

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 damnors 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.

Saluta 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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In A Burst of Fury

ROBERT FORSYTHE

QUITE THE MOST erroneous notion about motion picture reviewing is that the continued presence of the critic at his labors creates in him a feeling of sophistication and satiety which finally results in complete boredom. The exact contrary of course is true. There is a subtle poison which appears to seep down from the screen and worm its way up the aisle into the consciousness of the critic and which makes him relinquish standards which might have been handed down to him straight from St. Beuve. The longer he looks at pictures the more prepared he is to sit through productions which on any strict basis of artistic worth could only be compared with the shows the children used to have in the barn.

About five years ago I went through a lengthy period in which I never entered a movie theatre. Prior to that I had been seeing pictures on an average of twice a week and they seemed rather all right to me. After my vacation I picked my spots with care and went only to those features which were being hailed as world events. As I looked at them and looked around at the delighted audiences, it was plain that if this was art, insanity could not be far behind. I was at a loss to understand how anybody, even the most dunder-headed, could be taken in by this obvious nonsense. But as I went oftener that feeling began to leave me. Instead of saying, "This is terrible; let me out of here," I was saying, "Well, it isn't so bad; it's better than Jean Harlow last week."

A correspondent named Dee Brown in saying a few kind words about me in these pages several weeks ago was concerned about the possible effect of Hollywood on my brain. I am grieved to report that my unknown friend spoke more truly than I would have cared to admit. Last week in a burst of fury I saw four movies. If it hadn't been for the latter one, *Petersburg Nights*, I would have been lost. What I saw were Joan Crawford and Clark Gable in *Chained*, Kay Francis and Leslie Howard in *British Agent* and Robert Montgomery and Maureen O'Sullivan in *Hideout*.

In *Chained* Miss Crawford looked like somebody in the old vaudeville quick-change act. It was said to be a Clarence Brown production but in reality it belonged to Adrian, the dress designer. The phrase about Mrs. Actor's plush horse is no longer new but it applies so aptly to our Joan that it seems unnecessary to invent anything to replace it. She was dressed up to the eyes and never appeared twice in the same garment. Her coiffure was altered almost as often and if I seem to bear upon these points it is only because I was

so stunned by the magnificence of it all I could scarcely pay attention to the brilliant story which was being unfolded. It was something to do with a girl who is engaged to her employer, a fine oldish gentleman. She takes a trip to South America on one of his boats and meets Clark Gable, who is a gay chappie operating a ranch in the Argentine. What follows is love, Joan changing from a gown to riding clothes in time to get chased through the underbrush and finally fall panting to the ground in the arms of Mr. Gable.

She returns home to find that her old friend has sacrificed his wife and bairns to marry her and there is nothing for her to do but go through with it. In these scenes Miss Crawford is tragic. She weeps so steadily that the mystery increases as to how she can get her clothes changed without ruining the neckband with mascara. Of course she jilts Mr. Gable in marrying the elderly gentleman and by merest chance runs into him when he is on one of his rare visits to the States. Love flares forth again in a tragic way because it is love and yet it cannot be love, things being as they are with the old fellow, who has been very good to Joan in the way of wardrobe. Mr. Gable comes to take her away by force but when he sees what a gentleman the old gentleman is, he withdraws. The old fellow, however, understands more than appears on the surface. It is his turn now to sacrifice and he bunts to the pitcher, Miss Crawford and Mr. Gable both advancing one base to Paradise.

Heaven only knows why I waste time on such drivel unless it is to show you that I could sit through it and say to myself, "Well it might be worse; it's better than *The Fountain*." This is where madness sets in; this is where the movie reviewer ceases to be a critic and becomes an adjunct of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer despite the earlier granite-like quality of his intellect. The simplest thing is not to get into an argument with your intellect but to start floating with the current. The hard thing is to keep insisting that even motion picture productions are a form of art and should be considered with as much dignity and attention as a play or a novel. My fellow reviewers on the Metropolitan newspapers have my sympathy. It is not only that they must review six or seven pictures a week, and thus be weakened by the ailment I have been describing, or that they are faced with the harsh looks of the advertising department but that they have, I am sure they must have, the feeling that "the people like it; why should I be so persnickety about it when they don't care anyhow." My feeling about Hollywood is much the same but for different reasons. I

suffer from the knowledge that it isn't a fair contest; Hollywood is too easy.

Hideout was a picture in the manner of *It Happened One Night*, as most pictures are these days, even *Chained*. The swimming pool scene in *Chained* was the creek wading scene in *It Happened One Night*. It is probably true, however, that even *It Happened One Night* was prompted by the success of Robert Montgomery in his earlier humorous pictures. I saw a recent interview with Frank Capra, the director, in which he said as much. W. S. Van Dyke, the director of *Hideout*, is obviously profiting both from *It Happened One Night* and from his success, *The Thin Man*, which was also a copy of the Capra production. At the risk of boring you with it, I will say again that nobody can approach the Americans in humor and they are very good in the cinema generally when they avoid ideas. What they thrive on are notions and conceits, which pass in Beverly Hills as ideas. In any event *Hideout* was amusing and both Montgomery and Maureen O'Sullivan were excellent in their parts. It told of a gangster who was taken in by the farmer family and falls in love with the daughter. The cops finally come for him but she promises to wait until he has finished his term. The farm stuff is good and Van Dyke handles it well, even to the dinner table scene which is a replica of the dinner table scene in *The Thin Man*. If you will observe closely, you will see my barriers are breaking down one by one. Essentially what I am saying is that seeing *Hideout* is preferable to walking around outside in the rain.

British Agent is something else again. So far as I know it is the first time Hollywood has given the Soviet Union even a glimmer of an even break. Except for the ridiculous ending and the general tenor of the love affair, it is a faithful rendering of Lockhart's book. It shows that the English were perfectly willing to double-cross not only the Bolsheviks but their own representative if they felt it would overthrow Soviet power. In the subsequent counter-revolutionary plot, the British agent and the other conspirators do not appear in a lovely light. The producers can't resist the chance to show that the Bolsheviks were fanatical in their faith in the revolution, but that is a far advance from the shaggy haired bomb-throwing brutes who have been Hollywood's idea of the Communist in recent years. Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky are shown and are treated with such fairness that the film will undoubtedly be banned by the Lord Chancellor of England. My only regret is that it is not a better picture. Kay Francis is Lenin's secretary and also the lover of the British