

THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

Ivory Towers To Let

THE room was beautiful. The Orchestra was softly playing a Strauss waltz. The girls in their flowered late summer dresses looked lovely. The champagne was excellent. I went over and sat with Dorothy Thompson. "What," she instantly and peremptorily demanded of me, "is your opinion of Molotov, Voroshilov, Kalinin, Malenkov and Timoshenko?" "I read Sean O'Casey's new play, *Purple Dust*, this afternoon," I said. "It is rich in poetic imagination."

She looked at me, over her champagne glass, with profound disgust. "What is a mere play, even one by O'Casey, in times like these!" she exclaimed.

"But," quaking, I allowed, "it happens that my job is dramatic criticism, and the play interests me."

"A critic!" she scoffed, as the waiter refilled her glass. "There is no place today for a mere kibitzer in life!"

Politely, nay with ineffable chivalry, refraining from observing that the only perceptible difference be-

tween us was that Dorothy was a critic-kibitzer in the field of war and politics whereas I was one in the field of the theatre and drama, I bowed elegantly at the middle, kissed her on each cheek, for I have long entertained a personal regard for her, and departed in the direction of the bar. There, after a brief colloquy with the bartender on the respective merits of Joe Di Maggio and Alphonse Daudet, the latter a favorite of my bartending friend, I stood and meditated.

Why, I wondered, in a world grown cruel and ugly and so famished for even a little glimpse of the old peace and fineness and beauty, why this paradoxical sudden wide distaste and even contempt for the artist and for those who would defend and champion him? Why, I pondered — and my bartending friend sympathetically pondered with me — this belief that there is no place in the world today for men and women who steadfastly hold themselves professionally, if mayhap not personally, aloof from the current confusion and who stead-

fastly hope and try to keep alive the inspiring old artistic traditions? And just how, my friend and I further ruminated, is the contemptuous attitude of the Dorothy Thompsons toward the artist essentially different from Hitler's?

The fact, nevertheless, remains the fact. There is little general patience these days with any novelist, essayist, poet or playwright who does not allow his work in one way or another to reflect his concern with what is immediately going on around him. And as we unfortunately have few spirits independent enough to resist the market clamor, the result is often something pretty painful. A dubious journalism has usurped the chair of Melpomene; Thalia wears a V sweater; Calliope grows to look more and more like Winston Churchill; Euterpe sings *The Last Time I Saw Paris*; Terpsichore runs a Bundles For Britain ball; Erato chalks derisory limericks about Hitler on the lavatory wall; Clio gives public readings of the Gettysburg address; and Polymnia patriotically hisses Wagner.

No one, surely, wants to see Nazism beaten and liberty and democracy preserved more than I do, and no one is more willing and fully eager to do his small share toward that happy end, but I'll be good and bedamned if I can see how

it is going to be done, or even helped to be done, by the simple process of converting the fine arts into *PM* editorials. The Dorothy Thompsons and their boy-friends may write their heads off and yet they can no more bring down a single Messerschmitt with their propaganda screeches than they can bring up the estate of the drama with their propaganda plays like *Another Sun*.

II

It is much too early in the new theatrical season to tell just how far the stage this year again will go in plastering the ivory tower with indoctrinatory three-sheets. But unless all signs fail the analogy, parallel and straight-out propaganda playwrights will once more be with us in sufficient numbers and, as heretofore, will for the most part make us overpoweringly homesick for the days when the drama was still an art and not a rally. When I say us, I of course speak within narrow limits, for all too evidently there remains still a great audience to be capitalized on with dramatic repetitions of the afternoon's newspaper editorials, hams made up to look like Douglas and Lincoln, old-fashioned Germans heroically going back home to kidnap Hitler, pian-

ists in the little invaded nations drowning out the Stukas with brave renditions of Sibelius, cloak-and-suiters identified spiritually with Jesus Christ, Free Frenchmen beholding again the angel of the Marne in the bottoms of their wine glasses, and illiterate cockneys suddenly brought to a realization of the grave danger to the civilization of Shakespeare, Milton and Warwick Deeping, shouldering a 22-calibre pistol, and gallantly going forth to beat off the full force of Goering's Luftwaffe and save the Empire.

Since themes matter little and treatment matters much, all this might conceivably be acceptable even to such fowl as strangely persist in esteeming *Romeo and Juliet* above *Flight To The West* or even *Shenandoah* and *The Girl I Left Behind Me* if only the playwrights who are busying themselves with the themes were sufficiently gifted dramatic artists. But the most of them are very far from that, and the consequence has been and threatens this season to continue to be a succession of defense campaigns, spiritualist cabinet materializations of Tom Paine, testimonials to the valor of our English and Chinese brothers, and hot-foots to Adolf artlessly masquerading as reputable drama, and fooling no-

body but the actors and maybe a million or so other people.

This, obviously, as intimated, is of course solely the point of view of a professional critic of the drama, but how any professional critic of the drama can possibly entertain any other point of view and still hold his job with his head up is rather hard to make out. Yet the fact remains that there are plenty such, and that their heads still peculiarly brush the ceiling. For it is their stout conviction, regularly expressed, that if drama does not center itself upon the events of its immediate time it is not worth its salt and should be relegated to the library, where, presumably, it may languish forgotten along with all the great classic and modern literature there that similarly did not center itself upon the events of its immediate day.

This journalistic critical attitude, already spread through the nation like hot-dog stands and doing an equally rush business, is the most discouraging and malignant thing that our young dramatic artistic aspiration has to face. I know at least a half dozen young fellows of considerable talent who have come to me lately, in their eyes the look of little dogs lost and bewildered in a traffic jam, and who have speculated if there was any use in trying

to write the plays closest to the hearts of their imaginations with contemporary criticism waiting around the corner with a blackjack.

The records of more modern dramatic history suggest that good propaganda plays — and there have been good ones — have for the larger share been written not during the fact but considerably after it. Meditation and reflection have thus distilled what was mere stark propaganda into the tincture of philosophical dramatic literature. Heat makes reporters; calm makes poets.

The usurpation by most of our leading playwrights, duly encouraged by the majority of our critics, of the profession of newspaper editorial writers, cable editors and Mecca Temple Ciceros seriously threatens that advance of the American drama which began so auspiciously twenty years ago and which, until lately, promised to grow apace. Only O'Neill stands stubbornly, courageously and brilliantly apart from the salesmen of popular indignations and therapeutic cure-alls, remains resolutely in his ivory tower, and to the ultimate greater credit of the native drama looks amusedly down at the swarm of neo-Aristotelian ants scurrying aimlessly among the day's newspaper files, frantically looking

up the definition of analogue in the dictionary, and voraciously nibbling large chunks out of *Mein Kampf*, *Blood, Sweat and Tears* and the hundred and one *I Saw France Falls*. And only O'Neill does that drama a disservice by failing to give to it, in its hour of greatest aesthetic need, those fine, aloof plays which he has completed in the unholy dramatic din about him and which yet thoughtlessly he insists upon keeping from the stage.

III

As for the rest, look at the picture. Sherwood uses Lincoln as his Charlie McCarthy to sell us Democracy, and invaded Finland to sell us Preparedness. Anderson looks up and discovers the meaning of analogue and in *Journey to Jerusalem* uses Christ to sell us the error of racial persecution and oppression, and further drafts France, in *Candle In The Wind*, to sell us a lesson in sacrifice. Hellman wins the critics' prize with *Watch On The Rhine* for merchanting the need for some neo-Schurz to return to Germany and take a pot-shot at Hitler. Rice charts a transatlantic clipper and sells us tolerance of Zion and hatred of the Nazis in terms of a set of stock-company heroes at stage right and a set of stock-com-

pany villains at stage left. Behrman also looks up and finds the meaning of analogue and in *The Talley Method* auctions us antagonism to the totalitarian doctrine in terms of a heartless surgeon. And he also sells us the philosophy that this is No Time For Comedy by forgetting for the moment that he is a dramatic artist, turning special pleader, and writing a very poor comedy. Kingsley is about to sell us the Constitution through an actor listed in the program as Thomas Jefferson. And Odets is said to be about to peddle us again, in *Clash By Night*, one of his cosmic panaceas boiled from herbs grown on the old *New Masses* lot.

Look further at some of the others. Barry vends the preciousness of American freedom through a parable in which a red-headed young actress called Liberty Jones is chased around the stage by ferocious characters representing Nazism, fascism and communism. Irwin Shaw hawks in *The Gentle People* an allegory in which oppressed Jewry is shown to triumph over persecution, typified by a Brooklyn gangster, by luring the scoundrel to Sheepshead Bay and with sudden bravado hitting him over the head with a lead-filled blutwurst. Robert Ardrey in *Thunder Rock* sells us the idea that we

shouldn't rely on the traditions of the past, shouldn't lull ourselves into a false security and should bestir ourselves to fight for world order by exhibiting to us four or five actors designated as ghosts of the intrepid yesterday and then having them comport themselves like so many Joe Webers being poked in the eye by Lew Fields. John Howard Lawson in *Marching Song* retails the glory of the communist ideal in terms of the old foreclosure of the mortgage and the cruel eviction of the poor hero with his wife and little child; only the snowstorm is missing. Robert Turney hopes to recreate in us the Spirit of '76 through enough waving of the flag to give even George M. Cohan goose-pimples. Ben Hecht sells us the determination to battle the forces of fascism by presenting to us, in *To Quito And Back*, a bravo who finally rouses himself from lethargy and goes forth against the enemy armed with a mandolin.

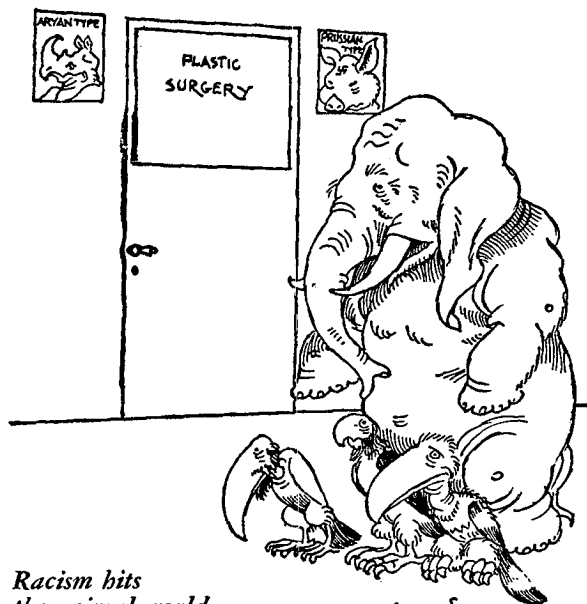
Continue. Ellis St. Joseph in *Passenger to Bali* joins the Newcastle Coke and Coal Importing Co. by exposing Hitler in the person of a spurious clergyman who persuades the crew of a ship symbolizing Old Point Comfort, Va., or something of the sort, to mutiny. Burnet Hershey in *The Brown*

Danube proffers us the hypocrisy of the Nazi Aryan doctrine by bestowing upon us a high-class Nazi whose mother's maiden name is discovered, to his glowering abashment, to have been von Ginzberg. Even the customary humorists, the Messrs. Kaufman and Hart, seek to sell us patriotism with a tear-brewery called *The American Way* in which an old German-American even more excessively amorous of the United States than George

Washington or Walter Winchell is beaten up by a gang of Fifth Columnists.

And girls like Ayn Rand, Clare Boothe and Dorothy Thompson help sail the coal schooners to Newcastle with the aid of windy plays demonstrating, respectively, the virtues of the pure Russians, the despicability of Nazi consuls, and the pitiable plight of refugees from the dictator nations.

And they say *Saroyan* is crazy.



*Racism hits
the animal world*

Arthur Szyk
N.Y. 1941.

A U-BOAT COMMANDER SPEAKS

BY CAPTAIN L. E. JAECKEL

Except for the change in name and a few other details, to protect his relatives in Germany, this is a true account in the submarine commander's own words, as told to Captain Jaeckel. — THE EDITORS.

IF YOU met the man whom we will call, for the sake of discretion, Oberleutnant Karl von Schlessing, you would be impressed by the fact that he does not look like a U-boat commander. He might easily pass for a professional man from the Wilhelmstrasse, or Unter den Linden, in Berlin. Cheeks do not bronze in a submarine and waist-lines do not expand. Von Schlessing is slender and of slightly more than medium height. His complexion is clear and his long, artistic fingers give no evidence of manual labor. He speaks excellent English; his Continental accent is not easily identified. One would never suspect that this well-modulated voice once barked orders which sent men and a ship to the ocean's floor.

Oberleutnant von Schlessing looks strangely out of place in a fenced and heavily guarded prison camp on the west coast of England, atop cliffs overlooking the

Irish Sea. Surf roar booms up the cliffs like rolls of distant thunder and when the wind is strong out of the northwest it creates a dismal moan among the crevices. There is a dankness about the place, a combination of moisture-laden sea winds and the nearby moors that stretch away to the north. There are no standing trees or shrubs within a mile of the prison camp. One may not approach it unseen, for a single road leads across the marshes, and ends abruptly at the massive barred gate. Within the high enclosure are a half dozen long, low buildings. This is a prison exclusively for maritime officers.

Von Schlessing does not like to talk about his U-boat career. He chose the submarine service because he had no liking for the Army and U-boats returned to the Vaterland more frequently than other naval vessels. He preferred the more hazardous task for the