

The Theater

Serious Laughter

"IF THEY had only gotten married, that would have solved everything," remarked the woman in front as the curtain fell. And as far as she was concerned—and all others who open one eye and one ear to a play—Lynn Riggs has written a rather stale story of youthful insurgence. Such people should never have remained through the evening, for *Russet Mantle* (Masque Theater) as it progresses offers less and less realistic theater. In fact, judged purely in terms of realism, it is a gratuitous tale of rebellion against morals. But in reality it has little to do with realism in the ordinary sense, and it is by no means primarily concerned with the sex code. Its subject is the problem of contemporary youth trying to free itself from the stifling, tawdry meshes of the great American dream. Approached on its own plane and in its own terms, *Russet Mantle* is a searching picture woven with the fire and grace of an incisive lyric.

It is a lucent example of what poetry can give the theater. By poetry, of course, we do not mean rimes, ornamental metaphors or scanned verses, but that intensity of characterization and compression of statement which communicates vastly more than appears in the syllables of the speeches. To achieve this the playwright must create characters that are more than credible individuals: their thoughts and actions must be representative of large and significant groups. A great deal can be taken for granted when this method of symbolic characterization is used; the playwright is saved much explaining of the whys and wherefores. But he must compact his dialog with enormous precision. And he must face the very real disadvantage of making demands upon

the imagination of the audience—in this case, an audience whose imaginations have been all but atrophied under a constant diet of dramatic journealese.

Horace Kincaid salvaged enough from the crash to buy a ranch in Santa Fe, where he and his wife Sue burn up the days in brief and bitter squabbles over their hen-and-apple-raising problems. Sue's sister Effie, wife of a Louisville banker, has just arrived for a visit, supposedly with her daughter. But Kay is nowhere to be found. Effie's casual explanation throws a small thunderbolt into the Kincaid ears: "Oh, she'd met some cowboy and was going out to his ranch. So I think she must have stayed all night with him," followed by: "I don't care *what* Kay does so long as she doesn't *tell* me." There is certain to be a clash when the young, superbly alive Kay arrives. And when John Galt, who has hitch-hiked a thousand miles "in order to think," gets a job in the household, the audience may be sure of complications between them.

Obviously the two youngsters will crack their heads against the wall of proud, good-natured stupidity around them. Obviously they will be drawn together in a variant of the cohesive-force-of-persecution pattern. But the result of their love will be far less predictable. Kay is pregnant. What of this child of a banker's daughter and a penniless, defiant youth?

At this point people insistent on one-eyed, one-eared theater should turn the page. For them the play should only begin here. And yet it is *Russet Mantle's* strength that its simple plot is so fully conclusive. The reason, I believe, may be found in the organic manner in which the characters, as they grow and change, construct a significant portrait

of contemporary social struggle. Riggs has not attempted the somewhat epic proportions of an Odets' *Paradise Lost*; he has built a smaller structure, but it is a surer one—one more solidly grounded in fact.

There is Kincaid embittered by a loveless existence, his fortune shattered, his wife unable to hide her deep contempt for him, her ceaseless regret that she chose economic security above a hazardous desire. There is Effie, the Dulcy wife of a banker, whose key-line is "Oh please, No truth. No truth." There is Galt, one of America's disinherited millions, who has dug ditches, worked in factories, plowed farms, run elevators, written poetry. And there is Kay, whose derisive gaiety dies when Galt rips off her defenses: "You were born sensitive and intelligent and once you became conscious of that woeful combination you fled . . . to escape . . . You are dying by your own hand."

If Galt and Kay do not typify the largest and most important sections of contemporary youth, they nevertheless carry enough truth to speak for a profoundly important struggle. Galt knows that the economic roots of avarice, cruelty and misery cannot be canceled: "They have to be dug up." If he is given to poetic trajectories, it is because he articulates the generation "born desperate enough, and searching—with the taste of rage in their mouths." If he is a poet whom Effie and Suzanne would muffle with dreaminess, his conception of reality can speak for a people:

Sometimes a winter when sleet and snow and wind are slashing and venomous. But what happens? The cold stops. Rains fall. The sun shines. The rigors and terrors of nature come to and end. But the rigor and terror of man against man never cease. I've seen it. I know. In textile mills, railroad yards, on docks, in the streets. Machine guns mowing down men in Wisconsin. Men and women hounded and flogged and tortured in San Francisco. Riot squads, strikebreakers, nausea gas—bayonets! And starvation! And voices crying out! For what? A little bread, a little sun, a little peace and delight. I've heard them, I tell you. I've seen. And I know. *This* is reality, this is the stuff our senses are gored with.

The newspapers call this play a comedy, so does the author; but its texture is so subtle an interweaving of tragedy and laughter that it emerges essentially as a work of deep seriousness. Effie's feather-brained non sequiturs may draw belly-laughs from the house for a while, but gradually she emerges a pitiful-and-despicable object. The Kincaid

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couple's holier-than-thou championing of a morality they fear to question is farcical until their individually tragic frustrations are told and then it is impossible to laugh at their deformed humanity. There are overtones floating throughout the dialog which deepen the meaning of the desperate clinging to the status quo and which make it difficult for the rebels to prove their case.

Obviously, Lynn Riggs has not loaded the dice in favor of the progressive generation whose cause he is proving. He has, in fact, created their opponents with more clarity and symbolic breadth. Some of us may prefer a more politically developed symbol of disinherited youth than Galt, whose energies have not yet gone beyond individual striving into the fruitful world of collective striving. Others may object to the validity of Kay as a symbol of psychically "hungry, tired, sick, desperate" and cynical youth. One can argue these matters and arrive at excellent conclusions and perhaps agree that *Russet Mantle* fails to do a number of worthwhile things. And while arguing, we would neglect the splendid fact that this tragi-comedy is a rich addition to the social drama. "We have to live in a world that's our time. We can help make it. It will make us." It requires restraint to write such a seemingly tentative finale in the America of 1936. Yet a more class-conscious conclusion would have been ruinous. It is to Riggs' credit that he has avoided wishful actions and wishful speeches—at the expense of an illusory loss of scope. It has enabled him to write one of the most convincing of social plays.

STANLEY BURNISHAW.

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The Screen

"The Ghost Goes West"

IN *The Ghost Goes West* (United Artists), the eminent French director, Rene Clair, spoofs an American capitalist through the eyes of a good-natured Scottish ghost. It is potentially a hilarious idea which succeeds only occasionally, is sometimes witty and charming, but always urbane. Clair's film opens with a prelude of Seventeenth Century Scotland. There are bagpipes, clans and feuds. And Clair politely pokes fun at the seriousness of the family battles, the ritual of war and Scotch whisky.

Mr. Martin, the capitalist, buys the ancient Glourie Castle and ships it to Florida, brick by brick and panel by panel. With the castle goes Glourie's Ghost who for two hundred years has been looking for a member of the MacTaggan clan in order to settle the feud between the families. Publicity men announce that the ghost is being imported through the courtesy of Martin's Food Products. But Congress objects to the importation of a foreign ghost and the British get snobbish at the idea of a "British Made" ghost being exported to uncivilized America.

It is an event when a genuine Scotch ghost visits these shores. Martin and his guest are given a royal Jimmy Walker welcome with all the trimmings. The scene in which Martin's car is followed by an empty one bearing the sign, "Reserved for the Ghost," will be remembered for a long time.

Once the castle is safely transplanted to Florida soil the director lets us down. What should have been the funniest part of the film is the dullest. There is the usual Rene Clair chase—influenced by the early Mack Sennett and Chaplin comedies—which is an anti-climax instead of the highest point in the film. The action is always interrupted by dialogue and long sentimental passages. There is none of Clair's usual exploitation of the minor characters which gave all of his earlier pictures their special flavor.

Rene Clair's strongest asset in the sound film was his understanding of the function of music in relation to the visual image. But the score of *The Ghost Goes West* is schematic and elementary. The most serious deficiency is the artist's reliance upon Robert Sherwood's undramatic scenario which belongs to the *Beggar on Horseback* period.

In a conversation with me, Clair admitted that his films were extremely disliked in France. He cooked his own goose with the French bourgeoisie when he satirized their cant, their pettiness, their stuffiness (*The Italian Straw Hat*). The climax came with the release of *The Last Millionaire*. It was shown just after the murder of Alexander of Yugoslavia and Clair was almost accused of provocation. The rich, the Rightists and other reactionaries almost ruined the movie house when they found that Clair's dictator

was a lunatic. "I had to leave France because of economic reasons," said Clair. "I couldn't get any money for new films." Of course with the increasing French fascism Clair found it more and more difficult to make the kind of films he wanted to make. He "escaped" to England where Alexander Korda of London Films promised him "freedom of work." But Mr. Korda, in spite of his interest in the cinema, is a business man. And he saw to it that Rene Clair's satire was such that it didn't hurt anyone. For it is a commonplace that polite satire which offends no one doesn't come off.

It is a wide gap that separates Clair's earlier brilliant film, *The Italian Straw Hat* from *The Ghost Goes West*. Still there is hope that one of the screen's most brilliant artists will recover his old spirit. It would be easy to generalize and say that he has "gone Hollywood." But in the meantime, it seems to me that only the ghost of Rene Clair goes West.

PETER ELLIS.

"Grain"

GRAIN (Mosfilm) is a story of the Soviet collectives, the beginnings, the trials, the hardships, the sabotage of the kulaks, and the final victories and the flourishing fields of wheat.

Here on the steppes, the kulaks have organized to break down the collective. "I am a cattle dealer and this is no government for me." They give the peasants houses to use for their schools, they organize "bigger and better" collectives, they penetrate into the ranks of the Red Army (but not for long)—anything to confuse issues, to break down the morale of the kolkhoz.

But it doesn't take long for the peasants to discover their leaders. The work is hard; sometimes it is difficult for them to understand; they learn slowly that these houses and these horses belong to them all, and that the land and the growing grain is theirs. But, despite the swift and frantic efforts of the kulaks to disrupt the ranks, despite the sabotage and the attempted destruction of the ripening wheat, the work is accomplished; there is a tractor, a great harvest and there is dancing in the fields.

The film is based on the novel by Ivan Shukov, and there was evidently conscious effort on the part of the directors to follow the script faithfully, and in this case perhaps the film succeeds too well. The picture suffers from overabundance of material, the sequences are too often broken for lengthy subtitles, forming what might be called uneven chapters. The result is a slow-moving and too often fumbling and episodic structure. There is little elasticity and while the work is completely realistic, there is an absence not of suspense but of dramatic moment.