

*D. M. Thomas*

## Aldershot Wives

Adventurers conscripted by bright adverts,

they too keep their square; all round the perimeter of  
Montgomery Road, Alexander Drive, Haig Avenue and Wellington Road,  
the colours of their regiment hang bravely, red  
and white and blue,  
in ten thousand gardens.

Grey-uniformed, the houses stand, stolid, on parade  
always ready for inspection; the gas-stoves  
blanco'd, floors polished like fire-  
extinguishers. They too are fighting a war, though

they have not yet identified the enemy. Much laughter  
in the Naafi stores disguises uneasiness, a sixth-sense  
of defeat. A fifth-column lurks, a traitor, the war of nerves,  
of waiting; the  
repetitive manoeuvres,  
making life by numbers. The dusty road, Officers  
and Other Ranks, floated by childish shouts, are a  
Troy of slow private pyres, a Thermopylae  
of neurosis, a Somme of costly small advances

and withdrawals. The longed-for foreign posting is an  
Arnhem; hoping to take the enemy by surprise, they find  
that they are floating down into desert or rice-fields,  
but still encased,  
pincerred, in their own skin, and  
habits, and habits of others, collected obsessively  
over the years like cigarette-  
coupons. They must land to a  
withering crossfire of them-

selves. Even when summer signals shirtsleeve order, the swim-  
suited wives are still under siege. Their task, clinging like  
identity-discs, to prime the weapons who prime the  
weapons, to take  
them, shot and dirty, in  
the afternoon, pull them through in the silently  
diligent bedspaces of the night,  
and send them out shining and highmorale-ed  
for the morning muster. Four tarnished letters in

Quo fas et gloria ducunt, are the k-rations of sex.  
No rescue-column, flamboyant and bugled, will come spurring  
kicking up the sandgrain houses of the Thames Valley,  
to rescue them;  
or if they do, they'll find  
that the defiant phalanx of bayonet-aerials  
jutting over the battlements, glinting,  
are held up by uncanny silence,  
a gallant stratagem, a last beau geste.

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# THEATRE

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## Life & Death of the Common Man

By John Weightman

IT IS NOT OFTEN that one sees, on successive evenings, two new plays such as Peter Nichols' *The National Health* (Old Vic) and David Storey's *The Contractor* (Royal Court), capable of warming the cockles of the heart, that fragile pump which, unaccountably and contrary to what one might have expected from the early publicity brochure, is not covered by a 70-year guarantee. Indeed, the Supplier is remarkably unreliable as regards all the parts. As I feel the cockles of my heart warm up, I wonder if my liver and my prostate gland will stand the strain. My hair and my teeth are little more than a memory; according to the optician, my eyes parted company some time ago; a cough shatters my aching lungs and is echoed collectively throughout the theatre. This is what is called the prime of life, when the mature brain is at one with the disciplined body. Why, then, do I have the impression of travelling inside a ramshackle vehicle which keeps losing its bits as we proceed along life's interesting way? If only, like G. B. Shaw, I could feel that I was part of the Great Whole, and that the universe was doing something significant, even though inscrutable, with my puny identity.

The reason why I warm to Mr. Nichols and Mr. Storey is that, unless I am much mistaken, their plays are inspired by just such a dumb wonderment about the purpose of it all. Mr. Nichols sets his action inside the men's ward of a hospital, where seven patients are shown in various stages of physical and mental decline, being looked after by nurses and doctors with that brisk, impersonal amiability which brings tears to the eyes when one is subject to it oneself. Outside hospital, a man has a social personality and can, to some extent, draw a veil over his physical inadequacies; he can also, up to a point, choose his associates. But in a hospital ward, he is primarily a body, which is openly discussed and lectured about with the help of slides, as only one interchangeable instance among many. In a sense, this is strangely

satisfying, since you feel like a parcel that was posted by Life at a given point, and that you yourself are no longer responsible for the date and hour of delivery; the initiative can be left to the National Health Service. At the same time, it is disturbing to find that one's social personality has largely evaporated and that one nevertheless has to make conversation with a lot of people, with whom one may have little in common except the general human condition. The real contact is with the other patients, because the doctors and nurses, however good, cannot see their charges as individuals; they can only assess their amenability or obstreperousness as bodies requiring treatment (except, perhaps, in those rare cases where a susceptible nurse becomes interested in a handsome young man), and so they adopt a professional manner which irons out all remaining differences. The cheeriness of the nurses, the severity of Sister, the regal banality of Matron, the urgent style of the Great Surgeon, who charges in with his aides-de-camp like a Napoleonic marshal inspecting the field of battle, the trance-like exhaustion of the houseman—all these things are marvellously stereotyped and provide a ready-made theatre of personae, if one has the strength to enjoy it.

Mr. Nichols puts these points on to the stage quite excellently, rather in the "Carry-On" manner, but without the commercial squeamishness of the "Carry-On" films. The patient with stomach cancer actually rants and raves until he is silenced by an injection; the neurotic homosexual with a duodenal ulcer, muttering over his basket-work, builds up a genuine vista of desolation; the senile are senile and then, during a brief period, recover a semblance of humanity. Mr. Nichols has somehow solved the problem of making boring, suffering people both funny and touching, without turning them into caricatures or departing from the immediate truth in any way. I could not detect a single false note or exaggeration; even his satire on the religious visitations in the ward—a jolly West Indian