

The Brig at the Living Theatre



The Brig, BY KENNETH H. BROWN, a new American playwright in his late twenties, has been brilliantly directed by Judith Malina and designed by Julian Beck for presentation at their Living Theater. The play exercises a memorable impact upon the spectator. The source of this impact is to be found in the surface sequence of events. To a considerable degree the play is these small events in continuum; the words that are spoken are nearly as meaningless, as uninterpretable of the action, as are the outcries of beasts in a zoo. *The Brig* is naturalism, asserted with a boldness and acute choice of subject-matter that one must deem a singular accomplishment within the tradition of naturalistic convention.

The events are enacted by a cast of eleven prisoners, four guards and two stretcher bearers whose performances are indefatigable and concise. A United States Marine Corps prison 'brig' in Japan is represented in painstaking detail. During a single day of March, 1957, the spectator observes the prisoners from the moment they are roused from their sacks, like the dead shrilly summoned from a mortuary of barbed-wire, until they drop once more

into their blankets, ill with exhaustion. The men must snap to attention. They dress and undress, are searched and dress once more. They sound off; "maggots," they are called, and their guards punch them in the guts. As they go about their inane tasks they must cross white lines painted here and there upon the floor. At each line they recite at the top of their lungs (it seems an infinite number of times): "Sir, prisoner number — requests permission to cross the white line, sir!" At all other times they are forbidden to utter a sound save when required to do so by a guard. They must trot when they move, and never can they sit unless commanded. In the course of their day the "maggots" scrub the floors, dogtrot until they drop, perform pushups, submit to smoke blown into the face. They make up their bunks and strip the bunks, shower and dress and undress, are knocked down to get up and accept it all over again.

What happens, in fact? The events here reported and scarcely anything more. What is meant, then? Within the wire and the bare walls, beneath white light of glaring bulbs, these prisoners are deprived of their humanity. If their mute exhaustion gives place occasionally to tears of humiliation and jaw muscles working to hold in words of protest, and if once a prisoner cries out and is removed in a straitjacket, yet the net situation is compounded of total obedience and the obliteration of personality. Difficult as it may be to conceive a theater devoid of personalities, here it is.

Nor is the phenomenon restricted to the prisoners. The guards as well lose their humanity and their dignity. It is they who strike the blows, who grant or refuse to grant permission to cross the idiotic white lines, who dispense or withhold cigarettes and come and go from the brig as they choose. But in truth they are as un-

free as their victims. To deny the humanity of others, they show, is to destroy one's own humanity.

NOR A MOMENT of the agony in the brig is compressed, telescoped or evaded. That is to say, no accord is reached with the theater world's characteristically over-generous consideration for the impatience and nerves of the public. Rather the audience is required to experience everything, raw and without the obliging stylistic graces of an interpretation that is, in nearly all plays, ready-made in the structuring of the materials or the remarks of the characters. And here is where I believe much of what the Living Theater has been getting at comes into focus. As in *The Connection* a society of sufferers, of victims is represented with naturalistic attention to the details of the situation and in particular those that are the most extremely vacuous, boring, vile and unendurable. The audience is shocked and possibly offended by the approach (as it is intended to be).

What shocks and what offends, however, is not so much the content, for instance the brutalized Americans who ironically are required to bellow the Marine Corps Hymn through their misery: "we will fight to keep our country free." Undeniably the content is cruel, but in our day we are adjusted to cruelties, we live with them and shrug our shoulders. This is the trouble. Although our world provides countless instances of a stifled humanity that ought to be set upon the stage, where we will see and be angered and act, yet the dread truth is that the mere representation of unhappiness and injustice is not enough. Seldom does it provoke a genuine indignation, and even more rarely does some rectification result. Thus the question must become one of *how* the spectator is made or permitted to look at the stage.

The Epic Theater follows one approach; believing that spectators are not afforded sufficient encouragement and opportunity for creative intellectualizing within the theatre, it em-

plays methods designed to increase the public's capacity to interpret, and then to act. The Becks in their Living Theater approach the problem in an almost opposite way; a way which must be regarded, however, as complementary to an Epic solution. The Becks wish to get under the skin of the spectator's equanimity. How, they ask, can the detestable indifference of our day be circumvented, so to rouse an awareness in the onlooker that is emotive and motivational, so he will be changed—and wish to change his world?

This seems to be the heart of the Becks' intention and the major basis of their choice of repertory. Or from the theatergoer's point of view: the spectator opens himself to the experience of a given play for perhaps two and a half hours, whereupon he leaves the theatre and goes into his accustomed world where as a modern man he is a newspaper reader, an article scanner, a radio listener and television watcher. From these sources and not from the theater he comes to think of and relate himself to the world. His life—our life—is a round of generalizations from generalizations based upon generalizations. The continual context of abstraction and interpretation drains the immediacy from our awareness of man; a reality of concrete human problems that might motivate us, remains beyond us at several removes. Nor do we know the truth of our own lives when the lives of fellow men are cloaked in the abstract skein of modern life. How is a humanistic theatre then to help this modern man? The response implied by the Living Theater is: we must avoid the kind of theater that seeks to interpret the world. For the theater that interprets the world is simply another contribution to the already immense pall of intellectualism. Rather we must give back to the spectator an intense and unmitigated experience of the world, raw and total, without intermediaries in style of writing and production which would only set a fresh barrier of interpretation between the onlooker and his world

In *The Connection* a character was still on hand (pretending to be a non-character, of course) to point at the on-stage event and adjure the audience, "this is how it really is!" In *The Brig* the authenticity, the bedrock reality of the event is to speak for itself. The essential kinship of the two plays is nevertheless clear. In the one, the public is obliged to wait in boredom for a significant portion of an hour while the motionless actors give their undivided attention to a jazz recording. . . and why? Because that is the kinesthetic, bedrock truth of the lives of the many narcotics victims of our society. No newspaper or essay could convey the sense of pointlessness, passivity and anguish that the Living Theater has forced its spectators to experience. Similarly in *The Brig*, an actor is required to run about the enclosed compound for an astonishing period of time. The spectator must watch the entire process from beginning to end, and share its cruelty *in extenso*. That is the way to a visceral and not merely intellectualized comprehension.

The audience is reduced to passivity in this kind of theater. It is afforded neither laughter nor tears, none of the usual 'releases' which reassure spectators of their detachment. They begin to hate their enforced lack of freedom which is the counterpart of

the situation on stage. Such a theater may in the experience be felt as unbearable. After the event it lives in one's memory and conscience.

This is a new variety of naturalism. On the one hand the manipulation of the spectator is more deliberate. As we grow more aware of the abstract nature of our awareness, and as the concreteness of our existence continues to diminish, the measures designed to achieve a communication must grow correspondingly more ingenious. We also find an increase of inability to act and misery reflected in this naturalism. The extreme example, in an earlier phase of the style, had been *The Selick Family* by Holz and Schlaf. In that play a Berlin worker, his wife and daughter, and a theological student lodger managed to articulate and shape their fates to but a tiny degree; and yet it is surpassed in this respect by *The Brig*. In Kenneth Brown's work the interpretive, shaping force of human will indeed dwindles to the vanishing point. *The Brig* Regulations together with an informal but institutionalized sadism are the only shaping energies to be found in Brown's play. The individuality consists of slight variations in the capacity to suffer or to inflict suffering. Personality? It is an anachronism, undesirable in the context of the system.

LEE BAXANDALL is an Editor of Studies on the left.



CORRESPONDENCE

Comments on Meier Article

To the Editor

AUGUST MEIER's "New Currents in the Civil Rights Movement" [Summer 1963] is his customary thorough and perceptive research job, a valuable contribution to the history of the movement. His evaluation of the various civil rights groups is acute and accurate, the best survey of this that I have seen. No one who has watched the NAACP in action could deny the cogency of his point that South of the smooth voice of Roy Wilkins, in the local NAACP groups, there exists a complex welter of militancy and conservatism. I strongly agree with his stress on the dynamism and effectiveness of SNCC and his statement that "it can probably be said that it has supplied the major drive for the civil rights movement in the South." Also with his contention that the rivalry between the various groups has been useful as a spur to them all.

I would differ with him on a few points. He suggests that the current mood of Negroes is one of disillusionment with Kennedy because of the expectation that he would act decisively. On the contrary, the current mood is, I believe, one of surprise that he has done as much as he has. This does not mean that they think he has done much—but that there never was really an expectation that Kennedy would act decisively. August Meier knows as well as anyone: Negroes are old hands at seeing through the white man's campaign speeches, and their lives have been spent cleaning up the litter left by broken promises. They expected nothing of Kennedy; they got very little; they are going to demand much more.

To me, the most interesting question raised by Professor Meier (I address him formally here; we have been good friends ever since we battled to-

gether for several years against segregation in the Southern Historical Association) is the possible carry-over in radical criticism from civil rights to other aspects of American society. Here I am somewhat more optimistic than he is. While I agree that, in the main, Negro drives are for the established American bourgeois values, there is a kernel of something more which *could* grow. I believe that at least some of the young Negroes involved in the current struggle are being forced to probe more deeply into the social structure, and don't like what they see. Professor Meier, by limiting the alternatives to Muslim nationalism and traditional Marxism, sees sodden middle-class Americanism as the most likely path. But there is a new kind of radicalism growing among young Negroes—and I have seen it in Atlanta, in Greenwood, in Albany and other places—which is independent of the old dogmas. True it is only a beaming, narrow current in the great tide of Negro fervor today, but it has possibilities.

More and more young people in SNCC see that our economic system is a failure for whites as well as for Negroes, that they are about to vote themselves into a political structure which is fundamentally undemocratic outside of the race question, that police brutality is part of the way of life of the whole nation—and indeed of *nations*, period. Furthermore, white college kids drawn into the civil rights movement now have a direct avenue of concern into other social questions.

I am not by any means here blowing the trumpet of inevitable triumph, just suggesting softly that in today's great singing, thinking movement for racial equality there is the human material for a profound change in the American way of life. Nothing may come of it. But to believe that something *can* is to better the odds.

HOWARD ZINN