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# THE THEATRE

by GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

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## CHARACTERS WITHOUT CHARACTER

IT IS more or less known that in the preparation of a novel Sinclair Lewis not only works out extended genealogical charts of his characters but further supplies himself with copious notes on their possibly inherited or acquired processes of thought and tastes in food, drink, ointments, underwear, if any, women, and what not else. The consequence is that, whatever opinion otherwise one may or may not have of the novels in their entirety, the characters in them with small exception stand as authentically revealed as if they had just stepped out of the bath. It is only on the occasions when he has chosen to neglect or forget his ample notes and records that, as in the case of a *Kingsblood Royal*, they have failed in complete conviction.

It is also more or less known that Eugene O'Neill goes even farther than Lewis and in the preparation of a play does not content himself merely with such genealogical charts, etc.,

but writes what amount to complete life histories of his characters, including their diseases since adolescent mumps and measles, their old girls, and the prison terms served by their great-great-grandfathers.

It is on the other hand the mark of most of our playwrights, and especially of the newer and younger ones who have been selected for the critics' particular enthusiasm, that they seem to know so little of their characters beyond the purely superficial that the latter expose themselves as no more than paper figures cut out with dull, if occasionally polished, scissors. The result is a parade of characters often scarcely more material than those of musical comedy and operetta. As in those forms of entertainment, they appear to have been born coincidentally with their first entrances; there is nothing behind them; we are told simply who and what they are and are asked to accept total strangers as intimate acquaintances. They are, in brief, so many antecedentless Topsy maneuvered by plainly visible strings.

One of the most palpable of these strings is so-called type casting, the resort of playwrights who, unable to achieve character internally, seek to mask their inability with ready-made externals. First impressions are handily substituted for final impressions. Hazlitt's philosophy of human beings is conveniently juggled out of sense in terms of actors. "First impressions," said he, "are often the truest. . . . A man's look is the work of years; it is stamped on his countenance by the events of his whole life. . . . There is . . . something in a person's appearance at first sight which we do not like and that gives us an odd twinge, but which is overlooked in a multiplicity of other circumstances, till the mask is taken off and we see this lurking character verified in the plainest manner in the sequel." An actor's face, good or evil, which is deemed pictorially appropriate to a rôle is thus made to take the place of inner character, and the lines in that face are made to pass muster for more searching and revelatory lines of dialogue. Instead of a living creature what we get is an articulate mummy, presently crumbling to dust.

Other illusory artifices are equally recognizable. A familiar one is the stratagem of establishing character not in and of itself but through the observations of others, that is, the interpretation of character by proxies. Another is recourse to the easy melodramatic formula of evolving character, or what is made to seem it, through action, which is to say, char-

acter in terms of extrinsic motivation. A third is a figure's description of and comment on himself, which may be defined as personal topography in terms of a travel folder. And still a fourth is the employment of a makeup box in lieu of an inkwell.

## II

The three new, younger playwrights who have been most favored by the critics are Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Richard Harriety. That each has some virtues is to be allowed, but sound character drawing, at least in their plays up to the beginning of the present season, is scarcely one of them. Of the trio, Williams is most adept in the legerdmain of concealing his weakness and fooling the less perceptive into seeing things that are not there. His bag of tricks includes what may be described as a scrim treatment of character, that is, the hiding of any real delineation behind pseudo-poetical gauze which blurs his audience's vision. This, augmented with soft, off-stage music, cajoles an audience into imagining that it actually sees a character that is only vaguely suggested to it. What one is reminded of is the icing on the cardboard cakes which sidestreet merchants display in their shop windows: dummy pastries with plausible surfaces. The moment Williams leaves off such duplicity and tries his hand at more realistic character his shortcomings become apparent. What we then see is character in mere melodramatic outline, and painted in the

harsh crimson hues of drunkenness, lust, vindictiveness, acrimony, etc., or in the harshly contrasting lavender of hearts and flowers. When his aim is tragedy, what results is a threnody on a zither. When his aim is fanciful serio-comedy, what results largely suggests Saroyan in a second-hand Prince Albert.

There is, moreover, occasionally such confusion in Williams' character drawing that his characters seem individually from time to time to be different people at severe odds with themselves. An illustration is to be had in the instance of his heroine in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Motivated mainly from without rather than within, the figure is pulled this way and that according to the demands of the plot and becomes so psychologically, pathologically, and logically muddled that she gives the effect of three totally different women housed in the same body. The author's possible apology that the character is a case history derived from research is not dramatically extenuating. A case history has to be deftly fitted in with the characters who are not case histories. In this instance, it is merely paraded among them, with the parading now and then interrupted by some distracting flights of poesy and bits of melodrama. Even as an alleged case history, the character is wide open to psychiatric doubt. It is, for example, debatable that a woman revolted by the spectacle of homosexuality would find moral sanctuary in promiscuous commercial prostitution.

with its possible occasional departures from sexual normality, or that one of even her degree of mentality would seek real love through a purge of mud, or that her avid quest of illusion would impel her search into so absurdly antagonistic a channel. Her final insanity is surely a poor blanket to cover up any such patchwork, and her ultimate tragedy is an anti-climax.

Without such of Williams' camouflages as vibra-harp music and mauve rhetoric, Arthur Miller's characters have an even harder time operating toward plausibility. Except for some facile mystical ormolu in the portrait of the mother in *All My Sons*, which he relies upon to make an unbelievable character partly believable, he presents his characters in what he hopes are clearly realistic terms. These, however, lead him into some strange conceptions, as may be appreciated from a view of his protagonist in the play in point. This protagonist is announced to be a well-to-do industrialist in an American town, otherwise unidentified. A manufacturer of airplane parts, his factory is described as being something especially impressive. He is, in short, a figure in the community. Yet, while he has risen to that eminence, he is shown living in the surroundings of a poor working slave: a cheap, little frame house in the town's outskirts, no servant to help his ailing wife, food symbolized by a few boxes of store crackers, dowdy clothes not only for himself but for his spouse, a

small tenement-like back-yard, etc., and all with no hint of any frugality in his character which might explain things.

Richard Harrity, the third of the endorsed trio on the score, chiefly, of his short play, *Hope Is the Thing with Feathers*, indicates something of an aptitude for types, but the types incline much more toward vaudeville than toward authentic character. They are, in the play named, personified gags. They give the impression of a group of minstrels with Harrity as their interlocutor: vagabonds on park benches lacking only tambourines and bones. That they are amusing is to be granted, but they are amusing not as characters so much as well-handled performers.

In neither of his two other short plays, the sum of his produced work thus far, is there any increased evidence of ability in a character direction. The one called *Gone Tomorrow* offers only blurry photostats of the stereotyped characters in the lesser Irish comedy-drama; and the second, *Home Life of a Buffalo*, only copies of long stage-familiar vaudevillians.

### III

That character, despite Aristotle's perplexities, is the most difficult achievement in dramatic composition need hardly be restated. Few of our contemporary native playwrights have proved themselves able to master it. Count off O'Neill, Kelly, van Druten, and maybe one or two others and you have called the roll. Some of the rest

have succeeded in dissembling the task and in beguiling audiences and even many of the critics into accepting the counterfeits as the real thing, but that they are merely haberdashers of dickeys who sell unsubstantial false-fronts for the complete shirt is plain to anyone who submits them to the test of a triplicate critical mirror.

Their feints then quickly betray themselves. Among these is, first, the sham of giving a hollow character some bulk by making him the repository of the playwright's independent sociological, political, theological, or merely amatory doctrines, which are frequently not only equally hollow but which are arbitrarily stuffed into him with a pile-driver, the sheer noise of which, like a riveting machine operating on a vacuum, rattles the auditor's head out of any sharp, analytical attention. Secondly, there is the fobbing off of manikins as characters of some depth by overloading them with rapid mechanical plot complications, often melodramatic, which bamboozle a dizzied audience into believing that the action proceeds from the characters instead of from the tricky playwright.

Thirdly, there is the device of attrition whereby a character nonentity is made to seem of some eventual size and importance by bringing him into conflict with other character nonentities who slowly grind themselves into a superlative nothingness, leaving him lord of the empty scene. Fourthly, there is what may be called the rebel ruse. This consists in lending

a character of obvious inconsequence an air of consequence by causing him to oppose the accepted comfortable thought of the moment, represented by the other characters, and carefully casting the rôle with an actor admired personally by the rank and file of theatregoers. And, fifthly, there is the snare of comedy interruption, which glosses over deficiencies in character plumbing and character appraisal with an intermittently laid on humor calculated to jostle criticism off the scent.

## AUCTION SALE

*BY CHARLES ANGOFF*

Large and shining hopes,  
Unrealized, chipped,  
Shaken at the core  
And slightly corroded  
By divine indifference,  
But still usable  
In better homes —  
What am I offered?

On this brass tray  
An assortment of hearts,  
Some broken, some stifled,  
Or otherwise damaged,  
And patched with tears,  
But almost as good as new  
In every other way —  
Do I hear any bids?

And here a box of dreams,  
A little sour and frigid;  
Thin, gray thoughts and echoes  
From a lost long ago;  
But a fine, sturdy box,  
Nice for children, young men,  
And women of all ages  
Twisted by love's bitterness —  
Who will make the first offer?