

# THE MEN WHO WRITE OUR PLAYS

BY PHILIP RAHV

ACCORDING to George Jean Nathan and other informed critics, the contemporary American drama is the most vital and advanced in the world. On the face of it this judgment, so flattering to our national ego, seems incontestable; yet it is so strictly comparative in meaning as to be far less complimentary than it sounds. It is more a reflection on the state of the world today than on the state of the American theatre. The truth is that our drama has attained first place by default. If the European theatre offers such weak competition these days, it is not its internal development which accounts for it but catastrophic conditions of a social and political nature.

To discount all fancy claims, however, is not to deny that dramatic literature in America has shown a liveliness and a sense of adaptation to new material which has saved it from the tendency to decline that has of late been observed in other literary forms. While the quality of novels has

visibly deteriorated in this period, the same cannot justly be said about recent plays. On the whole the level of playwriting is at present no lower, even if it is no higher, than it was one or two decades ago.

But certain nice distinctions are in order. The play, it should be noted, has by no means caught up with the novel as a medium of verbal art. In any final creative sense fiction is still far in the lead, as no other form of writing can rival its capacity to reproduce the diversity and complexity of modern life in a manner at once direct, subtle, and comprehensive. One must keep in mind the fact that a number of historical factors have combined to reduce the drama to the status of a second-rate medium. It is surely no accident that in America, for example, no creative writer of the first rank — with the single exception of Eugene O'Neill — has found in the drama his natural means of expression; and allowing for national variations this is equally true of England, France, and Germany. It seems

that the experience of highly developed and thoroughly urbanized societies is too varied and intricate to be readily encompassed within the simple, narrow, and rigorously economical outlines of the dramatic form. But perhaps it is this very "primitivism" of the drama which gives it a certain stability. The drama's basically traditional technique limits the scope and depth of its achievement in times of literary expansion, but also prevents it from slipping into a decline as rapid as that of the other forms in times of literary depression.

In recent years the drama has responded to the major events of our time by shifting its interest from the theme of private to that of public morality. Today the stage no longer feeds on the manners and humors of the private ego but on the frustrations and ambitions of whole nations as well as of social groups and classes. Plays like *Desire Under the Elms*, *Craig's Wife*, and *The Silver Cord* were characteristic of the 1920's when writers were preoccupied with the problem of personal relations and generally with the struggle of the individual to live his own life in the teeth of social taboos and family conventions. In the 1930's, on the other hand, the significant

concerns of the age were voiced by plays like *Winterset*, *Awake and Sing*, and *There Shall Be No Night*, which represent the fate of the individual in terms of the fate of society. There is little doubt that this trend will continue in the 1940's — because nowadays personal and social problems are so closely linked that to disconnect them is to treat them abstractly and hence unintelligently. The new morals of the theatre are social morals. This is as true of the upper-class comedies of S. N. Behrman as of the lower-class tragedies of Clifford Odets, of Robert Sherwood's excursions into current events as of Maxwell Anderson's declamations on man's place and destiny in the universe. Saroyan seems to be the only playwright who has kept aloof from social problems. But Saroyan, who imitates not the world but, strictly himself, is in no sense a typical case.

It is necessary to remark that the term "social" is not being used here as a synonym of the term "political." While social plays have their political implications — which you are free to interpret in your own manner — political plays usually turn out to be propaganda pieces. Not content with mere implications or even with a thesis or mes-

sage, such plays, more often than not, insist on providing the spectator with a complete philosophy of politics or, worse still, with the address of some party or organization which he is to join if dissatisfied with things as they are. And it is precisely this wrongheaded definitiveness, this arrogant and fatuous certainty as to where salvation lies, which has ruined most plays of social protest, especially those produced with such zealous disregard for the drama as an art-form, by the now defunct Theatre Union and other left-wing groups.

## II

Of the younger playwrights only three — Odets, Hellman, and Saylor — have so far gained the general recognition of audiences and dramatic reviewers. Odets is, to my mind, the most gifted of the three. He has intensity, meaningful convictions, a natural aptitude for the dramatic form, a theme which he was the first to explore and develop, and a style that by and large effectively assimilates the modern American vernacular to theatrical uses.

Yet Odets has not shown any real capacity for growth, with the result that his most recent theatre-piece, *Night Music*, falls far below

the level of *Awake and Sing*, his first full-length play. *Night Music* summed up, as it were, all of Odets' faults: the obsession with one type — the poor, baffled, garrulous, self-pitying, fighting-mad young man who, lost in the big city, desperately craves success and happiness; the tendency of his dialogue to run ahead of itself in glittering wisecracks that sometimes yield a kind of heroico-comical pathos but which otherwise destroy the logic and realism of his situations, converting his people into a band of jittery low-life mouthpieces; the naïve radicalism which, though never degenerating into political braggadocio or senseless sloganeering, is none the less inadequately understood and indiscriminately distributed among his characters; and, finally, defects of sensibility that permit him, as in *Golden Boy*, to adopt cheap theatrical devices whenever his invention fails him. Odets is, to be sure, a serious dramatist, and at least two of his plays — *Awake and Sing* and *Rocket to the Moon* — will long be remembered in the American theatre. But what he needs to do, if he is not to get bogged down in the writing and re-writing of the real or imaginary biography of his youth, is to rid himself of his adolescent identifica-

tion with the baffled young man who is the ever-recurring hero of his plays.

Lillian Hellman is quite as social-minded as Odets, but she lacks his ardor and intensity. A competent play-maker, she is precise in her stage-effects and expert in maneuvering characters; and as her special talent is for malevolence, she succeeded in making the morbidly mean little girl of *The Children's Hour* and the vicious people of *The Little Foxes* appear menacingly real. However, one cannot help but feel that there is something strained and factitious about her plays. Her dialogue is effective in its way yet too neat and dry, the dramatic incidents she devises often seem arbitrary instead of inevitable, and her portrayal of depraved types does not so much reveal the evil which is in the human heart as exploit for melodramatic ends our willingness to believe the worst about our neighbors. Yet Miss Hellman cannot go far wrong so long as she continues with her psychological studies of malice and greed; for it is only when she succumbs to ideological pressures and writes on class-struggle themes that her limitations become most apparent. I don't suppose I have ever seen a more inept "revolutionary" play than her *Days to*

*Come*, staged on Broadway several years ago, in which a capitalist's wife falls in love with a union organizer leading a strike in her husband's factory, the presumption being that this somehow symbolizes the fall of the bourgeoisie and the rise of the proletariat. Actually it was poor propaganda, for it reminded one of the old-fashioned story of the diligent young workman who marries his boss's daughter. What Miss Hellman had done was shift and revise this antique tale along radical lines to make it deliver a new political message.

William Saroyan, who in two seasons has managed to impress Broadway and to persuade the dramatic reviewers that he is a genius, is certainly a phenomenal young man. Plainly what people like about him is his enthusiasm, even though his enthusiasm is directed mostly at himself; and in these melancholy times his light raptures, spontaneity, and clownish fancies are apt to provide an innocent escape from the responsibilities not only of life but, to some extent, of art too. Hence one can sympathize with people who find it pleasant to believe that Saroyan is an important playwright, but one can hardly agree with them. Of his three plays, *My*

*Heart's in the Highlands* seems to me the most interesting and dramatically successful, for it is wholly integrated in feeling and its pastoral sentiments are truly objectified in the scenes it depicts. The same cannot be said, however, about the plays that followed this initial performance. I, for one, am unable to see in them very much more than a demonstration that by throwing all restraint to the wind it is possible to string together a series of stylized vaudeville skits into what may appear on the surface to be a genuine dramatic structure. This is an accomplishment of a kind, for which Saroyan deserves praise but scarcely the acclaim he has received. Least of all does it call for the canonical commendations bestowed upon him by the Pulitzer Award Committee and the Drama Critics' Circle.

### III

But the principal fare offered by the contemporary theatre is provided by the older playwrights, among whom are such veterans of dramatic writing as Elmer Rice, Maxwell Anderson, S. N. Behrman, George S. Kaufman, Robert Sherwood, and Philip Barry. And since it is mainly from this group that our drama derives both its strength

and weaknesses, an estimate of its present status as a creative art is implicit in any basic discussion of their work.

Kaufman is, of course, not so much a dramatist as a superb showman. Craftsmanship is to be respected in any field; and as his excellent comedies never outreach themselves, never strive to do more than entertain us, they are much to be preferred to the humorous exploits of a writer like Saroyan, who professes not merely to amuse but also to instruct us in the conduct of life. Elmer Rice, abundantly gifted as a play-maker, is primarily a journalist of the theatre. So is Robert Sherwood, who is in many ways the most enterprising of our playwrights. *Idiot's Delight*, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, and *There Shall Be No Night* were vigorous and exciting expressions of the time-spirit on a level accessible and hence pleasing to wide audiences. Dramatists like Sherwood are indispensable to the theatre, for their energy serves to enliven the medium and to extend its topical range. Philip Barry seems to vacillate between blundering mystical plays like *Here Come the Clowns* and such repartee-pieces as *The Philadelphia Story*, which are funny enough but not sufficiently witty and intelligent to make

more than a momentary impression.

But it is Anderson and Behrman who are undoubtedly, each in his own sphere, the most accomplished members of this group of older playwrights. Most critics value Anderson as a dramatist of high stature, as the heir, in fact, to Eugene O'Neill's mantle, whereas a small minority, whose opinion I share, regard him as the most overrated writer for the theatre in America. In Edmund Wilson's judgment, the characters in *Winter-set* express themselves "in blank verse of a hypnotic monotony and in conventional poetic imagery of a dispiriting flatness and banality," and his other plays give the same impression of "mediocrity and pointlessness." The prose part of his work Wilson found not nearly so bad as his verse. "I am inclined to believe," he wrote, "that it is this unhappy infatuation with blank verse which has aborted Mr. Anderson's talents all around. A technique should grow out of the material; and Mr. Anderson is trying to impose an old technique which has nothing to do with his material."

However, there is something more radically wrong with Anderson's plays than this artificial use of an old technique. The motiva-

tion of his characters, for instance, is uniformly either so high-flown and ultra-spiritual as to become almost completely abstract or else romantic in the stipulated manner of popular art. Anderson set out to recapture the grandeur of classic drama, and therefore it is quite in order to ask whether his ideas and the quality of his imagination are in any way commensurable with his ambition. And here is where one must reply that his content entirely belies the elevation of his tone, for his view of the world is at bottom genteel and academic. His plays are tragic in a pathetic but not at all in a dramatic sense; you will find in them far too many incredible Italian gangsters dragged in by the hair to resolve situations that the author does not know what to do with; and the Shakespearean notes that his lines so flatly echo only serve to call our attention to the plight of a Broadway writer who is trying to lift himself by his bootstraps.

If Anderson is the most overrated of our playwrights, S. N. Behrman is surely the most consistently underrated, at least by highbrow commentators on the theatre. Behrman has been very successful on Broadway, but the well-groomed types that people his comedies and, in general, their

glamorous air has stimulated in some circles a prejudice against him. Yet this prejudice is really nothing more than an inversion of the snobbery of which he is suspected. Actually the social machinery employed by Behrman is one of the most valuable conventions of the comedy of manners; for this reason to appreciate him rightly it is necessary to distinguish between the machinery of his plays and their substance. In his *No Time for Comedy* he examined his own position as a writer in relation to the grim forces that press upon the modern world, and I think we must accept his claim that his work is not "mere glitter and disillusion"—that through it are "refracted the disturbances and agony of the times." In his best plays, such as *Rain from Heaven*, *End of Summer* and *Wine of Choice*, he has represented on a small scale, yet incisively and in a true comic spirit, those same social issues, ideas, and figures that give our more serious contemporary drama its point and relevance. Behrman is unique in the American theatre in that he is not merely witty but also fully conscious of what he is about, in that he engages not only our sense of humor but our intelligence as well.



## COMMUNIQUE

AFTER the ship  
a funneled sea  
sucks at all floating things  
and over its broken wake  
the gulls  
are treading the sunlight  
with their wings.

DOROTHY LIVINGSTON ULRICH

## THE KLAN KICKS UP AGAIN

BY THEODORE IRWIN

THOUGH hopped-up for a 1940 comeback, the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, is befuddled these days. The new crop of Cyclopes, Klaragos, Nighthawks, Terrors, Great Titans, Furies, Klabees, Klokons, Kludds and Kladds, led to believe the order of bulldozers reigned supreme, doesn't know what to make of recent developments.

Witness: the goings-on at Atlanta, capital of the realm. One night last March, a band of knight-shirted men picked up Ike Gaston, a white barber, at the suburb of East Point, drove him to a clump of woods, stripped the flesh from his back with a four-foot whip, and left him to die. Kluxers had objected to his "habits of life." When plug-ugly knighthood was in flower in the 'twenties, such a flogging would have caused barely a ripple of local comment. But poor Ike's death brought on a genuine grand jury investigation with a parade of two hundred witnesses. It turned out that some fifty whippings had been staged in

the section during the past two years in a crusade for "better living habits"; a crusade, strangely enough, which coincided with a CIO organization drive in the textile area. Though Ike's murderers are still at large, Kluxers were promptly indicted for past floggings. The first actual conviction came in April when the "boss of the wrecking crew," accused of lashing nine victims, was given the limit — a year on the chain gang, six months in jail and a \$1000 fine. In May, another Kluxer was handed a sentence twice as severe and a third took an eighteen-months rap. Eight other badly scared members of the robed "wrecking crew" now await trial.

Nor are these the Klan's only recent setbacks. In Roselle, New Jersey, two Kluxers who burned a cross near a synagogue and scattered anti-Semitic leaflets were convicted and fined \$15 each — right in the face of a Kleagle's threat of a riot if the men weren't acquitted. The law cracked down promptly even in the Klan strong-