

THE only problem that arises in such a production is: how to make the whole play jell? If we feel bound to make Shylock a great tragic figure, like Lear, how can we rumble along when he is off the stage—which he is for most of the play? This problem alone might be enough to suggest to a producer that Shylock was not intended to be an overwhelming figure. Perhaps we may go further and suggest that he was intended to be more the sort of villain that we find in Sweeney Todd, or Captain Hook, or Svengali—that is to say, a creature of melodrama rather than tragedy. As the wicked villain of melodrama he works in nicely with the romanticism of Belmont; as a somewhat comical villain, he fits even better. It is not much good arguing that the famous words: “Hath not a Jew eyes . . . etc.” fix the stature of Shylock as tragic: they are the exceptional words; they run against the drift of the rest. A tragic figure *cannot* whet his knife publicly on the sole of his shoe, *cannot* mourn simultaneously his daughter and his ducats, *cannot* demand anything so grotesque as a pound of flesh. But stage-villains can do all these things, and are expected to. Moreover, if the gory parts of *The Merchant of Venice* were regarded as melodrama, the play would not need to be treated so seriously and so creatively—and might, in consequence, assume the form of a unified Elizabethan comedy, instead of a gawky representation of the 20th-century conscience.

If a producer followed such a pattern, *The Merchant of Venice* could probably not be produced at all. This would be perfectly understandable, for there is no reason why, when something horrible has happened in recent history, we should not refuse to produce a work of fiction that makes it laughable. The trouble is that we shall not proclaim any such self-denying ordinance. Our consciences will forbid us to play *The Merchant of Venice* true—but not to play it false. Indeed, the falser we play it, the more highly we shall respect ourselves. Every minute of it will be sixty seconds of disjointed self-tribute. There will be no *fact* of Shakespeare—any more than there is, in modern hands, a *fact* of Van Gogh, a *fact* of Bach, a *fact* of the Far East.

Luckily, *The Merchant of Venice* is an unusual case. And yet, it is also unusually pertinent in that it does its very best to draw our attention to the very problem we are discussing here. The Casket scenes, which we incline to dismiss as “dull” and devoid of contemporary interest, are devoted entirely to praising the virtues of honest lead and decrying the worth of gold and silver. As for ornament, it is dismissed as

*The seeming truth which cunning times put on
To entrap the wisest. . . .*

This suggests that even four hundred years ago, serious creative artists were hard at work under another name, and that it was as difficult for fact, to say nothing of art, to find a plain honest servant as it is to-day.

Letter from New York

THE first half of the 1959–60 New York theatre season, everyone sorrowfully agreed, was drab. I see no particular reason to lament this since as a spectator and critic I find it short-sighted to think of the theatre seasonally: it's like asking a friend, “What have you done for me recently?” The expectation that every four months (our theatre season is rarely longer than eight months) a batch of sensational new productions will be forthcoming is a mixture of æsthetic simple-mindedness and mercantile anxiety.

Since my report on the new plays of the season must perforce reflect something of the barrenness of the overall “picture,” I shall take the liberty of beginning with a few generalisations.

When I was in London last spring, I read the issue of *ENCOUNTER* which contained a review by Angus Wilson of Mary McCarthy's book of theatre criticism in which my own collection *Lies Like Truth* was also discussed. I was asked if I wished to comment on Mr. Wilson's remarks. I took this to mean “Do you want to find fault with or rebut any of Mr. Wilson's observations?” I did not. Mr. Wilson's article—“The Intellectual on the Aisle”—seemed to me in every important respect unexceptionable. Still it made me think of the difference between the literary attitude towards the theatre and my own which, as Mr. Wilson rightly pointed out, is that of a theatre man.

Mr. Wilson spoke of a certain theatre “provincialism”—which struck me as the only wholly innocent remark in his article. One might as well speak of literary provincialism or musical provincialism or painters' provincialism. The phrase was motivated by my having written that the part of Blanche du Bois in *Streetcar Named Desire* was one of the best parts written for an actress in the contemporary theatre. This apparently struck Mr. Wilson as immaterial to the consideration of the character. I wondered if he is equally taken aback (or amused) when a music critic in speaking of a serious composition points out in passing that the piece was well (or badly) written for a particular instrument.

Another thing in my book which puzzled (or again amused) Mr. Wilson was a statement I made “boldly” to the effect that I held *Waiting for Godot* a more significant play than *The Diary of Anne Frank*. I understand Mr. Wilson's surprise. What Mr. Wilson may not

have realised is that to the greater part of the American theatre audience, to whom my book is largely addressed, *Waiting for Godot* if it exists at all is nonsense and *The Diary of Anne Frank* a highly-moving humanitarian document.

MY POINT IS SIMPLY THIS: I do not believe one can truly understand the theatre unless one understands it in all its complexity. The theatre is not only a matter of writing, acting, direction, design, architecture, but of social atmosphere, audience differentiation, historical occasion, financial organisation, economic situation.

It may be that the best theatre people have often shown more awareness of literary values than literary folk have of the theatre. For example, I remember reading an English review in which the critic defended Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death* even though, he suggested, it might not be a good play for the theatre. The fact is that *Danton's Death*—beside its other merits—is a magnificent theatre piece which has been the occasion of several memorable productions in Germany. What was lacking when it seemed a bad play in the theatre was the theatre equipment and talent to project it adequately.

My belief is that men of the theatre as well as men of letters fail to recognise that most production in America and in England is inferior in imaginative scope and creative mastery to the best writing done in either country. The reason for this ignorance is that both the economic organisation and a lack of a certain theatre tradition in the English-speaking countries do not permit theatre artists the freedom to employ the full store of the theatre's means. It is not from a lack of ability or artistic conscience that England and America have not fostered their equivalents of the Moscow Art Theatre or a Berliner Ensemble, or a continuous series of productions on the level of Max Reinhardt, Meyerhold, Vachtangov, and the various Studios of the Moscow Art Theatre. Because they have lacked a steady theatre tradition on the scale which has obtained since 1900 in Germany and Russia (not to mention others), most American and English theatre craftsmen themselves have lost sight of what the theatre can be.

There need be no "war" between literature and theatre—even when it is said that literature comes into the theatre both as inspiration and as a "servant" of the whole. One reason we are frequently befuddled into thinking of such a "war" may be that so many theatre people think of the repertoire of the Royal Court Theatre (no disparagement intended) as the height of dramatic achievement (because it is so much better than most of the plays presented, let us say, at the Globe), and literary people think of the Tennent productions as the height of stage

technique (because they are done with a special professional polish).

ALL IN ALL, I believe there is a great deal of ingenuous high-mindedness in most complaints about the theatre—often destructive as well as foolish. John Osborne, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Christopher Fry do not have to be world-shattering geniuses to win our approval. Nor do we have to despise the competent West End production of a Terence Rattigan play because it is not done like a Joan Littlewood production.

What stage-folk and their literary brethren ought constantly to keep in mind is that the theatre is an immediate art, fulfilling in the first place an immediate, one might say an almost momentary, need—and is thus contingent far more than any other art on many conditions unrelated to the permanent aspirations of individual artists or particular individuals in the audience. Though we must always keep the highest standards in view we must not wield them like cudgels to murder present action which responds to present need. Only hindsight instructs us what has been profoundly valuable in the theatre—and even then we might do well to be circumspect in our assertions. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a great show in its day—and didn't Shaw sneer somewhat at *The Importance of Being Earnest* while he praised *An Ideal Husband* and Henry Arthur Jones' *Michael and His Lost Angel*?

THE American theatre is still "officially" and popularly *Broadway*. The "unofficial" theatre of the smaller communities and the "off-Broadway" movement in New York are growing apace. The latter limps and is bruised by economic hazards but one day in the not too distant future there will be a crisis in which the combined diseases of the "official" and the "unofficial" theatre will bring about a therapy and some semblance of health. The American theatre as it functions now cannot long survive its organised anarchy.

Though off-Broadway has not yet achieved the status among our play-goers that the Royal Court or even the Arts Theatre have in London, at least three new plays this season have attracted considerable critical attention.

The daily reviewers seemed particularly pleased by *The Prodigal* by Jack Richardson (aged twenty-five). It is a literate and intelligent play (influenced, I believe, by Giraudoux and other Frenchmen) on the theme of the *Orestia*. Richardson's Orestes is indifferent to the great issues of politics and social welfare which are the bone of contention between Agamemnon and Aegisthus; Clytemnestra's infidelity is almost

incidental as is the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Orestes wants to live a "human," normal, or passively pleasant life divorced from commitment to any ideology. But the sweep of age-old passions and prejudice which create the myths of our world will force Orestes into the action that perennially leads to havoc and bloodshed.

The play undoubtedly shows promise but above all it is another manifestation of that moral atmosphere which augurs withdrawal from any specific civic or philosophic engagement. *The Prodigal* is in this sense meaningful, but it strikes me as a less original or cogent dramatic expression than is to be found in *The Connection* by Jack Gelber or in *The Zoo Story* by Edward Albee—to my mind the two most arresting plays of the New York season thus far.

*The Connection** is on the surface simply a picture of a drug addict's pad. A group of men—black and white—near-intellectuals and might-be workers—are seen throughout the evening waiting for their "fix." What is fascinating about this exhibition—apart from its thoroughly convincing naturalism (the actors and several excellent jazz musicians—also "junkies"—seem to be very much what they are called upon to represent) is the fact that in some strange way the play achieves a kind of poetry. This is not due to the play's self-conscious and badly-written framework in which the audience is informed that they are to witness an improvised demonstration—a sort of "Life Goes to the Party"—but to a feeling we get that the sufferers we see before us in their abject escape from life have attained a certain purity of pain, an intensity of removal from our workaday world—and therefore a kind of depraved but nonetheless penetrating challenge to it.

The Zoo Story, a short piece, narrows our sights down to one person: a boy cut off from everything by poverty, loneliness, perhaps homosexuality and the brazen complacency of a harsh city. The boy is seeking a connection which he can only find through violence—finally against himself. For he compels an innocent stranger almost unknowingly to kill him. The excellence of this play lies in its sharp focus, for one sees and understands not only the central figure himself but the larger environment of which he is a part and the alarming significance of that environment.

ONLY three productions of old plays have been presented on Broadway since October: *Much Ado About Nothing*—with John Gielgud and Margaret Leighton—received with admiration for its leading players and with

reservations on other accounts. (Sir John himself did not appear wholly pleased with the production.) Shaw's *Heartbreak House* with Maurice Evans and a largely British cast (Diana Wynyard, Pamela Brown, Alan Webb, Diane Cilento, Dennis Price) was generally liked though there were some complaints that I had not directed the play with sufficient regard to its Chekhovian mood—an exact criticism since I do not feel that this or any of Shaw's plays is in the slightest degree Chekhovian—despite what one might infer from Shaw's preface. The Phoenix Theatre (an organisation mainly devoted to revivals) presented O'Neill's *The Great God Brown* which on the whole impressed its critics in 1926 more than it did either the press or the public now. For my part, I thought the play for all its fumbling symbolism and earnest candour—not to mention a production that in its attempt to capture the play's "stylisation" did not altogether embody the play's tremulous emotionalism—was still worth seeing.

The successes of the season thus far (I do not propose to dwell on the musicals: Rodgers' & Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music* with Mary Martin, or *Take Me Along*, a version of O'Neill's comedy, *Ah, Wilderness!*) are William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker*—originally a television script—and Paddy Chayefsky's *The Tenth Man*.

The Miracle Worker is a sort of "documentary" recounting the struggle of a simple Irish girl who made Helen Keller out of a blind-deaf-mute child whose background and "character" gave promise of being little better than a "problem." The best scene in the play is wordless: the physical contest of the teacher to impress disciplined behaviour (or table manners) on the recalcitrant and violently wilful child. The scene is primitive theatre—beautifully done by the child Patty Duke and Anne Bancroft—and as such is highly effective. Like all primitive theatre when its thematic material is sound, it works for its audience despite its clinical aspect and other obvious crudities.

The Tenth Man is a comedy in which the operative values are only indirectly related to its plot. This concerns the exorcism of a *dybbuk* (a vengeful spirit of a wronged person which enters the living body of an innocent one). The ritual—which appears to affect not the girl from whose body the *dybbuk* is being driven but a young hysterical man who has just met and fallen in love with her—takes place in a ramshackle orthodox synagogue in one of New York's suburbs. What makes the play "go"—it is often very funny and is almost always rather sweet—is its colourfulness. Jewish humour—thoroughly familiar to the Jewish portion of the audience and titillating to most Gentiles—

* See also Richard Wollheim's comment in the April ENCOUNTER.

combines with a certain wry sentimentality to box-office advantage. In the background—giving “depth” and popular appeal to the whole—is the sense of distress in the air of our anxious age and the primal need for some form of solace. What the author is saying semi-consciously and what moves the audience in the same way is that we “who believe in nothing” had better believe in some vaguely remembered and still atavistically respected faith no matter how little it convinces us rationally.

The play is actually a symptom of the cultural disarray of large sections of American Jewry whose relation to the past is tenuous and almost shamefacedly indulgent, and whose feeling for their present situation—like that of their fellow-citizens of other religious denominations—is well-meaning, confused, prayerful, and vulgar. It has been charmingly directed by Tyrone Guthrie (how did he get into this galley? he has an eye for oddity), and it is brilliantly cast with actors from everywhere: Arnold Marlé—London and Hamburg; David Vardi—Tel-Aviv; George Voskovec—Prague and New York; Lou Jacobi—Montreal; Jacob Ben-Ami—Odessa and New York, etc.

In regard to so-called “social” plays—of which America some years ago produced several striking examples—there have been very few this season and those we have are, so to speak, stealthily so. *The Gang's All Here* by Jerome Lawrence and Robert Lee is a melodramatic and fictional re-telling of our Harding administration scandals in which the president was first gulled by political advisers who were hardly more than racketeers into running for the office and then into being blinded to all sorts of national swindles. It is not a bad play as show-business goes. It holds one's attention; on a popular level it reminds our audiences of some of the less admirable features of the American way of life. In brief, *The Gang's All Here* has the quality of one of those “progressive” films that Warner Bros. used to produce in the middle 'thirties. They were the pride of the industry until they became something for which the producers felt called upon to apologise.

Fiorello, a new musical by Jerome Weidman and George Abbott, also has a liberal political facet because it deals with the early career of La Guardia, New York's honest and spectacular mayor of the Roosevelt era. The special charm of the show is not that it is, as some express it, “about something” but that it recalls a time when New York still possessed a personal tone, when it was still a city of neighbourhoods not as now a skyscraper development with five-and-ten-cent-store adjuncts.

The Andersonville Trial by Saul Levitt recalls an incident from our Civil War with an eye to

the issue of whether there is a morally categorical imperative for a soldier to disobey his superior officer's orders when they are inhumanly brutal. (The Nuremberg trials are an instance in which this question was strikingly pertinent.) The question is raised and the progress of the 1865 trial at Andersonville, Georgia, is made exciting in a well-acted and sharply-directed José Ferrer production but the play fails to make a specific point so that the tension provoked is never satisfactorily released.

Peter Shaffer's *Five Finger Exercise*, being a play already known to Londoners and having been produced in New York with most of its original cast, need not detain us. It is only proper to say that it has been very cordially received, though it is not likely to carry all the impact here that it seems to have in England.

The most mature new play to be presented thus far in New York is Jean Anouilh's *The Fighting Cock* (*L'Hurluberlu*). It is not the best of Anouilh and it might easily be argued that it is not a particularly good play. I call it mature nevertheless because it bears the mark of the author's distinct personality in a semi-satiric vein—directed this time against himself. The play is often witty, occasionally even tender, and in its Paris production—not an especially distinguished one—it provided a civilised evening in the theatre. Anouilh might be described politically as an anarchist of the right, and the general who is the central figure—the “fighting cock”—of the play is against the whole drift of contemporary society. Anouilh voices his discontent but he does not glamorise his spokesman. On the contrary, he makes him as much a fool as a misfit, albeit a rather amusing one whose cantankerous exaggerations may elicit some sympathy even from those who view the problems of our time in quite different terms.

The play in New York is damaged by a bad production directed by Peter Brook—an artist I usually admire. What is wrong—apart from the possibility that Rex Harrison may be miscast as the general—is that Brook has treated the play as an irrelevant exercise in “style”—instead of a simple play of character with a real atmosphere. By inflating the production needlessly the play emerges as an elaborate charade which dissipates most of its values. The result is that while the direction and the fanciful sets were generally praised the event as a whole has pleased very few.

THIS BRINGS ME BACK to what I said at the outset: many people who are able to read a script with discernment are unable to see a play with equal perceptiveness. Their literary sense may be firm but they are theatre-blind.

Harold Clurman

Paul Kruger's Heirs

Selfconsciousness of race began
Under a tall black upright hat
An ignorant, bigoted, wise old man
With eyes pouched up in purses of fat.

Mischance bequeathed him an eldorado
Greed and intrigue to take the bait
When war had passed like a tornado
Generosity turned up, late.

Noncombatants under a whip of shame
Invented duty, invented hope ;
Above their pulpits God became
An *über-Ich* in cinemascope

Shrieking imperatives from the steeple
Signing proscriptions with either hand
Hinting, sly, that the chosen people
Would see one day the promised land.

Look at it then, the prize allotted
To an obsolete self-righteous cause
A demi-paradise besotted
With jealousies and rugby scores

The pivot of a continent
Balancing on each new bonanza :
Was that what the mariners meant
With their *bona speranza* ?

You say no other people knows
So well the anguish of retreat.
It is a statue's straddling pose
What nation never knew defeat ?

But you took yours to bed with you
A prostitute or teddy bear
Claimed indignity as your due
And wept with gratified despair.

Now as the bitter morning rises
You pick revenge up like a gun
Ransack a drawer of fierce disguises
Determined not to be outdone
And step outside into the sun.

It does not claim the privilege
You claim, to comminate, defy.
It makes no judgment, gives no pledge
But watches with a steady eye
Out of a vast unpyting sky.

John Peter