



## REVIEW and COMMENT

# THEATER AND THE CASH REGISTER

By MATT WAYNE

THE FERVENT YEARS, by Harold Clurman. Knopf. \$3.50.

THERE GOES AN ACTOR, by Alexander Granach. Doubleday Doran. \$2.75.

A. WOOLLCOTT, by Samuel Hopkins Adams. Reynal & Hitchcock. \$3.50.

ALTHOUGH written completely independently, these three books, when read as a group, begin to take on the stature of a single historical document whose meaning for us should be solemnly considered, for together they tell a story of human waste so gigantic as nearly to overwhelm one with a sense of defeat.

*The Fervent Years* is the story of the founding and the foundering of the Group Theater as told by Harold Clurman, its director and mainstay. To anyone who watched the rise of the Group and found in its productions the most creative and exciting theater America has yet evolved, this secret history, as it were, of its struggles to exist as an organized and continuous theater is filled with answers to many questions previously left to gossip, malicious and otherwise.

The central question is why the Group failed even after it finally brought forth a real Broadway hit. Practically every other consideration, artistic and temperamental, hinges on this one. For if it could not, as a group, find stability through the financial and artistic success that *Golden Boy* was, it certainly could expect only total defeat thereafter. Unfortunately, Clurman has overwritten his explanation to the point where one is at a loss to put a finger on the cause of the failure. Some members of the Group, he explains, were lured to Hollywood, others found parts in independent productions and drifted away; and always there was the nightmare of conflicting theories of leadership, commercialism and social purpose.

What comes out of *The Fervent Years* most clearly is the picture of a little organism struggling to develop its individual art-soul from within, and trying to hold off the temptations and the attacks of the Broadway system of low taste and big money. It is reminiscent

of Robert Owen's attempt at raising a little socialist island in the sea of capitalism—the same heartbreaking failure, after the same temporary exhilarations of success.

One positive and lasting effect the Group did have, however. It showed America for a fleeting moment what organized theater can create. And its falling comet threw into high relief the

## Song of Rivatchka

Little Rivatchka, sob out of Russia,  
Was aching to drown New York  
In the vodka of her love,  
And through the midnight wild  
Called stone and steel and shadow  
To the warm roost of her breast.

Little nobody torn from the steppes,  
Vast soul of wild mare broken  
On a rack of alien tongues,  
Since she had not the speech  
To give her love to people,  
She'd give her love to the massed  
Shadow and steel and stone.

With a voice that was nearly all  
The clover of the tundras  
She called the buildings to her  
As of old she called her chicks  
In the farmyards of Kazan.

O long and long she called,  
Till crows of rust were cawing  
Round a moon of stainless steel—  
O long!  
Till the huddled beasts of brick  
Came almost to stampeding  
From their cruel paralysis,  
Then remembered they were stone  
And flapped their steel ears shut.

And Rivatchka's tired little fists,  
Tautened to fragrant hammers  
Of a temporary despair,  
Smashed all her love's tall glasses  
Against the morning air!

ROBERT WHITTINGTON.

poverty of commercial theater. But waste is its keynote, and its echo is sad.

The same note is struck in the late Alexander Granach's biographical cadenza, *There Goes an Actor*. With abounding joy he describes his picaresque life in the Europe before World War I, and his war years. But his too is the story of waste. For this son of poor Jewish peasants climbs and fights and elbows his way into the theater, has his knock-kneed legs broken and straightened in order to appear well on the stage, goes through a lifelong struggle for the right to express his talent, only to find—his book is the testimony—that the amount of time he actually spent creating and acting was practically nothing compared to the time wasted in simply trying to be where he could act.

First it is poverty and then war that cuts huge chunks out of his creative life. As in Clurman's book, we are confronted with great talent thirsting for expression, sacrificing everything for the right simply to give itself to the world and so thwarted and warped by the surrounding money economy as to make nearly impossible its mature fruition. Granach's book in its robust, backstage way is more important as a picture of the artist under capitalism than many a novel purposely written to make that point. It is salty and rude and revealing, not only of its author but his chaotic times. Almost symbolic is the description of Max Reinhardt's theater, the apogee in Europe of organized theater, which reached its flowering at the precise moment of the outbreak of World War I. Here is the evidence that the theater has not failed capitalist society, but that capitalism has throttled the theater. The reading of Granach's book might do a little for Clurman who, in perfect honesty, veers away from this obvious conclusion. There was just as much temperament in Reinhardt's actors as there was in Clurman's, but it took a World War to destroy the former, while the latter disappeared in the first wind of our pre-war fever. Clurman is most precise about the difficulties he had with actors who were at odds trying to work together, but he becomes mystical and overly cautious when ascribing any guilt for the Group's failure to the American economic system.

Clurman and Granach, whatever their shortcomings, share an honest, creative love for the theater as art, not as business. Compare them with their critic, one Alexander Woollcott, and a symbol of their enemy begins to take his weird and overfed shape. Woollcott, as painted by Samuel Hopkins Adams,

Anton Refregier. 1944



Drawing for a Post Office mural of the San Francisco Fire, by Anton Refregier.

combines all the yearnings and fears of a Granach and a Clurman, except that in him everything is upside down. Where they sacrificed to create he bled himself pink in order to make more and more money. The book is a competent though dully written explanation of how a man with a wisecrack can become one of the chief arbiters of theater in America's largest city.

It is almost impossible to equate what Granach and Clurman were striving for with what Woollcott thought of as good

theater. Here was a man whose job it was to tell America whether a theater piece was worthy or not, and who made the astonishing discovery in his later years that the secret of good acting was "to throw your lines away." As a book, *A. Woollcott* will entertain anyone with a curiosity for the inner workings of so celebrated a figure, and as such it is apt and wry. But if one considers Woollcott not in his cuteness but as the man thrown up by our society to express its reaction to art, both literary and theat-