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Salamanders and Politics

NOW IN NOVEMBER, by Josephine
Johnson. Simon & Schuster. \$2.

Sensitivity of a very high order has been fatal to more than one novelist and poet, or perhaps I should say that such sensitivity is often found in combination with fatal qualities. There is Emily Dickinson, for example, who at her finest completely transforms everyday experience and sharpens the senses of even the duller reader, but who rather more often is merely fanciful or absurd or trivial. Then there is Willa Cather, who, in her earlier novels, drew vitality from her extraordinary responsiveness to the smallest detail of Nebraskan farm life, but who has in later years become a kind of genteel antiquarian. Miss Dickinson, one gathers, was so remote from the normal course of human existence in her own age that she could not evaluate her experiences, could not distinguish the ephemeral and eccentric from the representative and profound. Miss Cather, on the other hand, has been precipitated into a world in which her earlier values are no longer pertinent, and she prefers to falsify life rather than adjust herself to it.

By virtue of her perceptiveness and her ability to communicate to her readers something of her own awareness, Josephine Johnson deserves to be compared, as she already has been, with Emily Dickinson and Willa Cather. The theme of her novel suggests, furthermore, comparison with an author who was perhaps greater than either of them, Emily Bronte. In *Now in November*, as in *Wuthering Heights*, the sense of doom colors the very first page. One knows that this is not simply an account of a Missouri farmer's struggle against drought and debt. One knows that there is more involved than the simple but intense revelation of a Dickinsonian appreciation of beauty in nature. From the first the novel builds towards the madness of Karen and her suicide, towards the catastrophic fire and the death of the mother, towards the frustration of both Merle's and Marget's love.

I would be the last to deny the power of this strange and almost unearthly tragedy that Miss Johnson unfolds. Yet I am most grateful for those elements in the book that are least reminiscent of the Brontes and Emily Dickinson, for the importance attached to the mortgage, for the casual talk about farmers' organizations, for the little glimpse of the milk strike, for the insistence on the general tragedy of which the Haldmarnes' tragedy is a small part. The novel ends, it is true, on the theme of resignation, but Miss Johnson takes refuge neither in mysticism nor in melodrama. There is, moreover, the hint, significant because of what has been said about organization: "It is not possible to go on alone."

I stress these things, not because they play a very important part in *Now in November*, but because their presence is an indication of the way Josephine Johnson's mind is working.

She seems to be honest. She has said, "Salamanders and fungus seem more important than war or politics, but it is cowardly and impossible to ignore them and try to escape." It is well that, with her peculiar temperament and talents, she has learned that lesson so early. A concern with salamanders and fungus and all they symbolize is not wrong in itself, but it may all too easily mean a refusal to think about war and politics and all they symbolize. That is the way that Willa Cather and Elizabeth Madox Roberts, for example, have gone. Miss Johnson seems to see its dangers. The other way is our way. It, too, has its dangers, but the disintegration of the backbone is not one of them.

GRANVILLE HICKS.

Brief Review

EDUCATION and SOCIAL PROGRESS,
by Charles H. Judd. Harcourt, Brace &
Co.. \$2.00.

The author is head of the Department of Education at the University of Chicago. He considers himself a "radical" or as he would term it a "reconstructor," for he professes to see a struggle between the forces of conservatism and the forces of "reconstruction" and places himself on the side of "reconstruction." Relatively short as a book, it is still an extraordinarily lot of wind, of the sort let out by cautious people anxious not to make a noise. "If the social implications of what is now being said by students of social sciences are to be understood and are to be made the basis of a new social order . . ." then more money should be spent on the schools. That, in substance, is Dr. Judd's conclusion, a hint that expanded educators might successfully block "extremism." The fact that the school system can not be changed without changing society is left discreetly alone by Dr. Judd; and of those who know it and are ready to do something about it, Dr. Judd snarls feebly, ". . . these extremists have misconceived the function of the schools."

*RAMESES TO ROCKEFELLER. The
Story of Architecture*, by Charles Harris
Whitaker. Illustrated in Aquatone plates.
Random House. \$3.50.

In his very title Mr. Whitaker reveals his realistic attitude toward architecture, the art which the rulers of society most steadily have chosen to glorify themselves. The temples, the palaces, the Rockefeller cities, have not hidden the hovels. Architecture remains specks of grandeur on mire until it serves a completely social purpose. It would have been a simple and inevitable step for the author in his lively and well written history, to have pointed the direction civilization must go to achieve a humanly and universally great architecture. But, Mr. Whitaker frightened by the word Communism becomes unclear at the end, and uses instead labyrinthine paragraphs from which the thought never wholly emerges.

The Theatre

Judgment Day

WHO ARE RIGHT? The newspaper critics who have trampled Elmer Rice's *Judgment Day*¹ under generally murderous words? or the second-night audience whose applause was enough to make the author break down and beam in a glowing curtain call? Is it "a pretty clumsy play" (New York Times), provided "with a hollow and unconvincing sound" (N. Y. World-Telegram), all in all "an incredible concoction" (N. Y. Post). Or may we suspect that after all 1,200 vociferating spectators can't be wrong?

At the risk of being stigmatized "liberal," I insist that both damners and praisers are justified. There can be little doubt that *Judgment Day* is one of the most jumbled, uneven melodramas that ever a skilled workman shoved into the semi-willing mouths of an arbitrary cast. Nor can one escape the fact that the action frequently wobbles between unintentional burlesque and febrile tragedy. Or that the final scene compounds the accumulated sound and fury into a dosage just a bit too gagging.

And yet on the head of the spectator normally acquiescent to the run of Broadway inanity *Judgment Day* falls like a disconcerting icy shower, bathing him with unsuspected speculations and utterly shocking realizations. It is because these politically unconscious and befuddled spectators constitute so vast a number of theatre-goers that *Judgment Day* assumes importance and value in the 1934 season.

To the politically illiterate spectators (from which group I hopefully exclude all NEW MASSES readers) the play as a whole naturally does not seem quite the naive jumble which it is. In one of the smaller European countries two members of the "Peoples Party" are on trial for attempted assassination of the Minister-President Vesnic. From the dialogue and direction it at once becomes clear that Rice is playing a variation in the vicinity of the Reichstag fire frame-up, using the more obvious asinities of the Hitler regime for creating a mood which seldom conveys anything deeper than variations of the Heil-Hitler salute, "Long Live Vesnic!" etc. Kurt Schneider, alien member of the illegalized party, is charged with firing the assassin's gun; George Khitov and Lydia Kuman (wife of the imprisoned party leader) are on trial for death charged with plotting. As the doped, imbecilic dupe of Vesnic's party Schneider makes an adequate analog of Van der Lubbe; pleading for her husband Kuman's and her own safety, Lydia sometimes registers moving pathos; but as a variation on Dimitroff, Khitov is an unforgivable burlesque. For

¹ *Judgment Day*, a play in three acts by Elmer Rice; at the Belasco Theatre.

nearly two acts the most his ordeal gets out of him is patience bitten with occasional irony; and when he finally does explode the explosion is almost casually brief and totally out of character with his hitherto quasi-affability and serenity—which serenity would have been understandable if Rice had shown it to be based upon a limitless faith in the power of the working-class to free the convicted from the death-sentence.

In view of the potential drama in the situation, the first act is far below the second, which begins to sparkle with the appearance of Rakovsky (variation on Goering). And when Rakovsky's girl-friend, the Italian opera star now infuriated by the boycott against foreign talent, surprises the court by exposing Rakovsky's complot with Schneider and thus undermines the State's case against the prisoners, the play begins to pick up. There is good theatre as well in the next scene—despite its unrealistic conception of Fascist frame-up technic—in which two of the five judges refuse to be party to the frame-up. They make it necessary for the dictator himself to testify. Some eminently unobtrusive dialog warns the audience that the Peoples' Party is planning something. Enter the dictator whose general demeanor could hardly offend the Friends of New Germany. In almost no time one of the judges shoots him, shoots himself, Kuman suddenly appears freed from jail, embraces his wife—and, I presume, the audience is to gather that the whole problem has been solved by the death of the dictator, as of course Dollfuss' death has solved the problem of Austrian Fascism!

Obviously *Judgment Day* contributes nothing toward clarifying the bases and manifestations of Fascism. On the contrary, by emphasizing it to be soluble by removing the dictator, Rice misleads the spectator into accepting Fascism as a one-man tyranny instead of the thing which it is: the last frenzied stand of the capitalist ruling-class, which uses a naked and terroristic dictatorship in its attempt to hold on and whose dictator is the employe of the bourgeoisie. Rice has left out of his play the two real opposing forces: the bourgeoisie and the working masses.

There is no reason to believe that Rice sees the meaning of Fascism in terms of historical forces. Nowhere does he indicate that the sole solution lies in proletarian seizure of power. Nowhere does he penetrate to the basic forces below the Fascist manifestations. The spectator is left to conclude that bourgeois democracy is a mighty precious thing and the sole alternative.

It would be hardly intelligent to deny the positive value of *Judgment Day* in impressing on Broadway audiences reasons—if only superficial ones—for despising Fascism. For this Mr. Rice is to be commended. But that he has failed to make a true and moving pre-

sentation of his subject indicates a present stasis in his development. How much longer will he continue to waste his skill and influence as a dramatist on confused and therefore tentative analyses? How much longer will he hold up the mirage-virtues of a bourgeois democracy? When is he going to take the trouble to acquaint himself with the enemy which he undoubtedly wishes to liquidate? In other words, is it too much to hope for a thorough, satisfying, revolutionary play from him? Must we look elsewhere—among playwrights with less craft, perhaps, and surely less influence, who are unwilling to tell audiences half-truths? Is Elmer Rice himself satisfied with *Judgment Day*? Would he understand our earnestness and friendliness if THE NEW MASSES were to send him a copy of R. Palme Dutt's new book *Fascism and Social Revolution* and ask him to write another, a truer *Judgment Day*?

GEORGE WILLSON.

Other Current Shows

Tobacco Road, by Jack Kirkland from Erskine Caldwell's novel. Forty-eighth Street Theatre. The best play now running. Amazing revelation of the sons and daughters of the American Revolution (the real stuff though). The place by no means tells the whole story of Georgia poor white trash, but what it tells is worth paying as much as a dollar-ten to see. Cheapest seat 50c.

Salute with Milton Berle. Imperial Theatre. An extended and torpid floor show with an interesting dance by Felicia Sorel and partner. If you can get in for nothing leave immediately after that dance. If seats were 10c they wouldn't be worth it.

Dodsworth, by Sidney Howard from Sinclair Lewis' novel. Shubert Theatre. Tale of a big-shot business man who doesn't know what he wants and finds it. Indicates in a third-rate way the decay of part of the finance-aristocracy, and the rejuvenation, via love, of another part. Walter Huston and Maria Ouspenskaya are actors and worth applauding. Cheapest seat \$1.10.

Sailor Beware. It doesn't matter who wrote and produced it. Lyceum Theatre. Smut just exciting enough to stimulate audiences for eleven months. Suggestive of a cover for Film Fun. Cheapest seat \$1.10.

Too Many Boats, by Owen. By public acclamation this trifle has already closed. Mr. Davis and his backers failed to make money on a play which melodramatically attacked the honor of Negro soldiers as well as the character of Filipinos. The glorification of war and the suppression of minorities is still bad business in the theatre.

Strangers At Home, by Charles Divine. Longacre Theatre. W. 48th St. Good, clean boredom as harmless as a postage stamp, but with less purpose. A postage stamp will carry a letter around the world; this play carries you right to sleep. (Even the cheapest seat is 50c.)

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