

# THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

## *The Case of O'Neill*

It is a characteristic mark of the lesser level of American criticism to boost potential and still struggling talent with all the gusto at its command and then, once that talent has come into its own and is sitting pretty on top of the fence, to give it a series of kicks *à l'improviste* in the abstracted rear. Nor is the upper level of our criticism entirely free from the same antic. What is at the bottom of it is unquestionably the very human, if proportionately uncritical, impulse to help the weak and hoot the strong, to do all we can for those who need us and to dislike, out of the fonts of vanity, those who are perfectly able to take care of themselves and who no longer have any practical use for us. Since the average critic amongst us is hard put to it to submerge his *alter ego* in his judgments and appraisals, since he is unable to dissociate his mind and emotions, we are constantly entertained by the monkeyshine to which I have alluded. When a young man of promise appears on the American scene the critics invariably start out like von Suppe's "Light Cavalry." But no sooner is the young man's promise actually realized than they take on the tone of Bizet's "Ivan the Terrible."

Eugene O'Neill is surely not the only writer in our midst who has met with this species of criticism. In the beginning, his plays, full of promise but as yet immature, were greeted with a comprehensive and gala pounding upon drums, cymbals and neighborhood dishpans. The racket of endorsement was deafening, and out of all proportion to the subject of celebration. But when gradually his plays began to attain to genuine solidity, imagination and profundity, when gradually he began to settle

himself squarely and securely at the very head of American dramatists, when finally he began to achieve the imprimatur of high critical praise from Europe—when this happened, the hitherto ecstatic local critical jazz and tzigane dancing stopped and in their stead the critical air became filled with Cherubini requiems, Liszt concertos pathétiques, Dvořák opera 89 and a whole chorus of Amnerises lifting up a despairful "Ohimè, morir mi sento." The same phenomenon has been observable in the cases of Sinclair Lewis and Cabell, as it was observable some years back in the cases of Dreiser and Victor Herbert. At the core of the nonsense, in addition to the point I have already mentioned, is doubtless the familiar critical passion to woo esteem for its independent and flexible judgment, which latter the school of criticism in question generally seeks to demonstrate by a sudden, surprising and intrinsically imbecile *volte face*, preceded by a certain amount of coquettish controversial detouring and by facetious animadversions on the gluey quality of such more sober critics as prefer to keep themselves in the background by repeating honest, if repetitious and hence dull, estimates of the artist under discussion instead of trying to clown themselves into notoriety and the limelight.

O'Neill, as I have said, is presently undergoing his dose of the become stereotyped rigmarole. It began to get under way when he wrote "The Great God Brown"; it got up more steam when he wrote "Marco Millions"; and it has now spread itself with a pervasive choo-choo tooting upon the appearance of his "Strange Interlude." It is not necessary to believe that these plays constitute the finest work that he has thus far done to appreciate the absurdity of his critical leg-pinchers. It is

only necessary to grant that, whatever one may happen to think of them, they are at least reputable efforts and surely, by any standard of criticism, superior to half the plays he produced in the days when all the boys and girls who are now disparaging him let themselves go full blast over his merits. One need not like "The Great God Brown," but no one in his right senses can fail to agree that, at its worst, it is yet a better piece of work than "The Straw." One need not think much of "Marco Millions" to allow that it is nevertheless a better job than "Welded" or "All God's Chillun." And one may actually be convinced that "Strange Interlude" is not all that some of us think it is without believing that "Gold" or "Different" or "The First Man" or "The Fountain" is infinitely better. Yet the goose-cries shake the welkin. Arbitrarily, evidently under the impression that they have been praising O'Neill long enough, the boys and girls forget the exact quality of his plays that they hymned in the past and proceed to a loud and hollow lambasting, seeking thus to achieve their silly little day in court and to show the world what great Bismarcks they are.

What they are, I allow myself to believe, are pathetic jackasses. O'Neill certainly is susceptible of sound critical attack on a number of sides—if such attack constitutes one a jackass, then I fear that I have on occasion been a lovely one myself—but he just as certainly is not the target for the kind of squashes that are currently being projected at him. Granting that I believe his most recent work is by long odds the soundest and best that he has so far done, and duly allowing that I may be quite wrong in my opinion, it still seems to me that any critic who, having accepted his "Ile," "In the Zone," "Before Breakfast," "The Dreamy Kid," "The Long Voyage Home," "Bound East for Cardiff," "Where the Cross Is Made," "The Rope" and even his "Anna Christie" as admirable, can yet not find his "The Great God Brown," "Marco Millions" and "Strange

Interlude" at the very least equally meritorious—that such a critic is sadly in need of a balance wheel.

Of "Marco Millions" and "Strange Interlude" I have already expressed a personal opinion in these pages, and at a time in advance of their actual stage presentation. Of the former, there is little left for me to say. Of the latter, there may be a word or two. The chief objection of the critics to it appears to be the author's employment of soliloquies and asides to suggest his characters' unspoken thoughts. These are declared to be unnecessary, interruptive of the action, superfluous, repetitive and posturing. The play, already extremely long, would, it is asserted, be the more compact and better without them. Exactly the same criticism, obviously, might be made—indeed frequently has been made by the same stripe of dolts—of Schubert's C major symphony, a perfect thing, as every musician knows, despite its similar musical asides, repetitions, interruptions and alleged superfluities. As a piece of musical writing it is relatively as long as O'Neill's play and the same arguments may be used by fools against it, but it remains none the less—to pop a platitude—a consummately beautiful work. And if it is seldom, if ever, played in its entirety, let the critics who imagine that in that fact they have found a good argument be made aware of the equally pertinent fact that "Strange Interlude" as it is currently being played on the Theatre Guild's stage is also not being played in its entirety, but has been very liberally cut down.

To turn to drama, what is argued against O'Neill's asides and soliloquies may just as logically be argued against Shakespeare's. If O'Neill's might be cut out as largely superfluous and interruptive of his play's action, so might Shakespeare's. Most of the soliloquies written by the latter were simply put into his plays to please actors and the plays would move more dramatically without them. If you doubt it, read almost any one of them, even "Hamlet," with the soliloquies and asides deleted.

To contend that Shakespeare's soliloquies constitute great poetry and that O'Neill's do not is to sidestep the direct issue. That issue is simply whether O'Neill's soliloquies and asides are dramaturgically valid. Poetry or lack of poetry has nothing to do with the case. In any event, the argument is based by the critical Bottoms, as so often happens, merely upon labels. The truth about soliloquies and asides as O'Neill employs them is that, while they are cunningly announced by O'Neill to represent the characters' unspoken thoughts—he is a shrewd hand at concealing the obvious and artfully masking it in a way to make the impressionables gabble—they are actually nothing more than straight dramatic speeches, as anyone can readily determine by referring, for example, to the powerful dramatic scene, say, at the conclusion of his sixth act. O'Neill has simply written his characters' thoughts in terms of straight dramatic speeches and has passed the device off on the idiotic novelty lovers by craftily insisting that they are only mute meditations.

As to the yawps over the play's considerable length—it runs for something like five hours—we engage criticism based upon the sensitiveness of the yawpers' sterns rather than upon the work of art itself. A certain critic finds that his netherland becomes weary after sitting out the play and hence confounds his netherland with his cerebrum which, in his case, is largely indistinguishable from it. Art is thus estimated not in terms of mental pleasure but of physical discomfort: the old Babbitt plaint that the Louvre is altogether too large for enjoyment and that the bath-rooms at Bayreuth are awful. While it is not to be denied that a five-hour play imposes more of a strain upon one than a two and one-half hour play, the strain surely is no reflection upon the play's quality. A Chinese drama that runs for three nights is not *ipso facto* worse than a play by Mr. Harry Delf that runs for a couple of hours. The

Oberammergau Passion Play, that runs on and on, may still conceivably be better than one of the Rev. Dr. Charles Rann Kennedy's shorter Biblical exhibits. Shaw's two-night "Back to Methuselah" doesn't impress me as being great shakes, but the fact remains that when it was cut down to one night's playing time it was made twice as senseless and dull as it would otherwise have been.

The kind of criticism that is ladled out to our more mature artists must often reduce them to a disgusted laughter. Lewis, when he writes an "Elmer Gantry," is met with the objection that—I quote literally from no less than thirty reviewers—"the book contains scarcely a decent character; almost all of them are hypocrites, scoundrels and vile." The same criticism may be made of Gorki's admitted masterpiece, "Nachtsyl." Dreiser, when he writes a novel twice as long as one of, say, Christopher Morley's, is charged with the very *embonpoint* and dispensation for which Dostoievski is acclaimed. Cabell is disparaged for doing what the Restoration writers are commended for. Sherwood Anderson is criticized for faults that in Zola are held to be virtues. And O'Neill is made mock of, in his finest and greatest play, for daring a profound and beautiful thing, far removed from the routine swamps of Broadway, instead of safely hugging the critical coasts with more of his youthful confections wherein a supposed spy's secret documents turn out to be love letters, wherein a Swede is given knock-out drops in a gin-mill, and wherein everybody goes crazy in a green light looking for gold or ile.

## II

### *A Failure*

Let us devote this space to a play that ran for only a few days in the New York theatre, that played to empty houses during its brief engagement, that was generally dismissed as of little worth by the critical press, and that, unless I am getting

to be a very poor judge of such things, was for the greater part of its distance as brilliant an American comedy as we have had since another play by the same author, "Two Married Men," ran also for only a few days in the New York theatre, played also to empty houses during its brief engagement and was similarly dismissed as of small worth by the same critical press. I allude to "A Distant Drum," by Vincent Lawrence.

Customers of this department will not be surprised at my regard for Lawrence, since I have frequently in the past spread myself in celebration of his merits. A playwright of periodically faltering invention and one who almost invariably writes last acts that astringe the themes he selects, he is nevertheless in this opinion as original, as independent and as penetrating a writer of comedy as this country has produced. His plays in the main exhibit a sophistication (I use the word in its best sense), an observation of men and women and a plumbing of character seldom achieved by his native contemporaries, and in the matter of dramatic dialogue that mirrors actual human speech he is without a rival among American dramatists. There is something about his plays, even when they are not all that one might hope for them, that reveals a peculiarly interesting mind, a peculiarly interesting honesty and forthrightness in assaying their subject matter, and a knowledge of the emotional idiosyncrasies of earthlings that pokes around far beneath the psychological epidermis. This "A Distant Drum," despite a final act that goes to pieces after half its course is covered, is a laudable thing. No Frenchman, and certainly no Englishman or German, has in recent years dug down further into what sentimentalists call the female heart and fetched up more subtly brilliant manure. And none has contrived a more searching comedy. We have had more finished comedies dealing with the same sort of material and comedies that, unlike Lawrence's, have succeeded in keeping their tails up

until the end, but I can think of none that has been more baldly true, more thoroughly alive and more sharply detailed. Without a single epigram, without an ounce of arbitrary theatricality (save in the stubbornly evasive last half of that third act), and without a trace of so-called polite comedy hocus-pocus, the author has put his story and its characters down-stage near the bright footlight trough, undressed them and let nature do its damndest. And what we get is a play that has reached out and made actuality its own.

Lawrence's plays have enjoyed small success in the American theatre; most of them have been failures. The reason isn't hard to make out. It is the custom to say that their failure is due to his inability to carry through for the full three-act distance and to his consequent collapse when ten-thirty rolls around. I doubt it. Any number of plays with good first and second acts and with weak final acts have prospered. The reason is rather to be found, I daresay, in Lawrence's disinclination to trick his plays into safe theatrical and box-office channels, a disinclination not shared by many of his brother playwrights, whether good or bad. It is Lawrence's method to state his thesis and manœuvre its execution in the relatively mild terms of implication and suggestion rather than in the usual and theatrically more pragmatic terms of black and white. He prefers to let his audience's mind dramatize his themes and contents himself for the most part with throwing out winks and hints. His plays are best when he adheres to this technique and worst, as in his last acts, when he momentarily loses courage and falls back upon dramaturgic stencils. He also suffers in the way of popular appeal because he deals with emotional reactions that are just around the corner from the majority of persons in his audience. The rubber-stamp emotional equipment of rubber-stamp drama does not interest him in the least; it seems to be his purpose to dramatize those emotions

that his fellow playwrights, lacking his sleuthy insight into human psychology, invariably leave out of their plays. The emotional reactions that lie under the obvious emotional reactions of the characters in orthodox drama are his dish.

The comedies of Lawrence are charmingly devoid of all suspicion of strain, of all suspicion of *cliché* that lies in a sedulous avoidance of *cliché*. He never for a moment suggests that he is posturing a point of view; what he says has the convincing ring of being founded unostentatiously upon experience and its acquired wisdom. He never, except in those periods that corrupt his plays' last paces, is the smarty, the little boy hitching up metaphysical long pants, the concealer of sham knowledge in glow-worm wit, that so many of his contemporaries are. The latter, essaying to write the kind of plays that Lawrence writes, betray themselves in their oily recourse to transiently deceptive but hollow dramatic subterfuges, praying thus to get themselves accepted as worldlings and as true professors of esoterics, when all that they actually are, as the left eye has no difficulty in seeing, are joeys. Unable to smell out the paradoxes that lie hidden in human character and that send up disconcerting little trails of punk smoke, they take refuge in making the more obvious paradoxes superior to their characters rather than, as is the way of things actually, their characters superior to the paradoxes. In simpler words, they present a paradox as a character instead of, as Lawrence does, a character as a paradox. Thus we find them arbitrarily giving their villains better manners than their heroes and imagining that thereby they have achieved an equitable characterization of the former. Thus we find them placing the more unpopular opinions and philosophies in the mouths of their heroes and heroines and imagining that they have thereby achieved rational character delineation. Thus, also, we find them dressing up their Jack Trevors as Desperate Desmonds and their Desperate Desmonds as Jack

Trevors and believing that both of them thereby achieve a greater approximation to real, living human beings. Such buncombe is not for Lawrence. He very simply and very quietly lays hold of ordinary, everyday persons and gradually unveils the paradoxical yet immediately recognizable impulses that motivate their thoughts and acts. In such of his plays as "The Ghost Between," "Two Married Men," "Sour Grapes," "In Love with Love" and "A Distant Drum"—I have tried to refresh my memory of others *via* "Who's Who," but Lawrence isn't there; all I can find are Samuel Shipman, Owen Davis, Hartley Manners, Edward Locke and Kate McLaurin—in such plays as these, he simply visits the neighbors and tells us not what they would tell us, but what they tell to themselves. He dramatizes not persons, but motives, and chiefly such motives as snooze beneath what appear on the surface to be the real motives. In a word, he dramatizes what is left of other dramatists' characters when they get through with them.

Still another reason that accounts for Lawrence's failure with American audiences is to be discovered in his perfect unconcern with morals, the one way or another. This unconcern is relatively evident even when he so far forgets his integrity as to shoot off a cheap and indignant melodramatic pistol, as in "A Distant Drum," or to warm his hero and heroine in a final arbitrary embrace, as in "Sour Grapes." He refuses to affix labels to his characters or to their acts, and this refusal—the refusal of a sincere and dignified artist—is mistaken by his frequently thin-skinned audiences for a partisanship toward what they are disposed to regard as not entirely *comme il faut*, *commune bonum*, or *Schicklichkeit*. These audiences, loving above everything else to pretend a momentary sophistication and emotional atheism that, when they get back home to baby, they are thoroughly ashamed of, have lately exhibited a theatrical willingness to swallow a bit of vicarious turpitude,



but Lawrence in a play like "A Distant Drum" pours out too big a dose for them. They will gulp down something like "Paris Bound" with its lady-fingering of adultery, or something like "The Command to Love," in which sin is shrewdly dressed by Jimmy Reynolds and morality by Saks, but they gag at the perhaps deplorable facts of life coldly presented, with no wisecracks to laugh them off, no incidental piano playing of Chopin to prove to everyone that the loose fish's heart is in the right place after all, no cute and generally admitted virgin cast to soften the strumpet's rôle, and no concession on the part of any character toward any other, save anatomical.

### III

#### *Red Light and Pink*

The much discussed "Maya" of Simon Gantillon, in an excellent translation by Ernest Boyd, was introduced to American audiences by the Actor-Managers who, previous to their presentation of the play, showed that they hadn't the slightest idea of its intrinsic character by getting out a folder in which they made the following observation: "We have chosen to produce 'Maya' in America because we believe that it is the creation of an author who desires to reveal a new interpretation of certain phases of life. The ordinary writer too often shrinks from the irony and tragedy of life into a sentimental outlook which softens and blurs its outlines. Gantillon, on the contrary, has sufficient power and integrity as an artist to face existence without flinching."

Whatever "Maya" may or may not be, it is certainly not the play that the Actor-Managers conceived it to be. Far from revealing what they designated as a new interpretation of certain phases of life, it interprets these certain phases of life precisely as they were interpreted in the Hindu mythology and legend of the dark ages and as they have been interpreted by dozens of

prose writers and thousands of poets since, to say nothing of an occasional playwright. Further, the treatment which Gantillon accords his theme, far from shrinking from a sentimental outlook, is as completely sentimental as it is possible to imagine. Of all the treatments that I have encountered, I know of none that is fundamentally pinker. While it may seem to be stretching a point, you will find even the sugary Barrie flirting a bit less sentimentally with the kernel of Gantillon's theme in the first act of "The Legend of Leonora." "Maya," despite all this, is, however, at times an interesting piece of work. These times are those when the author permits himself a furlough from symbolic curlicues and sentimentality and goes about the business of depicting more or less realistically the ins and outs of the profession of harlotry.

Gantillon's theme, as will already have been suspected, is—as Boyd puts it in his fore-note—"the prostitute, symbol of the eternal illusion which draws men to women, the changeless Eternal Feminine, always the same, yet different to every man who seeks in her the realization of his own dream." The scene throughout is the harlot's room in the street of harlots leading to the harbor of Marseilles. To this room come the harlot's customers from the seven seas, each bringing with him not only the flesh but the various things of the spirit—all to be reflected one way or another in the mirror of the woman's body. And to this room come also the red women of the quarter, each with her avarice and her generosity, her flintiness and her softness. In the illumination of the former of these attributes, Gantillon is relatively more successful than in his illumination of the latter. For, like most Frenchmen, he apparently cannot himself resist softness in the portrayal of softness, and as a result he becomes sticky when he would merely be tender. There attaches to his play, accordingly, something of the quality of the time-honored boozy recital of "the story of my life," familiar to all boulevardiers in the days of real beer.

# THE LIBRARY

BY H. L. MENCKEN

## *Two Enterprising Ladies*

MY LIFE, by Isadora Duncan. \$5. 8¾ x 5½; 359 pp.  
New York: Boni & Liveright.

IN THE SERVICE OF THE KING: *The Story of My Life*, by Aimée Semple McPherson. \$2. 7½ x 5½;  
316 pp. New York: Boni & Liveright.

THESE books prove anew what was long ago observed by sagacious men: that only a shadow separates angel from devil, devotee from damned. A trivial accident in youth might have turned La Duncan into a McPherson, and another might have saved La McPherson from the pulpit and set her loose upon the stage.

Superficially, to be sure, they differ enormously. La Duncan (posthumously, alas!) devotes a large part of her volume to shameless bragging about her drabbing; La McPherson (still alive, glory to God!) devotes at least a third of hers to proofs that she is chaste. But all that is only on the surface: deep down the two gals are tremendously alike. Both are mystics, and hear strange voices over the sky-rim. Both, disdaining money, come eventually to the lush, voluptuous material success of movie queens. And both have sad hearts, and reach out wistfully for something that never was on land or sea. Once, detained in Los Angeles by literary business, I permitted one of Aimée's fans, a man named Brother Quirk, to lure me to her basilica, the Angelus Temple. Her sacerdotal smile was as wide as a bath-towel, but it took no more than ten or fifteen minutes for me to note that it was really only a smirk. Underneath it I detected a great sadness. The lady, indeed, was so tragic that she made me uncomfortable, hardened though I was to the grinning masks of Hollywood. I hope no one will accuse me of impertinence when I venture the guess that there was nothing she

longed for more earnestly, on that melancholy Sunday afternoon, than a pair of strong male arms around her neck and the pillow of a heaving, piliferous chest. Not even the sudden conversion and baptism of Quirk himself would have done her more good.

The Duncan book, I assume, was planned as the first of two volumes. It stops short with the fair (and, by that time, somewhat fat) author's invasion of Russia in 1921. That invasion turned out to be as ill-starred as Napoleon's, and she was presently back in France, where she was to die in 1927. What she has to say in her first volume about her curiously banal love affairs has made the book a roaring success, and it is now being read by all the flappers who devoured "The President's Daughter" six months ago. But what gives it solid interest is not this pathetic and almost mannish mulling over cold amours, but the author's laborious and vain effort to explain the principles of her so-called Art. This effort leaves it revealed as precisely what it was: a mass of puerilities, without any more rational basis than golf or spiritualism. Isadora simply loved to prance around in a shift; all the rest was afterthought. The daughter of a music-teacher, she began this prancing very early in life and to the tune of relatively respectable music: in the fact lay the seeds of her future success. It gave the world, and especially the world of artists, a pleasant shock to see the shift waving and billowing to the tunes of Chopin and Tschaikovsky; there was another shock later on when it began to flap to the tunes of Wagner and Brahms. It was an era of painfully correct ballet-dancing, and to worn-out, tin-pan music. Here, at least, was something new—and straightway it be-