be the basis for a work of art. But art knows no perfection, the perfectionist had best stick to the business of calculating his effects. For example, the problem of illusion and reality which at some point baffles the artist, can be very precisely adjusted

by the dispenser of a hit play. Isn't drama for the audience? Well then, let them have illusion and reality as they want them; which is to say, let them chiefly have illusion, but let us keep them from knowing it by administering small doses of reality. In the fun-fair of the mind let there be a booth marked Reality Inc. (with subtitles of which Money should perhaps be the chief). Having been made to feel one with the wealthy—the drawing-room play always made us feel this —we are ready to hear about the simple virtues of the poor and weep a silent tear. After cynical laughter, we were ever the more vulnerable to sentiment; and, when due homage has been paid to culture (*Sabrina Fair* invokes not only Freud and Lucretius but Byron and Emerson, not to mention the Miltonic title), it pleases us to be pretty mindless.

Perfection is perfection; one must not pretend to find a flaw; yet if a critic of *Sabrina Fair* did so pretend he would probably cite the live quality of the joking; it prompts at least the suspicion that Mr. Taylor could be imperfect if he wanted. He has studied not only Philip Barry but Bernard Shaw and would be capable of truly Shavian jesting if he didn't find it necessary to confer upon it all the perfectionist's kiss of death. Shaw took the dead Victorian farce, the dead drawing-room comedy, and breathed life into it; Mr. Taylor takes the achieved Shavian comedy and breathes death into it. It is distressing to see the great Inverter inverted: to see his technique, which he put at the service of the spirit, placed at the service of his enemies. Samuel Taylor is the rich man's GBS.

Yet I must not permit my rationale to give the impression that the show is predominantly distressing. A great deal of what I say must be taken for granted; Broadway is Broadway; 1953 is 1953. Then again, though perfection is dead, it won't kill you. And, in the theatre, when an author takes life out through the window, the actors bring it in through the door. The real merit of *Sabrina Fair* is that it provides

six good roles for six good actors. They are stock roles, but the actors have been able to put a little flesh on the bones; and, after all, there are many parts these days with no bones to put flesh on. Direction (H. C. Potter) and stage design (Donald Oenslager) are a little too much in the "perfect" vein of the script: the slow-deliberateness of the directing underscores the mechanical quality of Mr. Taylor's wit; so does the designer's way of rendering a settled handsomeness and a brazen brilliance without fresh beauty or sprightly humor—without life.

Margaret Sullavan's acting, though a little forced, now that youthfulness is something she has to affect and demonstrate, is still full of brio and breeze. Joseph Cotten has the movie-star habit of repeatedly placing his face, as it were, on display (particularly in profile); he has a movie star's imperfect speech—he lisps and keeps getting a frog in his throat; yet his presence fills both the theatre and the vacuum in the script. Of the minor performers, I should like to single out Cathleen Nesbitt whose voice establishes the tone of the play in the first scene and holds it for most of the evening; it is the haw-haw, Oxford accent which always converts what might have been just a play into High Comedy if not into High Church ritual. How far, after all, could *The Cocktail Party* have got on mere Christianity? It needed those weird, women's voices. England is a country where—in 1926—civil war was avoided largely by the use of the Oxford accent.

36

NEW PLAYWRIGHT, NEW ACTRESS

One kind of American playwright was characterized long ago by Stark Young: "bold without power and humility about the great forces of life, highly journalistic, and dipping regardless into the depths, advancing with notable facility into regions where only the progressively oblivious could ever be quite at home." Mr. Young's subject was *The Silver Cord*; a more recent instance is *Ladies of the Corridor.*

But the brash type is no longer dominant; it has given place to a shy type. A playwright of the new generation, when successful, seems modest, fastidious, compassionate, poetic; when unsuccessful, he may seem cagey, gauche, spineless, tongue-tied. Two recent plays, *American Gothic* by Victor Wolfson and *The Trip to Bountiful* by Horton Foote, were successful enough to be worth attention yet were kept from complete success by the defects of the new mode.

Mr. Wolfson recounts the events that lead to the murder of a second wife by the first. The setting is a New England that recalls *Ethan Frome.* The murderess is a poor, demented creature whom we do not hate but pity. As performed by a capable group of young players in Greenwich Village, the play has a liveliness and a reality not usually found in the plays that producers put on up town. But then Mr. Wolfson shies back from his catastrophe like a horse approaching a

precipice—not from the murder itself but from the meaning of the murder. The horse falls over the cliff—but it is not a real cliff, we learn with some dismay, not a real horse. This is just a Gothic Tale, Mr. Wolfson seems to say, take it or leave it. And we leave it.

I believe it was Tennessee Williams who brought the word Gothic into current discussion (in a sense that applies less to *The Castle of Otranto* than to *The Castle* of Franz Kafka). In fact Mr. Williams bids fair to become, theatrically speaking, the father of his country: the new playwrights derive from him, not from O'Neill, Wilder, Odets, or Miller (to name his only conceivable rivals). Mr. Wolfson is not exactly a new playwright—his *Excursion* was a hit before the war—but his new play would be inconceivable without *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Summer and Smoke*. Neurotic woman is the chief exhibit of the contemporary American stage, and Mr. Wolfson does not forget to have her shouted at by a male ogre (Kowalsky) and courted by a mild-mannered rival (Mitch).

Though neurotic woman is assigned only the second-largest role in *The Trip to Bountiful*, she has no trouble moving in and taking over the show. Some of the best comic writing of recent seasons goes into her lines, but the cumulative effect of so many naturalistic details turns out, by paradox, to be pure farce; and the author's evident intentions are thwarted by his own facility. Lillian Gish, who acts the largest role in the play with a beautiful concentration and intensity, seems at many points detached—by the farce—from the play she should dominate. More crucial still, Kowalsky and Mitch are conspicuous, this time, by their absence. The man who stands between the two women—his wife and mother—is of straw. The plot, the theme, the exigencies of theatre all demand that he speak, that he explain himself, but he is maddeningly and fatally silent, pleading some fifth amendment of the dramatic constitution.

That Mr. Foote's neurotic woman is so funny and forceful must in part be attributed to Jo van Fleet who plays her. The new playwright has brought the new actor—or, more precisely, the new actress—in his train. Before the new playwright speaks, the new actress has brought onstage her prime attribute: "a quality," a bizarre, neurasthenic quality. Not that it is entirely undefinable. It is defined by grimaces and quiverings of the lip, by frequent sidelong glances, by jerky, syncopated movements of as many parts of the body as will move. The new actress cannot or will not keep still. She walks backwards a good deal and, if she has nothing else to do, rubs her right hand against her left fore-arm. She is well-adapted to central staging because she keeps turning her head and looking in the other direction. Jo van Fleet is only one of her names. She has also called herself Maureen Stapleton, Geraldine Page, and Clarice Blackburn.

(In fairness to Miss van Fleet I should add that, unlike some of her colleagues, she is not a mere "personality," bringing only her "quality" to the footlights. An actor should not *be,* but *mean*: and we are not in doubt that Miss van Fleet finds her meanings as an artist must find them—by craftsmanship. Nonetheless, she bears the mark of her generation, and there are many roles which—for all the craftsmanship—her personality will not, at present, let her play. I thought the role of Camille in *Camino Real* was one —unless Mr. Williams wanted to make Dumas' heroine over and this Indian summer of Marguerite Gautier was meant to be another Roman spring of Mrs. Stone.)

It is of course foolish for critics to tell writers of one school that they should go to another school. A bad writer will not turn good by change of address. A good writer is unlikely to need a critic's counsel. There is a futility about the criticism which offers a renascence of drama on condition that the dramatists adopt a certain method or a certain philosophy, and none of us who write criticism has always avoided this

error. On the other hand, with the shy playwrights of today, one has the impression that there is something inside them that is prevented from coming out largely by the censorship of certain current attitudes to playwriting. If there is no such thing inside them, they are not very good writers, and should choose another profession. If there is, let us break down the obstructive attitudes, destroy the censor, and see what happens.

There is a recent play which, in one respect at least, affords a corrective to the current trend of shy, sensitive, atmospheric writing. This is T. S. Eliot's *The Confidential Clerk*. It has a plot. Not just a story but the old, arranged, constructed, wire-drawn, and infinitely maligned article. If you have conceded anything to the "new" drama—of which one of the cardinal shynesses is shyness of plot—you will quickly take it back again at the first reminder of what a real plot can be. If you can't stomach *The Confidential Clerk*, the last act of *A Doll's House* makes the point much better.

37

GOD BLESS AMERICA

The profoundest analyst of American culture, Tocqueville, suggested that democracy was not conducive to dramatic art. And the twentieth century, without removing any of the obstacles to theatre which the French critic listed, has added a few more, notably the movies in its second decade, radio in its third, and TV in its fifth. This being so, the surprising fact is not that the theatre is harassed but that it exists at all. Nowhere have the substitutes for theatre been so developed and accepted as in America. Yet there is still an American theatre. Why?

One thing we have learned is that in the present phase of history one medium's gain is not always the other's loss: the phonograph record has enlarged, not reduced, the audience at symphony concerts. The theatre affords, perhaps, no precise analogy to this famous triumph in the musical field. The old "road" theatre *was* largely wiped out by the movies; the Broadway public *is* very small compared with the movie and TV public. Nonetheless, the spread of community and university theatres goes some way toward replacing the road companies. And, in New York there is usually a wide response to a good play *when it has a good*—or even just a glossy—*production*. In short, the idea that the theatre is dying—like certain churches—because the public has lost interest and is busy elsewhere is simply not true.

Professionally, the theatre retains the primacy which many of us believe to be its natural right; it is by virtue of no empty traditionalism that the theatre page (or column) precedes movies, radio, and TV in the papers or takes precedence over them in the magazines. The three newer arts remain to a remarkable extent parasites: they draw talent from the theatre, not vice versa. When we hear of a movie actor appearing on the stage, we find either that he was stage-trained or that he is a bad actor. There is of course the third possibility: that he has had stage training *and* is a bad actor; he *had* to go to Hollywood.

We are reminded that, in the early days of film, an actor had to come from the stage, there being nowhere else for him to come from. Isn't it possible, we are asked, for some other medium to become the main source of supply? It is possible, we have to reply, but there is no sign of its happening. On the contrary, one has only to attend a few TV rehearsals to see how utterly TV producers depend upon a technique of acting that could never have been acquired—nor even, perhaps, maintained—under the conditions they impose. Some of these conditions could be changed, though they probably won't be. Others seem to be inherent. The stage alone offers the actor full play—allows him to give a performance in an unbroken curve and places him in direct emotional contact with his audience. That is why real actors are dissatisfied with the substitutes.

The theatre exists. The snag is that it does not exist spaciously and variously enough to satisfy any of those who have its interests at heart. The producer's point of view has been that entertainment the public doesn't pay for, the country can do without. There is commonsense in this; and, even in art, the business man often proves less of a fool than other people. A show doesn't get to be a hit without meeting standards of showmanship. There is more fun, more craftsmanship, even more art in the average commercial show than in

the average serious play. The serious play as currently known to Broadway is a bore and an imposition. The cry of pain that goes up when reviewers pan these plays is emitted either by interested parties or disinterested muddleheads. Why should a business man invest in anything other than, say, *South Pacific*, when *South Pacific* has the artistic as well as the economic edge? The nest of serious theatre has been fouled by a foolish subintelligentsia.

Yet—we must convince our prospective investor—there *is* a need for a non-commercial, or less commercial, theatre. In part this need derives precisely from the theatre's primacy among the arts of entertainment: in order to make money in radio, movies, and TV, invest it in actors, invest it in theatre. Then again, the commercial theatre itself needs a non-commercial division. I believe I am uncovering no secret when I say that the impetus towards the creation of a professional experimental theatre at Columbia University is coming, not from "serious playwrights," but from the author and the composer of *South Pacific*, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein. They know that workers in the theatre need a training ground, and that there is a public—if not always a large and wealthy one—for other shows besides *South Pacific*. I do not mean that the audience for a non-commercial show must always be small and poverty-stricken. The boxoffice of a small art theatre often has occasion to rob the rich. And perhaps the strongest of all arguments in favor of a subsidy for theatre is that it opens the doors to millions who would otherwise never pass through them; by subsidy, we can lower the prices and admit the people who otherwise take their dollar to the movies. Hence, the subsidized theatre, far from being an attempt to force something down "the public's" throat, is a democratic institution, signalizing a refusal to limit the audience to the well-to-do. Nor is it a threat to the commercial theatre. In Paris, commercial and subsidized houses live side by side in reason-

able amity. And one notes that, artistically, they do each other a lot of good.

It may be thought that in invoking the European idea of subsidy I have wandered too far from the situation in America. Here we shall perhaps have to forego the word Subsidy (like the word Socialism) so as not to antagonize such cultural isolationists as might otherwise be our best friends. But the economics of theatre in America already includes much besides business enterprise. Help for the non-commercial effort is coming from at least three very considerable sources: individual philanthropists, local communities (which may mean philanthropists in a group), and the State legislatures. By philanthropists I mean men who are investing money with very little hope of getting it back (let alone with interest) in productions which they happen to like. The community theatre, though not yet as successful, perhaps, as English repertory, has its recognized triumphs in Dallas, Cleveland, Pasadena, and not a few other cities. The State legislatures, whatever they may think of Socialism in general or Subsidy in particular, pour money into the theatres of the State universities which—in Wisconsin, say, or Indiana—are among the chief theatres of the state.

In short, the fact that money does not come to our non-commercial theatre in the European way, should not delude us into believing that it cannot come at all. Under the Eisenhower administration, it may be vain to talk of a Federal Theatre in the sense of a *Comédie Américaine* yet it is not vain to recall that our actual Federal Theatre of the thirties was no such thing but rather an improvisation of a characteristically American sort—a triumphant piece of private enterprise in the public domain. The American way, I take it, is to seize your chances as they come up, for America is a country where you believe—most of the time—that they *will* come up.

38

END AS A YES-MAN

The human race—it is the theme of Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*—pays a high price for its institutions and organizations. This is also one of the traditional themes of comedy and, since the industrial revolution, has almost become the main theme of all literature and drama. The artist being, *per se*, a champion of the human, the modern artist has most typically been the enemy of institutions. And, when he has lacked the genius to write a *Resurrection* or a *Saint Joan*, he has honestly contributed *The Dreyfus Affair* or *Children in Uniform*.

In our time, however, many artists have gone over to the enemy. Their argument is that an institution is no longer an enemy when it's run by their friends; the Marxist writer withholds criticism once there is a Marxist government. There is a misunderstanding here. The artist's opposition is not to the party in power but to the facts of power as they will be under any regime. For him, therefore, to withhold criticism is to abdicate and go into exile—abroad or not. At this date, it is scarcely necessary to give instances.

What is necessary, rather, is to realize to what a large extent artists are withholding opposition even in America. Two well-known playwrights have intimated in *The New York Times* that they no longer feel opposition to be safe.*

* See pp. 268-269.

There are two answers to this. One is that opposition was never safe: Zola was not safe when he wrote *J'accuse!* The other is that America is not yet as unsafe and unfree as certain liberals like to think. ("Freedom in America is hanging by a thread," one of them said in 1948, hinting that by 1949, unless Wallace was elected, liberals would all be in concentration camps.) If our playwrights today are yes-men, it is not because it is impossible to say No.

These reflections are prompted by *End As A Man* by Calder Willingham which in play form was promoted from the Theatre de Lys to the Vanderbilt Theatre and from the Vanderbilt to the Lyceum. It is about the sadistic goings-on in a military academy. A generation ago, such happenings would have been taken as the material for an indictment of the military class and perhaps of the whole social "system" to which it belongs. Admittedly, that is a limited interpretation of the subject, and the resulting play would no doubt have been rather narrow, abstract, and doctrinaire. Had Mr. Willingham found a way to broaden the theme, one wouldn't dream of defending the earlier approach against his. But he is not more inclusive; he just switches sides, being *for* the army and *against* the individuals. And because he can cloak a more or less craven conformism in tough, not to say foul, language, he may be said to be grooming himself admirably for a totalitarian age. In *Death of a Salesman,* the older attitude of revolt was the strange bedfellow of the New Conformism. Mr. Willingham seems just to drop the revolt and take a hint from Mr. Miller as to the form conformism should take—namely, a neurological fatalism. What does *End As A Man* prove? That, in the best of all possible worlds, where authorities are wise and everything is taken care of, a couple of young men flutter the dovecots by being psychotic.

Perhaps, however, *End As A Man* belongs less importantly to the history of literature than to that of performance. It

began, in fact, as a project of some young men of the Actors' Studio, a New York organization in which professional actors are enabled through private philanthropy to continue their training with the help of Elia Kazan or Lee Strasberg.

I have been Mr. Strasberg's guest at many sessions of the Actors' Studio when the members, as a class exercise, performed scenes from plays. My impressions, however superficial, were far too various to set down, even in summary, here. I will mention only how different the work is from the traditional English training I am familiar with. English training begins and ends with speech. This American training, influenced by Stanislavsky, concentrates, not on technique itself, but on a kind of truthfulness of feeling through which, it is hoped, the action on stage will come to life. Fair enough. On the just assumption that the art of acting has fallen on evil days, the Russo-American approach does seem called for. Before we demand fine elocution or elegant gesture, we have a prior demand to make: that the stage be alive from instant to instant and that each instant carry us on to the next; for, like music, drama is non-stop action; only by moving can it come into being.

In attending to this primary principle, the Studio actors serve their art well. Their limitation up to now, as it seems to me, is that movement, as they understand it, is too insistently movement of the nerves. Perhaps the plays they are given know no other dynamic. Or perhaps the playwrights limit themselves to what they know the actors can do. Whatever the explanation, where the principle of motion is sheer plot or where, say, evil is to be presented, and not just maladjustment, I have thought the Studio actors to be baffled and lost.

But *End As A Man*—even in its limitations—lends itself to their method: here is no vision of evil, just a glimpse of neurosis, no profound moral life, but a violent palpitation

by which alone one instant is joined to the next. The actors render and sustain the palpitation with a remarkable skill, varying it—providentially—with the one hearteningly human feature of the play, which is humor. From the opening seconds of the performance, as with *Tea and Sympathy,* one senses that combination of energy and control which keeps a performance taut and an audience alert. The directing of Jack Garfein is full of good, "Kazan touches," such as a pause filled by a cracking of knuckles, a hymn accompanied by rhythmic bangs on a trash can, speeches accompanied by hand-stands on the floor and other physical jerks on the bed. There is not only Mr. Kazan's feverish rhythm but also his technical skill in timing a pause or building a climax. This is not a script well spoken to the accompaniment of pleasing gestures but a series of small "actions" rendered with emphasis on the tensions within each character and the tensions between one character and another. I remember no speeches, I remember Ben Gazzara kicking his wardrobe in a rage; not because the kick is remarkable in itself, but because it is skilfully prepared and timed. And I recall sequences of action, as when Mr. Gazzara pretends to be a green goblin in a football player's drunken imaginings and dances round him with a broom.

The publicity men, following up the broad hints of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Picnic,* are trying to offer up Mr. Gazzara on the altar of the new phallus worship. Joshua Logan had carried male nakedness as far as it could go from the head down; Mr. Garfein started at the other end of his hero-villain; and the ads display the latter in shorts and garters. It wasn't really necessary: Mr. Gazzara can act. There is in his performance a very live contrast between an almost feline femininity and a bestiality so gross we call it masculine. A little of the English training in speech would not hurt Mr. Gazzara if he wants to play parts less uncouth. But his success is deserved, and praise is only invidious if

it passes over the fact that William Smithers, Arthur Storch, and Paul Richards are equally exact, passionate, and distinctive in their roles.

Tension is tense. The old fashioned actors you are likely to see in, let us say, Margaret Webster or Guthrie McClintic productions have no equivalent to offer. The life of *End As A Man* may be of a constricted sort but it is life. The Old Guard achieve something decent, dignified and decorative—like a funeral.

39

THE ILL-MADE PLAY

What's an example of a good "well-made play"? Probably there isn't one; the term has so long been used to describe a kind of play which all the authors we like have rejected in favor of—well, sheer Truth, sheer Significance. Ibsen, said H. L. Mencken, just let the facts "tell themselves." Today, when Ibsen's plays seem to many a trifle too "well-made," it is *The Glass Menagerie* and *Member of the Wedding* that are considered utterly real. In his book *Playwright at Work* John van Druten tells us he saw both plays three times and asked himself how the latter

> achieved the things that made it so moving and so novel. Each time the method has escaped me. I can attribute this only to its total honesty, and to the author's absorption in what she was doing. She wrote nothing that was not of the deepest truth and significance to her . . .

One practical tip Mr. van Druten does vouchsafe us: leave out the plot. "A play that was all atmosphere, with no plot at all would be my preference." A recent play of this school is *In the Summer House* by Jane Bowles.

A young girl falls off a cliff—not altogether unaided, it seems, by a jealous friend—and is killed. That would be the central event of Mrs. Bowles' play, if current dramaturgy respected anything as oldfashioned as a center—or even an

event. The jealous friend would be the main character (if we had to have a main character) and the author's moral concern (if there had to be moral concern) would be with the degree of aid she gave in the fatal fall (murder, manslaughter, suicide, or accident). But *nous avons changé tout cela.* The fall from the cliff, never being precisely defined factually, cannot be defined morally. The author is not interested in events and morals but in mood and psychology, that is, of course, in melancholy and neurosis.

I have already heard the unstressed, undefined fall from the cliff compared to the pistol shot at the end of *The Three Sisters,* and am reminded that Mr. van Druten regards Chekhov as the father of the new dramaturgy. To follow up these suggestions would be unfair to Mrs. Bowles. We should discover her limitations and Mr. van Druten's error, not the quality of her play. That quality—all too derivative, it is true—derives from Tennessee Williams, Carson McCullers, and Paul Bowles, in short, from Mrs. Bowles' immediate environment. It is its modishness—that which would have qualified *In the Summer House* for publication in a magazine like *Flair*—that makes people around Broadway say it is too literary for the commercial theatre. The truth is, it is a good deal too stagy for literature. And too long. Though people think of drama as a condensed form, the New Drama is an exception to that—as to many another—rule: the new plays are but short stories writ long. It is not quite true that they are structureless. They have the structure of a short story. And there is nothing to be said against this structure except that it has no room for the major matters of drama and the novel.

Looking at short stories, one would say that they cannot be blown up into plays. Yet, looking at our recent plays, one would think them all based on short stories. Some difficulty there is, of course. Even Mrs. Bowles has to pad characters out with jottings from her notes on psychoanalysis. And

there is a problem of range. In a story, a phrase is enough to suggest Mexicans in the offing; in a play, you have actually to present these Mexicans; and the audience may detect that your knowledge of the Latin race comes chiefly from sources like *The Rose Tattoo*. In a story, lyricism has to be created in words; in a play, the signal "this is lyrical" can be given by an orchestra placed in the wings . . .

A piece of theatre, however, doesn't have to be a play, any more than a play has to be a tragedy or a comedy. It only has to take place on stage and keep us interested. *Member of the Wedding* did this; so does *In the Summer House*; and in both cases an authoress of uncommon talent had contributed her quota. Mrs. Bowles' is a lesser talent than Mrs. McCullers, but she has a not dissimilar gift for evocative dialogue and delicate portraiture. Even the staginess that might keep her from first-rate fiction is not always bad—on the stage. "If you have trouble filling up Act Two," advises Mr. van Druten, "you will be tempted to a drunk scene," and Oscar Wilde said there was nothing to do with temptation but give way to it. Mrs. Bowles' best scene is a drunk scene; her best character is a drunk.

I *think* the character is hers. The possibility exists that it is Mildred Dunnock's. At any rate, a collaboration of writer and actress has produced in Mrs. Constable—mother of the child who fell from the cliff—one of the memorable figures of recent stage history, made up, you may say, of current commonplaces about dipsomania, spinsterhood-widowhood and lostness, yet coming together with the force of something new. The greatest pleasure of the evening is to be found in the varied details of this role: the little fan Miss Dunnock carries in her first scene and the way she wiggles it, the fishingrod she carries in a later scene and the timid way she holds it away from her body, the fine realistic twist she gives to the standard comic business of a drunk's handling of bottle and glass (not to mention the hotdog Mrs. Bowles

throws in for good measure), the towering fury Miss Dunnock can alarmingly produce at an instant's notice, the mischievous humor she has not before (that I know of) had a chance to show us.

And then there is Judith Anderson. It would be a mistake to say that Miss Dunnock steals the show from her, because it isn't clear that the show was Miss Anderson's in the first place. And the contrast, anyway, is not between good and bad acting but between two different schools—Actors' Studio and Old Guard, school of Kazan and school of Guthrie McClintic. Perhaps a critic should simply declare his preference. Mine—though I find much in Studio procedure to object to—is not for the Old Guard. At times it is hard for me to regard what Miss Anderson does as acting at all: I get the impression that she has two or three stances, two or three gestures, that she takes up the desired position (as if for a camera), and simply holds forth. There is little or no characterization, and Miss Anderson's body seems not to have the suppleness a modern role requires. She is a "personality" without a doubt—and this not in the higher sense* but the lower one: she is not a Toscanini but a Stokowski. Her personality is not something defined by her acting. Rather we are invited to admire her acting because she is a personality —even as we are invited to see something out of the common in commonplace words if the person who speaks them is a queen. Alas, poor star actors—they are Public Figures, and wish to be treated as such! They get their wish. They give a line a comic reading, and a mechanical guffaw comes from the gallery. They change noisily into the high gear of tragedy, and "You were terrific, darling" wafts later towards the dressing room. Delightful, is it not, to be able to establish such easy contact with an audience? And to elicit so quick a response? Yet depressing, too, perhaps, to think how mechanical it all is, how little it has to do with dramatic art,

* As defined above, p. 122.

how much with the starved emotions of masses, the impulse to lionize, the repressed desire for royalty, and I know not what perturbation of the modern ego! There is a Pirandello play about a poet who, becoming a Public Figure, dies and turns into a statue. Star actors turn into statues without dying.

Has Judith Anderson done so? Or does she wish to remind us that there is, so to say, a statuesque aspect to the art of acting? Does she wish to dramatize for us the plight of a tragedy queen in an age of untragic republicanism? Does she wish to register a sort of protest against the little, twitching plays of today? Her grander manner was certainly effective in the long, opening speech of *In the Summer House* and also in the suddenly larger passion of her last scene. And perhaps, after all, it is Mrs. Bowles' fault that the character in that last scene seems, first, to change into someone else and, second,—in her very last speeches—to become unintelligible.

In his settings, Oliver Smith found pretty accurate equivalents for Mrs. Bowles' writing; one should perhaps not complain if, *ipso facto*, the limitations of the New School were also reflected. One of Mr. Smith's assignments was too hard: to stage a beach scene. Our peepshow stage almost never gives any impression of the out-of-doors, and the complete, sunny openness of a beach is outside its range. Some of the atmosphere of a beach was suggested by the performance: the actors were languidly blowing bubbles. On the other hand, Miss Anderson was stalking around in high heels, and people were sitting reading on rocks in complete disregard of wind and sun.

Called in to direct after the show had been before an out-of-town audience, Jose Quintero nevertheless managed to bring the show up to his usual high technical standard. One almost had the impression that he had brought some of the cast from his own theatre, Circle in the Square. Whither

Mr. Quintero goes, one thought, there goes the New Actress (named Elizabeth Ross this time), walking backwards, eyes popping, lips quivering, right hand sliding up the left forearm, tensely standing and staring wherever her director—too obviously—has placed her. (Slogan for the New Drama: inactions speak louder than words.)

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PESSIMISM AS A PICK-ME-UP

Optimistic plays are very depressing. "Too bad reality is different," you say in the lobby. It takes a pessimistic play to cheer you up. When you say "Life isn't as bad as all that" you are half way to declaring that everything in the garden is lovely. The great tonic of the 1953-4 Broadway season was *Mademoiselle Colombe* by Jean Anouilh, a tale of the futility of boy's meeting girl.

It was a production of many pleasures. Boris Aronson's sets alone were worth the trip to the Longacre Theatre. This designer, whose reputation is for thoroughness and grandeur, showed himself, here as in *My Three Angels*, to have as light a touch as anyone in the profession; his joyous wit and controlled fantasy provide a desperately needed alternative to the excessive, over-sophisticated gorgeousness of, say, Oliver Messel or Lemuel Ayres. Mr. Aronson's principal exhibit in *Colombe* was a backstage scene in which M. Anouilh's peculiar blend of French reality with theatrical unreality was translated into color and shape.

The play is also a showcase for some of our finest acting talent—by which I do not merely mean that some of our best actors are in it, nor yet that it enables them to show themselves off. Edna Best had a better chance to show herself off in *Ladies of the Corridor*; the authors gave her nothing else to show. Since Miss Best has one of the most charm-

ing selves in our theatre, it is pleasant to have her display it—but it is astonishing to have her dispense with charm altogether and get along quite as well without. Miss Best's part in *Colombe* is that of an aging actress wholly shrewish and shrill. Miss Best wears a false nose, chalky make-up, and a red wig; struts, gesticulates wildly, and screams her head off; in fact, goes all out; all of which is remarkable at a time when she'd get higher marks for acting if she relaxed and was a bit of a bore. As it was, Miss Best showed the way to the rest of a cast which—except for two performers—M. Anouilh dresses up as caricatures, outrageous as Hogarth or the Keystone Cops: Sam Jaffe, Harry Bannister, Nehemiah Persoff and others contribute notable cartoon-portraits. (Mikhail Rasumny is unintelligible.)

The exceptions are the hero and heroine through whom a more inward reality is explored. The heroine is played by Julie Harris. If my delight over this actress is somewhat belated, I had better admit that I was in Europe at the time when she came to prominence. Astonishing what can happen when one's back is turned! That Miss Harris has the special "offbeat personality" of the newer generation of actresses is the least of it and might well have set me against her. Her personality has the larger strangeness and even (potentially) the grander glamour that go to the making of a Garbo (different as Garbo is). Nor does the final impression come from mere color or timbre of personality. It comes, rather, from Miss Harris' gift, a gift not yet, to be sure, at its fullest pitch of development, but nonetheless unspoiled by any of the myriad forces which must have been trying to spoil it. I am afraid for her! She is like one of Anouilh's young women, all sensitive life, while round about is the wicked, insensitive world eager to hurt, not to mention the awful examples of Misses X and Y, first ladies of our stage, fifty and forlorn.

Eli Wallach is a favorite actor of mine; yet casting him

as the hero of *Colombe* was a rash bit of "off-casting" which has not succeeded. It is very well to ask a straight comedienne like Miss Best to do a character part, but to ask a character actor like Mr. Wallach to play a juvenile lead? The springy *élan* and homey vivacity that he has to offer he is compelled to save for one scene—the last. Before that we have to observe him grimly holding himself in or yet more grimly simulating qualities he cannot seem to possess like arrogance and intellectuality. The actor who played the role in Paris was possibly a less accomplished artist; he didn't do very much with the part; but there was no complaint about him because he fell into place; it is one of those rather neutral roles. Mr. Wallach, though he works manfully, and always holds the attention (because he is an artist), is the Achilles' heel of the show; and the anti-European newspaper fraternity has aimed to kill.

Achilles is not all heel. Apart from one gamble that didn't come off, Harold Clurman has played a careful game and won a number of tricks. Even his over-emphasis on the hero's badness can broaden our notion of a play which—however we take it—is witty and moving. I came away from the Paris production thinking M. Anouilh had but reiterated his standard theme of desecrated innocence, the only difference this time being that the innocent was a man. The Clurman production makes it clear that *Colombe* is—with *Antigone*—one of those more interesting plays of M. Anouilh in which there is some guilt on both sides of the conflict. The young woman is a very ordinary young woman (to make so ordinary a person so extraordinary on stage being a great joint achievement of M. Anouilh and Miss Harris), but the young man's superiority is pharisaical. In fact *Colombe* brings to mind a play that those who dislike M. Anouilh would dislike even more: *Le Misanthrope.*

Like Giraudoux, like Brecht, like Goethe, like Racine, like all foreign playwrights, M. Anouilh has been called

untranslatable. So there sets in that process called Adaptation, which commonly means the conquest and destruction of an author by a jealous would-be rival. If the British version of *Colombe* was not quite that, it was nevertheless full of changes by which the Adaptor vainly sought to justify having his name in the same size of type as M. Anouilh. It is a pleasure to report that the version used in New York—by Louis Kronenberger—is more faithful to the original without being less amusing in itself. Following the British precedent, and presumably under instructions from his producers, Mr. Kronenberger did tone down the nausea and pessimism which are most conspicuous in the Edna Best role. In the French she says, "I'm constipated and I've two hundred alexandrines to learn by tomorrow." In withholding the constipation from the play, I can only hope Mr. Kronenberger is saving it for his next piece (in *Time*) on Miss X or Miss Y.

There were other small things to grumble about, such as an awkward transition to the last scene in which the PA system is ineffectively and indistinctly used. But by and large, it is a splendid evening, and you leave the theatre full of the hope that M. Anouilh's hopelessness inevitably engenders.

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SHAKESPEARE'S POLITICS

Melodrama presents the struggle of right and wrong; tragedy—on one famous view of it—the struggle of right and right; Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* the struggle of wrong and wrong. That's what makes the play so hard to take. As one of Henry Luce's anonymous spokesmen recently indicated, the American theatre public insists on some characters being simply right and others simply wrong. He might have said the same of any other public, American or un-American, in the theatre or out of it. We all view life as melodrama, insofar as we are fools. Only to the extent that we are men can we see it as tragedy or comedy.

Now, though our folly is by no means confined inside theatre walls, our humanity is very easily left outside them. For we are wholly foolish when our individuality is lost in mob emotion, and any crowd of people—including an audience—can become a mob. Tragedy and comedy always tend, in the theatre, to decline into melodrama and farce; those critics who are the mob's representatives praise tragedy and comedy precisely in the degree that they do so decline: *Hamlet* is "as exciting as a who-done-it", *The Would-Be Gentleman* is "as funny as *Room Service.*" Etcetera.

If it is hard, then, for a producer to put across a tragedy or a comedy, how much harder for him to put across a play that combines the more forbidding features of both to the

exclusion of every melodramatic and farcical possibility! Such a play is *Coriolanus*; it is absolutely nothing but a masterpiece; we almost have to feel sorry for it.

Except that it hurts our feelings, gets under our skin, affronts our prejudices, and corrects our convictions. It is the most modern of Shakespeare's works in the sense that modern writers have been trying to write it: no wonder that our greatest comedian, Shaw, called it the greatest of Shakespeare's comedies! Those who have attempted political tragedy in our time have achieved, at best, brilliant political melodramas like *Darkness at Noon*. At worst, they have excitedly informed us that fascism or communism or capitalism is wicked and that common folk (like you and me in the $7.80 orchestra) are models of heroic virtue and good sense.

It is true that you can't fully identify yourself with anyone in *Coriolanus*. From the Broadway viewpoint, that is bad. From the human viewpoint, it is good—because you are prevented from dissociating yourself from evil, from pushing evil away, from locating it exclusively in the other fellow, the other place, Moscow or Corioli. The evil is here in Rome, in Washington, in Coriolanus, in our classmate Alger Hiss, in me, and in you—*hypocrite lecteur*. The reference to Hiss will seem pretty callow to our Marxist friends, not only because he was quite right to be a spy for Moscow (or is it that he *wasn't* a spy? I forget), but also because they acknowledge no continuity between personal character and political action. The rest of us have been coming round from the Marxist position (if we ever held it) to the Shakespearean one and are willing to see treason—that of Alger Hiss or Benedict Arnold—as the other face of pride, first of the deadly sins. Some degree of identification with Coriolanus we have, perforce, to permit ourselves.

The dignity of John Houseman's production derives from taste, intelligence, and discretion—most of all, discretion.

Mr. Houseman is a man of integrity, and has resisted the temptation to slant a masterpiece whose greatness is all vertical. The People—about whom Shakespeare is so "undemocratic"—are presented in all their moral ambiguity. No attempt is made to whitewash the enemy leader, Aufidius. If Mr. Houseman tips the scales at all, it is to overweight the badness of his hero. Perhaps this was the inevitable result of casting Robert Ryan for the role. Unable to suggest caste and the pride of caste, Mr. Ryan seems too simply a boor (and, hence, a bore). Not that one suspects this actor to be boorish by nature: he works all too hard and too obviously at it. It is only that, if Coriolanus is not an aristocrat, he is just a disgruntled gladiator.

Nor was Mildred Natwick the right choice for his mother. What she does, she does handsomely, and it is thrilling to learn how far from her comic character work this actress can go; one admires her attempts at the breadth of gesture and emotion. But what of that fatal rigidity of character which characterizes three generations of her family (even the little boy tortures butterflies)? Before Volumnia kneels, we should think: this woman's knees would never bend. With Miss Natwick, loving compliance seems entirely natural.

Mr. Houseman's is not pseudo-British Shakespeare. With perhaps two or three exceptions, the actors do not use the hooing and cooing Oxford voice. But, in avoiding the British gentility, Mr. Houseman falls into an American gentility, almost midwestern in its hominess. The author of *The Merry Wives* (owner of New Place, son of a butcher) would no doubt understand. Yet the material of early Roman history is the least genteel he ever used. Half-barbaric, half-aristocratic (or is it that aristocracy always *is* half-barbaric?), the stuff of this story is destroyed by being refined. Mr. Houseman has not destroyed his play; the refinement is only partial; but it is damaging enough. Both Coriolanus and his

mother have become remarkably middle class; indeed, the former role has been drastically cut for the purpose. Or take stage "business." The 1623 Folio tells us that Aufidius *stands* on Coriolanus' corpse in angry triumph; Mr. Houseman's Aufidius stamps his foot once—on the floor. The rest follows. The setting is by Mr. Oenslager. Alvin Colt's costumes, though very becoming in their rich reds, browns, and greens, are far too picturesque, too *nice*, for the subject. The effect of the whole production is of Beethoven's Fifth played pianissimo upon muted instruments.

On the other hand, it must also be said that Mr. Houseman's method yields results, both general and of detail. The chief general merit of the production—beyond the competence we can happily take for granted—is the peculiar sense of movement it conveys. This is a play that—for all the Elizabethan bustle of the scenes taken separately—remains stationary for whole sequences; then, of a sudden, it turns, as on a hinge or pivot, like some majestic old door. The alternation of stillness and tremendous reversal is Greek and awe-inspiring in its majesty. I would say that Mr. Houseman's largest achievement is to communicate a sense of this ancient and alien grandeur.

Among the many admirable details, the one that stands out in my memory is a conversation of three Volscian servants. The clowning of Gene Saks, Jack Klugman, and Jerry Stiller might serve as a model for future Shakespeare productions. In its unpatronizing lightness and uncute fun, its sharp satire, its controlled yet violent movement, the scene is in direct contrast to clown scenes as we usually and yawningly see them played. Modern elements, notably a sort of deadpan Brooklyn humor, are used for an Elizabethan effect. Paula Laurence's little "solo" as Valeria is successful in a similar way: here is simplicity where we usually get fancy talk, immediate charm where we usually get "Shakespearean acting."

I saw the show twice and would be glad to go again. While I deplored the choice of *Madam Will You Walk* as the opening play for the efficient new enterprise which is the Phoenix Theatre, *Coriolanus* makes ample amends. One hopes this theatre will rapidly forget Sidney Howard (what, after all, could be easier?) and establish for itself *an intellectual identity*. I don't mean a reputation for intellectuality. I mean that the Phoenix should stand for something; something more than just a well-produced show. Mr. Houseman could tell the managers what I mean. The Welles-Houseman Mercury Theatre *had* an intellectual identity.

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CAPTAIN BLIGH'S REVENGE

I don't recall an American play that has provided a livelier evening in the theatre than *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial.* A fine cast of actors—outstandingly, Henry Fonda and Lloyd Nolan—help to make this so, but the largest contributions are those of the director and the author. Charles Laughton's directing is not only good, it is good in a particularly valuable way. One often tends to think that the alternative in directing styles is between the manner of the Group Theatre—nervous, slangy, plebeian, American—and the "Shakespearean manner"—statuesque, elocutionary, genteel, British. It has taken the Anglo-American Laughton, having the best of both hemispheres, to find a third way. He has worked with American actors using live American speech (not Stage Diction), and he has slapped and kneaded this speech like dough until it has assumed a pleasing shape. The production has both the raciness of the new school and the dignity of the old. Laughton has used his Englishness not to fatten up the play with orotund vowels but to keep it lean with irony. He has used his Americanism not to "soup up" the emotions but to sustain the pace and keep the tone close to the audience. And the final effect of all his complicated work is a plain simplicity! I should need to see this acting at least twice more before I could write on it. The art of it flashed by me like conjuring tricks. I

should like the chance to savor it at each instant like old wine.

Herman Wouk has contributed his quota. He has a gift for crisp dialogue unsurpassed by any of our regular writers for the theatre. He has an excellent story to tell, and, in the confrontation of counsel with witnesses, has an exactly appropriate vehicle for his story. We receive each new witness with keen expectancy, follow his replies greedily, laugh over his foibles, applaud at his exit, start over with renewed expectancy at the next arrival, hear with pleasure or indignation what counsel has to say. . . . The march of exits and entrances, questions and answers, attacks and counterattacks, is admirably theatrical. And there are characters which are dramatic in the sense that they are more vivid on the stage than they are in the book. I would especially commend the two psychiatrists—Molière doctors caught in the toils of their *déformations professionnelles*—and the common seaman at a loss to cope with the language of the law (very like the young negro in the Hiss case).

But if we like Mr. Wouk so much we should be unfair not to take him as seriously as he takes himself and consider the claim he made in *The New York Times*, through his director, that the play is no mere psychological thriller but a tract for the times telling us to respect authority: mutiny is unjustified even when the argument against a particular commander is a strong one because the important thing is not to save a particular ship but to preserve the authority of commanders; for they win wars while we sit reading Proust. There is a good point here, and there must surely be a good play in it—a play that would show up the sentimentality of our prejudice against commanders and in favor of mutineers. If, however, Mr. Wouk wanted to write such a play, he chose the wrong story and told it in the wrong way, for we spend three quarters of the evening pantingly hoping that Queeg—the commander—will be found insane and the

mutineers vindicated. When, in the very last scene, Mr. Wouk explains that this is not the right way to take the story, it is too late. We don't believe him. At best we say that he is preaching at us a notion that ought to have been dramatized. And no amount of shock technique—not even the reiterated image of Jews melted down for soap—can conceal the flaw.

Of course, if you don't take the play seriously, none of this matters: the first part is a thriller, the last scene gives you a moral to take home to the kids. That the two sections are not organically related need disturb no one who is unalterably determined to eat his cake and have it. Others cannot but feel some disappointment at seeing the territory Mr. Wouk opens up to the view but does not touch.

Mr. Wouk's retort to sentimental radicalism is in order. Yet cannot the New Conservatism—for surely his play belongs in this current of opinion—be equally sentimental, equally ambiguous? It is true that on occasion we owe our lives to naval captains. It may also be true that I owe my life at this moment to the Irish cop on the corner. Must I feel more respect for this cop than for my more sedentary neighbor? It is Mr. Wouk, by the way, who says that the book my neighbor is reading is by Proust. That's so you'll say my neighbor is an egghead. In short, Mr. Wouk carefuly stacks the cards. His villain—Keefer—reads highbrow books. His hero—Greenwald—is a Jew. In real life, defense counsel might just as easily have been "Aryan," the villain—like Proust whom he reads—Jewish. But an author who wrote the story this way would *certainly* be accused of stacking the cards; then someone would suggest that Herman Wouk was the pseudonym of Ezra Pound.

There are also technical criticisms one might make. The exposition is not all clear sailing. Without the 300 pages that precede the trial in the book, it is hard to figure who some of the people are, what they have done, why they did it.

Willie Keith's place in the book is central: in the play it is none too obvious that we need him at all. The villain Keefer's relation to Maryk, the accused, is carefully shown in those 300 pages. In the play, though it is talked about, we do not see it, we are not even sure whom and what to believe.

This last point is not purely technical: the blurring of the Keefer story entails the blurring of the Queeg story. And it is because we are not clear about Queeg and his state of mind on the day of the mutiny that we cannot form an opinion on the main issues of the play. Just how crazy does a captain have to be for Mr. Wouk to approve his removal by a subordinate? The answer seems to be: he has to be *plumb* crazy, raving, stark, staring mad. Just how crazy was Queeg? It is impossible to figure. And while precisely this impossibility might make a dramatic theme, it would yield a play with a message decidedly Pirandellian; it would not increase our respect for authority.

The first time most of us saw Charles Laughton was in *Mutiny on the Bounty* when he played the wicked captain against whom officers and crew rose in righteous indignation. Inasmuch as *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial* says that a wicked captain deserves a vote of thanks, it might well have been entitled *Captain Bligh's Revenge.* Luckily, Mr. Laughton and Mr. Wouk are artists and, as such, have not been able to resist the temptation to make their wicked captain as offensive in the modern (i.e. neurotic) way as Captain Bligh was in the old satanic-melodramatic way. The result is, they create a character, and unfold a tale, which no amount of conservatism, new or old, can quite spoil.

43

OLD POSSUM AT PLAY

The theatre is a place where it may be the supreme achievement of a T. S. Eliot to provide a good part for an Ina Claire. In *The Confidential Clerk*, Mr. Eliot has not given Miss Claire the funniest lines she ever spoke, or the most shrewdly characterized, but he has caught the speech rhythms of a rich lady with religious longings, and from these Miss Claire can make the highest of high comedy. Such precise timing, such delicate underlining, such subtle modulation from phrase to phrase and word to word are almost unknown to our stage today. Our younger actresses, whose hands creep so nervously about in so many directions, might watch the fewer but righter paths travelled by Miss Claire's. Our light comedians, who so regularly practice the double take and other tricks of the eye and turning head, might profitably watch the quickness of muscle and attention by which Miss Claire avoids having her devices identified as tricks at all.

The rest of the performance is also impressive. Claude Rains offsets Miss Claire's light comedy with a persuasive piece of Ibsenite acting, pathetic and dignified. Joan Greenwood, if she is in some trouble with her more serious speeches, establishes her own bright color at moments when all around seems a little grey. This actress will be a splendid comedienne if she can prevent her vocal peculiarity (an

amusing croak, soft loud, loud soft) from becoming her chief interest in life. Douglas Watson gives what is inevitably called a "thoughtful performance" in the title role. He is slightly too elocutionary. One would be less conscious of his vowels and consonants if he would either perfect a British accent or rest content with his American one. And I doubt if the role, though pale, condemns him to be, as he is, less confidential than deferential. Still, this is the most fully molded of the half dozen persuasive and sturdy performances I have seen Mr. Watson give in the past couple of years.

It is probably obvious from my report that the actors in this show seem to go their own way—though there is one, Mr. Newton Blick, who seems to be exactly what the author conceived, neither more, like Miss Claire, nor less, like Mr. Watson. It is hard to gauge the director's work. One could praise E. Martin Browne for giving Miss Claire a free hand or blame him for failing to impose a single style on the whole performance. Possibly Mr. Browne tends to duplicate Mr. Eliot's oldmaidishness rather than make up for it; yet the happy corollary of this is that the author suffers none of the betrayals he would have met with at the hands of almost any American director. (Paul Morrison, the designer, has solved the tough problem of presenting the conventionality of a drawing-room and at the same time taking the curse off it—chiefly by slight distortions of angle and outline.)

Is it a good play? I ask myself that question at the first intermission and suspend judgment. Ditto at the second. Looking around for a taxi when the show is over, I think: "I've been enjoying myself, I've been following every line with interest, once or twice I was moved, several times I was touched, I laughed sometimes, smiled often, why should this be so hard an evening to sum up and appraise?"

That the play is grotesque is the least of it: the whole occasion is grotesque. T. S. Eliot's name is in lights on Broadway! Coriolanus asking the suffrage of the plebs is

not a stranger spectacle than Mr. Eliot asking the suffrage of those whose "rave reviews" are reserved for *Dial M for Murder* and *The Seven Year Itch.* Not that Mr. Eliot is a Coriolanus: in some mad medley of humility and ambition he seeks to come to terms with his voters. There are even signs that he has overdone it: the word on Broadway is that Eliot has written an ordinary commercial play and that it is *too* ordinary.

That is Broadway's revenge. Or would be—if it were true. But if anyone should see *The Confidential Clerk* without knowing who wrote it, the last thing he would write in his diary that night would be: "Have just seen typical Broadway play." It is true that the play falls short of both its main objectives: it is neither a great poetic drama nor a great light comedy. It is completely *sui generis*—praiseworthy or not, according to your own position. My position being a reviewer's aisle seat, I must praise the play as more entertaining than 99 shows out of 100—and in a different way. If you like being talked to by an incurably didactic but suave, eloquent, and intelligent uncle, you will enjoy listening to *The Confidential Clerk.* And in fact the Broadway audience does seem to enjoy it. They buckle down most remarkably to the task of following the low-pitched voices of Mr. Browne's actors and the sinuous, melancholy periods of Mr. Eliot's verse.

The extreme didacticism of the dialogue suggests that Eliot had a third objective: to say something. And some of us would have been glad to overlook his shortcomings as poet and comedian, had he seemed at grips with life or even in the grip of an idea. His best dramatic writing was done in the decade of propagandist theatre—the thirties—and was by way of a counterblast at the Marxists. The trouble with *The Confidential Clerk*—once you are past the first enjoyment of it—is that, though ideas are incessantly talked, there is no energizing and overmastering Idea. If there was a main

theme, I had decided by the time the play was over, it was the search for the tradition you are really in. (Since the hero's real father is a second-rate artist, the hero concludes he should resign himself to the same fate.) And I rather think my hesitancy in stating *the* theme is due, not to any sleepiness on my part or any reticence on Mr. Eliot's, but, first, to the fact that there are several themes and, second, to the fact that theme, in this play, scarcely seems to matter. The farcical apparatus seems not to bring it into high relief as in classic comedy but to rub it out. Conversely, the farce is kept from natural eruption into laughter by the avuncular speechmaking. If Mr. Eliot has a gift for thinking, and a gift for comedy, the two gifts, in this play, frustrate each other.

What will *The Confidential Clerk* look like in the list of Mr. Eliot's own writings? As dramaturgy, it marks an advance over the previous plays in one respect: Mr. Eliot has come to see that a play needs a plot. Unhappily, a comic plot fails to justify itself when unsupported by comic rhythm, which is a fast, not to say, diabolical one; and Mr. Eliot, for all his larger qualities, seems, like his more fanatical admirers, totally to lack vivacity. In other respects, the dramaturgy is as limited as before—most notably, the characters are still too dim, too tame. The dialogue might have been put together by an accurate student of the previous plays and poems. The only relationship I could see to the poems was that they are sometimes paraphrased and watered down: the famous garden image of *Ash Wednesday* is explicated as by some New Critic . . .

Am I saying that what Mr. Eliot has written is prose? And is a drama of ideas? Is he turning Shavian? He began his career as critic and dramatist in strong opposition to drama in prose, drama of ideas, and drama by Bernard Shaw; *The Confidential Clerk* has all the earmarks of Shavianism as described by the early Eliot without the merits of the real

Bernard Shaw. Perhaps there is some confusion in Eliot's attitude to theatre? Does he like and despise it at the same time? The possibility reminds us less of Shaw than James, who said that in the theatre you always have to throw your cargo overboard to save the ship. What is happening to Mr. Eliot in these latter days? Is he throwing his cargo overboard? (And is that *really* necessary?) Or has he no cargo left to throw? Is he in decline? Or playing possum?

44

THE IDEA OF A THEATRE

It is, alas, only since his death in 1944 that many of us have come to see that Giraudoux is a man to reckon with. Sketching the development of recent French drama some years back, I picked out only the names of Apollinaire, Cocteau, Obey, and Sartre. Behrman's version of *Amphitryon 38* had given me the impression that Giraudoux could be ignored; I was unschooled then in the ways of adaptors. In Europe around 1950, Giraudoux confronted me wherever I went: I saw *The Trojan War* and *Siegfried* in Zurich, *Electra* in Munich, *Intermezzo* in Rome, and *Ondine* in Paris. My eyes were opened to many things. I saw, for example, how I had come to overestimate the originality of *The Flies*; the mythological plays of Sartre and Anouilh are inconceivable without Giraudoux. More important, I had to grant that here was a first-rank man of letters consecrating his maturity to the theatre, finding in Louis Jouvet at once a great interpreter and a great instructor, and writing plays which constitute a claim to vast originality, plays which, if we accept them, would give to drama itself a new definition. And this definition is one which many modern persons would accept; for it is the definition towards which a great part of modern drama tends. On the technical side, it is a drama in which thought is more important than action or character and in which words are

more important than thought. On the philosophical side, it is anti-materialistic, metaphysical, a drama of magic and miracle. I suppose the nearest thing to Giraudoux in our language is Christopher Fry.

Even Mr. Fry is not very near. A more legitimate comparison is with the German Romanticists who gave Giraudoux both his philosophy and his dramatic technique. In *Ondine* the German derivation is avowed. The play began with the theme Giraudoux wrote in college on Fouqué's *Undine.* But while the German dwells on the narrative—how the water sprite Undine can have a human soul only so long as her lover is faithful—Giraudoux shifts the emphasis to love itself. His sprite represents the pure essence of love; her beloved represents love enmeshed in the ordinary impurities of living. Man—as defined by this knight—is unfaithful. The story requires a second woman for him to be unfaithful with; Giraudoux calls her Bertha. The end cannot but be unhappy.

Trying to summarize *Ondine* I find myself in as much trouble as with *The Confidential Clerk* and for the same reason: these plays have a huge periphery and no satisfactory center, they are full of topics, but if there is a main topic, it is buried beneath too many jewels of wit and wisdom. That is what I meant by saying that, in the end, thought is less important for Giraudoux than words. It is a paradox. There are no words without thoughts. But where there are too many thoughts, the effect is of none; the effect is of words, words, words. We call such writing brilliant; we call the author distinguished; but we are enjoying ourselves only intermittently and we don't altogether approve. Such at any rate is my experience of *Ondine,* both in French and English.

Not that the two experiences had very much in common. In Paris, a program note informed you that there is an obvious connection between theatre and religious solemnity

and that theatre is in fact a form of divination. Jouvet, who attributed Giraudoux's success to "the magic of incantation," was apparently going to prove it or have the audience die in his attempt. Distinguished, like his author, he was also, in this play, an insufferable bore; French critics told me I missed the wonderful nuances but the French friend who accompanied me wanted to leave at the first intermission. For my money, an incantation is no substitute for a play. As for Giraudoux' contribution, I suspended judgment.

Presumably the New York producers had seen the same performance and drawn the same conclusion: everything should be entirely different. For I suppose the furthest you can go from Jouvet is a standard leading man from Hollywood, pleasant and uninteresting, handsome and helpless; the only trouble being that at this point you realize what a lot there was to be said for Jouvet. If he scarcely bothered with characterization, Jouvet at least knew what kind of a play he was in. In a work where aroma is all, he may be said to have had, as it were, the right smell; while his counterpart in New York . . .

The failure of Mel Ferrer would not, perhaps, have been fatal, even though his part is a big one, were it not that the rest of the cast (with a single exception) seem to take their cue from him. Or did he and the others take their cue from the director, Alfred Lunt? One cannot but wonder if the latter didn't fall asleep at rehearsals (as I witnessed the French audience doing at Jouvet's production). How otherwise could he have permitted character work at the level of summer stock? And failed to find any "line" of style or meaning? I was also surprised that the designer, Peter Larkin, used—or was allowed to use?—so little imagination. For the Paris production Tchelitchev invented a world of his own; the fairy world of the New York show is pretty much what you'd expect in a children's show on TV. The costumier has reversed Polonius' advice and given us some-

thing gaudy not rich. And the three lesser ondines look like strippers from a nightclub act or Gabriel Pascal's idea of courtesans at the time of Androcles.

Amidst all the goings on, Maurice Valency's resolutely prosaic words often sound like a mildly-worded reproof. Mr. Valency has written in *Theatre Arts* that his view of translation is very different from mine. I must say I'd never have guessed it from *Ondine*. I might take exception to certain cuts, but surely what Mr. Valency principally does is to try and write in English what Giraudoux wrote in French? One might have to press the question: does he succeed? were it not undercut by a second: *could* he succeed? What of Giraudoux simply does not come through into English? And it is no fault of a particular translator if the answer is: the aroma; just as it is no fault of his if the aroma is the essence. One may, rather, believe that it is the fault of Giraudoux; for one may believe that, in drama, the aroma ought *not* to be the essence; the words ought not to take precedence of the thoughts, nor the thoughts of the characters and the action.

What is certain is that translation strips Giraudoux's structure rather pitifully naked, and that his second act stands revealed as a piece of desperate improvising. We see here Giraudoux' failure to dramatize the main situation of the play, Bertha not being clearly seen, let alone movingly presented. The text is strewn with indications that the tragic triangle is meant to be grandly moving on the scale, say, of the Tristan story (which is mentioned *); but one side of the triangle is missing.

Yet Giraudoux was a man of gifts. If most of them fail to shine through the New York production of *Ondine*, there is one that does not, and that is his gift for creating young girls—or perhaps I should say for providing roles for very young actresses, as it is not precisely the characterization

* At any rate, in the French original.

that is remarkable. It is not the girl's personality Giraudoux renders but the sparks it throws off, the radiance that surrounds it. In practical terms, this means that if an actress *can* throw off sparks, if she *is* radiant, Giraudoux will hand her situations and lines to match; in the ideal performance, the actress's contribution might well be larger than his. Audrey Hepburn's Ondine is near enough to the ideal to impress us with this fact. There are technical flaws. An actress shouldn't stand like a *Harper's Bazaar* model—legs flung apart, chest out, arms akimbo etc. In speaking poetic lines, the identical singsong shouldn't be so often repeated. Speech that calls so much attention to itself makes a weak *r* and overemphatic final consonants all too conspicuous. These are motes in the sun. *Ondine* was worth writing, translating, producing just to place Miss Hepburn on stage in such a role. No one, I think, would speak of great acting. The time to fix Miss Hepburn's rank as an actress hasn't yet arrived. For the moment it is enough to watch such grace and beauty light up the stage, light up the auditorium, and if anyone asks us: what is theatre? to point at this actress and say: *she* is.

45

HOMOSEXUALITY

Readers of André Gide have inevitably noticed that the play titled *The Immoralist* has precious little to do with the novel that suggested it. There is something immoral about the novel's hero not only in society's opinion but in Gide's: the young man is cruel and selfish, the dramatically interesting point being, perhaps, that his callous neglect of his wife in Africa is in some ways salutary—for his body, for instance; bad is sometimes good; life is complex, disorderly, and to a large extent disgusting. The book is not a likable one, perhaps not even a good one, but the mind and sensibility of Gide are in it; you can't shrug it off.

Since Ruth and Augustus Goetz, the authors of the play, were evidently none too interested in Gide's theme, his mind, or his sensibility, one might deduce that they could go to a novel of his only for its story. But *The Immoralist* has no story; none, at least, that is pushed to the point of drama, an art in which the complexities of the world have to be concentrated in the relations of a small group of individuals. Gide's hero has a roving eye, and we are privy to many of his thoughts as his eye roves. For stage purposes, the Goetzes find themselves forced to invent characters for the eye to rove *to*.

Why would anyone want to adapt a novel that doesn't lend itself to adaptation? Ask what characters the Goetzes

have to invent, and you have the answer. The two chief ones are homosexual partners for the protagonist. The Goetzes wanted to write about homosexuality.

Who doesn't? It is the subject of the hour. Why? Is homosexuality spreading or are we simply more and more aware of it? Unanswerable questions! What we may more profitably ask is where any pronouncement on the subject stands in the evolution of a more rational attitude to it. For, surely, since the time when the prostitutes danced on the sidewalk to celebrate the conviction of Oscar Wilde, public opinion has changed considerably. The Goetzes' play seems to have been conceived to carry a message of tolerance; if it does not spring from an understanding of the original *Immoralist,* it springs from sympathy for the married homosexual who wrote it. The play is a portrait of Gide seen through the spectacles of a generous humanitarianism. The message is pretty explicit in the speeches of a family retainer who asks the angry brother-in-law to be kind and in utterances of the protagonist himself, like (I quote from memory): "We didn't invent this problem."

Humanitarianism is generous by definition; by tradition it is rather misty-eyed and thick-headed. The kindness of so many humanitarians is the sort that kills; they must be kind only to be cruel. The Goetzes' kindness to their protagonist is so great they finally take the dilemma on which he is impaled and saw off its-horns. The question has been: what can a homosexual husband do—assuming that his wife loves him and that he needs her affection? The answer proffered in the last scene of the play is that he can do without homosexuality! Or can he? This is modern drama. We can end, if we like, with a question mark. What the Goetzes don't seem to have realized is that this is not to ask a question but to beg one—and that, the main question of their play. Perhaps the honest ending would have been to let the husband stay with the wife, both of them knowing that there would also

be young men. Is this more than the public of 1954 would take? Possibly; but a humanitarian playwright would be interested in putting the matter to the test. To write a didactic play is to suppose yourself ahead of the public and to suppose the public in need of your advice. A didactic playwright can write *only* plays that are more than the public will take.

There is a kind of liberalism which is safely reactionary. It offers you all the soft and self-congratulatory emotion of reformism without demanding that you run the risks. The chief trick of the pseudo-liberal is to fare boldly forward toward the heroic goal, then to slink quietly off at the last moment in the hope that no one is looking. It is certainly a handy trick when you're writing for the New York theatre where the critics start deciding what to say in the intermission; many is the last act which escapes unobserved.

The goal the Goetzes were making for was the open presentation of homosexuality and the open advocacy of a humane attitude to it. Up to now, as Gide told them in an interview, homosexuality in the theatre has been an accusation. Its standard form at present is, in fact, the *unjust* accusation; for our public has reached the point where it will allow the subject of homosexuality to come up, provided that the stigma is removed before the end of the evening. Our public's motto is: tolerance—provided there is nothing to tolerate. The Goetzes could hardly turn *The Immoralist* into *Tea and Sympathy*, but if our hero can't say he didn't do it in the past, can't we ask him to try not to do it in the future? If we can't teach our audience, can't we teach our hero? *He* at least must do as we say.

In short, the Goetzes stuck on a final scene that recalls the final scene of *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial* in its impertinence and its last-minute conformism. It is not true that what precedes that scene is uniformly undramatic. There is a drama in the story, though I don't think the

Goetzes have written it, and I know Gide hasn't written it for them. It is a triangle drama in which the third party is the husband's lover. The Goetzes, at one point, even suggest a possible approach: the young man is an immoralist, not in being homosexual, but in insisting on having both wife and lover, in refusing to choose between them. The idea is neither confirmed, contraverted, nor otherwise developed.

Oddly enough, it is the hero's two male partners who come off best theatrically—perhaps because they are played by two very skilful young actors, David Stewart and James Dean. The two principals—Louis Jourdan and Geraldine Page—do not fill the yawning gaps of the script. Mr. Jourdan plays with discretion, even with beauty, but gives no impression of being a complicated person or even an intellectual: his archeological papers and books are the merest externals. Geraldine Page does her usual act, a good one in itself, syncopated and fluttery, but without relation to this play. She did not make us feel she was a very powerful counter-attraction to the boys. And that the directing of Daniel Mann did not impose unity or even unbroken intensity on the material may or may not be a reflection on Mr. Mann; there were scenes (such as Miss Page's drunk scene) which did seem to have benefited from his presence.

Despite damaging reviews, the play is not a flop. It has shock value. In the intermission you hear dowagers asking if such things can be; the male prostitutes on Times Square are easy to overlook for those who see New York through taxi windows.

46

REIGEN COMES

FULL CIRCLE

Reigen by Arthur Schnitzler—known to American readers as *Hands Around* or *Round Dance*—was privately printed in Vienna in the winter of 1896-7 and published at the turn of the century. In 1918 Max Reinhardt acquired the stage rights. In 1920 the world première took place—not, as it happened, under Reinhardt's direction—at the Kleines Schauspielhaus in Berlin. The Kultusministerium declared it illegal, but the play continued to run until certain Nazistic friends of morality let off stink bombs in the theatre. In November, 1921, the producers and performers found themselves on trial. They were well defended; and acquitted. *Reigen* began to be produced all over Germany. But the age of morality was not dead; the stink was spreading. Accused of being a dirty-minded Viennese Jew, Arthur Schnitzler decided that his play would never again be performed so long as it was protected by copyright. (It is of curious interest that the leader of the agitation against *Reigen*, one Karl Brunner, was awarded the Goethe Medal by Adolf Hitler in 1942.) Arthur Schnitzler died in 1931. His son and heir, now a professor at UCLA, still tries to keep the play off the boards.

Since, however, Arthur Schnitzler had parted with certain French rights to *Reigen* before he decided to veto performances, the work can be legally presented, not only in France,

but all over the world *as a film*; and it is as a French film—*La Ronde*—that the world, including, by a decision of the Supreme Court, the State of New York, knows it. It is good that the friends of morality in New York should have received a defeat at the hands of the friends of *Reigen*. But it is unfortunate that America is permitted to see this film while being forbidden to see the play. Production of the play is, at this point, morally desirable—as a corrective to the distortions which the director Max Ophuls has imposed on the film.

It is the kind of film we call good when we mean "not utterly banal." It is better than that. There are real actors in it. There is a real sophistication in the showmanship. Late Saturday night, if you feel like seeing a little French bedroom comedy, and don't mind its not being one of the best, you can see *La Ronde* and like it. Go really late, so you'll be nearly as tired as Mr. Ophuls must have been when he made the scenario.

That, if you revive an older work, you must "do something" to it is an assumption by no means new to the entertainment business. The term "revival" itself embodies the fallacy. If a work were indeed dead, you couldn't bring it to life. If it is still alive, its life is its own; to ignore this fact, to try and give it another kind of life, will probably be to kill it. The intention is revival; what happens is murder. A recent example, in my view, is Marc Blitzstein's version of Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*.* The attempt to give Brecht life of another sort has been to kill the sort of life he does have. (Since personal motives are sometimes imputed to my criticism—a story circulated recently that my praise of an actress had been written in her dressing-room with her assistance—I should not conceal from any reader that I collaborated on another English version of Brecht's play. I'm not satisfied with this version either.) The adaptor

* Itself an example of the opposite. See p. 141.

of *Reigen* has committed the same murder as the adaptor of *Threepenny Opera*—betraying his author by removing the style and meaning—but with a different weapon. The classic irony of a Brecht or a Schnitzler (I do not mean to equate them) can be destroyed either by sheer weight on the one hand or by sheer lack of it on the other—by crudity or by whimsicality, coarseness or cuteness, ugliness or prettiness, Mr. Blitzstein or Mr. Ophuls. *La Ronde* is flippant and effete.

What's wrong with flippancy? Many movies would gain by it. We are taken aback in *La Ronde* because Schnitzler had been writing *about* flippancy and *against* it. *Reigen* embodies a keen sense of life as both tragic and comic; life in *La Ronde* is never more than a moment of pathos, a moment of absurdity, a juicy incident, a passing titillation, sour romance, wry farce. . . . Does life matter? Does this film matter? Schnitzler's serious sadness has shrunk to a cheap cynicism. One may justly say of the film that it is not even pornographic, and sympathize—sincerely enough—with those who came to snigger and remained to snore. In pornography you feel the pressure of *some* human impulse, however juvenile or neurotic. Cheap cynicism makes you feel absolutely nothing. Of all attitudes it is the most dispensable. Leaves you cold? Not even that. It leaves you at whatever temperature it finds you.

There are directors who get good work out of not very good actors. Mr. Ophuls has managed to take very good actors and get bad work out of them. In the case of Anton Walbrook, it may not be that the acting is bad; he has a part, possibly, that could under no circumstances seem good, the part of a master of ceremonies who moves—isn't life a dream? in Vienna, I mean, among the waltzes?—from 1950 back to 1900, turns the crank of a carousel, and smirks at all the copulation. If you want a really naughty film, Mr. Walbrook works hard to give it to you.

This is an actor who gave one of the best performances I have seen in English-speaking theatre as Gregers in *The Wild Duck*, a part which demands a Schnitzlerian mingling of thoughtful laughter and tears too deep for thoughts. That's nothing; Mr. Ophuls can even break the spell cast by Jean Louis Barrault. The means he adopts are a little crude: bad lighting and the camera too far away. But no doubt the motive was less to destroy Barrault than to do cute and continental camera work. Gérard Philippe is lost in character make-up, and, with him, Schnitzler's character.

Some of the other actors come off better. Serge Reggiani contributes a racy bit of French realism as a common soldier. As Wife and Student, Danielle Darrieux and Daniel Gelin play one sequence with delicious humor but it is not to be overlooked that this sequence is Schnitzler verbatim. (A play, we know, needs a lot of adapting to the screen; yet the best parts of this film—and some others?—are the dramatic dialogue unchanged.) What Fernand Gravet, no doubt under direction, does with the Husband is typical of the film as a whole: he ignores the character as written and substitutes a cliché. (The husband and wife scene opens with the husband going over his accounts in bed with his wife beside him.) Schnitzler's Young Gentleman is called here a Student (because he reads a book?); the Count is a hussar out of musical comedy. The waltzes are by Oscar Straus. In fact what Straus did long ago to Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, Max Ophuls has now done to Schnitzler's *Reigen*: he has converted a satire into the thing satirized. The legend of Gay Vienna—recently denounced by Schnitzler Jr. and denounced by implication in all the works of Schnitzler Sr.—has again carried the day.

47

ACTING, SEX-APPEAL, DEMOCRACY

Theatre, I suppose, is the most strongly and directly erotic of the arts. In a theatre you do not merely enjoy passionate images as in painting or "the imagination of love in sound" (W. J. Turner's definition of music); from your seat in the orchestra you can fall in love with an actual actress. And so kings have gone round to dressing rooms to find their mistresses, and Dr. Johnsons have had to stop going there because their "amorous propensities" were too much inflamed by "white bosoms and silk stockings." Even on celluloid Rudolph Valentino could enamour millions, and Mary Pickford become "America's sweetheart."

The case of Valentino is simple: he was attractive in the most immediate way. With him belong all the young persons of both sexes whose physical charms people will pay money to see. I do not think he would ever have been called America's lover; the land of the pilgrims' pride requires a "sweetheart" to take home to mom; Miss Pickford was less the object of love than a symbol of what ought to be loved. And, as the movies have come more and more under the domination of ideology (chiefly Catholic), the Valentinos and Jean Harlows have given way to the "wholesome" types.

I shall plead the fifth amendment, as it were, and not name names. My point is that the erotic content of movies became, not less—just less direct. If movie actors weren't

simply objects of desire they still belonged more to the erotic than to the artistic realm. They became folk symbols. If possible, they symbolized something *above* the common level, like dashing heroism, or marital fidelity. But more and more often they have come to symbolize the common level itself. They mirror the poverty of our spiritual life rather than reduce it. Isn't that democracy?

In the legitimate theatre, we have a name for the kind of performer who establishes an indirectly erotic relation with the audience without offering anything much that we could call Acting or a Performance. It is Personality. I have suggested alternative interpretations of the word; * but that is the standard one. The great current example is Shirley Booth.

I don't mean she *cannot* act, I mean she doesn't have to. Within a certain range, she happens also to be an actress of diabolical accuracy. She can carry her body as such people carry their bodies, look over her shoulder as such people look over their shoulders, speak—in pronunciation, speech melody, emphasis—as such people talk—such people, that is, as she herself is (at least in her public personality which is all I know). This, along with the gift of projection, makes her a stage personality and, for some parts—or perhaps just one part—the right actress. What could be more satisfactory on occasions when a playright has re-written her several parts, her one part? Miss Booth's appearance in *By the Beautiful Sea* is something else. This work is a banal musical comedy made interesting by Miss Booth's "personality." It works. That is to say, it *is* interesting to sit at the side—I had a chair in the aisle—with one eye on Miss Booth and the other on her lover, the public. These days it is the woman who makes the advances, and the man who responds —in proportion as he finds in the woman, not a goddess, not even a female, but himself. Someone has said Miss Booth

* See above, pp. 49, 81, 122, 179.

is the very symbol of democracy. If democracy means that the common man is delighted with the common man, this is true.

It is unfair to pick on Miss Booth. Danny Kaye is a more glaring example. Making love in public has been done before; Mr. Kaye manages to make love *with* the public—and this, so to speak, in private: a theatre critic who enters here is disturbing the privacy of Mr. Kaye's amours. (On his last New York appearance I was excluded—with perfect propriety, I have to admit—by the Palace management.) If Mr. Kaye has his private experience in public, I once had occasion to note that the converse is also true. In private he was very public; his eyes were glazed; focussed, if at all, on a distant spot; on that occasion, in fact, Mr. Kaye proved unable to perform before a small, intimate audience, with all faces visible. He said he needed a mass audience or he couldn't summon his energies. Individual faces had to merge in the one, featureless physiognomy of the Mass. That also sounds to me like democracy—People's Democracy.

Of course it is unfair to pick on Mr. Kaye either. My grudge is not against him or Miss Booth but only against those who confuse these amorous carryings-on with theatre. Not to be unfair yet again, the emotional relations of a stage personality and his audience provide *a kind* of theatre. One can complain only if it pushes out the other kinds, only if the idea of the actor as doer, performer, craftsman disappears before the idea of the actor as democratic personality; and this with the support of professional writers on the subject. That there is a public which wouldn't know the difference between a Danny Kaye and a Charlie Chaplin—or which might even prefer Danny Kaye—is merely unfortunate; that those who write on theatre should be equally undiscriminating is a scandal. One suspects that fewer and fewer of the latter can tell the difference between personality and ability, between sex-appeal (direct or indirect) and acting.

When a New York theatre critic likes an actress, how does he say so? He declares (I will not mimic the lingo of his enthusiasm in full) that he has "lost his heart" to her, that he "loves" her, "adores" her, and so on. This is primarily, I suppose, because he is more affected by Eros than by Thespis, by sex-appeal than by dramatic art. (No one wants to throw Eros out; but there are those who don't care whether Thespis ever gets in.) There is another reason for not saying anything about an actress except that she's Mahvellous and you Adaw Her and this is that it's hard to find any other words. Acting is hard to write about.

I should certainly include myself in a general complaint and admit that when I look back over my theatre reviews I am mortified to note how little I have said about the acting performances I have seen. How little dramatic criticism gets beyond the review of the school play in the school magazine with its pious list of names and the reward for each name a single epithet! And I am not merely regretting that good performances are so meagerly recognized. Badness in acting is often not spotted these days, and even oftener not mentioned. Because the press is much harsher with playwrights, it is a common occurrence in New York that a bad performance of a good play is called a good performance of a bad play. Even when an actor or actress ruins a play, there are critics to write that, though the play is poor, the enchanting Miss So-and-so almost redeems it. They don't say of course in what way she is enchanting unless some trait of her personality can be summed up in one of the other half-dozen stock adjectives.

I submit that any reviewer who proposes to judge an actor should ask the following questions. First, is his interpretation in line with the author's intention? This may seem rather an obvious question to ask, but in fact it is never asked in the case of new plays because the critics are not expected to have read the script; hence they cannot know what

the author's intentions are. Second, if an actor's interpretation is not simply conterminous with the author's ideas, is this good or bad? If the actor has added or subtracted, was the result a happy one or not? Third, aside from all questions of interpretation, was tonight's performance alive? The role of Shylock can be newly, correctly, profoundly interpreted and still not be given a good performance. I don't only mean when it is played by a bad actor but also when it is played by a good actor whose performance tonight (maybe not last night) was lifeless. From these three main questions, we can proceed to others. Is the performance alive only in moments or continuously? If it is sustained throughout the evening, has it the right shape, the right curve, from the first scene to the last? (A critic cannot just say "monotonous"; he must know where the changes should have come by which monotony would have been avoided; and what changes they should have been.) And so forth.

Defending myself and others, I should add that to write meaningfully about actors requires more space than the journalist critic even on the weeklies has at his disposal. The only critic who seems to have enough room is Mr. Wolcott Gibbs of *The New Yorker,* and he evidently prefers telling the story of the play.

48

THE STANDARD STORY

I have been asked why I review only "smash hits or plays of unusual intellectual interest." The reason—if this definition of my coverage is correct—is that if I tried to do the opposite and mention all the shows, this chronicle would be little more than a catalog. Nor do I mean to imply that shows I did not review are beneath contempt. Take two from the 1953-4 season: *The Magic and the Loss* by Julian Funt and *The Girl on the Via Flaminia* by Alfred Hayes.

They are both good productions—and this remark is, in a sense, sufficient commendation, since we are talking about theatre, and since, too, we are talking about a theatre in which many, many productions are not good. It was worth the trip to the Booth Theatre to see how Uta Hagen and Robert Preston cope with Mr. Funt's play. It was worth the trip to see a gifted new actor, Charles Taylor, cast as the son of the older pair. Mr. Hayes' play is directed by Jose Quintero and was moved onto Broadway from Circle in the Square, when the latter, located in Greenwich Village, was condemned by the fire department. The Circle's choice of plays has not been enterprising; Mr. Quintero's directing often rubs me (for one) the wrong way; and yet I would not abstain from the general vote of confidence which the group has won, nor minimize Mr. Quintero's achievement in giving his productions the imprint of his own personality.

Presenting a close-up of middle-class life in Manhattan, *The Magic and the Loss* tells how a business-woman comes

to be threatened with the simultaneous loss of a son, a lover, and a job. *The Girl on the Via Flaminia,* as novel readers will agree, tells how, in 1944-5, an Italian girl agrees to be the mistress of a GI she does not know, how she is made to feel a whore and a traitor, and how she kills herself. In *The Girl,* then, we have a conflict between conqueror and conquered, American and European, the theme, I suppose, being the failure of Americans to understand. In *The Magic,* the conflict is that between career woman and her men, also that between modern (i.e. divorced) parents and their children, also . . . but conflict and theme are all too manifold in this play. All I wish to prove is that, if these plays are neither smash hits nor satisfactory works of art, it cannot be from any frivolity of intention, any ignorance as to where stories are to be found, or any lack of judgment as to what is important in our world. The material both authors went to is excellent. We have to feel grateful to them for locating the quarry and going so manfully to work with spade, pick and—yes—dynamite. What fine stone! It is only later that we feel let down—when we see our authors either offering for sale the unhewn rock or hurriedly, with hammer and chisel, chipping out mechanical imitations of the sculpture on the bargain counter at the junk shop.

Raw material or non-art, manipulated material or pseudo-art: there is a good deal of both in *The Magic and the Loss.* For most of the evening, this play is so resolutely literal, we can hardly accept it as a play at all. What we think we are getting is one of those naturalistic documents which proceed, as it were, across a prairie of dreary troubles to the bare rocky mountain of death. Such a play has to end in death because, in life as presented, there really is nothing to do but die. True, this kind of drama cannot be profound or even highly entertaining, but it can have the dour virtues: commonsense, consistency, sincerity, *et al.* In the last few minutes, however, Mr. Funt changes his mind, *ex*changes

it, perhaps I should say, for a commercial substitute, replaces the child in his own cradle with a mechanical doll marked Made in Hollywood and answering with a mindless squeak to the name of Happy Ending. (Terence Rattigan did it—in the American version of *The Deep Blue Sea*—so why shouldn't Mr. Funt?) While conveniently offstage, a young boy undergoes a change of life; and, along with his character as presented while *on* stage, turns the plot around. In the New Brunswick depot, he drops his hate of his mother, picks love instead, and returns as the god from the New Jersey machine. It is curious that an author who for so long doggedly refuses to depart from the literal will plunge of a sudden deep into the absurd. A necessary compensation? A last-minute attempt to get some drama into the story, stemming from a last-minute realization that the little literal truths are undramatic? Yet if we swing from the small simple truths to big simple lies, the big complicated truths in which all drama is found are ignored. I do not think Mr. Funt wants to ignore them; he simply hasn't allowed himself to get at them. Yet he has achieved more than this brief and oversimplifying analysis discloses. The material is always impressing us with its possibilities, and sometimes it breaks the dam of Mr. Funt's naturalism, gushing out in a humor and a pathos that are genuine enough. Then again, this is an author full of bright remarks about New York life.

In *The Girl on the Via Flaminia,* Mr. Hayes faces some of the same problems and notably the same story—should one call it the standard story of modern drama?—the story of the girl who is being hounded to death. And he sees it through: no Happy Ending for him. What his play seems to need is a happy beginning: Mr. Hayes' girl is dead at the start and goes right on being dead for three acts. There is no development, or, if there is, just as it seems to begin, the girl jumps in the Tiber. Mr. Hayes has presented, not a drama, but a situation. It is, let me add, a truly touching situation, and

we appreciate the respect and curiosity Mr. Hayes brings to his people—especially the GI lover (played with respect, curiosity, and fire by Leo Penn).

In denying his protagonist all development, Mr. Hayes gives his leading actress a practically insoluble problem. I sometimes think our naturalistic dramatists have a wrong approach not only to parts as characters but to parts as roles. We say an actor "builds" a role. The metaphor can be misleading. What an author provides is not a pile of loose bricks which an actor can put together as he chooses. Unless the author has done some building himself, the actor can achieve none of those effects which will make an audience feel that he is great. If building is the right metaphor, we should say that the actor adds an imposing facade to a building that must already be there.

These plays of the little depressing facts, especially when they are also the play about the hounded girl, are notoriously monotonous. There is no building; just a nicely levelled bit of land. What can an actress do? If she is a virtuoso, she can force variety into a play that lacks it, and we shall enjoy the *tour de force.* There was something of this about Miss Hagen's extraordinary display in *The Magic.* I gather that Peggy Ashcroft, when she played in *The Deep Blue Sea,* also was so effective she made you see the mirage of a facade of a building that wasn't there. (I didn't see Miss Hagen in this play; Margaret Sullavan, whom I saw, was . . . monotonous.) For Betty Miller, playing Mr. Hayes' "girl," I have nothing but sympathy. She is not a virtuoso, but just another of Mr. Quintero's gifted New Actresses with a sensitive soul and wandering fingers. Bringing to the role considerable talent, tact, and concentration, she has been oddly singled out for criticism in a production that includes several vastly inferior performances—even a couple of rank amateurish ones. At this point, it should be firmly said, the actress is a scapegoat for the author.

49

TEA, SYMPATHY, AND THE NOBLE SAVAGE

The estheticism that is currently prominent in English theatre differs from the estheticism of the eighteen-nineties in that it is directed at the whole educated middle class; it is in no sense *avant-garde.* It can therefore make no headway in America, for the middle class here is unashamedly sentimental and earnest; it likes even a musical (*South Pacific*) dosed with humanitarian ideas. Our lighter works do not smell of decay; they reek with sentiment. Our authors cannot see what fun it is to fly the trapeze through a vacuum like Cocteau and his English epigones. While the European esthete strenuously endeavors to mean nothing, in America every author wants to mean everything.

For example, the authors of *The Teahouse of the August Moon,* John Patrick and Vern Sneider. This play was heralded with a glum essay in *The New York Times* and is punctuated by solemn animadversions on the same theme, to wit, the failure of the West to understand the East. I remember feeling sorry for Thomas Heggen when Joshua Logan made of his melancholy reporting a histrionic romp that had everything of musical comedy except the music. I can say nothing for or against Mr. Sneider, not having read his book. What is clear from merely seeing the play is that it lives exactly as the final version of *Mister Roberts* lived —only as one very limited kind of theatre. It never gets out-

side the small world of vaudeville sketches, and inside that world it lives as powerfully as *Mister Roberts* only through one character, a *Mister Roberts* character, the bad captain—here re-incarnate as a colonel, splendidly played by Paul Ford, who makes you laugh everytime he speaks and sometimes even when he doesn't. Of the other actors the only one who is (or has a chance to be?) more than adequate is David Wayne, and even he somewhat spoils his performance by excessive coyness. I hasten to agree that, if not taken seriously, it's a nice show, my objections to a nice show being only the normal objections to a nice girl.

But perhaps it should be taken seriously after all? Is it light entertainment? On a stomach that had imbibed Robert Anderson's tea and sympathy only a week earlier, it lay a little heavy. So much more of exactly the same diet is hard to digest. The tea is tolerable enough, it's the sympathy—and its correlative antipathies. Let me explain.

The sympathy is for the Okinawans. An Oriental friend tells me he regards *Teahouse* less as a compliment to the East than as a perpetuation of "the *Mikado* tradition" according to which Orientals are cute and infantile. We of the West probably wouldn't place the play precisely in that context, but we certainly can see it in the tradition of the Noble Savage, always dear to our dramatists. The Noble Savage, nowadays, is usually Latin-American, Sicilian, or plain Italian. *Teahouse of the August Moon* puts him back in the Pacific Ocean which was his home in the days of *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Mutiny on the Bounty.*

The point the playwrights always made about the Noble Savage was that he wasn't really a savage at all; it was our non-savage fellow citizens who were savage; the miscalled savage lived at peace with nature and himself. Applied to the current world situation in *Teahouse of the August Moon* and *The Girl on the Via Flaminia,* the idea is that Orientals and Latins are better than Americans. So far as I know, only

Americans *have* applied the idea to the world situation; and, if Orientals and Latins applied it, I suppose they'd have to say that Americans are better than Orientals and Latins. For the intention, insofar as it is rational, is the noble one of blaming yourself and not the other fellow; the only trouble being that the pattern is not only a rational intention; it appeals to something in us that is sub- and even anti-rational. The notion that they "do these things better in France" is a dangerous illusion not only because it spreads a pleasant falsehood about France but because the implied attitude to one's own country is not at all limited to rational self-criticism. Part of its content is self-hatred; another part, sheer diffidence (surely not a virtue); and another motif involved is the impulse to dramatize and simplify which takes the form of arriving at your opinion by mere inversion of the enemy's opinion: rabid nationalists think foreigners are wicked, Americans noble, *ergo* . . .

On Broadway, Okinawans are sweet-natured and wise, Americans irate and stupid; Italians are passionate and sensitive, Americans coldly sensual and callous. "*You* may have Leonardo," says the American protagonist of *The Girl on the Via Flaminia,* "but we have U. S. Steel"; while his opposite number on the Latin side—a young Italian from Mussolini's African army—quotes Leopardi. At this point the Noble Savage has dropped the last remnant of his savagery and is a cultivated gentleman, heir of the ages.

It should hardly be necessary to say that implacable criticism of America is a perennial task of American liberalism. But if playwrights venture into politics—and *Teahouse* is to be performed on Okinawa itself in the name of international goodwill!—they lay themselves open to political criticism—that is, to criticism in terms of the present situation and not simply in terms of universal principle. To paint a romanticized picture of common people in other lands in order to contrast it with the crass behavior of American colo-

nels and GI's who prate about U. S. Steel is a political act; a cultural historian could scarcely fail to link it with the picture presented in books, movies, magazines, newspapers, and plays issuing from the other side of the iron curtain.

I am not trying to tie our authors to Malenkov in the way in which they might be tempted to tie me to McCarthy. It is simply that our criticism of America is only good when its motives are healthy; when it doesn't take the form of rhetorical patterns and the merest folk-lore; in short, when it is truthful. As for foreigners, I return to my Oriental friend's remark. Messrs. Sneider and Patrick wanted to pay him a compliment. He took it—rightly, I think—as an insult. Our playwrights should place the whole question of patriotism and international good will under advisement.

Or make sure that we don't take them seriously.

50

WHO ARE YOU ROOTING FOR?

American writers have more success with light comedy than with other forms of drama. In fact American light comedy has become one of the more vital elements of world theatre. Even in Europe the lively item in a current repertoire is not unlikely to be an American light comedy—perhaps one that the youngest generation here has never seen, such as *Three Men on a Horse* or *The Man Who Came to Dinner.* And anyone who read through the plays of the twenties and thirties would, I believe, be less inclined to exhume the problem plays of those problem decades than, say, *The Torchbearers* or *Boy Meets Girl.*

Reviewing American light comedies, however, I find myself continually remarking the same flaw: an intrusion of crass sentimentality. If the greatest of American comedies are Chaplin's films, it is to be noted that we find the flaw there too. We find it again in the two best light comedies of the 1953-4 season, *Oh Men! Oh, Women!* by Edward Chodorov and *King of Hearts* by Jean Kerr and Eleanor Brooke. Are American authors unwilling to stay inside the boundaries of light merriment? Pursued by some notion of "adding a third dimension, that of feeling," they only succeed in pushing their fists through the perfectly satisfactory two-dimensionality of their canvases. That, at least, is my interpretation of the sudden eruption of the passions at

various points in both plays, accompanied, as it is, with a sudden access of morality on the part of the authors. All of a sudden, the smile disappears, and we are invited to take a devout interest in the needs of children, the duties of parents, the responsibilities of spouses and psycho-analysts, not to mention the promptings of the heart and that Note of Hope which is the Broadway-Hollywood surrogate for a shot in the arm.

It is surprising, perhaps, to what an extent the two plays are the same old one: variants on that classic theme of comedy, the misadventures of a professional imposter. Mr. Chodorov's psychoanalyst and the Brook-Kerr comic-strip artist both think they are gods. The plot in both cases is one long attempt, on the authors' part, to humanize them by humiliation. In *Oh, Men! Oh, Women!* the attempt is successful. In *King of Hearts,* it is not: the protagonist is beyond cure. In this respect, it is the Chodorov that is more characteristic of American light comedy, the Brook-Kerr play that will come in for criticism as being heterodox and heartless, if not dangerous and un-American. Brooks Atkinson says so bad a man as this king of hearts weighs a light comedy down. Wolcott Gibbs says he arouses such loathing that the actor in the part runs the risk of assassination. From the first critic, I derive this principle: a monstrous character has no place in light comedy. From the second, this: a monstrous character has no place on stage. Both principles are an established part of Times Square folklore.

Should I rather say Times Square philosophy? For implicit in New York journalism is a whole philosophy of drama according to which it is good that characters in plays be good—or at least likable; it is good that the playwright's view of life be: People Are Nice. Sometimes this thought takes a political form and might be summed up as Democratic Good Will. At other times it seems to be a theory of audience psychology. "We must care about the characters".

Well, that much is easy to agree to, but the New York theory of drama is that you only care when you also sympathize—or, in the jargon of the intellectual underworld, "empathize." With whom can you identify yourself? "Who are you rooting for?" Like football.

I suppose it is one of the philosophies or pseudo-philosophies that constitute the growing pains of democracy. It is wildly untraditional. The traditional way of telling the imposter story is exemplified in Carl Sternheim's *The Snob.* Sternheim wastes no more sympathy on his hero than Ben Jonson did on Morose or Molière on Tartuffe: he confronts us with a man who is completely dehumanized by snobbery, a non-man, a monster. Now *King of Hearts* is no classic, but what was generally written off as its weakness is classic enough and constitutes its strength: the protagonist is a bad man who, having no goodness in him at all, cannot conceivably turn into an angel in the last act. Such a character is not felt but seen; his authoresses see him and, with their abundant and admirably non-mechanical wit, enable us to see him too. Why should we want them to be sentimentalists, blinded by their own tears? (It was a possibility; there are sentimental moments.)

Both *Oh, Men! Oh, Women!* and *King of Hearts* are well performed. It is almost *de rigueur* on Broadway that a light comedy be well performed; it is only "serious plays" that are—too often anyway—left to the untender mercies of Passionate Sincerity or Ruthless Realism. Light comedy has to be acted. And it sets a director as hard a task as he will ever be asked to perform. Anyone can direct a mere play; it takes a George Abbott to direct light comedy; Edward Chodorov (directing his own play) and Walter Kerr (tackling *King of Hearts*) place themselves in the Abbott tradition in their devising of excellent "business," in their adroit manipulation of "props," and, above all, in their brisk pacing and hair's-breadth timing. Their casting was also extraordinary.

If the leading part in the Chodorov didn't, so to speak, deserve Franchot Tone, it certainly needed him, for he can almost make sentimentality seem unsentimental and passivity seem active. The perfect work of the show has of course to be done in the perfect (though small) roles. Anne Jackson does a finely etched discontented wife (vintage 1953). Gig Young and Larry Blyden do such ironic and shaded, yet zany and extravagant, performances as would qualify them in France for great parts in classic plays. (I am thinking of the great character work M. Barrault's company showed us.) Walter Kerr did some inspired casting. Who would have thought of Jackie Cooper for the amiable but mousy suitor? How solve the problem of a heroine who must be stupid and not stupid at the same time—except by appealing to Cloris Leachman's looks and talent? And as for Donald Cook. . . . It would have been very well for the critics to say their Christian charity, their democratic zeal, or their bad digestion prevented them from accepting a stage monster, had they gone on to remark that Mr. Cook has his own way of making the public swallow him. His own way? The classic way: he keeps the actor and the character separate and induces the audience to love one while hating the other—as actors of the part of Richard III or any other enjoyable (but not sympathetic) villain have done for centuries. In view of *Private Lives* and *The Moon is Blue,* the personality and technique of Mr. Cook should have been already familiar. I confess that, until now, I didn't quite "get" either. *King of Hearts* is his show. His feline walk, his funny drawl with its inordinate vowels, his sure-fire smile, along with whatever is less definable in an actor, though no less real, make of an ambivalent presentation an uncompromising performance and an unequivocal success.

51

CRAFTY GODLINESS

I love the stage
And hate to see it made the prostitute
Of crafty godliness.

—John Davidson

Here is a sentence I never thought I should live to write: I have just seen a play by T. S. Eliot in summer stock. Never, at any rate, until the last couple of years. By now it is *The New York Daily News* that's convinced Mr. Eliot is a playwright, and only the highbrows of the *Times* and *Tribune* who aren't so sure. The paradox is one Eliot invited. He has stressed the point that dramatic poetry is unlike other poetry; he can hardly be surprised if some admire his dramas in proportion as they are unlike *all* poetry. This brings the wheel full circle, for Eliot's interest in the drama began with his complaint that, of late, it had become prosaic.

Among those who know all Eliot's writings, there is, I think, general agreement that his plays are his least successful achievement. Just because of this, there is now a danger of dismissing them too lightly—as for instance with the formula that they are *simply* an attempt at commercial playwriting. Actually, the commercial theatre knows of no plays that resemble them in more than externals. Nor can the plays be neatly amputated from the body of Eliot's *oeuvre*.

To take a technical and trivial example: the quotations and obscurities. For a commercial playwright it would certainly be odd to slip a chunk of Conan Doyle or Shelley into the dialogue and not say so or to bury the plot of the *Alcestis* so deep that it has to be exhumed in *Comparative Literature,* Vol. 5, No. 2. I am far from offering these instances in Eliot's defense; on the contrary they bring out the old (J. Donald) Adam(s) in me: such carrying-on strikes me as beside all possible points. And, while I do not agree that *The Cocktail Party* is unclear in its main drift, there are certainly passages in it that convey just about nothing, either to me or to certain Eliot experts whom I've consulted. I can only suppose that those who say "Drama, not Poetry" were busy with their own dramatic and unpoetic thoughts while these passages were being spoken.

If Eliot failed, it wasn't because he took it easy. The real cause is the opposite: over-ambition. Eliot is trying to write a kind of play he cannot write, and I don't mean a drawing-room play: I mean a play in which the *Oresteia,* the *Alcestis,* or the *Ion* is re-created in a drama of modern life. And you'd almost think Eliot intended to do it simply by the exclusion of poetry, for he has never created characters and only once a plot. (Even this plot—of *The Confidential Clerk* —considering its ingenuity and comic intention, remains surprisingly inert in performance.)

We should not complain of the lack of poetry if in his prose (printed as verse) Eliot had created characters. His only full-size character is Becket. Now any writer could fail in this field, but Eliot may be the only one who could succeed only in the face of his own philosophy of life: for he does not believe that relationships between human beings are possible. Perhaps the only playwright to agree with Eliot has been Pirandello. Yet Pirandello believed you at least had a relationship with an image of the other person; you at least had the illusion of a relationship; and he

dramatized the illusion. In Eliot's plays there is really nothing between people, not even false relationships, not even illusions. The husband and wife in *The Confidential Clerk* sit side by side and it is not merely that they don't understand each other, it is as if they have never talked to each other before; they are not *like* strangers, they *are* strangers: they wouldn't know each other's favorite brand of cigarettes. And that is not all: for Eliot, human relationships are not even an ideal. "The soul," he quotes from St. John of the Cross, "cannot be possessed of the divine union until it has divested itself of the love of created beings." I am sure a Christian apologist would want to add that St. John is referring to a state of mind *beyond* earthly love, not just *without* it. But Mr. Eliot's religiousness has always seemed to me rather close to misanthropy, just as his politics is never far from snobbery and is at certain points anti-Semitic.

Well, the snobbery pays off in the plays to the extent that it suggests the drawing-room setting and Eliot's highly unusual attitude to it. This drawing room is part-historical (England as seen by the man from St. Louis), part-legendary (made up of images established in Eliot's mind by, say, Noel Coward, P. G. Wodehouse, or even Aubrey Smith and Nigel Bruce). But the philosophy of St. John of the Cross, as quoted, and, it would seem, taken rather literally, is about the most anti-dramatic view of life ever committed to paper: the aim of life is—to get rid of human relationships! "If they could exist in the first place"—adds Eliot, and assumes they couldn't.

Eliot's three "modern" plays (*The Family Reunion, The Cocktail Party,* and *The Confidential Clerk*) are three attempts at one play. Each is, as it were, full of quotations from the others. Characters and situations recur—most notably, the agonized young person who goes off and becomes a priest or missionary (Harry, Celia, Colby). You can see what he's driving at, and I tend to think there's a kind of

play Eliot *could* write: it would be made out of his favorite material (hollow men, waste lands, a sense of sin) but the vehicle for it would have to be, not anti-poetic, but super-poetic. *Murder in the Cathedral* is still his best contribution to the theatre.

It would be mean-spirited not to mention that, though the "modern" plays fail of their intention, they abound in incidental felicities—more in fact than have yet been revealed to any audience. For up to now, the major productions have been directed by an elocution teacher, E. Martin Browne, who, I should judge, has held the actors in check.

The production I saw this summer was *The Cocktail Party* at Bucks County Playhouse in Pennsylvania. Directed by the elocution teacher's stage manager, it followed the fatally formalistic "blocking" of the Broadway show: the actor who speaks most takes center stage while the others gaze out to sea, etc. But Uta Hagen showed that the part of Celia can be played with genuine passion, and Edna Best showed that Eliot's dry smile—helped out by a fine comedienne—can become the laughter of a whole audience. In short, while the plays are second-rate Eliot, they are better than most plays, and it would be interesting to know just how good—if for the first time they were really acted and directed—they could be. I should like to make one recommendation: that the part of Reilly, in *The Cocktail Party,* not be played by the star. The play is about Alcestis and Admetus, Lavinia and Edward, and we have not seen it till we have seen these parts presented as the "leads."

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THE PRESENCE OF MOZART

The German theatre was and is dominated by Goethe and Schiller, the French by Molière, and the English by Shakespeare. One corollary of this fact is that an actor is chiefly valued for his Mephistopheles, his Marquis Posa, his Alceste, his Hamlet . . . Another is that a new author may have to cock a snoot at the national idols before he can establish his own claim to a divine spark; Shaw and Brecht are examples.

Music being less national than words, a nation cannot so easily keep its musical theatre to itself, and the operatic stage—not only in German-speaking countries but in England and America—is coming, one might almost say, to be dominated by Mozart. In England he is a theatrical presence second only to Shakespeare; while in America—there being no Old Vic, no Stratford Memorial Theatre—he is a theatrical presence second to none. Without him we should—in more senses than one—be lost. Our debt to those at the Metropolitan and City Center who keep Mozart present among us is, accordingly, incalculable.

Those who tell me that this vote of thanks had better been offered to RCA Victor are overlooking the adjective *theatrical.* I trust it is not mere professional bias that makes me feel that a purely musical approach to Mozart is inadequate. I have in mind not merely that stage production

"adds a lot." That might be a disadvantage. Rather, I have in mind that Mozart is all the time *applying* his music to the spectacle, the character, and the story. One of the most striking examples was recently cited by Joseph Kerman in *Opera News.* It is that moment near the end of *Figaro* when the Count asks the Countess to forgive him. How could anyone know what the music was up to except by considering the theatrical context? And those who say "oh well, you can always *imagine* the theatrical context" just do not know the theatre and the kind of appeal it has. John Gielgud's performance in *Hamlet* is not something you can "imagine" while reading the play.

The only words vouchsafed to Mozart's Count at that great moment are: "Countess, pardon!" It is the music that tells us what this pardon means in human weakness and contrition. And we are reminded of the great arias in Mozart's operas where—in every case, I believe—the words are pretty commonplace and it is the music that provides the "poetry." Has the purely musical approach to Mozart some justification then? Certainly, music critics constantly revert to it. Only the other day the London *Times* was speaking of *Don Giovanni* as a triumph of great music over bad writing.

It is also true that there have been critics to find sublimity in the most banal verses of *The Magic Flute.* They would have us believe that Mozart's librettists are sages and great poets. This is a mistaken line of defence. The right defence of the Mozart librettos would start, I think, with the observation that great poetry set to music is not an ideal recipe for opera, in fact that there is no great dramatic poetry yet written that operatic music would not ruin. It is true that the songs in Shakespeare's plays are better poetry than anything by Lorenzo Da Ponte. Even at that, their "goodness" would be lost in arias of anything like Mozartian elaboration.

I do not want to get off on the vexed question to what extent we shall ever hear the words in opera. Rather, I'd maintain that, in any event, what the librettist needs is a command, not of great poetry, but of operatic dramaturgy. He is less of a poet than a planner of scenarios, and this planning involves a great deal more than the art of story-telling in combination with music (though Heaven knows that is a lot). To take a single example: the Mozart finales. There is seldom much narrative in them. What we have is the whole cast coming on stage. The task of the librettist is the interweaving of threads and, in Mozart, what an intricate interweaving that is! At this point, it is true, it becomes impossible to tell where the librettist's work ends and the composer's begins. But the fact that Mozart is a "dramatist" of the first order cannot be offered as evidence that Da Ponte is not.

The crucial case is *Così fan tutte*. The libretto has suffered more than a century and a half of contempt, and all because it is not much of a dramatic poem, not supreme reading matter. But it was never meant to be read! And, as for the plot being "absurd," as all the music critics say it is (consult your record album), why, all comic plots are absurd; perhaps the music critics haven't read *Twelfth Night*. This little story is a very respectable chip off the old block of Italian theatre. It is quintessentially theatrical. By all means, it would take a Molière to add the "poetry," but then Da Ponte *had* a Molière: namely, Mozart. You can't take part of a thing and condemn it for its incompleteness. *Così fan tutte* is as near to perfection, if I'm any judge, as any single product of the human mind; there being no faults to ascribe, how can we ascribe some to poor Da Ponte?

Some will retort that my argument is old stuff, and that Mozart productions are much more theatrical nowadays than a generation ago. Some critics have even been longing for the days when we just had a row of great singers on what was

virtually a decorated concert platform. And I don't know that their position is incompatible with mine. A row of great singers on a platform might give us more of the drama than groupings of mediocre singers *on a stage that is not the right stage for Mozart.*

The "newly directed" operas of the Met have been riddled with, for the most part, justified criticisms. We might sum up by saying that, though we give thanks for the presence of Mozart, we deplore the way our impresarios dress him up. Many of the shortcomings can't of course be helped. They are matters of money—or rather, lack of it. But I seem to have detected, especially at the Met, a certain lack of faith too, not in the music, but in the drama, the theatre, of it all. In comedy, lack of faith usually shows itself in a straining to be droll, a childish chucklesomeness; in tragedy, in a fear of solemnity. See *Don Giovanni*—greatest of tragi-comedies—at the Met and you must needs be offended by both kinds of evasion. One critic who well understands Mozart as theatre—Ernst Lert—has stressed the element of brutal realism in Almaviva; yet even so impressive a singing actor as George London descends at times to the usual puerilities. We have had in our own language a critic—W. J. Turner—who has fully understood the Shakespearean depth of drama beneath *Così fan tutte.* Yet when Alfred Lunt directs it at the Met he seems to be thinking of Sheridan. The singers have been given a lot of help, that is clear—but only in externals. Mr. Lunt ignores the message Mozart is signalling.

The City Center, more limited as its resources may be, often manages to provide a more enjoyable evening. Except at the top of the balcony you can see and hear; at the Met I have yet to learn if there is such a thing as a good seat. The Center's standards are, of course, very uneven; in the 1953-4 season I saw a *Figaro* that was as bad as their *Don Giovanni* was good. But even when the result is not

right, there is always a sense that the occasion is theatre. Among the shows I saw, this theatrical sense was most resplendent, not in Mozart, but in Rossini's *Cinderella,* a fact which should probably be credited principally to Lincoln Kirstein—to my mind one of the great benefactors of New York theatre today. (The only large grumble I have—and it applies as much to the Met as to the Center—is at the use of the Martins' Broadwayish translations; adequate enough for Strauss operettas, they are death to Mozart.)

53

". . . AND CHRONICLE SMALL BEER"

There follow some jottings about shows which I have not reviewed at length but should not wish to ignore.

The Italian drama is unknown in America, and would evidently remain so if Alfred Drake didn't honor the country of his origin by directing Goldoni, playing Pirandello, and—currently—adapting a Betti play, *The Gambler,* with himself in the title role.

Since the death of Pirandello in 1936 there have been only two Italian playwrights of note: Eduardo De Filippo and Ugo Betti. De Filippo, when he is wise, keeps close to the popular Neapolitan tradition in which he was reared. Betti is bourgeois and European. Seeing his work today we think of Sartre's *La Nausée* or Neveux's *Plainte contre l'Inconnu* (though in fact his "existentialism" antedates theirs); we think of Expressionism and of Kafka. Like *The Trial, The Gambler* presents the moral life of modern man in terms of a tribunal situated between this world and the next. As in T. S. Eliot's *Family Reunion* the protagonist is resisting yet steadily approaching the admission that he is guilty of murder whether or not he actually did the deed. Like Eliot and unlike Kafka, Betti caps the admission of guilt with an offer of salvation.

Speaking of Betti one inevitably mentions other authors not because one is sure which of them influenced him but because he is inescapably a "literary", a derivative author. Amid all the echoes it is hard to be sure if Betti has a voice of his own. If he has I should guess that it's not a philosophical voice but one that cries out in pain and loathing. He is more convincing (also like Eliot) in depicting the struggle than in conferring the prize. The optimistic philosophy arrived at in *The Gambler* is either spurious or obscure.

The play is given a far better performance than such things usually are. The average standard is that of, say, the Theatre Guild's *Legend of Lovers* or Cornell's *Antigone*: the play is lost in a chaos of uncomprehending direction, bad acting, and vulgar adaptation. The Drake-Eager version of *The Gambler*, though occasionally ponderous, is something better than adaptation, it is faithful yet, on the whole, idiomatic translation; the general level of the acting is respectable and that of two individuals—Alfred Drake and E. G. Marshall—firstrate; the physical production scheme devised by Messrs. Mielziner and Shumlin is both brilliant and simple. By and large this is a more expert show than the original Italian production of the play. On the other hand, what I saw in Rome two years ago makes me aware of a serious flaw in Mr. Shumlin's production: it duplicates Betti's ponderosity with its own. Mr. Shumlin seems to have believed that by slowing down the dialogue and the action he could achieve style and suggest profundity. The Italians got their effects by speed and lightness. Crucial is the portrait of the dead wife. In Rome she was just a modern girl. In New York she was something out of the dream sequence in an old-fashioned musical comedy.

It is good to see Alfred Drake again, and it is good to see him at this stage in his career. He still has the exuberance of youth, his work still quivers with possibility, yet he is old enough now to give also the sense of difficulties overcome

and technique achieved. Of course, his technique as a straight actor is not yet *completely* achieved. Thousands of appearances in musical comedy have dug rather noticeable grooves; one notices both body and voice falling into the same four or five patterns all the time. If he is going to be the fine straight actor he could be, Mr. Drake will have to work constantly on himself while making thousands of appearances in non-musical comedy. Alternatively he can simply relax and continue being the best leading man of our musical stage.

The Strong Are Lonely is a translation of a French translation of *Das heilige Experiment* by Fritz Hochwaelder. Like the same author's *The Public Prosecutor* which I saw in Vienna, it is a teasing play because, while the author is always stumbling on great themes, he is always stumbling. One respects Margaret Webster (the director) and Eva Le Gallienne (the re-translator) insofar as they wished to say something to a public that rarely has anything said to it. But the upshot of such an occasion is only that everyone exclaims: "You see? There's no public here for serious European drama." Why will backers squander money on second-raters like George Tabori and Fritz Hochwaelder when they couldn't lose any more on Sean O'Casey or Bertolt Brecht?

It has been remarked that Ethel Waters' place is not "at home"—as she currently pretends to be in her one-woman show—but in the theatre. Yet her producers could retort that their notion was based on a thorough study of modern mores. We like poets more than we like poetry. Our interest in public men is chiefly in their private lives. If we depersonalize actresses by astronomical metaphor, we at once per-

sonalize them by wallowing in the details of their marital life. And there is a great modern principle which reads: everything should be everything else—Einstein should be a political pundit, movie stars should tell us about theology, and so forth. If the producers' notion failed, it must be that Miss Waters is not very good at this sort of thing.

To see *Oklahoma!* after ten years was, for one spectator, to feel quite differently—and much better—about it. One never "just sees" anything. One sees through spectacles which the world provides, and in 1943 the world provided us, as I said in my review of *Porgy and Bess,* with a lot of chatter about grass roots and an "American *Magic Flute.*" If you brought to the theatre a knowledge of the Austrian *Magic Flute,* you were bound to be let down. If, on the other hand, you bring a knowledge of the musical comedies of the period 1943-53, Hammerstein's—and, more especially, Rodgers'—name leads all the rest.

The Little Hut has suggested to many that American taste is *sui generis.* But there is no reason why it should. This is a very funny play on any continent. If Nancy Mitford, in her free adaptation, has assimilated it to a British tradition of humor, that humor has constantly appealed to Americans—in, for example, a whole succession of movies from the early Hitchcock to the most recent Alec Guinness. It isn't Miss Mitford's fault that her leading lady in New York has little English and less humor. At that, it isn't chiefly the acting that is wrong; apart from the leading lady, the playing is well above Broadway average. The chief blame for the failure must surely rest with the director, Peter Brook, who has done, not too little, but far, far too much: a very live little farce has been murdered by a mas-

sive production. I should also put Oliver Messel's set on the debit side. It is gorgeous and it is clever. But it strikes precisely that note of self-congratulation—of pompous whimsy, portentous cuteness—which is the ruin of the evening. André Roussin, the author, could only say of this event: a poor thing, but not mine own.

Many of the shows which Messrs. Brook and Messel have lent their names to in England bear the stamp of the new English estheticism, seriously unserious, profoundly unprofound, and ungaily gay. *L'invitation au château* in Paris was a charming trifle; in London—as *Ring Round the Moon*—it acquired the sort of ponderosity which New York could subsequently witness in *The Little Hut*; it became the *idea* of a charming trifle, abstract and lifeless. Oh yes, in a sense, the charm and the triviality had each been multiplied by a hundred. That was the trouble. Not every six-tier wedding cake tastes better than a bun.

54

THE AMERICAN DRAMA

(1944-1954)

1. *The economics of it.* It costs anything from forty to a hundred and fifty thousand dollars to put a play on Broadway. It cost $23,000 to put on *Life With Father* in 1939, and $85,000 to put on *Life With Mother* in 1948. *Mother* cost three and a half times as much. One could cite wider differences. A famous Saroyan play was put on before the war for about $5,000. A famous Tennessee Williams play was put on in 1953 for $115,000.* That is twenty-three times as much. It would take a more expert statistician than I to say what is the average increase since 1939. Place it anywhere you wish between three-and-a-half and twenty-three, and you have an increase such as any business might find it hard to meet.

These figures help to explain the state of dramatic art better than any conceivable remarks about dramaturgy. However, instead of discussing union regulations, the "real estate situation", competition from movies and TV, I shall simply note the principal condition they impose on theatre

* Extreme cases. *My Heart's in the Highlands* was done only at special matinées. Few straight plays in 1953 cost as much as *Camino Real.* Musicals, on the other hand, cost much more: *Kismet* cost $400,000. There are further particulars, highly relevant to this chapter, in two important *Harper's* articles by John Houseman: "No Business Like Show Business," Sept. 1949, and "The Critics in the Aisle Seats," Oct. 1951.

—namely, that no play shall be performed unless a small group of wealthy men will bet on its having a long run. For it takes months of playing to capacity houses for investors to so much as get their money back.

What kind of play is the safest bet? No one quite knows, and that is perhaps the one happy aspect of the situation: think how dreadful it would be if we knew for certain that good plays always flop! Nevertheless, though no one lays claim to certitude, and an extraordinary number of hits are surprise hits, there *is* a general prejudice on Broadway against certain types of drama and in favor of others. Other things being equal, a play that can in any sense be defined as highbrow is considered a bad bet. It is not equally true that a play considered lowbrow is always considered a good bet. At this point, other criteria enter in. For example. All those who have opinions about plays seem to agree that *The Fifth Season* is an execrable play. Yet it was a hit; and its success was predicted by people with opinions, not about plays, but about garment workers, pretty girls, and Menasha Skulnik. A producer's job is not to judge plays but to "know the angles"—in more academic language, to know what criteria are relevant to success. That is, this *would* be his job, if it were possible. Since it has seemed to be impossible, what we witness is prejudice against so-called highbrow works and sheer guesswork among lowbrow works. "If only it were easier to tell good shit from bad shit," a producer said to me. We need not pity such a producer too much—we have our own troubles—but many of us do have some feeling about the prejudice against the so-called highbrow: we resent it. We have a prejudice against that prejudice.

I have simplified the producer-speculator's problem if I've suggested that he bets directly on the public's response. Actually, he doesn't ask about Tom, Dick and Harry but about Brooks Atkinson and Walter Kerr. "What will the critics think?" When the first performance is over the producer

presides over a dismal supper party till the small hours of the morning when the eight reviews are relayed to him by phone. If he has produced a serious play, and the reviewers don't like it, he is done for. If some of them like it, he is done for. Only if all of them write of it in a vein of corny exultation is he sure of a hit.

Many people still blame this state of affairs on the critics, but, as the latter are always pointing out, that is unfair: it isn't their fault if people take so much notice of them. And it is not true that they are unusually dogmatic men. On the contrary one might more justly complain of some of them that they play the role of the crumply little man who apologizes for having an opinion at all. They make such admissions of ignorance that one might say their motto is: "I thank thee, God, for my humility."

Why does the New York public pay so much more attention to the newspaper critics than it used to? Is it the higher price of a ticket that makes the customer more cautious? Is caution the best description of credulous dependence on eight reporters? Or is such behavior a straw in some more horrible wind? A token of an abject reliance on pundits that brings us nearer to George Orwell's 1984?

The Fifth Season is a play that succeeded without the critics, as musicals and other light entertainments not seldom do. The paradox of the critics' position is that they completely control the serious drama which they hardly even claim to understand, while no one very much cares what they say of light entertainment which they are quite at home with. Where they have competence, they have no power, and vice versa.

I should not like to leave the subject of economics without admitting there are exceptions to the rule that no play shall be performed unless a small group of wealthy men will bet on its having a long run. There *is* a non-commercial theatre which has three great sources of income outside the

box office: private philanthropy, the local community (or group philanthropy), and the state legislatures. That is: there *are* producers who will put on certain shows—with little or no hope of profit—because they like them; there are community theatres, such as those of Cleveland, Pasadena, and Dallas; and there are the theatres of the great state universities supported by the taxpayer. Such are the American approaches to a subsidized theatre. (Even the Federal Theatre, as is noted above—p. 170—was not a state theatre in the European sense.)

Non-commercial theatres deserve all the encouragement we can give them except that of flattery. The fact that we want to get more and more money for them is no reason for overlooking their present limitations. Let us admit that they are more often a provincial substitute for Broadway than an alternative to it. To call them collectively the Tributary Theatre is misleading. They do not pour their own waters into the larger stream. They are rather the Parasitic Theatre drawing what little life they have from New York.

An extreme—if, therefore, special—case is the Summer Theatre, which manages to be considerably more hidebound than Broadway. In New York, an actor's name is seldom enough to draw an audience; on Cape Cod, nothing else matters. In New York, a "name" actor usually—not always—has also to be a good performer; in a summer theatre, any nincompoop from Hollywood will do. The formula is a movie star, even one who hasn't acted in twenty years, any old company, any old director, and any old hit play.

So if you come along with a new play which is not too easy or too stupid, which is not identical in pattern with a dozen accepted hits, it may be hard to get it produced on Broadway but it may well be even harder to get it produced anywhere else. A corollary of this fact is that many plays that are worth seeing are done in New York and never sent out

on the road afterwards. The most recent works of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams are examples.

There is also the matter of how the plays are done. But before I tell what I have seen I should like to describe my angle of vision.

2. *The criticizing of it.* There is daily reviewing, and there is weekly reviewing. Most of the daily reviewers are weekly reviewers too, inasmuch as they add a Sunday article to their daily notices. But in principle daily and weekly reviewing differ. The daily reviewer is a reporter setting down right after the performance the responses of an "ordinary" playgoer. It is a very hard job—as reporting on anything, a football match or a street accident, is hard: it calls for a more observant eye and a more fluent pen than most of us possess. The weekly reviewer has the privilege of more time both to write and do his homework. And his aim is different. On most magazines the task he is called on to perform is dual: he has to judge the show as an expert on shows (not an average playgoer) and he has to entertain his readers with his thinking on and around the subject. Since the fate of a play in New York has been settled before the weekly magazine reaches the stands, weekly criticism has no immediate effect. To the weekly critic this seems both good and bad: it is a relief to know that you aren't doing anyone out of a living when you pan a performance and on the other hand it is depressing to feel that what you say has no practical importance. I sometimes feel my reviews have been dropped into a bottomless well, that they are contributions to a discussion that never takes place.

Even if I feel sure I am writing for a reader it is hard for me to know his identity. The weekly reviewer has to satisfy New Yorkers who have seen the play or will see it; he is also read by many outside New York who will not see it. Ninety percent of *New Republic* sales are outside Manhat-

tan. But then the Broadway audience is to a large extent composed of out-of-towners. So I have no idea what proportion of my hypothetical readers sees the shows. I find the thought of two distinct types of readers rather disturbing. I intend each article for both "inside" theatre people and for non-theatre people on the outside; yet there is some evidence that the former find my pieces too full of known information while the latter find them over-allusive and obscure. I should perhaps give the job up as hopeless but for the example of Stark Young who performed it so well for over twenty years. His procedure was simple: he set down what was of interest to him and left readers to fend for themselves.

The New Republic has a tradition in dramatic criticism. My two* predecessors on the magazine—Stark Young and Harold Clurman—stand apart from most of their colleagues in being less concerned with journalism than with theatre. Both have worked on the other side of the footlights. The personal relations with actors which such an interest entails set the critic problems of tact that are susceptible of no perfect solution. It is impossible for him to be both as frank as he should be and as discreet as he should be, as ruthless as he should be and as charitable as he should be. He is always either bowing and scraping or bending over backwards. He knows too much. On the other hand, very few people have ever learnt much about acting and production from seats out front after the rehearsal period is over. These are arts you learn as playwright, actor, director, designer, not as theatre-goer, nor yet as critic.

Whatever a man's estimate of the total intelligence of drama critics, high or low, he cannot fail to notice that—except for a Young or a Clurman—they know far less about acting and directing than about literature. Which is another funny thing about this remarkable class of men. They know

* Strictly speaking, three; and the third, Irwin Shaw, has also had a lot of theatre experience; but he stayed with *The New Republic* only a few months.

something of literature though they are anti-literary; they are pro-theatrical but know little of acting. And so, as was noted above, a mediocre performance of a mediocre play is often greeted as a magnificent performance of a bad play. A brash actor who ruins a play will not be found out. He may very well be praised. The ruin is blamed on the playwright.

This scolding of the reviewers leads to my next topic:

3. *The staging of it.* Nowhere more than in stage design is the matter of expense the decisive one. America spends a lot on stage design and doesn't get very much for its money. Costs are so high that many of the best ideas have to be dropped as too expensive. This is the main fact to consider in making any comparison with the German or Russian stage. Producers breathe a sigh of relief if they are assured that a play can be done with one set. So we get stereotypes. The chief old-fashioned one is the stage drawing room with its familiar rows of bookshelves full of unread books, the couch here, the armchair there, the staircase, the door, the piano and of course the phone. The chief new-fashioned one is the interior-and-exterior-combined (*Death of a Salesman, Rose Tattoo, Streetcar*), of which the porch-and-surroundings is a variant (*All My Sons, Picnic*). Some sets of these two types have been very fine pieces of composition, but the possibilities of variation are limited; and the alternatives to the standard modern patterns seem also to run to type. Thus there is the gorgeous-gaudy show, lowbrow in musical comedies, highbrow in opera; brains and ingenuity and a certain lush taste go into these things; but no style is achieved. Then there is Shakespeare with platforms and drapes. Though the scheme has its points, they are not as many as at one time was expected. The same could be said of that more recent scheme: central staging.

If we look at the designs of Christian Bérard of Paris, Teo Otto of Zurich, or Caspar Neher of Salzburg, we find more

of a style—more of a realized modernity—than even the most brilliant men are giving us here. We don't give our men enough practice, and we don't give them wide enough powers; so they find themselves caught between musical comedy with its miles of gaudy, old-fashioned scenery and the one-set play with its inevitable porch or its inevitable bookcase. We have fine craftsmen but they work under restrictions both artistic and technical that prevent them giving any adequate account of themselves. Ask why, and we are back again with economics.*

In this brief survey I shall not attempt to speak of directing: acting is more important. And, at that, directing today is less the mounting of giant spectacles, the marshalling of crowds, the unfurling of scenery, than it is the training of actors. Because we have no national theatre and no network of repertory theatres we offer our young actors far too little either of variety or continuity. Still, certain remedial measures have been taken. The creation of the Group Theatre was one such measure—back in the thirties. It was followed by the creation of the Actors' Studio in the forties. In these organizations, a new generation of American actors has been trained, and a new type of American actor has evolved. The easiest way of telling the layman about the new acting is to inform him that he has seen it in *Death of a Salesman* or *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It is a deliberate American alternative to the elocutionary "style acting" that we import from England. It seizes on the nervous excitement of American life—healthy or unhealthy—and communicates it. It makes older-fashioned acting seem stilted, slow, and emptily declamatory. I never felt this so sharply as when seeing *Tea and Sympathy* as directed by the head of the Studio, Elia Kazan, the night after a Margaret Web-

* There are other resources we don't use beside the human ones. I am not equipped to expound the theory and practice of George C. Izenour of Yale. But it is pretty clear that his researches have rendered the switchboard—and therefore much of the stagecraft—of all our theatres quite obsolete . . .

ster production (*The Strong Are Lonely*). It was like finding myself on an express train after sitting yawning in the waiting room. On the other hand, reviewing plays which are acted by members of the Studio, I have had frequent occasion to note the narrow scope of the newer acting. It almost seems limited to the portrayal of violent and neurasthenic types.

Two other kinds of acting are expertly practiced in America. The first is musical comedy acting, which includes singing and perhaps dancing. The second is light comedy acting. The lay public scarcely distinguishes the two; yet the distinction is in fact a fairly broad one. Musical comedy technique starts—I think—with song: not so much with the music as such, not with singing, but with the art of performing a song, handing it to the public by means of singing, half-singing, interpolated speaking, and pantomime. Then the postures and gestures—the whole art of putting a song over—extend themselves even into the parts of musical comedy which are not sung; so that, if you see a musical comedy actor in a straight play, you say: It seems as if he's always just going to sing. His bouncy manner, the little springs he takes from one foot to the other, the way he keeps lifting his arms in salutation, or extending his fist in a punch—all these things come from the pantomime of a singer. It is quite a jump from this to light comedy—from, say, Alfred Drake in *Kismet* to Elliott Nugent in *The Male Animal.* Light comedy has an inner connection with broader forms (like the musical) but conceals it; and that is the joke. There is a portentous pretense of grave reality. The vitality of a performance in light comedy depends on the degree of tension between the seeming reality and the concealed madness. The comic climaxes are reached when gay and furious imps of folly come surging up into a hitherto decorous situation. Any drunk scene is likely to be a simple instance

of the pattern; and, in a sense, all light comedy is drunken comedy.

Domestic drama, musical comedy, light comedy—these are what American actors are trained to perform. They aren't all of theatre. If we want to do Shakespeare or Wilde or Shaw or Eliot we are in trouble. British actors are called upon, and—to the extent that Actors' Equity lets them in—a provisional solution is arrived at. In the long run American actors have got to be trained to do these other kinds of work themselves. Shakespeare in particular is an author each country has to study and interpret for itself. The American Shakespeare might even be better than the British; at any rate it would be different.

4. *The writing of it.* Many of the most serviceable scripts of the past ten years have been in the less serious categories—musical and light comedy. The book of a musical is seldom impressive of itself; you go to musical comedy for everything except the words; yet, behind the music and dancing, the book may be efficiently doing its job.

Light comedy tends to have witty words wittily spaced out and arranged. If one were asked: What is the best American play? one might not have the temerity to say *The Male Animal* or *Born Yesterday*, yet they are better plays than most of those that have a higher reputation; and certainly, if you want a good evening, a light comedy is nowadays more likely to supply it than the so-called serious drama. During the 1953-4 season, for instance, one of the dullest evenings was an earnest treatise on the United Nations called *The Prescott Proposals*. One of the brightest was a joke about a comic-strip artist called *King of Hearts*.

Even inferior plays in the lighter vein often have something rather striking about them. It was agreed that a play called *Men of Distinction* was one of the very bad plays of the 1952-3 season; yet there was something very good about

it. In fact it had one virtue of such a provoking sort that not only the deficiency of the play but also its merit militated against success. This virtue was a cocky satirical humor totally unsoftened by sentimentality. There being no nice character in the play "to root for" you were unable to detach yourself from the non-nice characters. What made matters worse, they seemed nice. One of them was a Harvard man as personable and charming as Harvard's representatives on Broadway, Brooks Atkinson and John Mason Brown. But he was a pimp. (I said at the beginning that the fate of a play at the hands of the reviewers was unpredictable; *Men of Distinction* is an exception.)

Turning to plays of more serious intent, I do not know which are the best of the past ten years. *The Iceman Cometh* would be a candidate, *The Autumn Garden* another, *The Country Girl* a third, yet all three are in the nature of postscripts to a communication written in an earlier decade. I prefer to pick out for discussion plays which belong more exclusively to the period under review. Of course they have traditions behind them. Two traditions in particular: that of the social drama and that of the psychological "mood play".

It is agreed that the most interesting social dramas of the period are *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible.* Sidney Kingsley's version of *Darkness at Noon* is just as skilful a piece of craftsmanship, is in subject matter much closer to the center of social conflict, and makes a much clearer statement, but, for all the exciting bits that are its component parts, it is not quite a satisfying play. One reason for this is that the statement it makes is not only clear but obvious, not challengingly a little ahead of public opinion but boringly a little behind it. Why pay five dollars to be told that communism is unpleasant and immoral?

Maybe some people wish to. In that case I shift my ground and say they shouldn't. We shouldn't go to the theatre to

have our already inflated self-righteousness further blown up by ritual denunciation of an acknowledged villain's villainy. The theatre should be less serious than that—or more so. It should be a place either of innocent frivolity—or of moral responsibility. There is an unending war to fight in our theatre against those who are frivolous without being innocent and moralistic without being moral.

But not many people did wish to see *Darkness at Noon.*

They saw Arthur Miller's plays. Why? How could Mr. Miller's plays be more interesting if, as I have said, they are no better in craftsmanship, are less clear in meaning, and further from the center of social struggle?

At the center of things nowadays is the matter of communism. Mr. Kingsley put his play together to say so, and the play falls a little flat because we hold the truth of the proposition to be self-evident. What does Mr. Miller say about communism? He doesn't mention it; yet the word—spoken or not—is likely to be at the center of a discussion of Mr. Miller. Now which fact is more important—that Mr. Miller doesn't mention communism—or that you don't discuss him without mentioning it?

Suppose we ask in any group of liberal intellectuals: do *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* present a Marxian analysis of American society? Or: does *The Crucible* say that American communists should not be investigated? Some will answer yes, others will answer no; a certain heat and anxiety will get into the discussion; and a very vocal group will resent the fact that the questions have been asked in the first place. Mr. Miller may hold such and such a position, but, we shall be told, it is not—definitely not—playing fair to say so. In short, we encounter certain ambiguities and we find that these ambiguities have a strong emotional resonance among our fellows.

What is the nature of this resonance? What would explain so large an investment of emotion in Mr. Miller's plays on

the part of those who don't wish us to ask questions? Take *The Crucible.* It is a play in which Mr. Miller complains that the accuser is always considered holy, the accused guilty. We think of McCarthyism; and we think of it again when we find that Mr. Miller's story is about a witch hunt. What is unusual about Mr. Miller's treatment of McCarthyism? One thing above all others: that he sets up as the offense which the seventeenth-century McCarthys accused people of an offense which it is impossible to commit: the practice of magic. If to the McCarthyites (of both periods) an accused man is almost automatically guilty, to Mr. Miller he is almost automatically innocent. If one were to ask: what fantasy would give most perfect expression to a communist's feeling of innocence in the face of McCarthyism? one couldn't do better than reply: Mr. Miller's story. Mr. Miller has missed the essence of our political situation. He has thereby missed a more interesting dramatic situation. But he has hit upon a wish-fulfilling fantasy that, conceivably, has a stronger appeal than either; and with it he has soothed the bad conscience of a generation.

Just as the good liberal is not supposed to mention communism when discussing Mr. Miller in general, so he is not supposed to mention communism—or McCarthyism—when discussing *The Crucible* in particular. The production of the play was preceded by a quarrel between Mr. Miller and Elia Kazan. Mr. Kazan went on record as a former communist and named some of his former comrades; in the last scene of *The Crucible,* Mr. Miller presented a man whose dignity consists in refusing to talk under pressure of the investigators. But that one is not supposed to find any connection between that scene and the Kazan incident I discovered when I tried to get some remarks on the subject into a liberal journal. The play, I was told, was about the seventeenth century. I gathered that, though I could have

criticized Mr. Kazan's attitude, I mustn't criticize Mr. Miller's.

It is no business of mine—in this context—that Mr. Miller may be wrong. I am contending that he is ambiguous and this in a way that would amount to trickery were it deliberate. I assume that, like the rest of us, he doesn't deliberately deceive others but involuntarily deceives himself. What gives this fact public importance is that so many of our fellow citizens want to share these particular self-deceptions with him. Let me illustrate. Indignation is Mr. Miller's stock in trade: his writing has Attack.* But what is he attacking? And is he really attacking it? "He's attacking the American way of life," says someone. "Why nothing of the sort," says someone else, "he shows great sympathy for it." The punch is threatened; and then pulled. We are made to feel the boldness of the threat; then we are spared the violence of the blow. Now isn't this particular ambiguity strikingly characteristic of that large wing of the liberal movement which has been overawed by communism? They admire the audacity of communism all the more because they don't share it. They admire fearless outspokenness above all things; yet if outspokenness is actually to be feared, they fear it; ** and choose fearless silence. *The Crucible* is a play for people who think that pleading the Fifth Amendment is not only a white badge of purity but also a red badge of courage.

Another habit of the quasi-liberal mind has been to say that of course so and so is not a communist and yet, when it turns out that so and so is or was a communist, to register no dismay, not even surprise. Of course he wasn't a communist;

* "Daring is of the essence. Its very nature is incompatible with an undue affection for moderation, respectability, even fairness, and responsibleness."—Arthur Miller in "Many Writers: Few Plays," *The New York Times,* August 10, 1952.

** "But we have an atmosphere of dread just the same, an unconsciously—or consciously—accepted party line, a sanctified complex of moods and attitudes, proper and improper. If nothing else comes of it one thing surely has—it has made it dangerous to dare, and worse still, impractical."—Arthur Miller, *ibid.*

but, if he was, so what? This ambiguity has been given rather powerful expression by Lillian Hellman in *The Children's Hour* which was revived in the 1952–3 season with changes expressly calculated to suggest the play's relevance to McCarthyism. The play can be translated into political terms as follows. Someone is accused of communism, and says "How absurd, I never heard of communism, this is a witch hunt, my accuser is psychotic," and you believe him and your heart bleeds. Then this someone says: "Well, maybe I do carry a party card, either it's all this red-baiting that's driven me into the arms of communism or, well, being a communist isn't as bad as you assume. The social system *is* pretty terrible. You admit *that*, I suppose? I'm going to kill myself in a minute. My death will make you feel awful. Please be indignant about it."

The Crucible and *The Children's Hour* represent a type of liberalism that has been dangerous and is now obsolescent. *Darkness at Noon* is more defensible on political or even moral grounds; yet it fails to stir us for reasons I have tried to state. If these are our best social plays, one wonders what the future holds for the genre. Shall we ever have a social drama with the purity and force of *The Power of Darkness* or *The Lower Depths*? *

Perhaps the creative forces in America are no longer running into political art. More prominent, certainly, in our theatre than social drama is the "mood play." I am referring to the school of playwrights—the only American school of playwrights—which is headed by Tennessee Williams and includes Carson McCullers, William Inge, and Jane Bowles. An older playwright, John van Druten, has hailed this school as a fine new drama gloriously superseding the old in

* A couple of shows from the 1953-4 season—*End as a Man* and *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial*—suggest that the New Conservatism may have a vogue in the theatre under the slogan: Respect Authority. Both shows have force; but it is scarcely the force of their message; and both are as impure and equivocal as any liberal effort.

much the same way as William Archer hailed the school of Ibsen half a century ago. One has one's doubts.

The moral weakness of the social drama is that it scorns or neglects the self. Liberal idealism of the sort I have described springs from fear—even hatred—of the self. The new psychological drama, school of Williams, is equal and opposite. It springs from fear of the Other, of society, of the world, and from pre-occupation with the self. Now art that doesn't spring from the whole man but from one side of him tends, I think, not to become art at all but to remain neurotic or quasi-neurotic fantasy. The archetype of political fantasy is, perhaps, an imagined oration to a congress of the Party of your dreams. The archetype of non-political fantasy is an imagined confession to a psychoanalyst. Are the attitudes we find embodied in dramatic fantasies of either kind any more adequate for good drama then they are for the good life?

However this may be, one can certainly take exception to the view of form and structure implied in the new works and openly championed by their admirers. Mr. van Druten puts this view in a nutshell when he says he'd like a play to be all atmosphere and no plot. He says he finds inspiration and guidance in *Member of the Wedding, The Glass Menagerie,* and *The Cherry Orchard.*

These are not plays I should wish to attack: one is a masterpiece, all are good evenings of theatre. However, none of them seems to me as mysteriously structureless as Mr. van Druten implies. Perhaps Plot is the name he gives to a structure he finds bad or at least obtrusive? Or is it just that he enjoys economy of means and the audacity with which a playwright can push big, tempting events into the background? Chekhov could push a duel-to-the-death off into the wings while the center of the stage is occupied by someone reading a newspaper and whistling a tune. Mrs. McCullers kills off the little brother between scenes of *Member of the*

Wedding. This is not to say that either Chekhov or Mrs. McCullers has no plot, though Mr. van Druten admits that *Member of the Wedding* is open to criticism on the grounds that its action is too slender; which is to say it has a plot but not a very big—or perhaps a very good?—plot. Only by the beauty of the lines, the addition of music, romantic lighting and the personality of two fine actresses could the play command a whole evening. It is a little story prolonged by theatrical legerdemain.

Picnic I do not know in the state the author left it but only in its final state as directed by Joshua Logan. Mr. Inge clearly contributed admirable character sketches, group portraits, local color, anecdotes. . . . Can one venture to say that it took the showmanship of a musical-comedy director to give *Picnic* the size of a complete show?

Jane Bowles' *In a Summer House* posed a similar problem but met with a different solution. This play had rather a *succès d'estime* in New York largely, it is said, because of a performance by Judith Anderson which the critics called magnificent. Magnificent or not, this performance had little relation to the character Mrs. Bowles conceived. Yet—and this is my point—I don't know that the play would have stood up by itself. It needed a buttress made of harder material; and *that* Miss Anderson certainly is.

I am not interested in establishing that any of the plays I mention is weak but only that it might have been stronger had the author not followed current fashion and assumed he could get along without the traditional kinds of support. I do not mean that a bad playwright could ever become a good one by dropping one attitude and taking up another—only that mistaken notions can hamper a good writer. (I assume that writers we take an interest in are to some extent good.) Nor am I saying that Mr. van Druten's book is having a bad influence. Rather, it sums up—and is influenced by—the view

of drama which the more sophisticated people in the theatre had already come to hold.

This view is largely false. Chekhov's plays (for example) have a cast-iron structure, only it is concealed, like the girders of a modern building. Tennessee Williams (for another example) is no model of plotlessness. The fashionable components of plot may have shifted since Archer's day but *A Streetcar Named Desire* has a strong, straight-forward story, organized on principles that would be familiar to any earlier generation. What is the play in fact but the American version of *Miss Julia*? Even *The Glass Menagerie* has what I would call a plot. In short, I cannot see that the plays Mr. van Druten admires were constructed according to the theory he expounds; on the contrary, they seem to me to have merit insofar as they contravene this theory.

5. *Criticizing the criticizing of it.* Having stated where I think our playwrights are going wrong, I should like to end by saying where criticism, including of course my own, may go wrong. I shall go wrong if I imagine that the playwright needs me to tell him what to do. Drama criticism is not a disguised and prolonged course in playwriting. If a man can write plays, he doesn't need a critic to push his pen. If he can't, he doesn't need a critic to dig his grave.

A critic is only a judge. A judge doesn't help you to commit your crime or even to abstain from committing it. His verdict—too late to influence the actions under consideration —has value, if at all, not for the prisoner, but for society at large. I inferred earlier that the drama critic mustn't be modest and pretend he's the man in the street. (Between aisle seat and desk chair he knows only the inside of a taxi.) I am insisting now that he also lay no claim to direct influence on writers. If by chance he does exert such an influence, and it is salutary, so much the better; this is service over and above the call of duty. All he regularly and impera-

tively does is help to create the climate of opinion in which the playwrights live.

That is no small matter. The cultural air has often become oppressive. And it has done so, not when criticism was keen and demanding, but when it was non-existent. One writer who resented the power of critics got himself made propaganda minister and legislated criticism out of existence, substituting *Kunstbetrachtung*—that is, reportage and eulogy. This was Goebbels. In Russia, critical analysis is dismissed as formalistic. A writer is praised as a yes-man or silenced as a saboteur.

Though the direct influence of dramatic criticism is small, its indirect effect could be considerable. Bernard Shaw stated the converse of this proposition when he spoke of the "ruinous privilege of exemption from vigilant and implacable criticism." There is, of course, a converse of this converse: that the right to criticize enjoins the duties of vigilance and implacability.

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IS THE DRAMA AN EXTINCT SPECIES?

Nobody disputes that something is wrong. People have been saying that it's because the theatre is badly organized, and other people have been replying: not at all, it's simply that there's a dearth of good plays. There being a good deal of truth on both sides, it may be wise to sort out some of the points.

To begin with "good plays." One is concerned with two orders of merit not always clearly enough distinguished: talent and genius. Genius lies to a great extent outside any useful discussion because nothing we can say or do will produce it. It comes uncalled for or not at all. What can be discussed is the welcome we give it. And the sad fact is that we welcome it too little and too late. We welcome it when it is safe to do so, when it is practically impossible not to do so. The great modern example is Bernard Shaw. To have welcomed him in the Eighteen Nineties, when he was "dangerous," would have been enterprising. To accept him after 1910, as the theatre mostly did, was to accept the accepted. By that time the public had learned how to ward off Shaw's blows: critics thought him a clown, admirers thought him a classic; whichever way you look at it, he was through.

Since the death of Shaw, how many geniuses are left in the field? Readers will agree that they are few, even if they don't accept my nominations. And among the few I should have

liked to nominate some are not accurately defined as playwrights. Charlie Chaplin and Eduardo De Filippo, though they have taken on the dramatist's tasks and performed them admirably, achieve greatness in the composite capacity of actor-playwright, a special and perhaps indissoluble union of actor, role and author. I am left, it seems to me, with but two names: Bertolt Brecht and Sean O'Casey. Yet even two are enough to make us modify the proposition that there are no new plays for us to do. The plays are there. The question is why we don't do them. The answer cannot lie wholly in their authors' politics which are (for present purposes) not very different from Shaw's. It lies, rather, in Time: Brecht and O'Casey are now where Shaw was before 1910. When they have "dated," Broadway will announce that they are "timely."

Genius, notoriously, is tardily recognized in all the arts. One cannot be surprised at this. One's surprise should rather be reserved for the fact that there is genius in the offing at all. If economic history goes slump: boom, slump: boom, the history of playwriting, one is tempted to say, goes slump slump slump. The dramatic critic is not called upon to explain why at any given moment there are no great playrights. Empirical reasoning would more probably lead him to argue that there never could be a great playwright, just as empirical reasoning would lead a moralist to argue that there could never be a saint. You are not surprised to find money changers in the temple; the surprising sight is Christ with a whip. One is amazed at Shakespeare and Ibsen; Thomas Dekker and Henry Arthur Jones one takes for granted.

However—or rather, consequently—it is much more with the Dekkers and Joneses that we must be concerned. They, if anyone, are our regular stand-bys; their presence is not just an occasional blessing, it is something we require; it belongs to the minimum demands of theatre. In a world of

2,000,000,000 inhabitants it is fair to assume that there are always thousands of them. This means that if we can justly complain of a dearth of plays we are not so much protesting that very little genius exists as implying that talent, though it exists, is being deflected into other channels. The Dekkers and Joneses exist but are not writing plays.

So much the better for them. It is all too likely that the artistic impulse—the dramatic impulse particularly—can best find satisfaction today outside the arts altogether. There is the drama of science; and even the drama of politics need not be contemptible. Among our young people I find the artistic temperament, characterized by moral sensibility and vital energy, in undergraduates who will be chemists, lawyers and doctors, more than in graduate students who will be professionally occupied with the arts. Those in whom the need for literary expression is irrepressible write fiction or poetry, in either of which modes they can work unbullied by boobs, and in one of which they might even make a living. (Sometimes I think all our poetic and fictional talent today is dramatic talent scared away by the idiocy of the theatre. Certainly, if Ernest Hemingway or Robert Penn Warren could devote ten years to theatrical work he would write even the best of our playwrights off the stage.)

Nor can anyone pretend that TV and the movies attract only the less gifted. The time has gone by, if it ever existed, when the average film is inferior to the average play. Indeed certain stage forms have been superseded and rendered obsolete by the movies. Once *A Prisoner of Zenda* has been on the screen, you would never want to see it on the stage. Pictures like *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and *High Noon* transcend all the theatre's efforts to present adventure. I can explain the drama critics' enthusiasm for the current thriller *Dial M for Murder* only on the assumption that they don't go to the movies.

In short, playwriting talent has been deflected along with

the theatre public into TV, the movies, poetry, the novel, or out of the arts altogether, with the result that (to coin a phrase) "there is no American drama." There is a lack not only of Shakespeares and O'Caseys but also of Dekkers and Joneses. In America playwriting is not yet a profession.

Playwriting may be said to be a profession when playwrights of high average talent are given their chance, their chance being production by performers who also constitute a profession. The American theatre does not offer playwrights this chance. A play cannot be produced on Broadway unless its producers think it is likely to run for a year. Plays of "mere promise" are excluded; the theatre is a place where promises are not kept. Hence, though there is a place for the playwright to "succeed," there is no place for him to begin or to develop.

It has been said: "Without *Titus Andronicus,* no *Hamlet.*" Yet if a Shakespeare came along today, what would happen? Either *Titus* would never get produced at all; or it would be a flop and drive the Bard to drink, teaching, and TV; or it would be a hit, and the poet would spend an anxious lifetime writing twenty more *Tituses.*

A profession of playwrights, I have intimated, presupposes a profession of actors. Despite Actors' Equity Association, there is no such profession, there are merely some arrangements to stop employers running off with their workers' wages. An adequate definition of an acting profession would include what the French understand by métier—a standard of workmanship that you achieve by joining the group and by practice; as with playwrights, the lack is apprenticeship in the beginning and continuity later. You do not know what the art of acting is capable of unless you have seen an ensemble of players who have worked together, year in, year out.

In the matter of acting, America has much to learn from some other countries, notably, France, Germany and Russia.

(I don't know enough about the Orient to justify any Eastern representation.) In the matter of playwriting, I know of but one country where things are, perhaps, in a healthier state than here, and that is France. Only in Paris, it seems to me, have we today the impression that playwriting is a profession. A literate play stands the same chance of professional performance that, with us, a novel stands of publication. There is consequently a large band of playwrights who in Paris are regular and commercial and over here are (or would be) *avant garde:* for example, Achard, Anouilh, Obey, Salacrou. There is also an overlap with poetry and the novel, as the names of Cocteau, Mauriac, Montherlant and Sartre testify. Even the most "unplayable" poet is played: I saw *Le Soulier de Satin* and *Partage de Midi* lavishly staged in two of the largest theatres.

In England an "unpopular" poet like M. Claudel might well be broadcast on the Third Program; he'd never reach the West End stage unless he were willing, like Mr. Eliot in *The Cocktail Party,* to reach it on its own terms. Shakespeare continues to use up the best energies of English theatre. London produces him and ignores Mr. O'Casey today, exactly as it produced him and ignored Shaw in the Nineties. Italy, ever as poor in drama as she is rich in theatricality, is finding that a profession of playwrights cannot be legislated into existence even with the help of subsidies. Germany is the living proof that a well-organized and decentralized repertory system does not necessarily, or at any rate immediately, produce its own dramatists. It is amazing to think for how little time the German theatres were not playing. Goebbels closed them when he proclaimed total mobilization in 1944. By 1945 most of them were destroyed by bombs anyway. But the actors were at work again as soon as the war ended. Since then the old buildings have been repaired or new ones built. That there are no new playwrights only

proves that there is a deeper damage than that of air-raids. Somewhere a nerve had been cut.

Soviet Russia I do not know at firsthand. Russian movies suggest directly, reports of reliable witnesses suggest indirectly, that the Russians still have the greatest profession of actors in the world. What one knows of their playwrights is less pleasant. If the degree of organization were the criterion, I imagine the Russian playwrights are the most "professional" in the world. But if the criterion is organization at all, it is organization to a certain end, namely, enabling playwrights to grow to their full stature. Russia offsets the gift of a fabulous theatre and a good living with a heavy price in censorial restrictions. To the observation that Shakespeare also worked under a censorship, I can only reply that it is open to anyone to compare Elizabethan with Soviet censorship, both as to the regulations and their enforcement. In such a comparison, the Queen, and even the Puritan city fathers with whom she had little in common, will make a good showing. If some of the Puritans would have been as strict as Stalin, had they had the opportunity, it remains important that they did not have the opportunity.

A comparison of the two epochs and regimes could not be made at all except that we still tend to think of censorship in an old-fashioned way. We think of particular acts of censorship, the striking out of a forbidden word, the banning of a single book. We have barely realized that a greater efficiency in censorship has brought in its train a new mentality both in the censors and their victims. I have in mind not only the more macabre horrors of the situation but also the prosaic dullness of Soviet intellectuals. It resembles all too closely the dullness of the bourgeoisie against which all left-wing movements, as far as the intelligentsia is concerned, were a revolt.

Not long ago, two American playwrights said in *The New York Times* that the American drama was threatened by the

totalitarian mentality—in this case represented by the anti-red Senator McCarthy. One of them—Arthur Miller—seemed to feel that the American playwright could no longer speak freely, the other—oddly enough, James Thurber—that he could no longer even breathe freely—freely enough to relax and be funny.* Both statements have value as warnings; I cannot see that they have as yet much substance in fact. Satiric or other comedy may presuppose more freedom than at present exists in Russia, I cannot see—thinking of Aristophanes and Molière—that it presupposes more freedom than at present exists in America, even granting a harsh estimate of how much that is.** And in what sense have our playwrights lost their freedom of speech? It would, I suppose, be impossible for a communist playwright to find backers for an openly communist play, just as it would have been impossible for a fascist playwright to find backers for an openly fascist play at any time between 1930 and 1945. Even so, the only communist play I know of during the past few years had a small New York production and full-scale productions in Iron Curtain countries which presumably pay royalties. Is the present plea for freedom of speech a plea for any opinions other than communist opinions? Or

* "The constant open season on writers has seriously depressed literature in America. It has taken the exuberance and gaiety out of the theatre . . . Playrights may come out of hiding and start working happily again if they hear the old reassuring sound of America laughing; but if the subpoenas for Hellman and Odets are the beginning of an endless probe of Broadway, then the American theatre cannot be saved and will die."—"Dark Suspicions," *The New York Times,* July 27, 1952. See also footnotes on p. 257 above. It is fair to add that Clifford Odets is less in agreement with Mr. Miller and Miss Hellman than with Mr. Kazan, that is to say, he believed his duty was not to keep silent but to talk.

** Heine said: "It is certainly a mistake to attribute the sterility of the German Thalia to the lack of free air; or, if I may be allowed the frivolous word, to the lack of political freedom. That which is called political freedom is in no wise necessary to the prosperity of comedy. If one recalls Venice, where, in spite of the leaden chambers and the secret drownings, Goldoni and Gozzi created their masterpieces; or Spain, where, despite the absolutist axe and the orthodox stake, those delightful cloak and dagger pieces were devised . . ."—*The French Stage.*

is the complaint that any unorthodox opinion is dubbed communist? If that's it, the unjustly accused playwright deserves our sympathy and help, like the unjustly accused actor and professor. What I cannot see is how dramaturgy suffers.

A radical playwright, in any case, can't have it both ways: he can't make his living by flinging accusations at established society and then scold society for taking his living away if it flings some accusations back. In the past, it has been very safe on Broadway to hold dangerous views, and the result has been a spate of easy virtue. The only playwright who could not have got his plays put on would have been the anti-liberal. On the negro question, for example, Broadway has its own strict orthodoxy. The Broadway radical has been in fact one of the more pampered members of the community. Though an unpampered one said, when a play of his was rejected, "Well, I don't expect them to pay for their own liquidation," the pampered ones may be defined as those who expect just that.

In any event, we must look at a much longer span of time than Mr. Miller and Mr. Thurber were considering. The impression we have of "decline" over a period of five or even ten years is reversed as soon as one play we like comes along. I agree that *The Male Animal* is better than the comedies of recent seasons, but there may be a better one than *The Male Animal* at any moment (by Mr. Thurber, for example). Pondering the American theatre since 1900, one is bound to long for plays better than any on the whole record. Before 1918, after all, the American drama was almost moronic. The improvement in the Twenties was so great it rather naturally went to everyone's head. O'Neill was thought to have superseded Ibsen and to be comparable, rather, to Shakespeare and Aeschylus. I respect several of the critics who carried on in this way and I have been relieved to discover that, when challenged, they retract their hyperboles and hence call for no refutation from the rest of us. There

was no Elizabethan Age, there were not even any Shaws, Chekhovs and Strindbergs, but there were the Provincetown, the Guild, the Group Theatre, the Mercury, the Federal Theatre. At last there were some playwrights, even if there could not, all at once, be a profession of playwriting. There were theatres with the idea of continuity in them. From this germ, if at all, must grow an acting profession.

And now what? Circumstances continue to be against the playwright. Production in New York grows more and more expensive, public abasement before the eight daily reporters more and more abject. The Administration of Eisenhower is not likely to restore a Federal theatre which even a Democratic Congress let fall. The American National Theatre and Academy is interested, I am told, in decentralizing the theatre and depriving New York of its monopoly. Whether its leaders know how this can be done, or whether, if so, they can do it, is another matter. However, it is probably worth while to support ANTA; not knowing what "the one thing necessary" is we must perforce try everything. Every effort in the direction of a professional theatre, a theatre with continuity, must be backed up.

Can our efforts succeed? The facts wouldn't lead one to expect so, nor have I (or other people, apparently) a convincing over-all plan for the conquest of the facts. I console myself, on the other hand, with the reflection that drama—drama of talent, let alone drama of genius—has not come in the past by prescription, nor was it predictable. The professions of playwriting and acting which Shakespeare entered as a young man had not existed much more than a generation before him. Dramatic history can be swift, especially when the preparations have been made; and the activity of 1900-50 in America might certainly be regarded as preparatory. What is more, if drama died easy, it would be already dead. The art has a powerful hold on quite a number of people, among whom I count myself. And if now I seem to be work-

ing up an optimistic peroration, I would ask: what *can* I think? If you were a pterodactyl of the decadence, no one could expect you to talk in the tone of restrospective biology. Your business would be to die; and you can die with all the more dignity if you think you're not going to die at all.

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AFTERTHOUGHTS

Custom permits the dramatic critic, when he reprints his notices in a book, to dot the i's and cross the t's which the pressure of journalistic routine had prevented him dotting and crossing before. Each notice remains, however, a record of the response which was in fact his in the theatre. To "correct" this response later would be to fail to give a truthful eye-witness account without succeeding in giving anything decisively better—for even the most conceited of us cannot hope that his report will be complete and authoritative. Subsequent reflections have the status, not of godlike objectivity and definitive revision, but simply of . . . subsequent reflections. Hence the title of this appendix to my book.

E.B.

page 92. HAS WEAKNESSES, HE HAS NO FAULTS. Since these words were written, it has been urged that Mr. Miller's hero is shown not to be faultless in that he has committed adultery. A fault indeed by seventeenth-century standards, adultery in the context of Mr. Miller's play is but a weakness, that is to say, a "fault" which author and audience forgive him—for the good reason that they're aren't sure it is a fault: it is an endearing bit of weakness. Some months after the opening reviewed above, Mr. Miller personally

re-directed the play in such a way as to minimize its politics and maximize the personal story of husband, wife, and girl friend. If his intention was to prove his play not to be about McCarthyism, he failed. If any part of my original review would not apply to the later production, it is the phrase NOWHERE IS THERE ANY SENSE OF GUILT. When E. G. Marshall and Maureen Stapleton played the husband and wife, one had the sense of another impulse seeking—if not quite finding—utterance. Is it perhaps an impulse that will find utterance in another play—on the subject of the tensions of unhappy marriage?

page 106. YOUNG MAN IN HIS UNDERWEAR. Mr. Inge thinks I stooped pretty low in making him responsible for an advertiser's handiwork. But my point was, rather, that it is the *destiny* of a work like *Come Back, Little Sheba* to be advertised in this way; the ad is an accurate index of the play's primary appeal. That the works of Faulkner, or even the Holy Bible, also have such an appeal seems to me not relevant; for that appeal seems to me in these cases peripheral and perverse, in the case of Mr. Inge central and legitimate. Mr. Inge tells me that the choice of a protagonist like the hero of *Picnic* is to be explained by the prevalence of the phenomenon in the United States and not by the character of the author. But many phenomena which Mr. Inge ignores are prevalent in the United States. Mr. Inge is a human being: we must regard his choices as significant.

page 108. KAZAN . . . VIRTUALLY CO-AUTHOR. This sentence brought me a friendly but firm note from Mr. Kazan, stating that he had not written one line either of *Streetcar* or *Salesman*. I take it Mr. Kazan includes under the heading of authorship only the dialogue. But it seems to me that if a director helps to create the very idea of a character—changing it from what it was in the author's

original script—he is co-author—even though the creating and changing has been done without recourse to new dialogue. Dialogue after all is only one of a playwright's means of communication.

page 109. COULD NOT HAVE BEEN DONE . . . BY A CHOREOGRAPHER. A correspondent calls my attention to the fact that in the program Anna Sokolow is listed as Assistant Director. If part of what I attribute to Mr. Kazan should have been attributed to Miss Sokolow, then she was here less of a choreographer in the accepted sense than a director of actors. Also noteworthy is the fact that the style of the "choreographic" episodes did not differ from Mr. Kazan's style as we know it elsewhere.

page 110. THE PLAY IS DONE FOR. And so it proved. Only a small public is interested in a director's work as such. Only a small public goes to see a play because it is "interesting." And, as a matter of fact, the small audience at *Camino Real* did *not* profess to attend for this reason but, on the contrary, adhered to the usual Broadway pattern of extremes: if a play isn't the worst ever written, it's the best; if you aren't bored to tears, you are thrilled to the marrow. The effect was that of a clique, if not a claque. Because illiterates have to sneer at Mr. Williams for being literate, his literate admirers band together to hail him as a model not only of literacy but of literature.

page 172. CRAVEN CONFORMISM. A letter published in *The New Republic* declared that Mr. Willingham's novel was just what I said that his play was not: an *exposé* of a military academy. So I read the novel. Unlike the play, it does seem to belong to the tradition of the *exposé*: the reader's main response is "What a terrible place!" Yet the play still seems to me to have been what I said it was,

the interesting question being: how did it happen? For the change does not seem to have been wholly intentional. Comparing passage with passage you would generally exclaim: "But that's in the novel too!" For example: A crucial question in the plot is whether the army authorities are corrupt —whether they will kowtow to a cadet whose father gives the school money. And the army proves just as incorruptible in the novel as in the play. The reason the novel gives a different general impression is that its method is different. It is a naturalistic panorama of life in a military academy. The author is saying: "I'm just telling you how things are." The facts pile up so horribly that you say: "Never will any son of mine go to . . ." etc. But the author could add: "Read it again. You'll see that I don't blame the army. It's just life."

This kind of naturalism seems to me rather disingenuous, and there is a parallel disingenuousness in the foul language of the book. If we object to it, the author will say we're the kind of people who wanted *Ulysses* banned in 1920; he may also remind us that this is how cadets *really* talk and act. We needn't be impressed. The brutalities of *End as a Man* are too quick and easy a way to a reader's nervous system; the fact that you or I may be a prude is not a sufficient justification for their use; nor is the fact that they are facts—"art is art because it is not life." It is time to acknowledge that while the generation of Zola was genuinely audacious and, so to say, earned its right to ugliness, "Zolaism" now requires no audacity at all and is practiced, unearned, by many conventional and dull minds . . .

We associate the accumulation of sordid details (it is perhaps rather comic that we do) with social conscience; *ergo, End as a Man* is a novel of social conscience. But, though there are actors nowadays who are willing to urinate on stage, audiences are not so "broadminded" as to accept such a performance and time is short; so that, when *End as a Man* is adapted to the stage, it undergoes a change whether the au-

thor wishes it to or not. In becoming less "dirty," it becomes less of a document; and in becoming less of a document, it loses something in indignation; less urine, less adrenalin.

A play perforce presents characters and little else. In the nature of things characters on a stage tend not to be presented naturalistically—as part of a milieu—but morally; which means that, unless the author is subtle, they are villains or heroes. Evil is as evil does. If the stage shows you doing something bad, you are a bad man; whereas if the audience finds itself muttering "you have a point there," you are a good man.

I describe the process of "dramatizing" in the most primitive terms because the theatre is commonly a rather primitive place and *End as a Man* is certainly a rather primitive play. Placed on stage, the Gazzara character (Jocko de Paris) becomes far more of a monster than he was in the pages of a book. Conversely, the General, for whom the reader feels no affection whatsoever, when he walks on stage with such upright things to say becomes, *ipso facto*, a nice man, your uncle or mine.

The book *End as a Man* was published in 1947, is about the year 1940, and belongs, by mentality, to the progressive literature of the thirties. The play was produced in 1953, seems to be about the army in 1953, and certainly belongs to the New Conservatism of 1953. Yet the changes could all have happened automatically—in the process of dramatization.

page 183. NOTABLE CARTOON PORTRAITS. Notable but not, unhappily, harmonized, one with another. The production of *Mademoiselle Colombe* was marred by a certain disorder which came from heterogeneity of styles which, in turn, came from uncertainty in the producers' minds: they didn't know what they wanted the play to be like. This is not mentioned in my review because it wasn't immediately apparent to me. I was worried about something and, being

unable to define it, was silent. Behind both the silence and the worry was no doubt my desire that the show be good and my annoyance with the people who won't see M. Anouilh's talent. I realize that I am here exposing pure prejudice on my part. I like to think that most of my reviews are less prejudiced than this one. I would rather be prejudiced in favor of a show than against it, yet I hasten to add that I never consciously suppress my reservations in order to help a show along, any more than I consciously exaggerate my dislike in order to be "devastating" or consciously moderate my enthusiasm in order to seem superior. This means that my faults as a critic are real ones and not assumed for the occasion.

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E.B.