

In the "Let Freedom Ring" Country

WILLIAM F. DUNNE

WITH the rich material in Grace Lumpkin's book *To Make My Bread*, Albert Bein has constructed an authentic, moving and beautiful play depicting the development of a Southern mountaineer family into textile mill hands whose patriarchal and semi-feudal traditions are molded by machine production into the new mores of the class struggles.

The playwright, like the author, and others who have written about "the new South" with its rapid industrialization—rapid as history measures these periods—of an agricultural people, had the task of explaining these people, their method of solving the problems of an impoverished countryside, and their speech, to a Northern audience that knows them only from newspaper stories and articles.

To the direction and to the cast must go immense credit for having appraised correctly the magnitude of this task and of carrying it through successfully—and brilliantly. As far as this writer is concerned, he was enabled to live again through scenes of the 1929 battles in the textile sections of the Carolinas and the heroic resistance of the mountaineer miners in Kentucky and Tennessee in 1931-32. This is not a review of the play as such. This writer wants only to prove that the author and the playwright knew what they were talking about.

Circulating among the audience between acts, listening to the conversations of the white-tie boys and their women, there was to be detected an undertone of approval and overtones of disapprobation. This particular lady said: "Oh, the usual thing. Bolshevism on Broadway. The hero dies a horrible death every night for his class. But it is restrained. The restraint in the play is unusual."

The lady was wrong on both counts—and so are most of the reviewers of the metropolitan press. They caught the family angle, but they were unable or unwilling to explain its relation to the class struggle. For example, Brooks Atkinson of *The New York Times* says: "With people as simple as that, and actors as resolute as that, *Let Freedom Ring* arises out of special causes into the sphere of modern folk-drama. The crises they pass through are incidental to the fundamental integrity of their character."

The truth is that the fundamental integrity of their character is revealed by the crises through which they pass. Directly contrary to the prevailing opinion among the liberal intelligentsia, the patriarchal tradition, the strong family ties, the call of "kin," are not handicaps to the development of a union consciousness, but are tremendous assets—once the semi-feudal bonds are broken by

the influx into machine industry of these mountaineer folk.

The best way to show what is meant is by some concrete instances: in 1929, Bessemer City, North Carolina, was one of the best organized towns in the decisive textile area centering around Gastonia. The local union there had bought a house fronting on the hard-surface highway, and made it the union headquarters. At the time of the trial of the Gastonia textile workers, growing out of their armed defense of the striking tent colony in which the chief of police was killed and four of his deputies wounded, the Committee of One Hundred (the strike-breaking organization of the mill owners) staged a raid at night through three counties. They wrecked all union headquarters, kidnapped three union organizers and beat them within an inch of their lives. Newspapermen were still in Charlotte following the mistrial of the defendants and the story of the raid hit the first page of every important paper in the country. One hundred and five cars with three to five armed men in each swept through the Gastonia textile area and it was impossible for the local press to conceal the extent of the raid and its murderous anti-labor character.

Around five o'clock the next morning we drove through the raided territory. The union headquarters in Bessemer City had a sign of which the members were very proud. It was painted with red and black letters on a white background and said: "Textile Union Headquarters." The raiders had torn this sign down and trampled it into the oily, muddy water on the side of the highway. Everything that could be wrecked in the headquarters had been smashed. The long list of members, defiantly giving their addresses and the mills in which they worked, had been torn into smithereens and scattered all over the floor. Books and papers had been wantonly destroyed.

But there was a new sign over the front door of the wrecked building. It was painted with axle grease on a piece of white cotton sheeting. It said "Union Headquarters." The S's and the N's were all painted backwards and the sign as a whole staggered somewhat, but no one could mistake its meaning. The union was back and open for business at the same old stand.

In a chair tilted back against the wall, under the new union banner, sat a bewhiskered ancient. He was the grandpap of *Let Freedom Ring*. He fondled a double-barreled shotgun, a beautiful weapon, a Parker, that must have been at least a hundred years old. It had been remodeled from a percussion cap gun to take the modern 12-gauge cartridge.

We stopped and got out. When we drove up he was the only person in sight. In two minutes there were at least a hundred people around us. Where they came from I couldn't say. I asked the old lad one question. "Buckshot?" He said, "Yes, nine in each barrel." (This is interesting just by itself. Three buckshot chambers in a triangle in a 12-gauge cartridge. You put a wad between the layers and then pour melted mutton tallow to within an eighth of an inch of the rim of the shell. Anybody that's willing to risk the impact of such a projectile from point blank to seventy-five yards is too crazy to be living anyway.)

The oldster was taking his responsibilities very seriously but without any particular excitement. And here I want to make a technical criticism of the strike scene of *Let Freedom Ring*. These Southern textile workers never, as far as I know, reveal the intense excitement that is shown in the scene in front of the mill.

The ancient one with his double-barreled shotgun stated quite calmly, as soon as we had identified ourselves, that the new sign was there to stay and if it went down he was going down with it. He was a relative, that is "kin," of some of the officers of the union. To paraphrase the old cowboy song, there was kin all around. The Committee of One Hundred gang, so the old one said, had captured one of his kin during the raid on the union headquarters. They were "chunking him around." The proprietor of a nearby gas-station, who was also one of the kin, came out and told them to "turn

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him loose." The leaders of the gang told him to get back into his place or they'd come in and "get you in a minute." According to the tale, this gas-station proprietor, whose first name was Lem, told them to "make it a long minute." He went in and came back with two pistols. He told them to turn him loose and this time they turned him loose. But, as we say, outside of these minor incidents of this period of industrial warfare, there really was no excitement in Bessemer City.

One of the organizers who had been kidnapped and beaten got up early in the morning, after he had been given medical treatment, and insisted on going back to Gastonia. He was black and blue from his waist down, but he complained only of an unimportant bruise on his right arm. He said he knew a doctor who had a liniment that never failed to cure these bruises, but it cost around \$3—which at that time was approximately the price of a box of 12-gauge cartridges. He got the money for the liniment. He wrote out and pasted up a notice in the post-office that he was back home and spent the next 36 hours on the front stoop nursing a repeating shotgun and waiting for members of the Committee of One Hundred to call on him. They never did and his disappointment was as genuine as anything I have ever seen.

These instances are cited to reply to the left-handed praise by certain reviewers concerning the "restraint" shown in *Let Freedom Ring*. This reviewer could not see the "restraint" hailed in the dramatic columns of the Times, Herald Tribune and other metropolitan papers. The truth of the matter is that most of the New York dramatic critics were unable to understand the authentic language of the industrialized Southern mountaineer mill folk used by the cast. A few illustrations will make this clear, and in all fairness it must be said that this writer is himself not completely competent to interpret the various shades of meaning in much of the speech of a people whose language is Shakespearean and some of which goes back to Chaucer.

For instance: if these people say that a certain thing or person is "onfair," it means that they are very indignant. If they say "Hit hain't right," it means that they are very angry. If they say "Hit hain't just," or "Hit's unrighteous," in all probability they are ready to do battle.

It takes some time and patience for a Northerner to get the essence of this old folk-talk and to understand what it really means in terms of the class struggle. But it is *not* restraint. It does, however, carry with it something that even the most sophisticated dramatic critic managed to grasp, i.e., the sense of simple human values and the desire to maintain them even under the degrading conditions of industrialism in textile, coal-mining, the steel industry and associated industries in the deep South.

Some of the reviewers have contended that the violence of the employers in *Let Freedom Ring* is exaggerated. How any one who is conversant with the daily class struggle in America today can take such a position is beyond me. Sweet charity is not one of the outstanding characteristics of this reviewer. My conclusion is that such distortions either are deliberate on the part of the critics or emanate from the copy-desk. And this of course means policy writing.

The bloody record of the general textile strike of last year (Pelzer, for instance), a record which shows the use of violence without stint or limit against the same kind of working people who place their indictment of the present system with such telling force in *Let Freedom Ring*, needs no emphasis to confound the critics who attack the play from this angle.

It is impossible in an article of this length to list and give credit to all those members of the cast who have made a startling and valuable contribution to American labor history.

But one must be mentioned. Gorky's *Mother* has been brought into the American scene by Norma Chambers in the role of Ora McClure. There is nothing incongruous in this because the mother of the textile union organizer, and Kirk McClure's fellow-workers, with whose struggles *Let Freedom Ring* deals, have a peasant background very much like that of the mother and the factory

workers in Gorky's masterpiece. The dramatic development of the way in which she comes to stick by her son and his work, when he's alive, and after he has been murdered on the picket line, is as fine a thing as has ever been done on the American stage.

There is one criticism of *Let Freedom Ring*. It should have been dedicated to Ella May Wiggin, the mountaineer woman, textile worker, union organizer and ballad singer who died on the highway between Gastonia and Charlotte, with a bullet in her breast fired by a member of the Committee of One Hundred: Ella May, whose body lies in the graveyard of Bessemer City within sight of the union hall that Grandpap was defending with his shotgun—nine buckshot in each barrel.

Talking with some very sincere friends of *Let Freedom Ring* I felt that they thought the Negro question was handled rather crudely. It can be argued that young McClure makes his appeal for solidarity on the most primitive basis—the need for unity of black and white to lick the boss. All I can say is this is the way we worked in the South—and that all the other political implications flow from this.

One final word: whoever took this bunch of fifty-five actors and made textile workers out of them is wasting his talents on the stage.

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The Theater

Dead End Social Order

WHEN Wordsworth wrote a hundred and thirty years ago that "with the increasing accumulation of men in cities, the uniformity of occupations" would produce "a craving for extraordinary incident," he was anticipating with extraordinary acuteness the commercialized entertainment of today. Morning and evening the gutter-press feeds three million New Yorkers a diet of crime, murder and sex sensationalism—titillation for the work-wearied. And numberless pulp magazines dish out the same swill to millions of readers a year. Every month publishers of mystery books dispatch carload-lots of their products, manufactured to specifications, to distributors throughout the country. Movies and theaters have made fortunes with murder plots, gangster thrillers, etc. Crime sensationalism is one of the great pillars of contemporary culture. And since racketeering is a significant American industry there is every reason that it be reflected in our art. But commercialized entertainment not only accepts crime and its family of social perversions as inevitable but actually swathes them in gaudy heroics. How miraculous, therefore, to encounter the work of an author who rejects commercial cynicism in order to dig under the surface. Sidney Kingsley's *Dead End* (Belasco Theater) is an attempt to trace crime to its true progenitor: no mutation spawned by some diabolical chance but the legitimate brood of a pestilential social order.

When the curtain rises it uncovers a set that leaves nothing to your imagination. Norman Bel Geddes has translated a life-size photograph into three dimensions, and with such brutal clarity that you suddenly find yourself gazing into a dead-end street on a New York riverfront. Boisterous alley kids jump with a splash into what would usually be the orchestra pit. To your left: back entrance to an ultra-luxurious apartment house bordered with a leafy roof-garden; and immediately beside it a row of ramshackle tenements; a grimy black coal-chute to the right. This is not merely the set: it is the whole play, for what occurs behind the footlights can never do more than intensify the visual fact: Millionaire Row rubbing its flank against Rat-and-Louse alley.

There is little in the way of invented plot; such action as there is is merely an extension of your own impression as you sit in the audience; you more or less know what happens in terms of social conduct when the poverty-crushed inhabitants of verminous flats are forced to see day and night the glitteringly luxurious life which their rich neighbors enjoy. Gimpty, a crippled young architect, sensitive to the situation, but thwarted and ineffectual, is hopelessly in love

with a sentimental slut who lives with one of the apartment-house dwellers. Babyface Martin, current Public Enemy No. 1, returning to the dead-end street to tell his mother how much he loves her, is recognized by the architect as a boyhood pal. Gimpty informs on Babyface, and the G-men get their man. But Babyface, the fine flower of this alley, has not lived and died in vain. His cycle has already been begun in the life of young Tommy, leader of the alley gang, a twelve-year-old with a shrewd brain, a head full of lice and a fearful adoration for the dead gangster hero. In the space of a dozen minutes, Tommy has robbed a rich boy next door and stabbed his father. Thanks to the society which bred him, he is immediately shipped off to a reform school where he will receive his graduate training in gangsterism.

The dialog carries the same photographic realism of the documentary set. Babyface is the stock Public Enemy that ornaments the tabloids, pulps and movies. The sentimental mistress runs true to type from her first speech to her last; you know in advance that every time she opens her mouth a bro-mide will fall. The rich boy is a stock character, as are the cops, footman, rich father, etc. For the playwright became so entangled in his material that he allowed it to control him. Indeed, most of the characters are paste-ups from the files of the Daily News and the Mirror. And this explains why, by comparison, two of the characters strike one as original creations: the crippled architect (Gimpty) and young Tommy's older sister. Only they seem to know what is happening in this alley, and in their unclear way they grope around for a solution. It is always a personal solution. Drina seems to have learned only the rudiments of mass action from her experience as a sales-clerk on strike. Gimpty temporizes not out of cowardice, but from a confused motivation partly explained by his feelings of personal inadequacy. Only these two characters suggest the positive direction out of this milieu that foredooms

its inhabitants. The burden of ideological balance is heavy indeed, and these two are not quite equal to it.

Does *Dead End*, then, fail to drive home its meaning? Emphatically no; and this is its achievement: that by unequivocal documentation it never permits the audience to doubt that crime and gangsterism are the diseases of society and not of individuals. In an objective sense, *Dead End* is one type of pure propaganda—propaganda unburdened by slogans, platform speeches or manufactured situations. It can be vastly compelling because it merely provides the data and the emotional catalytic so that the desired reaction takes place in the spectator's mind.

Unfortunately, the emotional force of *Dead End* is not entirely adequate; and this may be observed in its lacks as dramatic art. If "poetry should surprise by a fine excess," this is no less true of drama. *Dead End* rarely pulsates with fresh shocks of surprise. The characters are chiefly types filed away in the common consciousness of our decade. In fact, the whole play remains on a plane of photographic naturalism. Sustaining drama requires something more. But there is reason to believe that the author did not intend sustaining drama but a kind of reportage in

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