

achieved, the chorus was dismissed with a courteous wave of the hand.

Now it was the turn of the soloists, and the members of the orchestra required for the parts assigned to the *oboe d'amore*, the *oboe da caccia*, and the *viola da gamba*. Finally, the stage was empty save for mezzo Ruža Baldani, the player of the violoncello continuo, Ottomar Borwitzky, and organist David Bell. Thus, without imposing on the patience or the time of performers who were not involved in this procedure, Karajan could work quietly, patiently, effectively with the few artists who served this particular necessity.

Such acts of consideration are by no means common, and they paid off in the uncommon quality of the results that were heard. Because it came last in the sequence of three performances, the sound of the *St. Matthew Passion* remained clearest in the ear. Fine string playing and chamber music collaboration with the chorus are routine for the Berlin Philharmonic, whose supremacy among European orchestras is now unchallenged. But the solos for the esoteric wind instruments were performed with the artistry of specialists and the accuracy of masters. This doubtless flows from the perfectionist in Karajan's makeup.

WHERE his perfectionism yielded a more debatable outcome was in the division of the long work into two parts separated by a five-hour interlude. Theoretically, this procedure assures closer attention all the way through from the audience and, if all goes well, greater physical resources from the singers as the work progresses. But it is also a fact that vocalists tend to unwind during an extended break, and the rewinding at the beginning of Part II left something lacking in tonal focus. But the last 70 pages of the vocal score could hardly have been better, as such newer artists as Baldini and soprano Anna Tomowa-Sintow settled into a stride that brought them close to the level of such expert performers as Peter Schreier (the Evangelist) and especially José van Dam in the key role of Jesus.

As a native of Belgium, which has little music of its own in the international repertory, Van Dam is ideally placed to range widely among all the possibilities that present themselves to an intelligent artist with a full and flexible bass voice. But even that latitude can hardly account for the versatility that enabled him to sing a fine Ferrando in *Il Trovatore* two days before he turned his attention to the *Bach Pas-*

Continued on page 51

Theater

Of Broken Bodies and Dying Hearts

by Gordon Rogoff

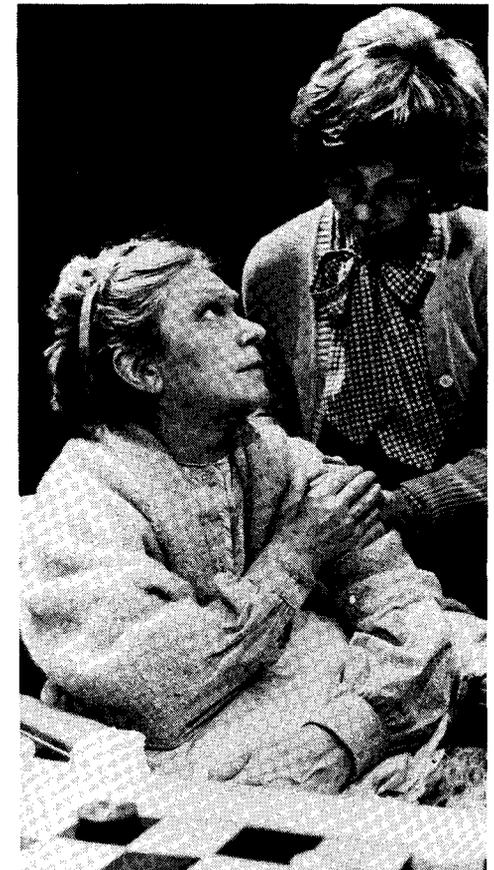
THE plague is clearly sweeping the country. Where the cinema has turned to sinking ships, threatened jets, and gnashing jaws, the theater is turning to broken bodies, shattered lungs, and dying hearts. Chekhov's Nina imagined she had become a sea gull. Today she would see herself as an intravenous jar.

Monsters, a double bill at the Astor Place Theater off Broadway, consists of *Side Show* by William Dews, about Siamese twins, and *The Transfiguration of Benno Blimpie* by Albert Innaurato, about a man who is "eating [himself] to death." Across the street at the Public Theater, Joseph Papp has brought Ernest Joselovitz's *Hagar's Children* from the New Playwrights' Theatre in Washington, D.C. In it, five disturbed teen-age children have been cast into funny-farm exile by their parents. Across town, as part of the "Berlin Now" festival presented by Goethe House, there was a brief appearance of a new German play by Gerlind Reinshagen, called *Heaven and Earth*, in which Jennie Egan's Sonia was dying of lung cancer at a hospital in which she encountered Will Patton's Goldie, who lost an arm and a leg between the first and second acts. And uptown in Broadway's Morosco Theatre, coming by way of the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, is Gordon Davidson's production of *The Shadow Box* by Michael Cristofer, a play that brings three dying patients together with their families or friends during the waning hours or months of their lives.

I did not stay long enough at *Hagar's Children* to discover which child had killed the pet lamb in the yard. But the Siamese twins in Dews's play were celebrating their birthday by murdering their parents; Benno Blimpie's dirty old grandfather was stabbed to death by a nymphomaniacal thirteen-year-old; Benno brought a meat cleaver to his huge stomach as the lights blacked out; Sonia died onstage before the oxygen could help her; and the three patients in *The Shadow Box* reassured us

antiphonally at the end that "It doesn't last forever," meaning life, I suppose, which—as you can probably sense by now—is far more merciful than the theater.

Benno Blimpie excepted, the plays themselves are plagued as much by the disease of fake realism as they are by the diseases they take so numbingly and literally for their subjects. Even *Benno* threatens to expire from the heavy weight of real food dripping down Benno's overalls. But Innaurato's prey is not Benno's appetite for food so much as it is his appetite for gigantic images: the outsize horrors of his family's tenement existence, the devouring memories of rejection and punishment, and the enormous emptiness surrounding desire. Both James Coco as Benno and Rosemary de Angelis as his



The Shadow Box—"Yawning its way through an arduous reminiscence."

mother cut a path through the underbrush of simulated reality, emerging almost into a realm where the playwright's half-articulated obsessions can begin to find size and shape. They don't escape self-pity any more than Innaurato does, but at least all three are after bigger game.

The same cannot be said for *Benno's* companion piece, *Side Show*, or for the other plays, though they range from the sloppy sentimental soapiness of *Hagar's Children* to the orderly sentimental soapiness of *The Shadow Box*. Self-pity comes in just so many disguises, so it isn't surprising that the plays and their devices begin to seem interchangeable after a few visits. The insults to intelligence are as obvious as the phony claims on attention. *Hagar's Children* is subtitled "A Play About Giving," while *Heaven and Earth* is subtitled "A Play That Could Change Your Life." The doctor interviewing the patients in *The Shadow Box* is a voice-over for most of the play, just like the director in *A Chorus Line*. Feelings are manipulated in the same way. The doctor might as well be counseling the dancers in their auditions or the troubled kids in *Hagar*. If his patients just happen to be dying, so what? In pulp theater, there is no difference between the condition of dying, the condition of resentment, and the condition of losing a role to another dancer.

One of the *Shadow Box* patients asks the interviewer if he has his "friends out there today?" Turning to the audience, the patient asks: "All come to look at the dead people?" In the early moments of *Hagar*, after a particularly sweaty bout of morning wake-up realism (one young lad beating to the tune of a different drummer under his sheets), the kids suddenly notice—you guessed it—Us: "What are you looking at?" they ask. Then they break into a chanting harangue: "I can't fake it, I can't make it, I can't take it." Which is definitely false. Most of these playwrights are faking most of the time, which is why a lady in *The Shadow Box* and Sonia in *Heaven and Earth* both show the jewels they won as sexual trophies and why an unhappy boy in *Hagar* and a placid boy in *Shadow Box* both play guitars. The coincidences are not as casual as they might appear. They occur because the plays are fundamentally not acts of dramatic imagination at all. They are commercials put out by the same interlocking directorate, and they carry the same slogan: Do not disturb.

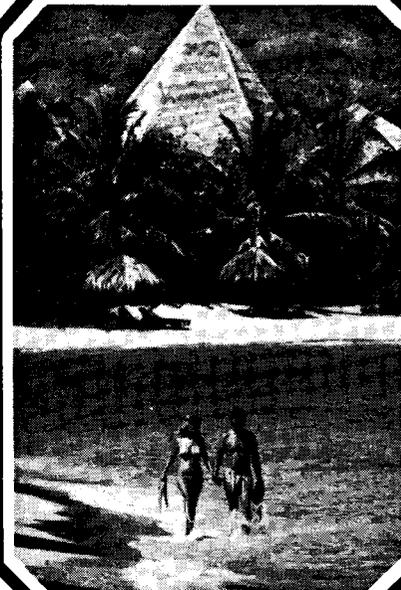
When the dialogue is not cracking wise, it is usually yawning its way through an arduous reminiscence. Yet the similari-

ties in playwriting motive and tone have not yielded entirely similar productions. The most beautiful and appropriate design is Wolfgang Roth's for *Heaven and Earth*. In its white-sheeted simplicity, it is also the least expensive. The ugliest and heaviest design is the monster cutout dollhouse by Clarke Dunham for *Hagar's Children*. A forest must have been felled to build it, but that never guaranteed reality in the theater any more than it guarantees an entertaining Sunday edition of *The New York Times*. Meanwhile, Ming Cho Lee has built a shadowed forest as background for the three levels of cottages in *The Shadow Box*, and if it never looks like a hospital, that may be what the doctors ordered. This is a play that confronts reality, after all, by never mentioning cancer in front of its patients. Or us.

With so many handicaps, it is remarkable how calm and tactful Gordon Davidson has been with his actors and their text. Patricia Elliott's exit—stopping to face the audience, a pause for clenching away her tears, followed by the rush to the wings she should have taken in the first place—is his only major miscalculation. He has arranged a minimal number of outbursts, despite the temptation in such earnest and self-important plays to do otherwise. If I remark upon the pointed softness with which the actors speak much of the time, it is because I had begun to think recently that it was a lost art. The people are programmed by the playwright to feel labeled emotions on cue, yet all the actors—Rose Gregorio especially, but also Joyce Ebert, Mandy Patinkin, and Simon Oakland—are deft arbiters of a more complex orchestration.

I HOPE these plays do not signal a trend. Dramatic literature has never needed illness to keep it healthy. Lear's heart breaks: it failed him only when he was dividing his kingdom, and he wouldn't die more eloquently if we knew he was suffering from one carcinoma or another. Chekhov was a practicing physician who could have authoritatively covered his stage with ailments, but when Dr. Astrov comes to treat a patient in Vanya's house, it is only an excuse to woo the patient's wife. And by now nobody believes that Ibsen's *Ghosts* is about Oswald's case of syphilis. As Michael Meyer, Ibsen's biographer, says: "*Ghosts* is a play about ethical, not physical debility . . . the devitalizing effect of a dumb acceptance of convention." The dumb acceptance of convention is a trend, I'm afraid, that is always with us. ©

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Why the Huckster Is No Longer the Heavy

by Karl E. Meyer

THE statistic that everyone will remember about the television season now ending is that 80 million Americans—the largest television audience ever—saw the final installment of *Roots* last January. Another statistic, however—one that attracted less attention—is equally arresting: in 1976, the CBS television network became the first single advertising medium whose revenue reached a billion dollars.

Both these figures are worth discussing. In 1954, when it took advertising leadership away from *Life* magazine, CBS's total billings were \$146.2 million. Thus the 1976 figure of over \$1 billion represents an incredible gain—615 percent in a 22-year period. Comparable gains were made by ABC and NBC, and total advertising revenues for the three networks in 1976 were close to \$3 billion. In this case, money is not simply talking; it's shouting.

What was the result of these enormous profits in terms of program quality? What did the networks offer in the way of new dramas, entertainment programs, documentaries and special series? Well, there was *Roots* of course, and there were a few worthy oddities like *Eleanor and Franklin*. Nonetheless, to call the past season undistinguished is to overpraise it.

The central concern of the networks has always been to make money, which is not at all surprising. Therefore the lucrative rewards and the furious competition for ratings have made network programmers unwilling to take a chance on almost anything different or demanding. What is surprising, however, is that the old villain of years past—the Madison Avenue huckster—is quietly emerging as the most effective friend of better commercial broadcasting. Who would have thought, a generation

ago, that this would ever come about?

Back in the 1950s, it was an article of faith among liberals that the root of most broadcasting evil was the sponsor. Program content was in many instances directly controlled by the advertiser. The most obvious—certainly the most flagrant—display of that control concerned the big-money quiz shows. The networks would like us to forget that Charles Van Doren was instructed to take a dive when his ratings slipped in 1958.

The rigging of the quiz shows was exposed in due course, and Charles Van Doren publicly confessed that he had been coached by agency producers. As much as anything else, the scandal brought about a basic change in which sponsor control of programming was supplanted by network control. The advertiser henceforth was able to buy time, but not control. Final authority over scheduling and content moved from Madison Avenue to Sixth Avenue.

Many of us thought, naïvely enough, that this shift of control would bring about improvement in quality. Not so; the tables have simply turned. Now the networks are the ones scrambling for larger and larger audiences. The advertisers, on the other hand, are often just as interested in the quality of the entertainment as they are in the quantity of the audience. One result is the increase in corporate underwriting of public-television shows like *Masterpiece Theater*.

This past season saw another innovation, one in which sponsors bypass the networks and sell their programs to individual stations, creating, in effect, an informal "fourth network" on an ad hoc basis. Thus Mobil gave us *Ten Who Dared*, a ten-week British-produced series on great explorers, which was shown on individual stations in 50 of the country's largest markets. Despite the fact that Mobil may have sponsored the series in a calculated effort to enhance its corporate image, credit is due. The series was imaginatively promoted by commercials, advertisements, and kits sent to high school princi-

pals. With a respect for viewer sensitivity seldom evident in network shows, Mobil broadcast the programs without commercial interruption.

Meanwhile, the advertising agencies themselves are assembling similar fourth-network consortiums. Later this month, a mini-series based on Taylor Caldwell's *Testimony of Two Men* is due to be shown on independent stations. Ogilvy & Mather is working with Metromedia Television on a year-round "Metronet" project to provide alternative programming Monday through Friday on independent stations. Benton & Bowles is putting together two hours of Sunday-night programming, also intended for unaffiliated stations.

Obviously, the proof will be in the programming, but the essential notion is appealing. We are bound to have greater choice. It is also worth noting that advertisers are taking the lead in challenging the surfeit of gratuitous violence on network action shows. For the moment at least, the huckster is no longer the heavy who can be conveniently blamed for the slick mediocrity of television programming.

Is there an audience for something different and something better? Surely the lesson of *Roots* is that the potential exists. The response to the week-long dramatization of Alex Haley's documentary novel took even ABC programmers by surprise—*Roots* had been deliberately scheduled for a week when there was no national "sweep" of ratings that would have provided a measure of local audiences in every market. It was a typical network hedge, stemming from a nervous under-rating of the average American's attention span. I'm glad *Roots* proved the network programmers wrong; I'd be happier if I thought for a moment that the ratings for *Roots* had an eloquence equal to the billion-dollar advertising revenues of 1976. ©

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Their common bond... was... wit... Dorothy Parker, as capable a poet as any of her contemporaries, said of herself, wryly, "I was following in the exquisite footsteps of Miss Edna St. Vincent Millay, unhappily in my own horrible sneakers."

