



Company Is Two

AMONG this season's new plays, the theater experience most desperately worth having is My Sweet Charlie. In it David Westheimer explores with fervent honesty one girl's progress from ignorance and racial bias to a degree of civilized awareness only possible when one can live temporarily outside society.

Mr. Westheimer has not written a thesis play, but a document of intensely human behavior. True, he sets up a contrived situation in which a sixteen-year-old white girl who has been thrown out of her home for having become pregnant is forced by circumstance to share an empty Gulf Coast house with a Northern Negro lawyer fleeing an anti-civil-rights posse. But from this point on, the human beings in the characters, and in us, take over. At first the girl, Marlene, sees only a "nigger" who, she assumes, is about to rape her. But when the lawyer, Charlie, tells her to "stop acting so white" and assures her that besides she's too ugly to interest him sexually, her anger reveals that she is a girl first and a white second.

Gradually her ingrained prejudices give way to more honestly evaluated experience, and Charlie's resentment of her turns to humorous understanding. When, after some time, she calls him "Negra," he chuckles and remarks, "I'm getting up in the world." A little later, without thinking, she tells him, "You would think that, being a lawyer . . ." and we realize that she is able to think of him as a representative of his profession rather than of his race. When they are discussing his decision to come down South and join a group of Negro demonstrators, she even upbraids him for getting mixed up with "those kind of people."

There is a marvelous scene in which Marlene drills Charlie on how to act like a Southern Negro when he goes to the store to buy food, and under Howard Da Silva's direction, Bonnie Bedelia and Louis Gossett play it with refreshing warmth and humor. In another scene, Miss Bedelia's timing is perfect as she explains why she peeped at Charlie in the bathtub. "Colored men are supposed to be bigger," she says quietly, and then adds matter-of-factly, "but you ain't."

Mr. Gossett is fine, too, as he keeps the action from becoming romantic. He even makes his final tribute to her seem an unconscious slip of the tongue. "You're different," he says, and then is surprised to discover that unintentional-

ly his compliment reveals his prejudice.

The truly moving climax of the play comes in the next-to-last scene, in which Marlene tells Charlie that she wants her baby to be like him. It is moving, not because it is prompted by love, but because it is a genuine assessment of the kind of person Charlie is.

The short final scene is anti-climactic and arbitrary, but it cannot destroy the wonderful events that precede it. Furthermore, one can always turn to the just published novel upon which the play is based. Unlike the play, it ends with Marlene being harshly asked, "Who was that Charlie?" The novel most eloquently reads as follows:

And anger and some of the hurt drained from her and she thought, You're so dumb I feel sorry for you. And she looked at him with great wisdom and tolerance and she said gently, "He was my daddy."

The setting by Jo Mielziner nicely suggests that the cottage is socially isolated by placing it on blocks that elevate it a foot above the ground. And subtle changes in lighting enhance the mood of a play in which the genuine feelings of the performers obliterate our awareness of its mechanics.

MAKING a musical comedy out of Jan de Hartog's 1951 play, The Fourposter, is a forbidding task. Indeed, one attempt to do so failed in Europe a few years back. After all, there is a monotony in following one couple's marital marathon, particularly when it all takes place in one bedroom. However, Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt, for better or worse, till death do them part, have chosen to cherish these limitations, and their I Do! I Do! succeeds in making honest if plain theatrical virtue of them.

The musical opens with a bare stage behind which we hear a concealed orchestra. Then as the marriage of Agnes and Michael begins, bits of their bedroom float together before our eyes. The main piece, of course, is the fourposter bed which Oliver Smith has designed in such a way that the performers can easily rotate it. Thus, a feeling of fluidity is established and is echoed in Jean Rosenthal's mood-sensitive lighting and Freddy Wittop's slightly humorous costumes. All of these simple elements are tastefully and imaginatively manipulated by director Gower Champion.

Because the show's stars are two such thoroughly expert professionals as Mary Martin and Robert Preston, this manipu-

lation becomes a game played between them and the audience. There is never the illusion that we are seeing Agnes and Michael. We are quite obviously seeing Mary and Bob, which under the circumstances may be a good thing. For it takes the curse off the compound sentimentality of the story.

Miss Martin sings and clowns nicely. She is best in the shriller portions of the action. In a song such as "Someone Needs Me," she demonstrates her unique ability with the insistent phrase (remember "I'm in Love with a Wonderful Guy"?). And how refreshing to hear her finding fault with life once again, as she does when she complains to her husband, "When I get to where the joke should be, you always say it just ahead of me."

Mr. Preston is highly amusing when he is being impossibly self-centered. After his wife reminds him that having a large family will entail a host of diapers, bottles, etc., he innocently replies, "I (Continued on page 68)

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Unsentimental Gentleman

IT IS SAID out in Hollywood that, given a list of ten top directors, any studio would choose for its next multi-million dollar spectacular the mild, soft-spoken, unassuming Robert Wise. Actors love him because he helps them to Academy Award performances. Studios love him because he generally manages to bring in a picture on time, on budget, and in a form that earns praise from the critics and dollars at the box office. Not only that, Wise is varied. He seems able to do almost anything, from the uncompromising realism of *I want to Live* to the operatic *West Side Story*, from the superbly manipulated shudders of *The Haunting* to the sunny splendors of *The Sound of Music*. But whatever the genre, Wise manages to give it the style most suited to the material, in contrast to most directors, who would rather stamp their pictures with the style most suited to themselves.

This virtuosity is impressively displayed in his newest film, *The Sand Pebbles*, based on the novel by Richard McKenna. Set in China in the late Twenties, it is a vast, wide-ranging adventure tale, panoramic yet also intimate as the upsurge of Chinese nationalism is viewed through the eyes of a handful of

American sailors on a U.S. gunboat assigned to cruise the Yangtze during this troubled time.

At the center of the film is Jake Holman, a "loner," an independent spirit who has transferred to the tiny *San Pablo* from a larger ship because he wants to run his engine room without interference. Once aboard, however, he discovers that in effect the Chinese are operating the vessel, the crew having gradually insinuated itself into every phase of the ship's activities except battle drill. The officers and his fellow enlisted men resent Holman's attempts to do his proper duty as a threat to their exceedingly comfortable way of life.

But on shore, events in China are posing a far more formidable threat to their way of life. The country, divided for centuries, is being forcibly unified by the new Nationalist Army; and the leaders of the new China, joined by the students, are fanatical in their efforts to drive the "foreign devils" from their country. As an understanding missionary explains the situation to Holman, "What would you do if Chinese gunboats were sailing up the Mississippi?"

The missionary, who runs a school far up the Yangtze, wants no help from the

crew of the *San Pablo*. A man of peace, he feels that nationalism can only lead to wars. When the gunboat arrives under orders to evacuate him and his staff, he declares himself a "stateless person" and refuses to leave. Ironically, in order to reach the mission, the ship has had to run a blockade manned by the students he trained at the school, and its official protectors. With his protection gone, the missionary is killed by Nationalist soldiers and, soon after, so is Holman and most of the *San Pablo's* crew.

Obviously, this is not only strange, but rather strong stuff for a multi-million dollar spectacular, and a far cry indeed from the marshmallowy *Sound of Music*. But just as, within the limitations of that



film, director Wise was speaking for human dignity and freedom of the spirit, in the wider dimensions afforded by *The Sand Pebbles* he is able to put forward some provocative ideas about the nature of nationalism, American intervention, and the need for a more basic understanding among people—ideas that are as relevant to our role in Vietnam today as they were to our position in China forty years ago.

Robert Anderson's brilliantly succinct script blunts none of this, neither our untenable position in China in 1926 nor its implications for Vietnam in 1966. But the remarkable thing is that he achieves this with a minimum of harangue. The missionary is what he is, and he defends his position only when forced to do so by the *San Pablo's* well-meaning but jingoistic captain. Holman is simply searching for a decent way of life; and the tragedy of the film is that when he finally finds it, it is denied him by the intolerance of which he was unwittingly a part.

But action—often bloody, always colorful—is the essence of this film; and Wise has been nobly abetted by a script that keeps hurtling forward for more than three hours with scarcely a let-up in pace, by authentic-looking backgrounds in Taiwan and Hong Kong that are more than adequate stand-ins for the Chinese mainland, and by a large and excellent cast that seems wholly responsive to what the film is trying to say. Of the latter, Richard Crenna is outstanding as the starchy captain, Candice Bergen attractive as a missionary teacher, Richard Attenborough effective as a sailor who falls in love with a Chinese girl in a house of shame—and all of them dominated by Steve McQueen, who is nothing short of wonderful in the pivotal role of Holman.

—ARTHUR KNIGHT.



"Please, Martha, I'm trying to hear the roar of the city."