

sights and sounds



FAITH—ACTIVE OR PASSIVE?

Anderson's new play about Joan of Arc leaves the question in a pit of mystical indecision.

By ISIDOR SCHNEIDER

MAXWELL ANDERSON'S *Joan of Lorraine* is a play within a play. The internal action is in the form of rehearsals of scenes of a play in process of production. The external action is given over to huddles of the director and the cast and arguments between him and the star. Action is rather a misleading word here, for the core of the play is discussion, with the disputed meanings of the rehearsed play as the subject.

By this device of a play within a play Anderson is enabled to carry on the discussion on two levels. The dilemmas of the production are related to the dilemmas in the play. The point of crisis, the clash between the director and the star over the interpretation of her role, is resolved in a rehearsal scene when the director, substituting for an absent actor, embodies an agreement with her, in the rewritten dialogue. And the counterpoint of argument *within* and *about* the play is interesting, in itself, and keeps the edge of the discussion sharp.

The points taken up in the discussion are two, and one of them is settled in the play. The resolved question is: May one compromise if it leads to the fulfilment of one's aim? The answer, as given in the play, is positive. To secure the liberation of her country, Joan brings herself to work with and even in the interests of ignoble men. A parallel is given in the circumstances of the production of the play, whose "angel" is a swindler.

The other question, however, is left unresolved. Putting it as simply as I can the question is: How do men come by the convictions on which they act? As Mr. Anderson puts it to us, we rationalize what we already believe, and

the conviction is the starting point, not the end. We act on faith.

But this takes the argument back to its own beginning. By what process does a man arrive at his faith? In such action as the rehearsed portions of the play develop, we see the people encountered by Joan draw faith from her faith. But this, too, pulls us back to the beginning. If the source of their faith is in Joan, where does her faith come from?

Does it come from her saintly "voices"? The implications in the play are that the voices are objectifications of Joan's inner conviction. Which derives from where? The question of faith is thus left in a pit of mystical indecision. If faith is self-generated and self-justified, as Anderson seems to conclude, then fascists and even lunatics are justified since they too have faith in their evil and in their delusions.

That preposterous conclusion has been answered in the World War in which fascism was fought to the death; and it is daily answered in the forcible confinement of lunatics. Mankind cannot afford to tolerate active evil and lunacy, no matter how firm the conviction that directs their action. Mr. Anderson's mystical conclusion seems to come from a lack of faith in social science.

But there are, already, large areas in life in which conviction is founded in evidence and logic. In chemistry, for example (giving full consideration to the special contribution and leadership of the exceptional experimenter, the genius), we accept laboratory results derived from evidence and logic, not from faith. And we are moving to a similar acceptance in other fields where

the operations of social and psychological science are, as yet, kept restricted and tentative.

In surrendering those areas to the mystically unknowable Mr. Anderson must leave faith sunk in passivity. In turn, choosing one of the most militant and active of the saints as his character, he must present her as an ordinary, obsessed, passive and enduring female martyr. But the combination of patriotic anxiety and submission to divine will shown in his Joan was a common enough commodity and, by itself, if that could have done it, should have liberated France a hundred times over before she appeared. But in the circumstances of France, during that crisis, faith had to be activated, as in fact it was, through the strong-willed and dynamic personality of the historical Joan.

Mr. Anderson's conception of Joan is far from that. It leaves her almost depersonalized. She is presented as a sort of holy neuter, a mere vehicle for the will of her sky-high saints. It is hard to believe in these remote saints, unrelated to anything tangible in Joan's personality, as objectifications of her inner convictions. For Mr. Anderson shows us nothing in his Joan out of which such convictions could grow and move on into actions. His Joan is merely a rather poorly-chosen instrument of divine will.

It is strange that Mr. Anderson should so conceive Joan after Shaw had helped to restore her to energetic humanity. One must assume, reluctantly, that Mr. Anderson preferred a conception of Joan in which the sources and nature of faith could be held in question, though that meant ignoring historical evidence.

Meager as are the historical references to Joan, they add up, nevertheless, to a forceful and effective personality. Her campaigning showed strategic insight and resourcefulness; and the discipline she brought into the French army showed an orderly and dominating mind. Mr. Anderson's—and Miss Bergman's—Joan could not have won victories and liberated her country without "divine" assistance. Their Joan's "voices" could not have been objectifications of inner convictions; but in the historical Joan they were and she exploited them as Napoleon exploited his "destiny" and Alexander the myth of his divine descent.

In the historical Joan we can see

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the personality through which passive faith could be activated, taking her to the head of armies. We see a hard-willed, masculine sort of woman who craved command, who took to man's dress and could not return to woman's even in the prison cell and even to save her life; and who seems to have had an obsessive revulsion against being reacted to as a woman by men. In turn there is a suggestion of horror, as at something unnatural, in the attitude of her own officers and soldiers toward her. It would serve partially to explain their failure to attempt her rescue after she was taken prisoner by the English.

Whether the leaderly and commanding traits in Joan's character reached abnormal points is immaterial. What is historically clear is that they existed in her nature; that the desperate need of her country brought them into action; and that in a situation where the male leaders of the nation had been dragged down to a cynical despair that made action impossible for them, her qualities received one of the rare opportunities for fulfilment that history has offered to a woman.

For these reasons, because Miss Bergman is beautiful to behold and so convincingly the "gentle maid," she is as miscast in her role as the role is misconceived in the writing—if we consider that Mr. Anderson sought to use history to answer his questions about faith. Even costumed in armor, Miss Bergman remains feminine and gracious, making it hard to see in her the general who could force new strategic conceptions on the French command, and could conduct campaigns and win battles.

But within Mr. Anderson's conception Miss Bergman plays her part with a direct and unaffected earnestness that was beautiful to watch. Sam Wanamaker, as the director, turned in another excellent performance; and the acting and staging were effective.

"THE FATAL WEAKNESS," George Kelly's comedy about marriage, is keenly written, exquisitely produced and brilliantly performed, particularly by Ina Claire, who displayed what seemed to be the most flavorful acting I have seen this year. The play contrasts the preposterous romanticism about marriage of an older generation with the equally preposterous worldliness that is a contemporary fashion. The contrast strikes off some telling

sparks of insight and wit, though it does not cut to any depth.

AS ONE means of disarming criticism, the producers of Noel Coward's *Present Laughter* call it a *light* comedy. Mr. Coward has done more than attempt to disarm his critics. He has written his revenge upon them, into his play, in the form of a repulsive character who lectures the vain but supposedly charming actor-hero of the play on the solemnities and responsibilities of his profession. It remains necessary for the critic to characterize this comedy as trivial as well as light. Written with a sort of tired craftiness, its ancient bawdy situations and over-familiar smart lines forced laughs from the audience like digs in the ribs. It is a pity to have Clifton Webb, Evelyn Varden and Doris Dalton waste their good performances in it.

THERE is enough irony in the expertly-turned lines of *Park Avenue* to give edge to its satire on the marriage customs of the rich. Nunally Johnson and George S. Kauffman, who wrote the book, and Ira Gershwin, who wrote the lyrics for Arthur Schwartz's score, have used their celebrated skill to contrive a hit. Leonora Corbett and Arthur Margetson and a good supporting company of singers and prettily costumed dancers give a trim and lively performance.

FILMS

THE antics of the average movie publicity department should not, at this late date, cause any surprise. Yet there are times when the doings of the tub-thumpers startle even a Times Square newsdealer, than whom there are none more blase or knowing. The publicity for *Open City* was so fashioned as to have people think the picture dealt with a wide-open city; Colonel Blimp was billboarded as a fatuous roue; the early posters of *The Informer* promised moviegoers a lurid tale of wine, women and song.

The most recent example of such unbridled advertising is furnished by the advance publicity for *Undercurrent* (Capitol). For weeks the blurbists imparted to this picture an air of well-guarded mystery. Even the critics, in a spirit of clean, though unhealthy, fun, promised publicly not to tell. Well, there is nothing to reveal except that *Undercurrent* has nothing to guard