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Jameson's poetic style to the best advantage—to state with extraordinary grace the regenerative function of memory. For what is it that happens in the end to Vacslav and the rest in that quiet village? Simply that they remember. Despite Hesse's treatments they begin to piece together from the fragments that remain in the present, from the untouched recollections of one old woman, Anna, the old determination and courage of men who have been free. There are new rumors of "Thomases" in the hills, men who are named for that great man (can it be Thomas Masaryk?) who had been their statesman in the day of freedom. Yet one *caveat*—it is too simple to conclude thus that the debt shall be paid. For Socrates merely owed a cock to Asclepiades. The triumph of the good people over their oppressors is much more than the work of memory. It is something not to be contained by a delicate fantasy such as this. It is war.

MARIAN ANDREWS.

## For Gentle Readers

THOROFARE, by Christopher Morley. Harcourt, Brace. \$2.75.

I DOUBT that a book with no conflict in it, and in which the characters are revealed rather than developed, can properly be called a novel. On the other hand, it is pleasant to encounter 468 pages of competent writing with no glaring absurdities of plot or character. As a matter of fact, *Thorofare* is a treatise on the minor social and language differences between England and America, as illustrated by the transplanting of a professorial English family to a small Chesapeake college in 1897. This theme is necessarily of the gentlest, and while I understand the whole purpose of the book is to promote mutual understanding between the two countries, I don't think it will make much of a contribution.

For one thing, while *Thorofare* abounds in the kind of small sociological detail that made *Kitty Foyle* a best-seller, Mr. Morley doesn't reveal anything to the American reader that the British writers, always close observers of their own *mores*, haven't said before. And as for Mr. Morley's English readers, they must make out with kindly old Major Warren (Civil War, Confederate) as the only fully presented American type. The most interesting aspect of the book turns out to be its devotion to language: assimilation into a country is seen, correctly enough but with tremendous over-emphasis, as related to the assimilation of new language patterns by the immigrant. It is unfortunate that the well known Morley whimsy breaks out most noticeably in this connection—he finds it necessary for his youthful hero to construct a country called Geoffland, or Jeffland, in America—but the conversation is the better part of the book, which might on the whole be classed as an unseasonable bit of light but literary summer reading.

ROBERT ELLIS.

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# ROBOTS, CAT PEOPLE, ET AL.

Some oddments on the stage and screen this week. About robots who are almost people, about people who are really cats. . . . And a play about the Cajuns of Louisiana.

**E**VEN twenty-two years ago, when it was first produced here, Karel Capek's play, *R.U.R.*, was not a good play or a clear one. It came out of a time when people (artists in particular) were beginning to wonder where the machine was leading us—as though the machine were a conscious force in the world instead of an instrument to be used by conscious men and women.

The "revolt against the machine" found many literary expressions—as, during the industrial revolution, it had found physical expression in sabotage. Men were put out of work by machines; hence they smashed them, not realizing that the machine itself wasn't their enemy. In Mr. Capek's play you find this rebellion carried to its logical conclusion—absurdity.

The Rossums, father and son, had invented a way of manufacturing men—a simplified form of man who had no "soul" and was designed only to do the work of the world. Humanitarians objected to this; demanded that the robots (which is Czech for workers) be made more like man, be treated better. A charming young woman induced the R.U.R. physiologist, Dr. Gall, to alleviate the unhappy lot of the robots. This he did. Result? Leaders grew up among the robots who organized them on a worldwide scale, and they rebelled, overthrowing, then killing every human being—except one. This one, not being a physiologist, could not work out the secret of their manufacture.

When the play first appeared it could have been interpreted in several different ways. This is still true. It was interpreted in 1922 as an attack on the man-destroying machine. It was interpreted as an attack on regimentation of human beings (as the present producers interpret it). And it was also interpreted as an attack on the Soviet Union—since the robots issued a manifesto starting, "Robots of the world, unite!"

The present production, by quoting President Roosevelt, is attempting to give an anti-fascist twist to the play: "It is the young, free men and women of the United Nations, and not the wound-up 'robots' of the slave states, who will mold the shape of the new world," said the President on September 3 of this year. This concept is carried further by having the robots wear an iron-cross emblem on their uniforms; by having the *fascies* worked into the motif of the stage set.

But the whole remains confusing, when it is not static. The entire first act is pure exposition—talk. And when the robots rebel in the

second and third acts, Lee Strasberg, the director, has failed miserably in evoking what theatrical excitement was inherent in the idea of rebellion. You get to laughing at these robots instead of being terrified by them. Capek himself, however confused, was a generally progressive playwright, who died as the result of fascism's invasion of his native Czechoslovakia.

In the several roles of *R.U.R.* the actors were unable to give much vitality to a wound-up play. Better than others were Gudrun Hansen (as a blonde, female robot); Sydney Smith as the chief "agitator" among the robots; and Edith Atwater, who did the best she could with the impossible role of the human humanitarian who caused all the mischief. Boris Aronson's modernistic sets could be used for a better play.

For in order to mean anything these days, *R.U.R.* would have to be completely rewritten, so that we would know what the robots are supposed to represent—the regimented slaves of fascism or the conscious, organized working class of the world, fighting its way toward a world in which the machine will be the servant, not the master of mankind.

**H**ERMAN SHUMLIN's first production of this season is a dramatization of E. P. O'Donnell's novel, *The Great Big Doorstep*. The play version was done by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, and the sets by the brilliant Howard Bay. Mr. Shumlin directed.

This information is, I am afraid, about as important as the play itself. We have come to expect, from Mr. Shumlin, plays that are far above the ordinary Broadway level; plays that carry some significance and the stamp of artistry; and generally, if Mr. Shumlin cannot find such a play, he does not produce for the mere sake of production, or for the box office alone.

*The Great Big Doorstep* is aimed straight at the box office; at a particular sort of box office, in the bargain. It is supposedly about the Cajuns of Louisiana, people of Acadian (Nova Scotian) ancestry, who live among the canebrakes and bayous. No doubt they offer excellent material for a play, be it serious drama or sympathetic comedy. *The Great Big Doorstep* has been rather generally taken as a sample of the latter. Actually it is a farce with slices of slapstick. To me at least the funniest thing in the whole play was the characters' speech. Only Dorothy Gish attained even the faintest semblance of Cajun dialect; the others, with one exception, spoke imitation southern,

while the only genuine Louisianan in the cast had sedulously rid herself of all traces of bayou inflection or even of southern accent. The sets were authentic but you can't establish an atmosphere with sets alone. Nor can you portray Cajuns by saying "Oui, oui" and "God-dog" every few lines, or pronouncing "*court-bouillon*" two different ways, both wrong.

The truth is the play is not really concerned with the *mores* or character of Cajuns. It moves around the highly dubious and certainly archaic notion that "shiftless" people are inherently funny. The Crochet family is a sort of higher class Tobacco Road group. Father digs ditches. Mother fusses and frets about her six children. Father does not dig very assiduously, even when there is digging to be done. He'd rather eat. And since he eats more than he works, he suffers from an upset stomach all the time (or so he says). But he has big dreams—he wants a good house. One of his boys has fished a great big doorstep out of the Mississippi River and the family schemes to get a house to go with it.

They finally get it, and it's true that you sympathize with their struggles and are happy for the unexpected circumstance which brings about their success. You may also learn to like them. The audience, however, laughs at them more than with them—at their "shiftlessness," their clothes, their comic-strip fights and misunderstandings, and in particular at the father, a burlesque sort of Micawber played by Louis Calhern, who does nothing to make the role less noisy and obvious than it was written. Dorothy Gish achieves some dignity as well as genuine charm and humor, while Joy Geffen, as Evvie, the younger daughter, does an excellent piece of acting. Since the play itself is not intended to be serious, one cannot get very serious about it. Just the same I want to register my objection to laughter evoked by poverty, frustration, and ignorance. Mr. Shumlin is—on his record—one of the few Broadway producers who is really concerned about the world's increment of poverty, frustration, and ignorance—and the oppression that causes them. That is why I wish he had not produced *The Great Big Doorstep*.

ALVAH BESSIE.

★  
**H**ORTON FOOTE is a young playwright who writes about his own Texas small-town background. *Only the Heart*, his fourth play to be produced by the American Actors Company (at the Provincetown Playhouse), concerns a middle class family which is nearly destroyed by Mamie Borden, a woman who