

# Communist Election WIND-UP RALLY

MADISON SQUARE  
GARDEN

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 1st  
at 4 P.M.

HEAR:

EARL BROWDER

ISRAEL AMTER

Candidate for Governor

ELIZABETH GURLEY FLYNN

BENJAMIN J. DAVIS, Jr.

Candidates for Representative-at-Large

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caterwauling to the troops in the jungle, with improbably large areas of skin exposed to the jungle bugs. No more destructive undervaluation of women's place in the war effort can be imagined.

The prevailing attitude toward death is similarly cheapened on the screen. One of the most notable aspects of courage is a refusal to shudder at the thought of death. "Come on, you—; do you want to live forever?" In the fourteenth century, when the Black Death depopulated Europe, entertainment developed the Danse Macabre, which reduced horror to farce and made it bearable. Exactly the same thing is happening in the current enormous popularity of murder stories, murder plays, murder movies—but stories and plays which represent violent death as a trivial and amusing thing. The conspicuous Broadway success of our time is *Arsenic and Old Lace*, which piles up the laughs by heaping corpse upon corpse. Murder doesn't frighten you after you've taken a good look at Hitlerism.

Political thinkers and literary critics are often impatient with this macabre laughter, seeing in it a mere failure to face a serious situation rather than the invaluable psychological defense it often is. For it fills a need, it helps us keep our balance. Our present humorous enjoyment and callousness in the face of death may be repugnant to human decency; yet if we allowed the horrors and atrocities to tear us in bits with proportionate emotional agony we would be good for nothing except giving employment to a deserving straitjacket. The trouble is that many of Hollywood's horror-farces exaggerate this psychological defense until it becomes destructive itself.

SUCH a film as *To Be or Not to Be*, a perfect example of the defensive laugh, offended a great many people through bad taste and pettiness. More, the laugh often becomes hysterical, as in the dancing-madness of the slaphappy gyrations of our musical films. And, still more, the laugh often becomes a substitute for action. It is not true that you can laugh or satirize an enemy out of existence; those who try it usually discover that mockery is the slave's consolation for his servitude.

Thus when Hollywood takes its old horror-film mad scientist formula and turns it inside out, in *The Boogie Man Will Get You*, the product twitches with sick nerves. Basically, Hollywood is doing a healthier thing by making you giggle than it used to by making you shudder; but *The Boogie Man* is laboriously crazy, and your head aches in sympathy with its writers. Somewhere along the line it picked up a few good action gags which contrast oddly with its adenoidal plot. The light comic touch contributed by, of all people, Boris Karloff and Peter Lorre, and the heavy comic wallop of Maxie Rosenbloom, give it moments of delirious charm. Yet it tries too hard to pretend that everything's a barrel of fun; it is the work of frightened people, and something you shouldn't serve to normal adults.

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The same holds good for *The Glass Key*, which started with much better material—a Dashiell Hammett novel and Brian Donlevy. The failure here is twofold; in the first place, Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake would give any film the rich mellowness of an unripe persimmon; in the second place, this tough gangster stuff just doesn't impress us any more. It used to be effective when we were gentle people in a reasonably unbrutal world, where violence was abnormal. Now it is unconvincing, in *The Glass Key*, except for the vivid moments in which an elephantine thug makes a vast joke out of his own brutality.

Nobody could give a hoot about either of these films on their own merits. They are, however, dangerously significant as signposts. Granted that the macabre is with us, and that we had better laugh at it than cry, it would be still better to think and act. These escape-entertainment films are involuntarily side-tracking thought and action, substituting a half-mad recklessness, and, worse yet, a taste for sadism. In consequence, these films are not valuable as morale-builders; nor can they be called cheerer-uppers; nor are they even entertainment. If we must laugh at death, let's laugh with our eyes open.

Joy DAVIDMAN.

## Idea for a Play

*Alvah Bessie suggests a dramatic production of a recent novel.*

IT HAS occurred to a lot of people who have read Arnold Manoff's moving first novel, *Telegram From Heaven*, that it would make an excellent play. I'd like to second the motion, and urge Mr. Manoff either to take a crack at it himself, or to find a good playwright to do it for him.

The first thing that occurs to anyone considering the translation of material from novel to play form is dialogue and on that score alone Mr. Manoff could do a bang-up job, for there is nothing wrong with the dialogue in *Telegram*—it is swift, pungent, highly redolent of the atmosphere that surrounds his characters. But as we've seen on innumerable occasions, dialogue alone never makes a play—the most startling example of this fact being, perhaps, Hemingway's play, *The Fifth Column*. Everyone had expected—rather naively—that since Hemingway was the master of a peculiarly effective and oblique sort of dialogue, he would automatically make a good playwright.

But dialogue aside, *Telegram From Heaven* possesses other excellent possibilities for the stage. The scope of its action, in a geographical sense, is limited; which would make it possible to present the play in relatively few scenes; always an advantage in the theater from the production point of view. Many fine novels, of course, range so widely both geographically and in time, that attempts to force them into the mold of the theater result in episodic treatment that loses the develop-

mental qualities which have made them memorable in book form.

I feel that *Telegram From Heaven* could be confined within the walls of Sylvia Singer's home, a park, possibly the optometrist's office, the candy store. But that is the playwright's problem. What I'm chiefly interested in is seeing someone attempt this book as a play, solely for what it has to say about the problems of its little people—a people Odets has used to excellent effect in his better plays—whose possibilities for drama have by no means been exhausted.

For there are millions of little people in America, and the Singers (Sylvia and Mom) and the B. F.'s and the girl friends, too, present the pageant of America in their lives and aspirations. These people are full of the juice of life; they present, in certain respects, the least common denominator of human existence in this period of war and human upheaval: the struggle for survival, for security, for homes, husbands, wives, love, and peace. In Sylvia and her boy friend Paul, the stage would have a likeable human pair immediately recognizable to almost any Broadway audience.

The play form is obviously a much more rigid form than the novel, but nothing essential need be lost by such a transformation. Much of Sylvia's internal monologue might be lost, but even a good deal of that might be externalized by clever and valid dramaturgy. And such scenes as her conversations with the photograph of President Roosevelt, her struggle with the amorous optometrist, her arguments with Paul about the impossibility of immediate marriage, her scenes with her brother and her mother, would be as rich on the stage as they are in the book itself. For these scenes in particular go deep in their humor and pathos, and the pathos is genuinely the other face of the humor, as it is in any good work of art.

The humor of *Telegram From Heaven* is not gag humor; nor is the pathos tear-jerking. They are reverse expressions of the same deeper emotion—the yearning for security, the struggle against confusion and defeatism, which is so essential a battle today. The scene with the optometrist, for example, while hilariously funny on one plane, is essentially pathetic on another—if you recall the moment when Sylvia frustrates his advances by smashing several trays of his lenses, and he gropes about on the floor trying to salvage them and saying with utter bewilderment, "Look what you've done; just look what you've done!"

These are scenes, and while the optometrist scene is not central to the play, the relationship between Sylvia and Paul constitutes not only the chief conflict of the book (and play) but a problem in contemporary life that has deep and broad implications for America: the problem of the girl who seeks fulfillment in marriage; of the boy who seeks fulfillment in marriage at a time when his country needs his energies—and possibly his life—in the struggle against its deadly enemy, fascism.

ALVAH BESSIE.

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