

TELEVISION

Filleted Haldane

Ivor Montagu

DREISER, Robeson, Chaplin, Gorky, Brecht, Picasso, Anatole France, Shaw—these are all giants whose association in one way or another with the movement for human emancipation has led to establishment burial beneath a tombstone of praise from which all mention of what they stood for is carefully erased.

Malcolm Muggeridge, in the intervals between baring his soul or castigating the sins from which age exempts him, is always there to remind us that the Webbs' great tribute to 'Soviet Communism' was a mere act of dotage. The latest telly victim to get 'the treatment' is now J. B. S. Haldane ('The Last of the Polymaths', February 6, 1969, BBC 2). Months of study went into the preparation of this programme, 'a portrait of this remarkable but unusual scientist seen through the eyes of his friends and critics' (*Radio Times*, January 30, 1969).

The picture that emerged safely was just one more stereotype of the eccentric professor, his contact with Communism the equivalent of accidentally dining off the lab-dissected frog instead of the packet of sandwiches. Critics there were indeed: Darlington—to whom, ironically enough, J. B. S. Haldane was inflexibly loyal in his lifetime and against whom he would accept no word of criticism—was cut back to whenever a word of condescension or belittlement appeared appropriate. True friends, also, in the persons of Chain and Maynard Smith. What there was not was any friend or associate from the dozen or so vital years of Haldane's

work with the *Daily Worker* and the Communist Party—the period of the growth of fascism, the betrayal of Spanish democracy, the run-up to the Second World War, the war itself. Haldane's chairmanship of the paper became a mere picturesque oddity, an aberration like his final resort to India and the wearing of the dhoti. Likewise there was plenty about his invaluable war work on the effects of breathing high concentrations of carbon dioxide. Not a word that these dangerous and painful experiments were undertaken using not only himself and Helen Sturway as guinea-pigs but also men of the International Brigade, several recovered by him for this voluntary task from the concentration camps abroad to which they had been exiled by the idiot British Government.

The truth is that J. B. S. Haldane was the most consistent whole man of his time, a humanist to whom no thought was alien or too daring, no discipline that attracted him too deep for exploration, and all meaningless unless contributory to action for the advancement of mankind.

It was no accident that he came to Marxism. He found in Engels a philosophy embodying his own approach to science and the relation between man and the rest of nature, and his interest in it was so persistent that, as R. Palme Dutt attests, he never missed a meeting of the *Modern Quarterly* Editorial Board. He came to the *Daily Worker* for a severely practical reason. He considered (thirty years before 'modernisation' became a catchword of Wilson) that the ordinary man needed to understand scientific thought and development, felt a call to expound it—which he did brilliantly—and the *Daily Herald* refused him even an occasional column. And he joined with Communists because he found thereby

the means to struggle to secure adequate air-raid protection for the population against the perils from Hitler to which Tory betrayal was delivering it undefended. The retirement to India was equally principled. A personal attempt, by teaching and example, to contribute however minutely to redressing the balance of imperialist exploitation, and the dhoti itself an appropriate symbol of respect for the culture and civilisation that the colonisers in topee and trousers had neglected and despised.

It is not that the BBC did not know this. Their researches led them to me, ~~and~~ last.

and to R. Page Arnot, for example. But such information did not suit the safer picture of the latest in the long line of our island eccentrics. An intellectual may be revealed as a progressive if his sentiments remain in the domain of feeling. What must never be revealed is a logical connection between knowledge, conscience and action. One thing certain, however, is that if a polymath is one to whom nothing human is alien, and whom his science and courage drive to devote himself utterly to human welfare, then J. B. S. will *not* be the

THEATRE

Rich Seam

Roger Woddiss

TOTAL THEATRE uses a variety of forms and techniques—song, movement, mime, satire, slides, etc.—to make its impact. When it is allied to a theme of universal proportions we have total theatre in a richer sense. The audience is totally involved, the fourth wall down and replaced by a community of understanding between performers and onlookers that goes back to drama's primitive roots.

'Close the Coalhouse Door' is a play about the miners of North East England—'born in love and indignation', says Sid Chaplin from whose short stories Alan Plater made his adaptation. It grew out of the real soil of the history it celebrates.

From the opening song ('Close the coalhouse door, there's blood inside') to the moving finale when the entire

cast bows in humble acknowledgment to the union banners, we are caught up in a living story that is still being told. There is everything here—the bitter struggles, the horrifying details of child labour, the greed and hypocrisy of the owners, the defeats and the victories. And above all the humour, the indestructible affirmation of life.

The ensemble playing of a superb cast headed by Colin Douglas, Bryan Pringle and John Woodvine, Alex Glasgow's songs, Brian Currah's sets and lighting—all reflect the unifying purpose of director Bill Hays.

After its recent West End run this production is now on tour, taking in Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle and Billingham. Trade unionists should organise block bookings from their branches. They will echo the feelings of a Viennese visitor: 'I walked out holding my head high because I belong to the same race as the mining folk—the human race.'