

Readers Forum

Children's Hour

TO NEW MASSES: Alvah Bessie opens up two questions in his article on "Morale for the Six-Year-Olds" that deeply concern everyone who works with youngsters. (And that is a very large part of our population.) His summary of advice to parents is helpful, and I would like to add one or two suggestions. Children in time of stress need an extra amount of affection and sympathy. We may find them apparently reverting to babyishness—losing some independence and leaning a little more on us. We must be flexible and meet this need for increased assurance with understanding. A hardening process will not prepare children. We cannot prepare them for even a separation from the family by evacuating them before it is necessary. It is better to give them security through their feeling of closeness to the adults they trust.

I would also like to amplify Mr. Bessie's statement that we *must* teach the children that this is a just war. There is an implication that this will be hard—though I am sure it was not meant so. It is not hard, for we are in the fortunate position in *this* war of having all the right on our side and issues so clear that any child will feel this. Now is a good time to teach children the real history of our country—its struggles for democracy. Now is a time to give them hero stories, and stories not only of military heroes and statesmen but also of those who fought for labor's right to organize, of women who won the measure of equality we enjoy, of those who struggled to build the public schools—and let them know too that the battle for democracy in our country is not over. They will feel a pride in their country and know what we are fighting for.

There are problems other than adult attitudes, however, that must be solved. Mr. Bessie points out that a multitude of agencies is working on the question of evacuation, care of children, etc. He also rightly says that there is so far no coordinating agency with power to insure action. Mr. McNutt, in a recent article, said that twenty-four federal agencies and many more private ones were planning for child care. This is fine, but time is a factor now and how can the plans get from paper to reality unless some agency has the authority to bring together all these groups? The situation is acute. In defense industries more and more women are becoming full time workers. They are young women with young children. In peacetime we have never provided adequately for the child under six, and now we are faced with a growing need not only for care for the pre-school child during working hours but for the school child after school. We need this care for all communities, not only the industrial centers—though of course they come first. We need it so that the civilian defense program may be really a democratic program, and not one in which only women who can afford a nursemaid may participate. If every defense council had an expert in nursery education and one in child health, we would have a beginning. There is money appropriated for child centers in defense areas, but who is to administer it? Boards of education which are usually made up of good businessmen but seldom include anyone with understanding of the nursery school problem? How can these centers be realized, how can we obtain in every community a place where young children

can be given proper care during working hours, where children's health can be checked, where parents can be given help in meeting their problems? This, I think, is a job for the federal government. Only under such administration can we be sure of uniform treatment for all—uniform standards. Why is not the care of children under six at least as legitimate a field for government concern and authority as that of education for those over six? Parents and educators are discussing this everywhere. I hope NEW MASSES will carry on the subject farther.

MARION HOYTE.

New York City.

TO NEW MASSES: Congratulations on Alvah Bessie's "Morale for Six-Year-Olds," a topic very dear to every parent. It is encouraging to learn that so many agencies are actively attempting to deal with the problem of children in wartime and I hope we can look forward to instructive literature on this subject before long.

The most important aspect of the problem to be stressed over and over again is Bessie's point that "the child takes his cue from the adult—in all things." And here the parent faces the difficult task of achieving that precise balance which presents the realities of the situation, and at the same time keeps from frightening the child with an over-emphasis on the dangers. Again Bessie stressed an important point: do not lie to the child; do not present a false front.

Here NEW MASSES might perform a further service to its readers. Why not run an article by an expert dealing specifically with (a) games and play situations which can convey the realities of the world as we face them in children's terms; and (b) a definite survey of steps taken and experiences of experts in Spain, Britain, and the USSR?

I feel that material from the USSR would be especially helpful because of twenty years' concentration on the welfare of children and the very long period of war preparations. One glimmering of what the USSR does was conveyed in a recent newspaper description of the Soviet children's Christmas in Kuibyshev. Posters depicting a combination of figures dear and well known to children, and showing the fascist attack, seemed a most

excellent method of bringing reality home to them. Moreover, the participation of children even younger than those indicated by Bessie, in the war effort, is a long established fact in the USSR. An article might analyze further the methods of involving children in civilian defense and of imbuing them with that spirited enthusiasm that is the core of children's effort in the USSR. The warning of the German General Staff to its soldiers to "beware of little boys" who are so expert at guerrilla tactics is a case in point.

JANET FEDER.

New York City.

Detroit Story

TO NEW MASSES: I thought Mr. Magil's article on war production was splendid (NEW MASSES, December 30). It gave a fine picture of the industrial scene in Detroit at the present time.

From a friend who works at a copper and brass plant in Detroit, I learned that the plant, which is large, well equipped, and well staffed, is unable to operate at full capacity because of a shortage of copper ore. The plant has been making strips of copper used on bullets. The shortage of copper ore is due to the unwillingness of copper mine owners of northern Michigan to mine large amounts of copper since the government has fixed the price of the ore. No shortage of copper was noticed before the price ceiling was established.

Large numbers of Briggs auto workers have been sent to a trade school in preparation for jobs in Briggs Aircraft. I have heard several speak of the difficulties they and their families experience in living on the fifty cents an hour which they receive during the ten weeks' training period.

Ford trade school workers receive fifty-five cents an hour. They are required to purchase more than twenty dollars' worth of mechanical drawing equipment. Only two seven-hour shifts are being trained at Ford's and many of the workers would be glad to put in ten or more hours to hasten the training period and add to their salaries. There is a shortage of instructors in the school but the instruction seems thorough. I have heard the opinion that if the airplane engine trade school were being organized with typical Ford efficiency, three shifts would be rolling in well geared precision.

SHIRLEY GOODMAN.

Detroit.

Synthetic Rubber

TO NEW MASSES: "Gripping" is the word to describe F. J. Wallace's article, "No Time to Retire" (NEW MASSES, January 13). It holds the interest of the reader from beginning to end. It is hard to believe how one item, rubber, can have such an effect on human behavior, until one follows the article to the end. Wallace builds his case up like the rolling snowball to what should be a grand climax. Here, however, he falls short. Here he disappoints me.

Wallace expects one to accept this state of affairs as inevitable. He barely mentions the possibility of manufacturing synthetic rubber. This should have been his cue. What of the obstruction of this plan for manufacturing rubber synthetically, a plan suggested a year or two ago by government experts? Did you hear over the air waves that now the government is going to override these obstructionists? Now they promise to manufacture rubber within eighteen months. Wallace should have rebuked those who have been standing in the way.

W. E. LEE.

Cleveland.



REVIEW AND COMMENT

CUE FOR DRAMA

A new book surveying the theory and technique of the modern theater. Welding the elements of production. Where the actor and playwright come in. Reviewed by John Howard Lawson.

PRODUCING THE PLAY, by John Gassner, with the NEW SCENE TECHNICIAN'S HANDBOOK, by Philip Barber. Dryden Press. \$3.25.

HERE we have, for the first time, a comprehensive survey of the theory and technique of production in the modern theater. Other books have touched on aspects of production. But there has been no adequate attempt to study technique as a whole, or to analyze the various steps in the dramatic process from the point of view of a unified result. This book is designed primarily to meet the practical needs of the non-professional stage. But the material has been prepared by leading experts in the professional field, and it offers a summary of the whole production experience in our theater today. The book begins with the general theory of drama, and a brief historical outline of styles of presentation. It then traces the process of *producing the play*, from the inception of the idea to the selection of the best type of nails for scene construction, and the imitation of bird and animal noises.

MR. GASSNER has handled this monumental job with skill and scholarship. His task goes far beyond that of editorial supervision. The material contributed by experts is only a part of the whole scheme. Mr. Gassner supplies the groundwork of theory, which gives added value to the diverse experience of the various contributors. Philip Barber supplies a separate, and altogether indispensable, part of the book: his *New Technician's Handbook* has been in use for some years. In its revised form, the *Handbook* provides a detailed and accurate guide to the construction of scenery and properties, costuming, lighting, methods of rigging and handling scenery.

In his introduction Mr. Gassner points out that most books on the theater tend to be one-sided: some writers deal only with esthetic theory, while others are concerned chiefly with practical techniques. This gap between theory and practice has been so wide that it has had a serious effect on the development of the modern theater. The director, or the scene designer, or the actor, often achieves a high degree of technical dexterity in his own field. To be sure, the director seeks unity as a technical key to the effectiveness of a production. The scene designer seeks a similar unity as a key to an effective design. The actor knows that his dexterity will be of no value unless the unity of the performance is maintained. But all too frequently this *desire* for unity results in a scrambled and disjointed effort in the four hectic weeks of rehearsal. One can

blame the trouble on the shortness of the rehearsal period. But one must also realize that a common effort (whether it covers four weeks or four years) depends on a common understanding to make the effort meaningful. Practical technique is sure to be inadequate without this *wholeness* of theory and purpose.

IT CANNOT be said that *Producing the Play* meets this need. It rather serves to emphasize the need, and to give us a fairly accurate barometer of the present level of thinking in the American theater. The quality of the individual contributions is extraordinarily high. There is a wealth of technical information which can be found in no other work on the theater. The best articles are those on various problems of direction (by Worthington Miner, Harold Clurman, Guthrie McClintic, Margaret Webster, and others) and the exposition of "Lighting the Play" by A. Feder. It is natural that the director's viewpoint should be especially valid and conclusive regarding production as a whole. What one misses is the sense of any collective purpose binding the director and the actor and the scene designer and the playwright, or any substantial philosophy which might guide and define this purpose. Worthington Miner's chapter on "Directing the Play: The Complete Procedure" is one of the most important in the book. It is clear, practical, and packed with the experience of a knowing craftsman. Yet Mr. Miner begins by suggesting that the director's function is extremely limited and "interpretative": "If playwrights turned out nothing but completely stageworthy plays, if all actors had the intelligence, the integrity and the skill to work together and interpret these plays perfectly, the director would have no function to perform." One doubts whether many playwrights or actors would agree with this curiously limited, and at the same time curiously all-inclusive, conception of the director's task. Mr. Miner has little respect for theory: "The theater is flooded with theories of action, theories of production, theories of everything under the sun."

We can all agree that theories-in-a-vacuum are worse than useless. The problem, which Mr. Miner recognizes obliquely, is the finding of workable principles and their concrete application to the job of production. Mr. Miner sets down fourteen rules of conduct to guide the relations between director and author. Most of these are concerned with overcoming the author's distrust and unwillingness to cooperate: "Let the director start off by saying all the nice things possible. . . . Don't tell an

author anything, if it is humanly possible to avoid it. The truer it is, the more he will resent it. . . . Make him tell what the play is about. He may resent it a little, but less than he will resent anything else." I do not present these quotations either as a defense of playwrights or an indictment of Mr. Miner. Unfortunately there is a good deal of practical wisdom in this advice to directors; playwrights bear a large share of responsibility for the confusion and cross-purposes and nonsensical egotism which plague the majority of our dramatic productions.

Perhaps the most serious defect in this book is the lack of adequate presentation of the experience and viewpoint of the playwright and the actor. It may be argued that everything in the book relates to the work of the dramatist as the creator of the play, and the essentials of dramatic construction and play analysis are ably covered by Mr. Gassner. But I cannot feel that this is sufficient. The development and revision of the play in production, the specific role of the writer in this collective process, are problems which should be fully dealt with—and of which the playwright alone can offer a convincing solution.

It seems to me that the omission of a specific contribution from the actor is even more significant. To be sure, there is a first-rate discussion of "Acting and the Training of the Actor," by Lee Strasberg, with supplementary articles on rhythmic movement, gymnastics, and voice, by Ernst T. Ferand, Gertrude Eckardt, Marian Rich, and Alice Hermes. This approach is excellent as far as it goes. But it fails to take sufficient account of the performer as a technician in his own right. Mr. Strasberg deals (all too briefly) with the history of acting, and with modern methods of training. But he stops short at the moment when the actor steps upon the stage: "I feel a certain helplessness or frustration in writing about it. It is like *describing* a picture, instead of painting it." Thus the problem of the actor is always treated at a tangent, as a subordinate element in work planned and managed by others. We see the actor being cast and rehearsed; we see him against the background of the set, moving rather vaguely amid the wonders of modern lighting. But we get little understanding of him as a living artist, as a creator whose skill and technique are the very sum and substance of effective production.

THE PROBLEM of the actor (and that of the writer and the designer and everyone else in the theater) cannot be considered separately. There must be a unified approach, a welding