
THE THEATRE

by GEORGE JEAN NATHAN



DRAMA WITHOUT STYLE

IT IS the increasing impression of an observer of the contemporary American stage that the ability of most of its more conspicuous playwrights is seriously disabled by the infirmity of their literary style. With slight exception, any trace of distinction is lacking in even the case of the relatively better plays, and the result is a drama that, however commendable it may be in other directions, has about it an air either of spurious cultivation or of downright commonness.

It isn't that the playwrights do not strive for style. The striving is often only too clammily obvious. It is that by and large they seem to be either incompetent to achieve it or mistake for it a prose which suggests rented white tie and tails or a poetic expression which weds a Tin Pan Alley lyricism with a hamburgered verse form. As examples of the one and the other we may take such figures as S. N. Behrman and Maxwell Anderson.

Some years ago, Behrman's writing seemed to be on the point of developing a style both graceful and witty, and in one or two instances was even successful in realizing it. But presently what had borne tokens of some authenticity tended more and more toward the manufactured botanical variety and soon produced any number of such fancy little blossoms (I quote from *Dunnigan's Daughter*) as "I was thinking—a multitude of thoughts—little winds of thoughts, springing up and dying down"; and "A slim, golden column; you could be a caryatid holding up the roof of some exquisite Greek temple." Let alone such exalted titbits as "I sense in you tonight a singular mixture of allure and threat"; "The constant hazard rather piques me"; and "A heart-murmur, he said. I was enchanted with the phrase. A murmur. Sounds like a berceuse. Should be set to music, don't you think? By whom? Debussy, if he were alive. . . ."

Worse still, what earlier was simple, fluid and unaffected became transmuted into such jerks and rattles as

"The function of the platitude. Very useful. As useful as the coins in a shop. No matter how worn, they serve. If not for platitudes, we should have to bare our hearts. Would one care, in general conversation, for all that nudity?" Or into such starched phraseology as "Surely, Ferne — you are intelligent — surely you don't believe in this universal love-myth hypocritically promulgated by the vested religions." Or into bubble-gum like "The serpent in the garden of Eden — he is coiled around us. We have to throw him off, some way. Evil is mobilized. Goodness not. Goodness is like you, mixed up, not resolute. Yesterday, Ferne, I saw a chance to play God; everybody likes to play God a little bit; but that is dangerous. The other God has seized me. The blind God . . ."

Anderson's gestures toward lyric expression have frequently led him into a style not less phony. Though now and again he may capture a pretty phrase, a telling line, the bulk of his later writing amounts to little more than a cotton fancy draped in imitation tulle. In illustration:

Nothing but just to be a bird, and fly,
and then come down. Always the thing
itself
is less than when the seed of it in thought
came to a flower within, but such a flower
as never grows in gardens.

In even more touching further illustration:

You should have asked the fish what
would come of him

before the earth shrank and the land
thrust up
between the oceans. You should have
asked the fish
or asked me, or asked yourself, for
at that time
we were the fish, you and I, or they were
we —
and we, or they, would have known as
much about it
as I know now — yet it somehow seems
worth while
that the fish were not discouraged, and
did keep on —
at least as far as we are.

Compare the pseudo-polished comedy style of a Behrman with, for example, the simple, finished product of an English comedy writer like Maugham. A speech or two from *The Circle* will do. "For some years," remarks Champion-Cheney, "I was notoriously the prey of a secret sorrow. But I found so many charming creatures who were anxious to console, that in the end it grew rather fatiguing. Out of regard to my health I ceased to frequent the drawing-rooms of Mayfair." Or the same character's "It's a matter of taste. I love old wine, old friends, and old books, but I like young women. On their twenty-fifth birthday I give them a diamond ring and tell them they must no longer waste their youth and beauty on an old foggy like me. We have a most affecting scene, my technique on these occasions is perfect, and then I start all over again."

Or, finally, Teddie's familiar, "But I wasn't offering you happiness. I don't think my sort of love tends to

happiness. I'm jealous. I'm not a very easy man to get on with. I'm often out of temper and irritable. I should be fed to the teeth with you sometimes, and so would you be with me. I daresay we'd fight like cat and dog, and sometimes we'd hate each other. Often you'd be wretched and bored stiff and lonely, and often you'd be frightfully homesick, and then you'd regret all you'd lost. Stupid women would be rude to you because we'd run away together. And some of them would cut you. I don't offer you peace and quietness. I offer you unrest and anxiety. I don't offer you happiness. I offer you love."

Or contrast the synthetic poetic expression of an Anderson with the true singing line of an Irish playwright like O'Casey: "Ashamed I am," proclaims O'Killigain in *Purple Dust*, "of the force that sent a hand to hit a girl of grace, fit to find herself walkin' beside all the beauty that ever shone before the eyes o' man since Helen herself unbound her tresses to dance her wild an' willin' way through the streets o' Troy." Or Avril's reply:

"It's I that know the truth is only in the shine o' the words you shower on me, as ready to you as the wild flowers a love-shaken, innocent girl would pick in a hurry outa the hedges, an' she on her way to Mass."

II

In the case of playwrights who elect to abjure the chichi rhetoric of a Behrman or the rhythmic calisthenics

of an Anderson, any chance for style goes aground on their peculiar theory as to the spoken word. It is apparently their conviction that the latter can under no circumstances bear any resemblance to the written or so-called literary word, and that, as a corollary, it can have verisimilitude only if it lacks grace. The consequence is dialogue which often not only bears small relation to human speech above the grade of that employed by the lower order of morons but which is ugly and painful to the critical ear.

The notion that the spoken word is dramatic only if it departs sharply from what may be called the literary word is responsible for night after night of such sore lingo as the following:

A. Don't fling that at me, Mr. Caldwell — you'll get nowhere with that. That's my wife's attack. "I didn't take a lover. You took a mistress." Well, I don't consider that a virtue, see? But to hell with that now. Get this through your heads — all of you. It's not just because my wife's going to live in California that I'm fighting for Christopher — I wouldn't care if she was going to live on the next block. I want my son with me — all the time. I want him to live with me — to be part of my life. I want him. (*Christopher Blake, Moss Hart.*)

B. I know! I know! Why bother to step outside and look at life, when it's so cozy indoors and there's always a shelfful of books handy? For God's sake, hasn't anything ever happened to you? Have you never been drunk? Or socked a guy for making a pass at you? Or lost your panties on Fifth Avenue? (*Dream Girl, Elmer Rice.*)

C. I once set up a travel booklet about them. I was a linotyper after I had to quit

college. You learn a lot of crap setting up type. I learned about the balmy blue Pacific. Come to the Heavenly Isles! An orchid on every bazoom — and two bazooms on every babe. I'd like to find the gent who wrote that booklet. I'd like to find him now and make him come to his goddam Heavenly Isles! (*Home Of The Brave*, Arthur Laurents.)

The apology that such language is perfectly in key with the characters who merchant it does not entirely hold water. It may approximate the characters' speech to a degree, but only to a degree. It amounts merely to a fabricated approach to the exact speech. Among other things, it misses a fully accurate ear and is simply a paraphrase, and a poor one, of factual speech in terms of stage speech. It is, in short, no truer and infinitely less effective than so-called literary speech.

Compare in this connection, whether for verisimilitude or dramatic effect — it need not, obviously, be added for beauty — such otomyces with dialogue like Carroll's for his Canon Skerritt:

And since when has the Sacred Heart of our Redeemer, that kings and emperors and queens like Violante and Don John of Austria and the great Charles V and the soldier Ignatius walked barefooted for the love of — since when has it become a sort of snap door chamber where dolts and boobs come to — to kick ball and find themselves tripped up on an altar step instead of a goal post?

Or like Shaw's for his Candida:

Ask James' mother and his three sisters what it cost to save James the trouble of doing anything but be strong and clever

and happy. Ask me what it costs to be James' mother and three sisters and wife and mother to his children all in one. Ask Prossy and Maria how troublesome the house is even when we have no visitors to help us slice the onions. Ask the tradesmen who want to worry James and spoil his beautiful sermons who it is that puts them off. When there is money to give, he gives it; when there is money to refuse, I refuse it. I build a castle of comfort and indulgence and love for him, and stand sentinel always to keep little vulgar cares out. I make him master here, though he does not know it, and could not tell you a moment ago how it came to be so. . . .

Or like Synge's for his Conchubor:

There's one sorrow has no end surely — that's being old and lonesome. But you and I will have a little peace in Emain, with harps playing, and old men telling stories at the fall of night. I've let build rooms for our two selves, Deirdre, with red gold upon the walls and ceilings that are set with bronze. There was never a queen in the east had a house the like of your house, that's waiting for yourself in Emain.

III

Dramatic art in America for the greater part has become simply a playwriting business, and its practitioners are largely racketeers with a dramatic sales talk, devoid of anything remotely resembling literary taste, literary ability, and literary education. Most of them read and act like pulp writers crossed with telegraph key-men. Their style, so to speak, follows set tracks and is readily recognizable. It consists in the wholesale use of dashes, as in such dialogue as "Oh, God — if they don't come

back — if they don't — come — back —." It hopes to conceal the obviousness of its content in such apologies as "What I've said — I know it's old hat and that you've heard it many times before —," etc. It relies upon crew-cut dialogue with its monosyllabic replies as a substitute for both suspense and humor, as, for example:

Answer yes or no. You live downstairs,
I take it?

No.

Oh, you don't live downstairs?

Yes.

Say, what the hell? Do you or don't you?

Yes.

Yes, what?

Yes, no.

Wait, Sergeant. I think I understand her.

You mean, yes, you do not live downstairs?

Yes.

It further cuckoos its own style endlessly: "Everyone's a murderer at heart. The person who has never felt a passionate hankering to kill someone is without emotion, and do you think it's law or religion that stays the average person from homicide? No — it's lack of courage — the fear of being caught, or cursed with remorse. Our murderer is merely a rational animal with the courage of his convictions." Profanity and obscenity are regularly resorted to for a strength of expression that otherwise seems to be beyond the playwrights' competences, and "Jesus!," "Christ!," "God damned," "bastard," and "son-of-a-bitch" are scattered through dialogue like toadstools.

"Yeah?" is the mark of vulgar character; "Indeed?" of polite. "Wonderful" is the adjective common to most emotions, whether love or a relish of kidney stew. And the habitual "I mean —" is the refuge less of character than of playwright inarticulateness.

Passion is writ by rote: "But I need you. You know that! And you need me. It's too late. We are helpless now — in the clutch of forces more potent than our little selves — forces that brought us into the world — forces that have made the world! Whether you will it or not, this binding power is sweeping you and me together. And you must yield!" The Pulitzer prize is given for authentic Yankee speech to playwrights who confect such lines as "Let a man get miserable and he is miserable; a woman ain't really happy no other way," and as "It 'us then that the scales dropped from my eyes! An' I seen the truth! An' when I did, everything in the whole world 'us changed fer me! I loved everybody an' everything! An' I 'us so happy I felt jist like I 'us afloatin' away on a ocean o' joy!"

The "punch" style, miscellaneously indulged in, also has its pattern: "The whole damn government's a gang of liver flukes sucking the blood out of the body politic — and there you sit, an honest liver fluke, arranging the graft for everybody else and refusing to do any blood sucking on your own account! God, it makes me sick!" Cousin to the punch style is the

heroic-romantic style: "The important man, George, is the man who knows how to live! I love Hocky, I think an awful lot of him. But, he's like my father. They have no outside interests at all. They're flat — they're colorless. They're not men — they're caricatures! Oh, don't become like them, George! Don't be an important man and crack up at forty-five. I want our lives together to be full and rich and beautiful! I want it so much!" And cousin to the heroic-romantic is also the heroic-scientific: "There is not a man in medicine who has not said what you have said and meant it for a minute — all of us, Dr. Nussbaum. And you are right, my friend. We are groping. We are guessing. But, at least our guesses today are closer to the truth than they were twenty years ago. And twenty years from now they will be still closer. That is what we are here for. Ah, there is so much to be done and so little time in which to do it that one life is never long enough. . . . It's not easy for any of us. But in the end our reward is something richer than simply living. . . . (*Sighs*) Come, Dr. Nussbaum, a little game of chess, maybe, or (*winks*) a glass of schnaps?"

The melodramatic style generally fits into a mold something like "For the love of God, listen to me! While you sit here quietly eating and drinking, tonight, enemy planes dropped seventy thousand kilos of bombs on Paris. God knows how many they killed! God knows how much of life and beauty is forever destroyed! And you sit here drinking and laughing! Are you worms? Are you lice? Get out of your soft chairs and off your soft tails and do something, do something! If you don't, you bastards, as God is my judge I'll bust the jaw of every God damned one of you!" And the "cultured" style, usually in self-protecting caution crossed with a touch of banter, one something like this: "There is in your psychological composition, my dear, a touch of the chiaroscuro of Rembrandt, of the livid gauntness of El Greco, of the stark realism of Goya, of the spring-time freshness of Botticelli. You are, my dear, in other words, an orchestration of that occasional color monotone in Brahms and that flowery ornamentation in Rossini."

The style is not only the man; the style is the play.



THE COLLAPSE OF CZECH DEMOCRACY

BY DANIEL SELIGMAN

CZECHOSLOVAKIA's foreign policy, since her liberation, has been based on a military alliance with the Soviet Union. Her domestic life has been regulated by a National Front of the Communist and democratic parties. The basic premise of fellow-traveling politics — that cooperation with Russia and the Communists need not destroy freedom — has thus been thoroughly tested in Czechoslovakia.

It is now clear that the attempt at cooperation was a failure.

The Czech experiment in fellow-traveling did not fail because of any opposition to it; it failed simply because Communism and democracy do not mix. All the democratic parties — the leftish Social Democrats, the moderate National Socialists and Slovak Democrats, even the relatively conservative People's party — were unified in their support of the experiment. All of them acquiesced, not only in the alliance with Russia and the admission of Communists into the government, but in the whole postwar economic program, which called for widespread nationalization of industry.

But the democrats found, as had all fellow-travelers before them, that in order to work harmoniously with the Communists they had to make a virtually endless series of concessions. They agreed not to join in the Marshall Plan. They allowed the Communists to push the nationalization of industry far beyond what had originally been intended.¹ They submitted meekly to Soviet demands for annexation of the Carpatho-Ukraine; and they submitted again when the Russians asked for the forced return of some 40,000 refugees who had fled the region. They joined in the passage of a totalitarian law to mobilize Czech labor. They allowed the Communists, even before the elections, to gain control of the strategic ministries. They legalized retroactively the Russian seizure of "war booty" during the occupation. They twice capitulated to Communist demands for extending the life of the so-called "people's courts," which dealt out summary justice to alleged collabora-

¹ The Czechs nationalized two thirds of their industry within five months of the liberation, and by January 1948 the figure had been raised to about three fourths. Compare this with the program of the British Labour Party, which is planning to nationalize only 20 per cent of Britain's industries over a period of five years.

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