

F O R S Y T H E ' S P A G E

Mr. Behrman and the Facts of Life

AMONG the casualties when Hitler came into power was S. N. Behrman, the American playwright. The ferocity of Hitler's policy against the Jews shocked Mr. Behrman to an extent that can only be understood by those who knew his previous work. As a brilliant author whose play, *The Second Man*, had been produced by the Theatre Guild (the highest honor to which a writer might aspire in those days), he was an important figure in New York literary life. That group was then almost entirely free of race consciousness, and even today with the hate-builders active, the notion that a man could be less an artist because of his ancestry would get little support in this community.

However, as has often been said, New York is not America, and certainly it is not the world. The imbecility and bestiality of Hitler's policy opened the eyes of many writers who lulled themselves into a comfortable feeling that art was enough. The result with some was a further retreat from reality and a pathetic effort to propitiate fate by pretending that nothing had happened. If it were possible, they reasoned, to make Hitler and the other anti-Semites see that the Jews were good people minding their own business, he would soon recognize his error and mend his ways. Just as Senator Borah feels that any disapproval of Japanese terror will only stimulate Japan to worse terror, they felt that any attempt at defense by them would merely infuriate Hitler the more.

What Sam Behrman felt I was never able to make out, although I talked with him about it on several occasions. My respect for him as a writer and my fondness for him as a friend does not alter the fact that I consider him a muddled thinker. He is trying desperately to clarify his mind, and he is thinking both of the world and his position in the world, but the plain evidence of his recent plays is that he is little better off than when he began thinking seriously on social and political problems. What he would really like to do is return to the old pre-Hitler days. The liberalism to which he clings so tenaciously (and which Brooks Atkinson in the *New York Times* esteems so highly) has all the earmarks of desperation. Mr. Behrman can't bring himself to go forward, and he is too sensible to think that he can go back; the compromise is not so much liberalism as stultification.

From the practical viewpoint of playwright-

ing, the liberal or middle-ground position is ideal. Since the New York carriage trade will have nothing to do with outright radicalism even when it is panned up with humor, it is practically impossible to present a Communist on the American commercial stage. The idea of using a Nazi as a hero is so ludicrous that nobody has even attempted it. All that remains for a playwright who is interested in ideas is a form whereby he can allow the extreme factions a say under an understanding that there will be a noble and impersonal and "unprejudiced" observer in the middle to show how good sense and a decent bearing will conquer all. From seeing Mr. Behrman's recent plays, *Rain from Heaven*, *End of Summer*, and *Wine of Choice*, it is evident that he is no more certain of his position than when he started.

The fault lies not with Mr. Behrman but with some of liberalism's assumptions. When Brooks Atkinson praises him for presenting a good liberal position, he is also whistling in the wind. What he refers to as liberalism in *Wine of Choice* is not liberalism at all but a dramatic attitude. It helps resolve a play which otherwise would never end. The fact that he uses a Senator from New Mexico as his catalytic agent is particularly interesting, because the man he refers to, Bronson Cutting, was a friend of mine, and if there was anyone in this world more confused than Sam Behrman it was Bronson Cutting. When I saw him last in Washington shortly before his death in an airplane crash, he pressed on me a volume dealing with the Douglas social credit plan. It was his newest attempt to avoid the contradictions of the capitalistic system by finding a way to correct its evils without undermining its foundations.

Cutting was a fascinating man to study because he had two lives—one as a junior subdeb Tammany Hall in New Mexico and another as a genuinely forward-looking member of the United States Senate. At home he was a realistic, hard-boiled, vote-buying politician; in Washington he consistently and sincerely stood for the right things. It would be less easy for Mr. Behrman to idealize Bronson Cutting if he knew both lives, and yet Cutting essentially was an admirable character. What his life proves is something that some liberals never like to believe: that democracy is not something that can be lived in a vacuum. The people who speak of our very imperfect, blundering, capitalist democracy with a catch

in the throat as if it were a concept as romantically fine as the search for the Holy Grail are merely making fools of themselves. To make it possible for himself to bring his liberal ideas to Congress, Bronson Cutting had to be a practical politician at home. He gave coal to the needy, he gave presents to new babies, he buried the dead and got paroles for the careless. His personal fortune was estimated at \$40,000,000, and at one time he controlled both the Democratic and Republican Parties in New Mexico. For his reputation, his death was a blessing, because it was generally known that out of the election contest brought against him by the present Senator Dennis Chavez evidences of widespread corruption would have been uncovered. The effect would have been unpleasant even if his election had been upheld.

Despite all this Bronson Cutting was a sincere liberal and a national influence for good. I have not mentioned the New Mexican background of his political power to bismirch his reputation; I have given it for exactly what it is: an evidence that liberalism under capitalism is not necessarily an ideal state. The facts of life are hard, and Mr. Behrman's liberal is as much a stock figure as his Communist. The latter, in truth, is a caricature, as he always must be on Broadway. Either he is a dirty-necked agitator living on his grandmother and maligning her for her charity, or he is a devilishly clever gentleman who frequents the drawing rooms of the rich and loves and leaves the daughters of his host as ruthlessly as the former traveling man deserted the farmer's daughter. In my time I have known many Communists, both agitators and intellectuals, and neither of these gentlemen do I recognize when I see them on the stage, but there is the probability that I do not get around as widely as Mr. Behrman. In general, too, the Broadway character of a Communist is always something of a fake. He is just playing at Communism, waiting for a good chance to sell out. Mr. Behrman should know better than this, and I think he does know better, but he docilely follows along. It is the figure his audiences are used to, and perhaps it would be as hard for him to change the concept as it would be for him (or any other American playwright) to present the character of a middle-aged and flighty woman without having Ina Claire or Jane Cowl in mind. (As an aside I may say that the only person I have ever seen who looks like a Hearst-cartoonist radical is George E. Sokolsky.)

If the state of the world were less involved, one might excuse Mr. Behrman for his stock liberal, but his policy of mental neutrality is exactly as dangerous as political neutrality. The reactionaries like nothing better than writers who refuse to take sides. Fascism has grown fat on such kindness. If there is anything Hitler must love it is the kindly and well-intentioned who are content to leave him alone. What they never seem to learn is that by no possible chance will Hitler and his gang leave *them* alone. Not even good Guild playwrights.

ROBERT FORSYTHE.

Attack on the T.V.A.

By Henry Zon

BEATEN four times, the nation's utilities are making a fifth desperate drive on the New Deal's power program. Utilizing the current squabble among the directors of the Tennessee Valley Authority, they are demanding an investigation of the T.V.A. which, they hope, will indefinitely postpone pending legislation designed to implement the Administration's power program.

Such, in essence, is the basis of the current congressional demand by the Senate Tories for an investigation of the T.V.A. Its starting point is the mud-flinging contest among the T.V.A. directors, but the Knoxville name-calling jamboree is just a convenient excuse for the power trust and its friends to cry "Corruption," "Teapot Dome," "Scandal," "Fraud."

The background of the T.V.A. will help illuminate the present situation.

For fifty years the electrical industry thwarted every attempt to secure state or national regulation of rates or securities. The results were disastrous. Investors lost millions in the Insull collapse, in Cities Service. Consumers paid extortionate rates. Politics, newspapers, schools, colleges, and technical professions were smeared with utility cash, were serving utility ends.

With 1933 the whole superstructure collapsed. A liberal national Administration took office, and the nation turned its face toward public ownership of public utilities. In 1921 Muscle Shoals, no longer needed for the war production of nitrates, gave the nation a chance to establish a super-power system, and Senator Norris of Nebraska led in the attempt to convert the Muscle Shoals dam into a power-producing station.

But the utilities decreed that there would be no generating stations, and the obedient servants in the White House and Congress heeded the decree. Big business was in the saddle and, in fact, in 1928 Josiah Newcomb, the chief utilities lobbyist in Washington, in a merry and brave moment in the Cosmos Club declared, "I represent a nine-billion-dollar industry. We will not permit the United States to build generating stations."

The swing came in 1932, and Muscle Shoals and Boulder Dam were built and converted to the generation of power. The power trust was licked on power generation.

Next the utilities decreed: No public transmission lines. In the T.V.A. Act the right of the government to build transmission lines was declared, and the power trust was licked on transmission.

Municipally owned distributing systems must be stopped, the power trust decreed again. Bond houses refused to deal in public bonds for that purpose, or else charged exorbitant interest rates. When Secretary of

the Interior Harold Ickes offered P.W.A. loans for the building of municipal distributing systems, the companies ran into the courts and secured injunctions.

In January the chastened Supreme Court held in favor of the government, and Ickes is now turning loose over \$99,637,000 to sixty-one projects in twenty-three states for distribution systems. The cities will provide an additional \$47,279,854. The solid front of banker opposition was broken, and the power trust was licked on distribution.

In 1930 the utilities started the New River case, in 1934 the Ashwander case, and in 1936 the Eighteen Company case, all denying the right of the federal government to generate and sell electric power. The Supreme Court threw out the Ashwander case. On January 21, 1938, Judge Florence Allen, in the Eighteen Company case, declared the contested sections of the T.V.A. act constitutional and stated, "These complainants have no immunity from lawful competition, even if their business be curtailed or destroyed." Thus the power trust was licked on the question of constitutionality.

Having failed to top the demand of the masses for cheap and plentiful electric power, the utilities have now turned to a smear campaign while stalling for time. A look at pending power legislation tells why the utilities demand delay.

First, there is the Norris regional conservation bill, embodying a comprehensive program for power production, land planning, soil conservation, and intelligent usage of the nation's natural resources. Because it provides for public control of power it is anathema to the utilities.

Secondly, there is the appropriation for the Rural Electrification Administration. Since the appointment of John Carmody as R.E.A. administrator, the potentialities of electric power have been brought home to thousands of farms, principally through rural distributing coöperatives. At the moment the Senate has appropriated \$40,000,000 for the R.E.A. for the coming fiscal year, while the House appropriated \$30,000,000. Conferees

failed to agree on a figure, the power lobby is fighting to keep the sum at \$30,000,000, and the fate of the appropriation hangs in the balance.

Third, there is pending an appropriation for needed additional construction at the Bonneville Dam in the West, of which J. D. Ross is an able and honest administrator. The utilities crowd is fighting it.

Fourth, an appropriation for the Gilbertsville Dam at the mouth of the Tennessee River is also pending. It is an important link in the T.V.A. structure and means a possible 192,000 kilowatts of electric power.

Fifth, pending in the House Commerce Committee is the Norris resolution, directing the Federal Trade Commission to resume investigation of private utility propaganda and appropriating \$150,000 for the probe. It has passed the Senate and has been pigeonholed in the House for over a year.

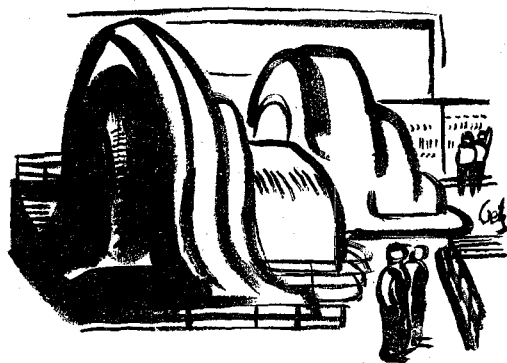
Thus defeated on four fronts and facing a rout, the power trust grabbed at the alleged T.V.A. scandal as a reliable red herring with which to divert attention. Had the T.V.A. directorship been serene and harmonious, the enemies of the T.V.A. would have filled the air with other charges to secure an investigation of the T.V.A.

That the investigation, which seems sure to come, will be an impartial, fact-finding investigation is unlikely. Senator H. Styles Bridges (R., N.H.) tipped his hand when he refused the suggestion of Senator Norris that they both stay off the investigating committee. This same Senator Bridges, it will be recalled, was the man whose heart bled for Tom Girdler during the Little Steel strike, who demanded that the Post Office deliver food and clothing to the finks in the plants, who shouted for law and order when the Post Office Department refused to perform strikebreakers' duties, but who raised not a peep when Chicago police shot, in cold blood, ten steel workers.

Bridges has been joined in his demand for an investigation by Senator King (D., Utah), a sanctimonious tory, who thinks that the housing act is "communistic" and sure to lead straight to Socialism. King's chief target in recent years has been the relief appropriations, and it has been his sadistic delight to cut and slash at those appropriations at every turn.

On the other hand, despite all the hullabaloo, the investigation is likely to produce little, for, in the words of Representative Jerry Voorhis (D., Calif.), the administration of T.V.A. has been "clean as a hound's tooth." The probe is apt to center on the three-man T.V.A. Board of Directors.

In charge of the power end of the T.V.A. is David Lilienthal. Well versed in the tricks of the power trust, he has, in many instances, beaten them at their own game and even sold



Arthur Getz