

S I G H T S A N D S O U N D S

Big Themes in the Theater

THE day of the still, small voice in the theater is definitely over. We live in heroic times. The newspaper headlines, the radio news-broadcaster speak in tones of measured tragedy. An American by-election takes on the trappings of heartbreak and suspense.

And even the commercial Broadway theater must respond to this heightened rhythm, this tense pitch of the times. It is no accident that the two most successful plays of the season, the new *Hamlet* and *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, reverberate with great rhetoric, rolling periods, noble poetry, and enormous themes. Men live history every day. They have an appetite for sweeping, challenging theater played in the grand style.

So Orson Welles' theatrical instinct was right when he picked *Danton's Death* for his first production of the season—and *Waltz in Goose Step* fails because it reduces fascism, and the fight against it, to a drawing-room tragedy of perversion, mania, and bad manners. The rolling periods of the old German play about the French ex-revolutionist should have pulled audiences from their seats—and by the same token, *Waltz in Goose Step* was destined to fall short of the mark because the tragedy of our era cannot be translated into Noel Coward hysteria.

But rhetoric and good intentions are not enough to make a great play. The Mercury Theatre's new production is a great disappointment for two simple reasons: it is dull as ditch water and completely muddled. Unless you're a specialist in the French Revolution, which I'm not, it's practically impossible to figure out what all the guillotining is about. The issues and events of the period are completely obscured by a lot of high-sounding talk. I did my level best to fit the puzzle together, and spent agonized moments trying hastily to recall college history but, frankly, I simply couldn't make head or tail of the story. If Danton drew back from the revolutionary movement after only the first steps had been taken, thereby criminally endangering the whole revolution, Robespierre continued to march forward. But the Mercury Theatre production is neither flesh nor fowl—nor good red herring, either. The sympathies of the audience must shift uneasily from Danton to Robespierre and back again. Did Danton really plot to destroy the republic? The Mercury's Robespierre (and history, incidentally) said he did. Two minutes later Danton is

shown talking to a politically harmless whore—which is the extent of the plotting the audience sees. And another thing. Even Danton's love life is inexplicably mixed up. Along toward the middle of the play, after several high-life scenes in brothels, Danton is suddenly shown with a loving wife, whom I took to be a fancy lady in one of the earlier scenes. Why wasn't the good lady jealous? Why did she decide to kill herself when Danton died? I don't think betrayed wives commit suicide over the graves of faithless husbands, not, at least, without good reason.

Unfortunately I haven't read the original *Danton's Tod* so I can't say whether the Mercury Theatre's production brings some order out of complete confusion, or whether the remarkable lighting, offstage noises, bare stage, trap doors, and elevator system serve only to further muddle the proceedings. The production, like every Mercury Theatre production, is startling and provocative. I have an uneasy feeling, however, that Mr. Welles is using a heavy hand in *Danton's Death*. Certainly there are too many trap doors—actors pop up and down from every corner of the stage and I am not being whimsical when I say that by the middle of the play the audience starts to worry itself sick for fear Robespierre will take one step too many on the elevator platform and break his neck as he tumbles into one of the gaping holes on the stage. And the whole production is definitely too dark. Stages ought to be light enough to get a good look at the actors, and the pitch blackness in the house makes the theater-goer uneasy.

The cast for *Danton's Death* is admirable. Vladimir Sokoloff, one of my favorite actors, does a fine Robespierre and Martin Gabel is splendid as Danton. The entire supporting cast turn in notable performances and no other theater in town is currently displaying such a group of talented actors and actresses.



Soriano

Marc Blitzstein did the incidental music, which I liked enormously. "Christine" is a fine song and ought to be heard frequently around town.

Danton's Death fails because its heroic rhetoric doesn't make sense. *Waltz in Goose Step* is unsatisfactory because its author, Oliver H. P. Garrett, attacks fascism with spitballs rather than siege guns. The play revolves around the lives of a group of fascist leaders, and reaches its climax in a palace revolt engineered by the Leader's right-hand man to save his own skin. *Waltz in Goose Step* proves that fascist leaders are perverts, sadists, ignorant maniacs, and hysterical fools. And it adds that fascist propaganda is compounded out of a cynical play on the hopes and fears of innocently misled people. But this is not enough to make either a good play or a moving anti-fascist document. Against the tragic backdrop of Czechoslovakia the petty melodrama of *Waltz in Goose Step* fades to triviality.

For the truth of the matter is that it doesn't really matter very much whether Goering is a dope fiend or Hitler's sex life is peculiar. Perversion is unpleasant, but not very important. The private lives of fascist leaders may be dull and dirty, but the anti-fascist movement cannot center its attacks on the vicious manners and abnormal appetites of Nazi rulers. Mr. Garrett's mistake is not in lack of understanding but in emphasis. The dialogue in his play indicates that he knows the origin of fascism—the greed of monopoly capital. Many of the lines show that he comprehends the effect of fascism—the destruction of culture and human dignity. But it is not enough to have a decadent actress and a perverted fascist mourn the destruction of Art. Nor is it compelling to put a bereaved Jewish woman on the stage and let her weep for the misfortunes of her race.

Mr. Garrett's drama fails because he elects to have it spotlight the private weaknesses of fascist leaders. He has no opportunity to put either the fascist leader-makers, or the anti-fascist fighters, on the stage. His play is all petty villainy. The only relief from the monotonous procession of vicious characters across the stage is a Communist who appears for a moment to indicate, but merely indicate, the anti-fascist forces offstage. I cannot help but think, after reflecting on *Waltz in Goose Step*, that the great anti-fascist play of our time will have to be written around a group

of characters fighting fascism, rather than around the careers of the fascist leaders themselves.

The play, however, is well worth seeing, if only for the beautiful performance of Henry Oscar as the piano-playing pervert who, in the end, gets shot by his own valet. The rest of the cast do well enough with the impossibly melodramatic situations.

RUTH MCKENNEY.

School Directory

THE U. S. Army had better beware of Hollywood. Two new pictures, *Brother Rat* and *Touchdown, Army*, masquerading under the innocent themes of love and baseball, and love and football, respectively, seem to me to be dangerously near to seditious. They hold the army up to ridicule. The subversive directors in each case have used the technique of emphasizing the traditional role of military academy life so heavily that the spectator is moved to dedicate his progeny to rabid pacifism.

Brother Rat concerns the Virginia Military Institute, of which Stonewall Jackson once said, "The Virginia Military Institute will be heard from today." The grateful academy immediately capitalized these words and had them graven on the pedestal of an equestrian bronze that stands on the campus. Around this hallowed spot cadets are wont to gather when the sun paints his golden bars in the west, there to exchange confidences about the day's drill, their affairs of the heart, and often, it is rumored, to speak in hushed tones of one of their number who has been caught cheating at "exams." Reader, do not be too harsh with these youths; remember growing boys are not always the saints we'd like them to be. How three of these wholesome lads, together with a comical plebe whom the upperclassmen are fond of hazing, meet some young ladies of their own age begins a story that will put the fan on the edge of his seat. There the fan will hesitate for a moment and then get up and go home.

Touchdown, Army crackles with innovations. First, the role of the conceited quarterback is not filled by Lew Ayres but by Robert Cummings; second, the star player is not kidnaped on the eve of the big game but merely confined to his quarters for cribbing at a quiz; third, there are not ten scenes in which the fresh plebe is addressed as "Mr. Ducrot," "Mr. Dumbjohn," "Mr. Dumbgod," and the rest of the Dumb family—but thirty. Making the best of these derelictions, Director Kurt Neumann has stuffed the old cadaver full of live direction and a very funny satirical scene involving Raymond Hatton as a bogus Civil War veteran who reenacts the Battle of Shiloh by maneuvering a roomful of cadets and their girls.

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