
Stage

Clowning with Survival

Alan Ayckbourn: *Ten Times Table*; Globe Theatre, London.

Alan Ayckbourn is nowadays regarded on both English-speaking sides of the Atlantic, as the supreme technician of the modern comedy scene. His latest offering, entitled *Ten Times Table*, has other ambitions. It aspires to convince the viewer about the socio-moral virtues that derive from victorious bungling, allegedly an arch-British specialty. Mr. Ayckbourn sets out to suggest, in a quasi-symbolic manner, that the magic exorcism for England's contemporary ills and sores may be concealed in such a philosophy of life and politics. There's something to it, as the British, through a good chunk of history, have always made fun of themselves, trying to convince the world of their good-humored naiveté and dimwittedness, sprinkled with snobbish poses and supercilious idiosyncrasies, while, in the meantime, conquering or controlling a good chunk of the same world to their advantage.

This time, the story is about their own domestic survival. Ayckbourn constructs a generally static anecdote that drags through two acts about a provincial set of social doers who sit at a table in a shabby hotel restaurant and plan an historical pageant to bring back a little national glory to their sleepy town. This noble design is to be frustrated and abused by non-English extremism: an attempt by a neurotic leftist and a psychopathic fascist to take advantage of the situation and promote their goals, but, in the climactic last act, they end up eliminating one another, defeated by the good-humored English bungling, dimwittedness and naiveté. It is also meant as a gentle satire on socio-ideological polarization, and if the contemporary Englishman believes that *that* may be a metaphoric solution to his country's quite real prob-

lems, we can only wish that this kind of happy survival will come true.

However, the leftist is much more of an idiot than the authentic collectivists in the trade unions and Labour Party's current team of extremists seem to be. The rightist's tics announce his ideology by manic facial expressions, exactly like the bad, mad Germans in *Hogan's Heroes* used to do, and this time it seems as if Mr. Ayckbourn misses by far both the

comedic and the literary point. He populates the stage with familiar characters and paraphernalia: a very hoary, very eccentric lady, a kind-hearted fool as personification of common sense, a sex-starved middle-aged spouse, a grotesque masquerade and inevitable pratfalls. The final limbo, full of shooting, smoke and slapstick, is supposed to herald that happy days are here again, and if not already then very soon. (ES) □

Screen

Stylization, Charmlessness and Kitsch

The Last Waltz; directed by Martin Scorsese; United Artists.

Heaven Can Wait; directed by Warren Beatty and Buck Henry; written by Warren Beatty and Elaine May; Paramount Pictures.

Grease; directed by Randal Kleiser; written by Bronte Woodward; Paramount Pictures.

by Eric Shapearo

Once upon a time, Armstrong was style (and bonhomie), Bessie Smith was style (and social poignancy), Ellington was style (and irony and finesse and dynamics of the musical imagery). The Band, a most venerated rock ensemble, whose last concert is the content and substance of Scorsese's audio-visual-poetic commentary—is all stylization. Clothes, faces, countenances of the people in *The Band* and around it either derive from or adopt the principle of imitation as the source of art. The Band is surrounded by a host of musical sup-

Eric Shapearo reviews spectacles for the Chronicles.

porters whose most elevated artistic goal seems instant impact through pretense. Thus, drug addicts pose as weather-beaten cowboys, a rat-like Bob Dylan molds himself into a folk tribune in a Mississippi gambler's attire. A whirlwind of stylized artistry and tonality emerges from the stage and naturally saturates the audience which—as does every audience—indulges in the raptures of identification. What occurs is a giant sham: a fashionable trend is presented as style, being in fact just stylization, that is, a shallow and infertile adoption of styles.

By now, we know it as homily that everything which was transformed into America's most potent cultural message comes from the musicality that crystallized along with the lower course of the Mississippi River and its delta. American native music in all its variations is based on the novel treatment of the musical matter that emerged in the South, mostly New Orleans, branched out everywhere in the country, and blended countless influences and traditions. Rock'n'roll, as we know it now, is primarily this music's urban version dating from the '50s, but in the '60s it degenerated into an idio-

syncratic harmonic sophistication with a claim to an all-encompassing synthesis. "All together is rock—" the drummer of The Band, who assumes the role of an ideological spokesman, says at one point. With the same cognitive accuracy he can maintain that a hamburger subsumes all the culinary tastes of America.

One listens to The Band and realizes the incoherent chemistry of hard rock. It pushes tonal intensification at the price of depersonification; in fact, it promulgates a solipsistic performer, but gives him less access to his own individuality than the collective improvisation in jazz, let alone the jazz instrumental solo. It abandons spontaneity and introduces in its stead feverishness and frenzy. It purports to be the efficient dispatcher of social signals, but does not know how to individualize their touching texture, thus turning them into political sloganeering, spurious and uncogent. In *The Last Waltz*, Bob Dylan and Neil Diamond sing protest songs against the rich and powerful, and songs of solidarity with the poor and powerless. However, one has a sense that they are self-appointed commissars of the sensitivities of the deprived and exploited, that they only pretend to be high-strung humanists while being, in reality, greedy millionaires; that there is no true mission in Bob Dylan, the dyspeptic cherub-Shylock, but an avidity of success and political obduracy. The Band promulgates skepticism and suffuses the air with franticality; it sings of coolness and altruism, and on their faces there is perspiration and meanness. In its heyday, jazz was also all social protest, but the misery of the blues (Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, Billie Holiday) kept so close to the genuine suffering of human beings that they originated a unique artistic message whose significance will never fade. This accounts, perhaps, for the mere fact that whenever I hunt for old records in a local Salvation Army store, I never can find copies of even mass editions of Fletcher Henderson, Jimmy Lunceford, or Bunk Johnson, but the boxes are crammed with Rolling Stones, Jimmy Hendrix, The Doors, Blood, Sweat & Tears, Crosby, Stills,

Nash & Young, Credence Clearwater, the 5th Dimension. What does it mean? It means that people do not keep rock art as they used to keep Armstrong and Stokowski.

Admittedly, all those rock stars have belted out their music with tremendous and impressive energy during the last fifteen years. However, the musical, and any other message, must have been disproportionately meager to the input of vehemence. In spite of its decibels, it evaporates—while Mozart's flute and Satchmo's humming will stay forever.

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It is a remake of the 1941 movie *Here Comes Mr. Jordan*, directed by Alexander Hall, written by Sidney Buchman, and acted by Robert Montgomery and Claude Rains. As much as the original was charming, entertaining and witty, *Heaven Can Wait* is charmless, dull and flat. It drags its socio-intellectual insights from the upper-class Hollywood populism for rich media executives, and tries hard to convert newspaper headlines about nuclear industry's laissez-faireism, or air-pollution ethics, into Everyman's issues.

However, it contains a question of the largest cultural dimension, one that requires volumes and treatises to ponder the answer. Why has filmmaking, having climbed to the technical acme of performing, and formal perfection of picture and sound, lost the grip on human souls that it held for half-a-century? Why did leaving the movie house once mean living for nights and days with acquired images, purchased for cents, or dollars; while leaving it today means an almost immediate forgetting of what flickered before our eyes minutes ago? The victims of this inexplicable disease are the young: it's impossible to explain to them why the progressivism of Beatty and consorts leaves them cold, whereas the populism of Frank Capra and John Ford had the magic capacity to move to tears even the fiercest anti-populists. This magic has gone, Hollywood of today is no longer the dream factory—or evil incarnate as

it was perceived by the liberal intellectual of the '30s, '40s, '50s—and with every year this evolution proves to be more of a cultural catastrophe. The new generation pays \$3 for a few insipid jokes and an everlasting feeling of maudlin emptiness now created by the Hollywood directors, scriptwriters, actors—whom the critics for the national magazines indulge in calling "brainy."

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The humanoids on screen can barely articulate speech into cogent sentences. Emotions expressible by words seem to them a distant achievement of a future civilization; for the moment they rely upon grimaces and gestures. According to *Grease*, the new cinematic musical, they represent the teenagers of the mid-fifties. Chronologically, they thus should be the parents of the teenagers who these days crowd the movie houses to see *Grease*. This is not easy to believe. The image must have been flattened either by Hollywood professionalism, or by the Liberal Culture's concept of the fifties.

Existential and spiritual problems the anthropoids struggle with are:

- the sexual aggression of one male targeted at one female;
- one unwanted pregnancy thanks to a faulty prophylactic; it is approached by both the authors and heroines with *femacho*—that is with that mixture of low-brow cockiness and moronicity once called *macho* which has made dunces out of men through the ages; it is supposed to grace the women of the seventies, but was scarcely popular in the fifties.

The vulgarity and obtuseness with which the scriptwriter and the director treat these mental and behavioral rashes are routine in today's Hollywood. Even the simple arts of allusion, suggestion, visual metaphor, or just making the characters communicate through acting and dialogue, for the present filmmakers seem as useless as they would for meat packing or sanitation workers. Thus, what remains interesting is the theater

audience's response to such crude schlock.

The movie is immensely popular with teenagers who seem in the throes of nostalgia for the '50s. They mob movie houses and appear to be uproariously amused by the contraceptive mishap. Any mention of crotch or menstruation is greeted with joy and a burst of applause. At the same time, however, every hint at corniness, as it is remembered from that innocent, or rather sanitized era, is received with sighs and an eager empathy. It is a puzzling ambiguity. Sensing the mood in the darkness of a show one gets an impression of the symbolic quandary of the American popular culture. By

successfully invading it through the last 15 years, the Liberal Culture has accomplished a bizarre reversal of gospels. The lack of inhibition in word and deed, whatever its motivation, is the king of today's cultural ambiances, but a subcutaneous impulse to some innocence—whatever it means, or may mean, in the '70s—coexists with the most repulsive trivialities.

Movies like *Grease* somehow help us to realize that stripping human conduct of all conventions is more of a brutal oppression than all the ancient lies about storks and ideal love among teenagers. Such movies may ultimately perform some socially valuable function. □

Journalism

New York Times' Commandment

We may call it the "Ten and a Halfth" commandment, for the *New York Times* has spoken and the native liberal consciences across the land have been awestruck by the bedazzling, mind-disarming sagacity of its words. What did the venerated repository of liberal gout speak about? It spoke about censorship.

The lead editorial was entitled "A Bit of Censorship," and it went about establishing that such a thing is impossible and unthinkable. To prove it, *NYT* sets authority (apparently *any* authority—moral, civic, political, communal, intellectual, etc.) against the freedom of speech as two irreconcilable absolutes. To facilitate this bit of philosophical acrobatics, the editorial's conceptualist (or team of them) shrewdly and spuriously equates "orthodoxy" with "authority," blurring the difference between these two distinct notions and accusing all those who object to the deluge of cultural-permissive obtuseness of "orthodoxy." *NYT* pontificates:

"Orthodoxy carries its own imperative: someone must define it. What distin-

guishes democrats is that they have no such someone. So they must suppress the occasional, and understandable, temptation to define what is orthodox. Nazis must be left to march not because they are acceptable but because we trust no one with the definition of what is. A burst of dirty words on a radio broadcast should not be the cause of government censure because no single authority can be trusted to label ideas as indecent."

Such obvious falsifications of factuality notwithstanding (we already *know* what Nazism *is*; there *is* a fundamental difference between dirty words and indecent ideas), we are then asked to accept the mendacious and self-serving, allegedly democratic "truth" that authority, one of the cornerstones of civilization, is a dirty word itself because it could impose on the *Times* and the media certain rules of conduct. What's wrong with the authority of Moses' faith, Christ's teachings, Plato's wisdom, Aristotle's knowledge the *Times* won't elucidate. However,

whenever the *New York Times'* journalistic authority of information and judgment is called into question, the critics are immediately and hatefully persecuted as imperial presidents, bigoted authoritarians, etc.

The *Times'* quest for absolute power and absolute license is coupled in the editorial with a matter-of-fact hypocrisy. *NYT* censures the Supreme Court for searching "for reasonable definitions": such is a futile occupation, according to *NYT*. However, the *Times* knows without a shred of hesitation what the "ultimate values of our society" are—and one, *NYT* asserts, is the reasonableness of the freedom of the press' taboo.

It is easy and bathetically noble to demand an absolute liberty, call it rationality, and not bother with daily realities and their consequences. Ultimately, such a stance is nothing but an immense distrust of and contempt for the human mind: *NYT* automatically assumes that men do not have the faculty to distinguish between bad and good, better or worse, and thus cannot make decisions that affect public consensus or disagreement in keeping with empiricism, circumstance and good sense. Any American has the right to be unsympathetic to orthodoxy of thought and principle, but telling Americans that orthodoxy is the same as authority, and superciliously claiming that we would be unable to tell one from another, is a peculiar arrogance that stems from an arbitrary power—apparently the *Times'* most cherished and flaunted status.

None of the First Amendment absolutists could ever explain how an administrative action against Larry Flynt's cultural pus would curtail the political, social, religious, literary, or artistic freedom of expression—but the apocalyptic half-truths and hackneyed slogans about the "indivisibility" of freedom never leave *NYT's* editorial pages. However, freedom is divisible—there exists a better and a worse freedom, and man is equipped with tools of cognition to constantly evaluate and re-evaluate freedom's contents. And, above all, freedom is man's construct and therefore cannot be absolutized, and