

BIGGER THOMAS ON THE BOARDS

Richard Wright's great novel "Native Son" is successfully dramatized by the author, Paul Green, and Orson Welles. Canada Lee's splendid performance. Review of the movies and music.

LIKE many other readers of Richard Wright's magnificent novel, I was a bit skeptical and troubled when I first heard the plans for a play-version of *Native Son*. The dramatic possibilities of the book were obvious, but even more impressive was the technical problem of translating the story into another medium without distorting its complex and subtle meanings. How easy it would be, by one fatal misstep, to convert tragedy into melodrama; or to reduce Bigger Thomas to a merely pathetic victim of circumstance on the one hand, a surly killer on the other; or to twist the social meaning of the story into its opposite, as some reviewers had attempted to do, by wrenching episodes out of their artistic context. The news that Paul Green and Richard Wright were collaborating on the script was reassuring. But another question remained. Would it be possible to find a producer who would dare to fight a Broadway theater which had so largely abandoned itself to the timidity, escapism, false patrioteering, and giddiness engendered by the war hysteria?

That these legitimate doubts have been so thoroughly dispelled by the production itself is a tribute to the integrity and skill of Paul Green and Richard Wright, of Orson Welles, Canada Lee, James Morcom, and all the others responsible for the imaginative staging of *Native Son*. For the play, like the novel, is more than a protest. It is a positive thrust against the conspiracy of bigotry, hate, and oppression which poisons our national life so deeply that we cannot be restored to health without its final and utter eradication. No sensitive human being can leave the theater without realizing, in the words of Paul Max, the defense lawyer, that the oppression of the Negro people, the criminal Jim Crowing of 15,000,000 American citizens, in the army, in the navy, in every walk of life, is a rotting sore in the national organism. To a theater long in the doldrums, *Native Son* brings a serious and bold conception which challenges the official view that it is unpatriotic to tell the truth about American life.

It is Bigger Thomas, of course, who dominates each of the ten swift scenes, whether or not he is physically present on the stage. Interpreted with great understanding and sensitivity by Canada Lee, Bigger comes to life as a major dramatic character, thwarted, rebellious, tormented by the alternating rhythms of fear and hate and pride. While it has been impossible to reproduce all the values of the novel's documented psychological insight, the dual and apparently contra-

dictory aspects of Bigger's personality are faithfully presented: his tenderness and eruptive anger, his self-consuming uncertainties and his pretenses of unmitigated toughness, his moments of trembling hope rising from the depths of his being only to be smothered in a vast self-defensive cynicism.

In the very first scene, Bigger strongly rejects the philosophy of religious submissiveness preached by his mother. He refuses to praise God for the poverty and hunger and shame which haunt the tenement room in which the whole family lives. The enormous grey rat ("Mr. Dalton") which Bigger kills and dangles at the meager breakfast table symbolizes the enemy, wellfed, sleek, mean, and Bigger hacks away at him with awe-inspiring gusto. The play begins on this level of high tension—there are no small-talk preliminaries—and it keeps mounting as we follow Bigger and his friends in the street scene that follows. Imaginatively, they play at being aviators, politicians, soldiers, engineers, anything but terrified boys planning a hold-up because they have nothing better to do.

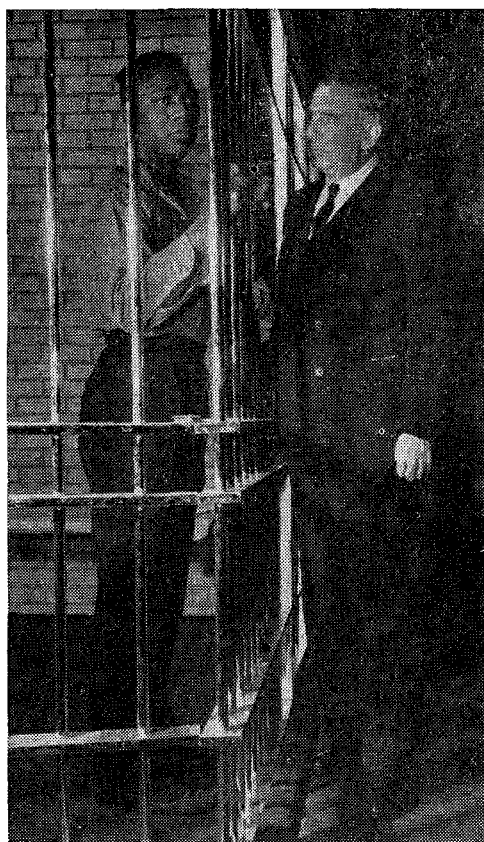
Breaking through the conventional three act mold, the authors develop Bigger's character in rapid and suggestive scenes: his in-

roduction to the Dalton household, where he is quizzed by the detective, lectured to by his "philanthropic" employer, and terrified by the advances of Mary Dalton, the young university girl who fancies herself a radical; the unforgettable bedroom scene in which Mary is accidentally killed by a terrified Bigger; the scene in the furnace room where his crime is discovered; the highly dramatic moments in which Bigger makes his girl an accomplice in a kidnapping scheme and in which both of them hide from the police searchlights; and finally the stirring trial scene in which Mr. Max delivers an eloquent indictment against the real criminal, a social order based on discrimination, and the jail scene, where Mr. Max tells the boy: "They do not hate you. They do the same thing to each other; and not until all the poor people in the world gain confidence in themselves. . . ."

The play is a miracle of compression. In certain respects, indeed, it has gained over the original story. By reducing Jan Erlone (who had been imperfectly realized in the novel) to a nominal role, and by pointing up the character of Mary Dalton, the play clarifies the situation leading to Mary's death. Moreover, Mr. Max's trial speech is now more compelling in its firmness and simplicity, and one is not conscious, as one was in the novel, that it is a mere recapitulation of all the meanings already communicated.

In other respects, the play has sacrificed values which were powerfully felt in the original. The prosecutor in the play, for example, is a quite ineffectual figure; in the story District Attorney Buckley, running for re-election, on the lookout for sensational publicity, has seized on Bigger as a victim, and exploited prejudice for political ends. Because of the exigencies of the scene structure, characters like Bigger's mother, sister, brother, and friends, disappear after they are introduced, whereas in the novel they are brought back for effective contrast. The tie-up between Red-baiting and the victimization of Bigger, suggested here in the words of the detective and reporter, has only a portion of the social force which it had in the novel.

But these shortcomings are not central. To a great extent, they were probably inevitable. If the play is not as rich as the novel, if it is not as great a piece of dramatic as it is of narrative literature, one need not be surprised. For the story of Bigger Thomas was conceived and elaborated within the framework of fiction, and it is as hopeless for a play to realize all the values of



Canada Lee as Bigger Thomas and Ray Collins as Lawyer Paul Max in a scene from *Native Son*.

TRIPLE LAKE RANCH
SUCCASUNNA, N.J.
 Enjoy the holiday at this popular nearby resort • Free Horseback Riding Instruction • All Outdoor Sports • Well-heated accommodations • Teachers' Discount on Full Holidays • Only 37 miles from N. Y. (Route 10 above Dover) N. Y. Phone: TR. 5-2163.

EASTER RESERVATIONS ACCEPTED NOW!!

AN ARTIST INVITES YOU

to...his 100 acre farm
 ...glorious country
 ...superlative cooking
 ...homey atmosphere
 ...barn dances, all sports
 ...55 miles from N. Y.

make early Easter Reservations
 Limited accommodation for holidays—From \$17.50 weekly
 *GEORGE A. PODORSON
 250 Park Ave., N. Y. C. Phone: PLaza 3-8926
 or Locust Grove Farm, Sylvan Lake, Hopewell Junction, N. Y.

ROYALE-HARMONY
 Formerly Unity and Royale Hotel
MAKE EARLY RESERVATIONS FOR EASTER!
 Ideal place for your winter vacation—"Tops" in entertainment. All winter sports—FREE BICYCLING, excellent cuisine, 801 Monmouth Ave., Lakewood, N. J. Tel. Lakewood 1159, 1146
 Management: Gross, Gelbaum and Broude

ENJOY YOUR EASTER HOLIDAYS AT
Birdland
 OPEN ALL YEAR
 Formerly Lewisohn's estate. 1 hr. from N. Y. — 225 acres in fascinating hiking country — All Seasonal Sports — Bicycles — Congenial Atmosphere — Musical Recordings — Library — Open Fireplaces — Excellent Cuisine. Tel.: Highland Mills, 7895. Mgt.: FANNIE GOLDBERG. MAKE EARLY RESERVATIONS. Central Valley, N. Y.

BUY DIRECT from FACTORY
WESER PIANO CO.
 NATIONALLY KNOWN MANUFACTURERS selling consumer direct. Tremendous savings. New, used, Spinets, Grands, Steinways, Chickering's, Knabes, others. Bonafide Values. Payments.
524 W. 43rd—ME dal. 3-3512

THE DECISION IS TO LIVE...
My Immediate Response
 NEW MASSES
 Established 1911
THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY FUND DRIVE FOR \$25,000
 NEW MASSES
 461 4th Avenue
 New York, N. Y.
 Gentlemen:
 I enclose \$_____ as my donation to the NEW MASSES thirtieth Anniversary Sustaining Fund Drive for \$25,000.
 Name _____
 Address _____
 City & State _____

a great novel as it is for a novel to realize all the values of a great play. All one can expect realistically, I think, is fidelity to the essential spirit of the original and independent vitality in the new medium. And the stage version of *Native Son* survives both tests with honors.

Orson Welles has treated the play with characteristic daring and flexibility. He has focused every scene on Bigger without destroying the other characters. He has been at great pains to give the effect of speed and concentrated action which the script required. James Morcom's sets are really distinguished for their variety and brilliant evocation of mood. Canada Lee is supported by a group of gifted and persuasively sincere players: Ray Collins as Paul Max; Evelyn Ellis as Bigger's mother; Nell Harrison as the blind Mrs. Dalton; Erskine Sanford as Mr. Dalton; and Rena Mitchell as Bigger's girl Clara.

It is reported in the press that MGM is contemplating a movie production of *Native Son*—with an all-white cast and the total elimination of the Negro theme! If this plan goes through, over three or four dead bodies, we shall witness a degrading contrast to the fighting play which Orson Welles has put on at the St. James Theater. It is to be hoped that the play will continue to win the cheers of a deeply stirred audience for many months to come. For its significance must be burned so deeply into the public mind that any subsequent Hollywood whitewash will be hooted out of existence.

SAMUEL SILLEN.

Rover Boys on Wings

Hollywood discovers a new flying technique

THIS reviewer has always considered herself fairly articulate, yet, face to face with *I Wanted Wings*, she feels the poverty of her vocabulary. All the words which describe it adequately are unprintable. Presented with enormous ballyhoo, it has an airplane and a recruiting station outside the front door for the purpose of signing up young men who are sufficiently impressed with the film's version of Air Corps life to make them want to enlist.

I Wanted Wings makes no bones about its intentions. It is a recruiting poster in style, sentiment, and static quality. If you imagine yourself compelled to stare at such a poster for two solid hours, you will have some idea of the entertainment value of this juicy offering. Indeed, the Air Corps has not got its money's worth, for, regarded solely as an inducement to enlist, the film is remarkably uninspiring, and its picture of the private life of student flyers is an insult to the service. Using the crudest of appeals, *I Wanted Wings* alternates uplifting pep talks with uplifted blondes.

A more flaccid script would be hard to imagine. Three Rover Boys are taken on a picnic through the Air Corps training school

Enjoy your Easter Vacation at

PLUM POINT

the year-round vacation resort

Picturesque estate on the Hudson.
 Only 53 miles from New York.

- Complete social & athletic staff
- Special week-end programs & personalities
- Indoor bowling alley on premises
- Saddle-horses on premises
- Musical recordings & library
- Free bicycling; billiards

Write P. O. Box 471, Newburgh, N. Y.
 Phone Newburgh 4270

SPRING VACATION ON A FARM

Relax in the quiet and simplicity of your own country home. Play amidst the beauty of Candlewood Lake and magnificent rolling country. Small congenial crowd. Home cooking you'll like. Only 65 miles from N. Y. City. Make your Easter reservations now. Call New Milford 756-J-3 or write STANLEY LAPINSKY, BARLOW FARM, SHERMAN, CONN. FREE BOOKLET.

ARCADIA OPEN ALL YEAR

FISHKILL, N. Y.

1100 acre estate. Modern oil heating plant, plus wood-burning fireplaces in spacious, comfortably furnished rooms. Indoor and outdoor sports including skiing and skating on premises, bicycling, symphonic recordings. Unexcelled cuisine.
 Make Easter Reservations Now Rates \$25 per week
 Phone: Beacon 727 — N. Y. Phone: WA 3-2347
 R. R. Station: Beacon, New York

MAMANASCO LAKE LODGE

RIDGEFIELD, CONN. PHONE: 820
 A luxurious estate converted into a vacation paradise. New, modern, convenient. Magnificent lake. All winter sports — Golf — Riding — Ping-Pong. Sumptuous cuisine. 50 miles from N. Y.
 OPEN ALL YEAR 'ROUND

CHESTERS' ZUNBARG
RELAX!
 Bring your country togs and have a fling at Spring in this delightful mountain hide-away. All outdoor sports in season. Indoors: Table Tennis, Dancing, Recordings, Library, Open-hearth Fires, Delicious Food, Cozy Quarters, Genial Company.
 \$27.50 per week (3 per room) LUXURY LODGE \$35 per wk.
 \$30.00 per week (2 per room) Extra days over 1 wk. pro rata
 WOODBOURNE, N. Y.

Sacks Farm

Saugerties, N. Y. Telephone 82 F. 5
 Intimate. Informal. Unusually beautiful countryside. Picturesque hiking trails without number. Acres of pine woods. Finest home cooking. Sports.
 Low rates. Open all year.
 MAKE EARLY RESERVATIONS

HIT THE TOP at

HOTEL ALLABEN

LAKEWOOD
 NEW JERSEY
 303—7th St.



Phone Lakewood 819

TOPS IN FOOD

TOPS IN FACILITIES—Every Room with Bath-Showers.

TOPS IN ACTIVITIES—Ice Skating, Badminton, Ping-Pong, Volley Ball, Horse-Shoe Pitching, Bicycles on Premises, etc.

But NO TOPS in Rates—We're Very Moderate

MAKE EASTER RESERVATIONS NOW!

Director: Jack Schwartz, formerly of Unity Hotel