

Parade in Boston

ROBERT FORSYTHE

IN TALKING about American cities, one is bound to generalize and likely to be wrong. The impression a visitor gets of Philadelphia, for instance, may be entirely at odds with what the more conscious Philadelphian feels about his own town. At a venture, I should say that Philadelphia was dumb and reactionary and Washington was simply bewildered. But about Boston, there can surely be no doubt. It is the most aggressively ignorant, blackly reactionary city in America.

In the face of these well-established facts, the choice of Boston for the tryout of *Parade*, the Theatre Guild satirical revue, was a historical decision, if not a form of suicide. Practically speaking, the Guild was furnishing its Boston friends with the last play of its subscription course for the year. If the intention was to offer the attraction to the audience most likely in America to resent it, Boston was the ideal spot. There were two reactions possible: (a) The audience would love it or (b) the audience would hate it. If the audience loved it, the authors of what was to be a left-wing revue could proceed in a single file to the River Charles and jump in. If the audience hated it, that would not be news, unless it were bad news for the Guild box office. In brief, *Parade* couldn't win in Boston.

The opening night was something to remember. The lobby of the Colonial Theatre was crowded as early as eight o'clock by ladies and gentlemen patently invented by Peter Arno. Where they had been resting since the surrender at Yorktown is something I will probably never learn. The mere recital of the gowns of the ladies is not enough and it was done far better in next day's reviews by the Boston critics. In some way it was necessary to probe into the minds of these amazing people who were taking part in a social occasion reminiscent of the Russian Ballet in its most notable days. New York, with its scattered aristocracy and its infiltrations of groundlings, has nothing to compare with it. What Boston was doing was showing the flower of Back Bay at its bravest. The nature of *Parade* had been well advertised in advance. It was a radical revue and for one who had known radical plays only at the Civic Repertory theatre in New York, the presence of these gleaming shirt fronts and diamond dog collars was not so much astonishing as frightening. If they were expecting to be amused, they had obviously not reflected upon what a radical revue could do to them. If they were coming to be insulted, they were indulging in a form of self-punishment which bordered on perversion.

For a time it would have been impossible for a neutral critic to determine the mood of the audience. From the balconies and from the standees lining the rail at the rear of the orchestra seats, there was a burst of enthusiasm

which seemed to carry the house along with it. The Jackass sketch which had to do with the resentment of the farmers at the A.A.A. policy of destroying crops brought a roar from both the left-wingers and right-wingers. Some inkling of how the show was going with the dog-collared ladies could be seen in the presence of a woman near the rear of the orchestra. From the time she seated herself and turned her thin-lipped visage toward the stage, no emotion showed on her face. She sternly disapproved of everything that went on before her. Her mouth was set in a hard, thin line and her eyes never wavered. But for the rest, there were no obvious signs that the Back Bay Lords and Ladies were having a bad time.

Just when it appeared that it was never going to be possible to read the minds of these sophisticated, worldly, cultured people, a change occurred in *Parade* itself. Instead of the satirical material, something different appeared on the stage. As is always true at opening nights, the performance was long. It was now almost 11:30 and the last numbers were coming on. Originally, I understand, it had been the intention of the authors of the revue that the numbers I am about to speak of should be the finale of the first act, but the Guild had routined the first night's performance so that they were to close the show.

The first was *Letter to the President*, a powerful number sung by Avis Andrews, a colored girl. It told of the share croppers who had been promised that the New Deal would solve their troubles and of what the Roosevelt policies had actually done to them. That was followed immediately by *Newsboy* and it was now that the Boston upper-class soul began to reveal itself. *Newsboy* is not new to workers audiences, but it was new to Boston society. Not only was it new, but it constituted a kick in the face. They were interested enough in the exciting beginning of the number, with its cries of the newsboys and the swirling of characteristic figures around a street corner. When it came to the passages of the hungry boy asking for money enough for a meal, the Boston audience began to rustle and make the uncomfortable and distressed protests common to a group which is hearing something it hates and is too polite to answer back. By the time the sequence was reached where the colored boy is beaten down and from the darkened stage come first the whispers and then the importunate questions . . . "Tortured . . . Framed . . . Electrocuted . . . Murdered . . . Have you heard of Sacco and Vanzetti? . . . Framed . . . Electrocuted . . . Have you heard of Scottsboro? . . . Have you heard of Tom Mooney? . . . Tortured . . . Framed . . ." something physical had happened to the nice folk of Back Bay. Ex-Governor Fuller of Massachusetts, who had refused the last pleas for Sacco and Vanzetti,

arose at this point and left the theatre. From the rest of the orchestra came an ominous rumbling sound, the distinct roar of the mob—in this case a high-class mob. They had reached the point where they could stand no more. Every soft feeble fibre was being outraged by something which they would protest was dearer to them than life itself: Truth. They couldn't stand truth when it wasn't their kind of truth. They didn't care to have Sacco and Vanzetti and the Scottsboro boys and Tom Mooney recalled to them. When it seemed that they could stand no more, *Newsboy* ended on the words: "Have you heard! Have you Heard!" and the show came to a close with the rousing militant number *No Time to Sing a Gay Song Now*. . . In short, it's time to fight, time to make a better life, time to take the world away from such people as these in the orchestra seats.

There were cheers from the balconies and from the standees behind the rail, but there were no cheers from the people who were drawing their opera cloaks about them and flipping out their top hats preparatory to departure. The pressure after the opening was so great that *Newsboy* and *No Time to Sing a Gay Song* had to be taken out of the show. Whatever happens in New York (the opening occurs too late for a review to appear in this week's *NEW MASSES*), the Theatre Guild can always remember the time it opened *Parade* in Boston. If it should run long enough in New York to warrant a further road tour, I am prepared to offer my services in mapping an itinerary. It will have, to begin with, an initial week in Washington under the auspices of the National Security League and Hamilton Fish, Jr. After that it will sail immediately for an unlimited run in the chapel at the Vatican in Rome.

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The Theatre

NEAR Philadelphia last week, in the tiny Hedgerow Theatre, I saw two "American Tragedies" where only one was scheduled. One was Erwin Piscator's dramatization of Dreiser's famous novel as staged by Jasper Deeter. The other was Deeter.

Jasper Deeter is a theatre artist whose name, like Piscator's in pre-Nazi Germany, should be honored and whose work should be seen by large sections of the revolutionary working class, with whom he has been in sympathy for years. Instead, in order to keep his theatre alive to present plays he believes in, Deeter is forced to present pap like *Happy Ending* and *Spring in Autumn* before audiences composed for the most part of idle rich "patrons" from the great estates which surround Hedgerow. This is an American tragedy that will not be remedied until Jasper Deeter leaves the isolation of Hedgerow and identifies himself completely with the great revolutionary audience that has never heard of him but is waiting nevertheless to welcome his work.

Piscator has fashioned Dreiser's novel into a powerful propaganda play against capitalism, and Deeter's clear, class-conscious production of *An American Tragedy* makes it one of the most straightforward, uncompromising revolutionary plays ever staged in this country. From the time the Narrator begins by proclaiming that "this tragedy is as natural as the opposition of the classes," Deeter never permits the audience to forget the real forces that move Clyde Griffiths to betray his fellow-workers, his sweetheart Roberta and his own innately decent character as he pursues the American Dream of success to the very shadow of the electric chair.

Clyde Griffiths is always seen in the No Man's Land between the classes, which are always arranged in sharp contrast to each other. While the workers are slaving below, the upper level of the small stage shows the rich Griffiths taking it easy in their offices. While Clyde and Roberta work together or pursue their forbidden love below, the rich Griffiths act out their sheltered, luxurious, empty lives above. The workers are given simple, direct and unaffected bearing in contrast to the stylized, stiff and pretentious mannerisms of the idle rich. Deeter gets

marvelous performances out of the young Hedgerow actors.

Not only two levels are used, for Deeter is a resourceful director who knows how to make full use of the stage. In the Christmas-eve scene, for example, after Clyde breaks his promise to be with Roberta in order to attend a party with his rich acquaintances, he is shown being fitted into a dress suit in an imaginary store in the center of the stage. Meanwhile, unemployed workers on the left sing "Pie in the Sky" while, on the right, the pious sing "Silent Night." As Clyde leaves the "store" to climb to the level on high where the rich are dancing and making merry, the workers stop him and tell him they are starving while he buys evening clothes. He breaks away and joins his wealthy friends while the workers' song of protest against starvation drowns out the holy song and breaks into the world above.

An American Tragedy is class war set upon the stage by a first-rate artist who belongs to the theatres of the working class.

HERBERT KLINE.

Other Theatre Notes

When the New Theatre of Philadelphia, after six months of preparation and a stirring, victorious fight against censorship, finally presented its first play, *Too Late to Die* by Christopher Wood, the audience was prepared to see a fine revolutionary work. Unfortunately, the play suffers from weaknesses common to early workers-theatre plays. It has an unwieldy carry-all plot. The characterization is slight. There is present always the tendency to substitute expository conversation and story telling for dramatic images and action. Wood tells rather than dramatizes the story of Chester Jones, an incredibly naive unemployed machinist who, after a series of harrowing experiences finally learns what it's all about and becomes a radical. As the story is unfolded in twenty scenes (which would have dragged terribly if not for Lem Ward's ingenuity in keeping the production moving smoothly) we

realize that *Too Late to Die* is a good play in the making that suffers from having been born too soon. How it ever got beyond the New Theatre studio, with such a fine revolutionary play as *Waiting for Lefty* available, is a mystery. The acting was unusually good in the mass scenes.

"National Theatre Week" will be celebrated with the presentation of seventeen new revolutionary plays. On Saturday, May 25, the Theatre of Action will give a special opening preview of *The Young Go First*, their new full-length play of C.C.C. camp life, at the Park Theatre. John Howard Lawson will speak after the performance.

On Sunday, May 26, the Group Theatre will present Art Smith's new play *The Tide Rises*, a drama of the West Coast general strike, at the Belasco. In addition, Jimmy Savo, star comic of *Parade*, will preside as Master of Ceremonies and will give several feature numbers. The Dance Players, an experimental group in coordinating drama and dance, will appear in *Protest*.

Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, May 27, 28 and 29: lectures on creative problems of the theatre arts by M. Gorelik, M. Solatorov, Anita Block, Lee Strasberg and Herbert Kline.

The conference will culminate with the competitions of fifteen New Theatre League groups in new plays at the Manhattan Lyceum, 66 East 4th Street, New York on May 31 and June 1. Information may be had at the New Theatre League, 114 West 14th Street, New York.

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