

SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

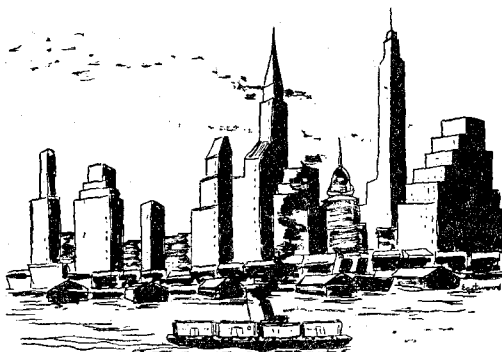
New Plays by Messrs.

Howard, Steinbeck, et al.

THE Theatre Guild's fourth production of the season is Mr. Sidney Howard's *The Ghost of Yankee Doodle*, which might not unfairly be described as the glorification of a family of liberals who do not choose to die with or for their ideals, but prefer to remain snug within the bosom of capital and hope for better times. According to Mr. Howard, this family of liberals is representative of American gentility: they are the last of the old stock, the dry seed of the old breed, the true and only inheritors of the noble tradition of American republican liberalism upon which the foundations of this glorious democracy have been set. Like the Theatre Guild (now picketed by its workers), the Garrison family believe in free speech, free politics, and free art—and, of course, free business. When they are faced with the necessity to choose between freedom and their interests, however, they find themselves forced to abandon the first and lugubriously console themselves with the whiskeyed reflection that their ideals are much too good for the wickedness of this world. It's a play, in short, written by a liberal dramatist and produced by a liberal theater, about the wishywashiest set of self-conscious fence-straddlers that ever cluttered a stage; and I assure you they are as ineffectual in the theater as they are irresolute in life. The head of Mr. Howard's family of liberals conveniently happens to be a retired actress of great charm and beauty. I say "conveniently" because Miss Ethel Barrymore is thus enabled to bring her own great charm and beauty to the playing of the part, which she does so well and with such sweet and ethereal queenliness that no one forgets for a moment that she represents the ghost of Yankee Doodle's wife (especially when her old beau turns up in the transparent disguise of Mr. Hearst). Well, Miss Barrymore, or Mrs. Garrison, is naturally a bit put out when a new world war begins and she learns from her brother-in-law, the head of the family business of liberalism and dye-working, that America's neutrality policy threatens the business with bankruptcy. Opportunely Mr. Dudley Digges, as the former beau press-lord, drops out of the sky and brightens the proceedings by (a) proposing marriage to her, and (b) plunging America into the war. The dye-works are saved and liberalism goes down with the curtain. But there is a sub-plot. The daughter of the Garrison household is in love with a young college professor who has been fired for teaching Marxism to his students. When the press-lord's illegitimate aviator-son makes a pass at her, the daughter succumbs and the young college professor gets quite red and talks good sense for a few lines—after

which the Garrisons (and the audience, unfortunately) see no more of him. The amorous aviator goes off to fight in the war his father has helped to start and crashes en route. This ties up with the main plot by helping to expose the rottenness of the press-lord, who promptly sets about publicizing his son's death to help his war propaganda. Here Mr. Howard has done well, and Mr. Digges even better. Between them, at any rate, they contrive to stage a rounded portrait of a modern plutocrat: powerful, childish, crass, gross, oleaginous, and treacherous—and absolutely disgusting in his ideas and personality. Even Mrs. Garrison realizes this at last, and refuses to marry him.

Clearly there is sufficient here to have made a really interesting play. Mr. Howard must be complimented upon his recognition of the abomination of capitalism and his exposure, in spite of his obvious sympathy, of the futility of liberalism. His success at these static themes leaves him little excuse in his failure to write a conclusive play. He is not incapable. Simply he has not taken the pains to penetrate his own material to its root. He fumbles like an amateur, which he is not, and glosses it over with the cheapest of professional stage tricks, gags, sentimentalisms, and salacities. The play is poorly constructed; the dialogue is thin; there is a note of monotony and an incessant lack of suspense, the reason being that Mr. Howard consistently deviates from his conflict through a refusal to face it. He feels that liberal ideals are right and good: but, as he cannot admit any other basis of society than the bourgeois individual, he is forced to avoid the conflict which such ideals necessarily set up within a capitalist framework. In drama, as in science, after all, the truth holds that only in motion do bodies reveal themselves. As Mr. Howard's characters never *move*, really never do or effect anything at all, they cannot be said to obey the first law of dramatic characterization, which is *development*. The result is unmitigated dullness, a little alleviated by the efforts of Miss Barrymore and Mr. Digges, and by Miss Barbara Robbins as the daughter, and Messrs. Martin Holme, Russel Andrews, Don Costello, and Donald Mack. The remainder of the cast was distinguished mainly by inaudibility.



Martin

One of the notable characteristics of bourgeois existence is the complete stultification within it of all spontaneous human emotion. This is clearly observable in bourgeois drama wherein the heights of passion are reached when a man wins a mistress and the depth of feeling plumbed when a man loses a mistress. Apart from sex and whatever interferes with its free play, the bourgeois dramatist has no topic about which he can express himself in heartfelt terms. The whole field of human loyalties and struggles outside of the stuffy bed-sitting-room is a wasteland to him inhabited by nonconformists and children. Even friendship, that simplest of human fidelities, is something alien to the bourgeois theater. Friendship is conceivable between schoolboys: but between bourgeois adults? It is for this reason that one would not be overstating the virtue of Mr. Steinbeck's novella, *Of Mice and Men*, if one should call it a worker's myth. Its theme is friendship: the friendship of one worker for another; and in its prose form it was a tender and lyric story. The stage play, produced by Sam Harris and directed by George Kaufman, follows the story almost word for word. It is directed with decent reticence and extremely well acted by Wallace Ford as the bright-witted George, and Broderick Crawford as his dim-witted friend, Lennie. There is a superb piece of acting by John F. Hamilton, looking like a Picasso old down-and-out of the "blue" period, in the part of an aged worker who has lost his hand on his job and has nothing to look forward to but the poorhouse. And the other players, Miss Claire Luce, Messrs. Will Geer, Charles Slattery, Thomas Findlay, Walter Baldwin, Leigh Whipper, and Sam Ryhl, are all good in their roles. Finally, the scenery by Donald Onslager is natural without being naturalistic, and far better than the usual run of Broadway sets. Nevertheless, in its translation from book to theater, Steinbeck's story has replaced tenderness with sentimentality, realism with smuttiness, and the lyric quality has been quite lost. The voice is the voice of John Steinbeck, but the hands are the hands of Mr. George Kaufman.

The Abbey Players from Dublin have produced *In the Train*, a new play in one act adapted by Hugh Hunt from a short story by Frank O'Connor. It is a fair study of various Irish provincial types returning on a train from a murder trial at Dublin. Attempting no point, it has none. The same program (Ambassador, N. Y.) saw a very bad revival of Synge's imperishable Oedipian satire, *The Playboy of the Western World*.

MICHAEL SAYERS.

THE "CONVERSION ENDING" is one of the aspects of left-wing literature which have drawn adverse criticism from bourgeois reviewers, who have by and large taken the posi-

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tion that life doesn't work quite that way. The answer has been in part that art frequently distills a meaning from life and presents that distillation in a form not always to be encountered on every highway and byway. Another part of the answer has been that the "conversion ending" in a strike play, let us say, has to do with a phase of life not particularly familiar to dramatic reviewers (but, let us hope, more familiar since Arthur Pollock of the Brooklyn *Eagle* took to the picket line), and which, hence, may seem more artificial than the realities warrant. A third part of the answer, deriving in some sense from the second, is that bourgeois criticism tends to be hostile to the aspirations of the labor movement.

How far bourgeois criticism may object to the conversion ending as such, regardless of who is being converted to what, may be measured by the acclaim with which most of the press greeted *Father Malachy's Miracle*, in which an agnostic is finally converted to the Catholic faith. I do not recall any carping on the ground that life doesn't happen quite that way. At the same time, I doubt that any reviewer except a dyed-in-the-wool Catholic mystic would argue that there was the slightest chance of life happening that way, i.e., that two miracles could be deliberately performed and so make possible the conversion. Which would seem to indicate that the decisive question for bourgeois reviewers is less the conversion ending as such and more who is being converted to what. Which is what left-wingers have contended all along.

But that isn't the whole story. The fact is that *Father Malachy's Miracle* is a skillful piece of dramaturgy, splendidly acted. It is very shrewd, genial, and human—so much so, indeed, that the trade gossip that it has the sanction of the Roman church seems at times incredible. For the cardinal who arrives to suppress Father Malachy's miracle-working seems an almost malicious portrait of a slick worldly politician—introduced by the Scottish Catholic parlor-maid as a "priest all dressed up in red, and sort of slinky-looking." Elsewhere the Roman hierarchy is referred to by another Catholic as "them Eyetalians," and there are a dozen other unanswered slights on revered symbolisms, as when the Scottish Catholic bishop, peeved at Rome's anti-miracle-working attitude, asks the cardinal to relay the information to Rome that when the Scottish branch of the church undertakes miracles, it won't go in for "any tomfoolery about cockerels laying golden eggs on altars"—a recent embarrassing miracle cited by the cardinal. This touch and go, as well as the common substance of love-story comedy, give the play a lively interest—an interest too keen for some of the devout, apparently, because members of the audience were seen to develop definite huffs and leave after the first act.

But about the conversion ending: it's not a violation of dramatic logic in this play for it to take place; certainly it would be too odd if a pair of authentic miracles done before the characters' eyes could not accomplish a con-



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