

SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

Shadows and Substance on Broadway

BY an almost symbolic coincidence, a remarkable contrast in *Weltanschauung* was brought out last week on Broadway. On the one hand we had two plays, Ben Bengal's *Plant in the Sun* and Francis Edwards Faragoh's *Sunup to Sundown*, dealing with youth and child labor, and standing with both feet on the ground of present-day America; and on the other, a pair of plays dealing with matters transcendental, making excursions into the world beyond and giving off a phosphorescent glow of the decadent philosophy of fulfillment in death. The two are Paul Osborn's *On Borrowed Time* (at the Longacre, N. Y.), fashioned from Lawrence Edward Watkins's novel, and Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (at the Henry Miller). Between these two pairs of opposites was wedged in Erskine Caldwell's *Journeyman*.

By the verdict of the critics, *On Borrowed Time* and *Our Town* have been placed on everybody's must list, while *Sunup to Sundown* closed after seven performances. *Journeyman*, which was scheduled to close after nine, is at this writing continuing at the Hudson. *Plant in the Sun* was a one-time affair, to be repeated, we hope, many more times.

With some it would be tantamount to blasphemy to put Osborn's and Wilder's plays in the same category. In the first instance we have a fabricated piece of hokum, rather unusual in its tricky mechanism; in the second—

a work of imagination and high literary skill. But at the risk of appearing irreverent, we cannot help placing Wilder's poetic drama in the same thought-stream with Osborn's clever contraption. *Our Town* is, ah, well—an absorbing play, glorifying the humdrum middle-class life of a small New England town which takes on a kind of grandeur of eternal sameness, like the flow and ebb of the tides. At the author's direction, Jed Harris stripped the stage of all scenery and props, putting the characters of the play through the abstracted motions of day-by-day living. This, we grant, was an inspired idea on the part of Mr. Wilder, for only by disembodiment of the life of *Our Town* could he possibly have distilled poetry and eternal wisdom out of the dreary monotony of its life cycle. It would have been disastrous to treat the play realistically, for then we would have got a concrete picture of *Our Town*, a picture of pinched lives moving within a fixed narrow orbit, a picture of stagnation and social inertia, of convention stifling personality, of a dead leveling that reduces everything and everybody to the lowest common denominator of conformism.

Well, Jed Harris has carried out his assignment superbly. His disembodiment of the play has resulted in a theatricalism which, if self-conscious and not new in method, is nonetheless beautiful in its lofty and magnificent simplicity. The Group Theatre put a similar style to better uses in *The Case of Clyde Griffith*, and the Chinese have been doing it for centuries, but Jed Harris made it fit his New England material in a masterful manner.

The third act of Mr. Wilder's play is given over almost entirely to the deceased of *Our Town* who are supremely happy in death and speak with contempt about the joys and sorrows of the living. Death with them, and Mr. Wilder, is the ultimate fulfillment. Having no particular aim in life, denying the desirability or validity of social progress, the glorifier of sameness reaches his ultimate in an idealization of death.

It is an exasperating play, hideous in its basic idea and beautiful in its writing, acting, and staging. To Frank Craven go the top honors as commentator and chummy guide through the life of *Our Town*. The others in the cast are uniformly good, combining raciness of utterance with the eerie disembodiment of the Wilder-Harris style. John Craven and Martha Scott are as beautiful a pair of young lovers as Broadway has seen in many a moon, and such old reliables as Jay Fasset, Evelyn Varden, and Helen Carew make the combination well-nigh perfect.

The phosphorescence of decayed wood is beautiful in the dark. In this sense Thornton Wilder's play is beautiful.

On Borrowed Time is hokum. That the critics hailed it as the best ever merely goes to show that criticism and a guide to shopping

are two different things. Heralded as a "fantasy" and an "imaginative" play, Osborn's opus is a queer combination of laugh-producing lines, genial cussing, grandpa and boy, a streamlined figure of death in the person of Mr. Brink, a penny's worth of penny philosophy about the sweet surcease in death, a generous helping of *Death Takes a Holiday*, and a tricky invention coupling reality with unreality. Gramps somehow becomes possessed of a power to keep Mr. Brink parked on a tree, and everybody is het up about death's enforced idleness. There is a frame-up to commit the old man to an insane asylum (a matter of inheritance, in case you don't know your hokum), there is shooting and intrigue and a happy ending à la Wilder, surcease in death. Mr. Brink is as soothing and well-bred as a fashionable mortician, and Gramps swears delightfully. The boy emulates Gramps, and boy and old man die together, blissful in their new abode on Mr. Brink's estate.

A hodge-podge of this sort might have proved a frightful and offensive bore but for Dudley Digges and the boy wonder, Peter Holden (aged six or thereabouts) who saved the situation and assured the Longacre of capacity audiences for many months, no doubt.

The intangibles of production and acting might have made a beautiful and poignant play of Francis Edwards Faragoh's *Sunup to Sundown*. That it looked good and important in the script is attested to by the verdict of the judges in the play contest of the I.L.G.W.U.

Recently Recommended Movies

- The Dybbuk*. A touching film of Jewish life under the influence of cabalistic doctrines.
- Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Walt Disney's first full-length film makes delightful entertainment for children and adults alike.
- The River*. A government documentary on land erosion, with some thrilling sequences and a telling message.
- Boy of the Streets*. A more sincere and convincing film of the slums than any of its predecessors, it makes a plea for better housing as a means of obviating crime.
- True Confession*. Insane comedy mixed with brilliant satire that is at all times amusing.
- Peter the First*. A magnificent and gusty historical film of Russian life as it was when Peter "opened the window to Europe," superbly acted and directed. Easily ranks among the very best of historical pictures.
- China Strikes Back*. A vivid picture of the Chinese people's defense against the Japanese invasion with excellent shots of life in the Eighth Route Army and of its generals.
- Heart of Spain*. A documentary of medical aid to Spain, which has rightly been called "pictorial dynamite."

Recently Recommended Plays

- One-Third of a Nation* (Adelphi, N. Y.). The Federal Theatre's new Living Newspaper successfully dramatizes the case for low-cost housing, pointing its lesson with careful evidence and witty candor. One of the "musts" of the season.
- The Shoemaker's Holiday* (National, N. Y.). Orson Welles's inspired staging of Dekker's uproarious farce, with its rich, bawdy humor and its gusto for a democratic, warless life. Put this on your "must" list. Alternates with *Julius Caesar*.
- The Cradle Will Rock* (Windsor, N. Y.). Marc Blitzstein's satiric operetta, a dynamic, pungent work which brings music to grips with reality.
- A Doll's House* (Morosco, N. Y.). Ibsen's drama of frustrated womanhood in a charming revival.
- Pins and Needles* (Labor Stage, N. Y.). This I.L.G.W.U. production is the brightest, most sparkling revue in many a season. Social significance at its entertaining best.
- Of Mice and Men* (Music Box, N. Y.). John Steinbeck's warm novel of friendship between workers expertly dramatized and extremely well acted.
- Julius Caesar* (National, N. Y.). Orson Welles's production of the Shakespearean play in modern clothes and with an anti-fascist slant is one of the highlights of the current season.

who awarded it the first prize of two thousand dollars. But on the stage of the Hudson Theatre it has emerged as a frail and ineffective piece, with a rather blurred view of the least lovely aspect of the American scene, child labor.

Faragoh has successfully escaped the pitfall of the familiar pattern of a labor play. Though there is exploitation, resentment, and resistance put on view, the play is not designed according to the formula, "We suffered, we struggled, we won." But in avoiding the hackneyed pattern, the author of *Sunup to Sundown* has not given us anything better or more effective. Instead of a play on child labor, we find a drama juvenile love gumming up the works.

Yet it might have been a fine play. Had Faragoh actually succeeded in integrating the theme of young love with that of crushing poverty and child labor, we would perhaps have got just about the kind of labor play we've been hoping for ever since we've begun growing weary of the oppression-strike-victory formula. Or had the production been more searching, a way might have been found to effect some kind of balance between the two themes. As it is, *Sunup to Sundown* completely succumbs to the theme of adolescent love, bogging down in its unhappy ending which is devoid of all hope or adult point of view.

It is just as well that Faragoh has avoided the black-and-white treatment of the social categories represented in his play. There is no villain in the piece and hardly a hero. The tobacco farmer, operating mainly with child labor, is human and decent. He squirms at the necessity of acting the part of the harsh employer and child sweater. But, driven by competition and the pressure of his own exploiters, he behaves true to type—sweating the children, firing their parents, and leaving a trail of tragedy and broken lives.

Having been honest with himself by not painting the employer as a black devil and symbol of exploitation, Faragoh has neglected to put forward an equivalent symbol that would arouse the audience against the upholders of child labor. Perhaps he can contribute to the solution of the problem no more than his sympathy for the kids and the feeling, "It's too bad!" But surely some sort of direction could be pointed out, some sort of hope suggested on behalf of those children he has made us like and pity so much!

We sympathize with Faragoh in his predicament. Obviously, he did not want to write another "labor play." He tried to integrate the social problem of child labor with character and milieu, choosing the most difficult and elusive medium, children at the first stages of adolescence. He became absorbed in the problems of adolescent character to such an extent that he made it his central theme, getting rid of the child labor problem as best he could. Worse than that, he brought the play and the audience to a sentimental impasse where a *status quo*, leaving the pregnant child-woman and her family on the tobacco farm

under the same conditions of exploitation, would under the circumstances constitute a veritable happy ending!

Apparently, something more than artistic integrity is necessary to write an honest social play. One also needs a clear and valid idea. Also in the theater, thinking is the better part of writing.

And of directing. Joseph Losey did all he could to put the play into the morass of futile sentimentality. Concentrating on milieu (a swell stage version of a tobacco shed was designed by Howard Bay) and the humanity of it, he failed to bring into focus the social aspects implicit in the material and lurking somewhere between the lines of the script. With the exception of the fine and sensitive acting of Florence McGee (of *Children's Hour*), the adolescents of the cast did not measure up to requirements, and since *Sunup to Sundown* was reduced essentially to a drama of adolescence, the poor cast accounted a good deal for the play's weakness on the stage. The good performances of the adults, notably Percy Kilbride, Walter N. Greaza, and Carl Benton Reid failed to lend vigor to the feeble whole.

Sunup to Sundown was not a bad play. It missed being a good play by the margin of Faragoh's blurred thinking, but it was honest and poignant nonetheless. Even as drama of adolescent love it is vastly superior to the commercial products of the Fata Morgana brand. Faragoh belongs to the theater. We hope to hear from him again—and soon.

There is still some life in the old strike-formula if it can result in such a gem of a one-actor as Ben Bengal's *Plant in the Sun*, presented by the New Theatre League as the principal item of its first New Theatre night at the Mercury of a Sunday evening. It is a play of uncommon appeal and charm, combining strike fervor with juvenile tenderness and roughneck comedy. As acted by a group of alert performers, it suffered slightly from overacting and playing for laughs. The accent in the direction (by Art Smith) was frequently placed on sure-fire lines and comedy-business rather than on the pathetic, if droll, predicament and bewilderment of the group of youngsters improvising a sit-down strike in a

candy factory. But despite the show-offish acting and the faulty accents, the essential values of the play reached the audience and evoked a response comparable only to the reception given *Waiting for Lefty* when first produced under the same auspices on a similar New Theatre night.

Bengal is a newcomer in the left-wing theater, and his first play, a prize-winner of the Youth Play Contest of the New Theatre League, reveals him as a dramatist with a fine ear for the vernacular and a sense of character. Though the leader of the juvenile strike is the least individualized of the swell bunch of kids and smacks too much of the familiar idealization of the strike leader, Bengal knows his kids and their lingo and likes both. While he generalizes his basic idea, he particularizes character and its interplay. The fine cast included Ben Ross, Will Lee, Harry Lessin, Sam Bonnell, Perry Bruskin, and Bert Conway. Just a little less acting, and they would have all been excellent.

The curtain-raiser, *Hello Franco*, by Theodore Kaghan, had its moments but in the main it was futile and flimsy. Proceeding from nowhere and going in the same direction, it utilized a dugout in Spain for the purpose of calling Franco "stinker" and Hitler, "you dirty page of history." The American volunteers used the remaining few minutes before an attack to carry on imaginary conversations with their kinfolk at home and with Franco and Hitler over a disconnected telephone. Here and there these phantom conversations gave off sparks of character and incipient drama, but the whole thing was in the nature of a drawn-out stunt and rather pointless.

Chalk up another for Morris Carnovsky who gave an impressive reading of H. Craft's moving anti-Nazi piece, *The Bishop of Munster*.

An unpretty piece of Americana, Erskine Caldwell's *Journeyman* reveals all of the faults and none of the virtues of his *Tobacco Road*. The virus of poverty that accounted for the putrescence in the house of Jeeter Lester is missing in the house of Clay Horey, but the putrescence remains. The obscenity is the same as in *Tobacco Road*, only more of it, with less reason for its being. The rascal-preacher is but an elaboration of Sister Bessie of Caldwell's classic. Will Geer's rampagous devil-chaser is an actor's picnic and an excursion into the familiar.

NATHANIEL BUCHWALD.



A. Marculescu

Music with a Purpose

UNTIL Count Basie's impassioned band swung into the exuberant coda of the stirring evening at the Forty-Sixth Street Theatre, February 6, there wasn't a trumpet to be heard at the NEW MASSES concert of "music with a purpose." But long before Buck Clayton deftly tossed off his first phrase, sonorous blasts were sounding and the walls of