

## Translations

*The Birthday of the Infanta. A pantomime with music and scenario by John Alden Carpenter, décor by Robert Edmond Jones. The Manhattan Opera House. February 2, 1922.*

AFTER I Pagliacci with its hot loves and fierce dramatic lyricism, its tawny and blue and crimson world, and its tawdry and mediocre setting, *The Birthday of the Infanta* brought a strangely different atmosphere. Against the passion, laughter, revenge and death of those strolling players it set up the thin and innocent life of a little princess of twelve and her court in the midst of the rich, hard magnificence of the circumstance about them. We see first the garden courtyard of the palace. On either hand the high walls rise, flat spaces with long heavy moldings, grey varied to darker and more ashen tones. To the left at the head of a flight of steps a door, very high, with an inspired touch of greyish white in the baroque metal awning across the curve of the top; and dark red curtains showing through the glass at the sides. Across the middle of the scene and between the two walls, a sort of raised terrace and balustrade connecting them, and to the back a high iron screen through which appear the Spanish mountains, a violet silhouette hardening to blue against the cold grey-rose of the sky. It is all grave and austere and cruel and lovely, elegant, rich and superb, this place where the child princess and her court will make their festival. And the music meanwhile in that opening moment is austere, a little thin, it is innocent, lonely, continuous; and now and then it hints at the grotesque and the poignant and the frail tragedy to come.

The Infanta enters through the great door; her court surrounds her. They bring in gifts; a chest with a gown, brocade banded with galloons of gold; a huge silver cage with strange birds; a painted casket with a doll in a green farthingale. There is a birthday cake with lighted candles, there are mock rope-walkers, jugglers, and a mock bull-fight, when the ladies have taken their places on the terrace to see. And then last they bring in the grotesque. He is Pedro the dwarf and hunchback. He looks strangely about him, crooks his head, and begins to dance about for the court. He is perplexed, a lonely, vague, ashen little figure amusing the fine company, and clinging to the balustrade as he reaches out his hand to the princess above him. The Infanta and her court withdraw. And as the scene ends Pedro eludes his guard, gets his crooked legs through the door just in time, shuts it in the guard's face, and escapes into the palace.

The curtain rises then on the palace vestibule, lofty, with a high door looking out on the same cold-rose sky as before, across a terrace promenade. The scene there in the palace is crimson and grey, dull rose, gold, black. Candlesticks with their huge candles stand ten feet high, and there are two mirrors higher still. The grotesque enters; he is awestruck by the splendor around him, and then he sees the mirrors. Then, as in Oscar Wilde's story, he sees himself for the first time in all his ugliness and deformity; and dances a frenzied dance until he falls dead. After a little the princess comes in, touches him and calls him to dance for her. But he does not waken and she sees that he is dead. She lays her red rose on his cheek. They draw her away as the merry-makers from without appear in the door.

All this innocent and grotesque, sombre, ornate gaiety

Mr. Carpenter expressed, so austere is his music at times, so macabre, so hauntingly elaborated, so wistful, and so finely withdrawn. This music of the Infanta has none of the fury of sex in it, for the lives that it reveals have an ironical innocence and formality; but in them and in their music as well there is the shadow of what will mature into passion. In spite of Mr. Van Grove's rather thin conducting, especially in the first part; in spite of the miming and dancing, which lacked mass rhythm and emphasis; and in spite of Mr. Serge Oukrainsky, whose Pedro had no pathos or dramatic magnetism, the imagination of the music constantly appeared; it sustained a modern quality throughout; it had the excitement of poetic sincerity, and it carried the whole piece toward something that was inescapably drama.

Mr. Robert Edmond Jones' contribution to *The Birthday of the Infanta* if not more significant than the *Macbeth* was more complete. It was the most distinguished thing that he has done so far, it seems to me. And it is, moreover, a fine case to take as an illustration of a point that is clear to very few people and that concerns the art of the theatre as an art strictly to itself. This:—to be repeated over and over again—the art of the theatre is not a mere combination of any particular things, setting, actors, recitation, literature, for example; it is a distinct and separate art. It may be composed of many things, but it is none of them. Nothing that goes to compose this art remains as it was before becoming a part of it. The art of the theatre has ultimately its essential character; and differs from painting, literature, architecture and all its contributory arts as they differ from one another in the essential character that sustains and perpetuates each one of them. But what that separate art of the theatre is, can be more easily illustrated than defined. As an illustration of it, then, in one single respect out of the many involved, take the setting for the Infanta.

Nowhere in Spain have I seen buildings like these. But I have seen in Spain that character of sterility, of color and mass. I have seen that barbaric and cruel barrenness of sheer walls emerge, though any amount of rococo and baroque or plateresque ornamentation had been superficially laid on to soften the aspect of it. And I have seen in Spain this cold elegance pushed to the romantic; as in the Escorial, where Philip's simplicity becomes at length a glowing and sinister affectation. The character of Mr. Jones' settings then perfectly expresses the Spanish instinct, to which the actuality of buildings has been translated by the artist. But that is not the important point just here. So far they have indeed become art, it is true, but not necessarily the art of the theatre. The important thing to be said here is that this is not architecture but a translation of architecture into theatre terms.

The same is true in a region even more difficult perhaps, and certainly more elusive, the costumes. These costumes in the Infanta were not particularly interesting as reproductions of Spanish fashions toward the end of the seventeenth century. I have seen much better copies than they were or tried to be. And they were not mere clothes such as we used to see in a careful Clyde Fitch production, or garments that were costly enough and exactly borrowed from history, as in Miss Doris Keane's *Czarina*. None of these things. These costumes for the Infanta were distinguished because they were Spanish seventeenth century costumes seen superbly in terms of the theatre. They would suffer heavily—as they ought to do—if taken out of their present employment. They are inseparable from

the whole, and in themselves they are moving and exciting.

There are three high spots dramatically in *The Birthday of the Infanta*. The third and last of them is at the death of the dwarf, the very end of the play; and here the scene subordinates itself; it only envelops the action in a towering, rich shadow, and leaves the moment to the music, whose language best suits its poignant necessity. But the drama of the two others is almost entirely created by the setting. One of these places is where against those iron bars and the hard mountains beyond them, the princess and her ladies in their citron color, their crimson, blurred saffron, rose and white, gold, silver and black, sit on the balustrade above the courtyard, and the little hunchback below in his pallor and drab and green reaches up his lean hands toward the dazzling splendor of them. And the other and still more dramatic incident—and more simply achieved—is that earlier moment when the little

princess enters that great door, and stands there under the height of it and at the top of the steps leading down, a figure like a doll in all that relentless magnificence and order, symbol of the tragic puppetry of all life in the midst of time and the world's vastness, her grave and delicate little body borne along in those billowy, great skirts as her heart is borne on the waves of the music.

And finally this achievement in the décor for *The Birthday of the Infanta* illustrates remarkably how in the art of the theatre precisely as in other arts, say music, painting, poetry, the reality must be restated in terms of the art concerned before there is any art at all. It must have the charm of presence and absence, as Pascal said of portraits. An element must be there which was not there before. It must be incredibly translated into something else; it must be the same and not the same, like the moon in water, by a certain nameless difference born anew.

STARK YOUNG.

## C O R R E S P O N D E N C E

### In Reply to our Editorial, War and Christian Ethics

**S**IR: While there is much to commend in your recent editorial War and Christian Ethics, it misrepresents the spirit and action of the Protestant Churches of America through their authorized denominational assemblies and through their common federal body, the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America.

I enclose herewith repeated actions taken by these bodies previous to 1914, and also actions, taken upon the entrance of the United States into the recent war, and since that time.

It is, I believe, untrue to say that the churches, at least during the past quarter or half century, have ever "gloried" in war.

The accompanying volume, *The Fight for Peace*, and the actions taken by the Federal Council last month, fairly represent the action and attitude of these bodies as a whole.

Indeed, so far as our Civil War and the recent war are concerned, the churches have, I believe, taken the position which your own editorial takes.

That there are all too many lapses from these ideals so far as individual members of churches are concerned, no one will deny. Your editorial, however, alleges to set forth the procedure of the churches as corporate bodies and the setting forth of their ideals, whereas every point urged in your editorial is now an article of faith in our churches, in which their members and the community are being constantly educated. That the human community is far behind these ideals, no one will deny.

It would be of value and interest to have your judgment as to the recent action of the Federal Council at Chicago as a basis for a great national movement for all good people.

I feel that a more discriminating and constructive editorial might now be helpful.

CHARLES S. MACFARLAND.

New York City.

**S**IR: I cannot understand the logic of your editorial on War and Christian Ethics. You commend the Churchman for the courage of an unequivocal condemnation of war; you point to the opinion of the Continent, which believes that a good cause may hallow any war, for proof that there is no hope of peace in the church because it lacks unanimity of conviction, and then you state your own position, which is essentially that of the Continent.

You think war may be the lesser of two evils and that upon that score our own entrance into the world war was morally justified. You find fault with the churches not for having hallowed it but for having gloried in it. Now it may be true that many pulpits permitted themselves such an excess of passion during the war as to justify your charge that the church

gloried in the conflict. But there were many of us who did not. We accepted it reluctantly for precisely the reason that you championed it. The question is, could we do it again with sincerity? The Wilsonian liberalism, the New Republic brand of idealism, and the principles of that not inconsiderable body of Christian opinion which did not take its guidance from official propaganda or popular hysteria, were alike of no avail when the fruits of the war were to be garnered. We failed. And most of us are beginning to feel that our failure was due to more fundamental causes than the personal weaknesses of our representatives (the singular would be better here) at Paris. Now we have nothing to salve our conscience but the highly conjectural opinion that, bad as the peace is, it is a little better than the Prussian variety offered us.

Is it not true that the forces of passion and unreason which any war unleashes are too powerful for any reasonable and conscientious interpretation of war aims? Every attempt to make war serve ideal causes is bound to be overpowered by the elemental and primitive passions which war unlooses. After witnessing the tragic consequences of the world war and the pathetic impotence of the liberals and idealists who tried to gather grapes from thistles what reasonable alternative has a conscientious Christian to a position of unequivocal opposition to all warfare? I find none in your too finely spun theories.

R. NIEBUHR.

Detroit, Michigan.

**S**IR: My husband and I are constant and most appreciative readers of your magazine, but I feel I must take exception to the general premises and deductions of your editorial, War and Christian Ethics, in the issue of January 11th. Granted that fallible human wisdom is in a position to judge as to which of two evils is the lesser, before either one has been given the opportunity to function, the question, it seems to me, is whether the Christian is justified in participating in any evil at all. For the ultimate salvation of mankind it is necessary that there be a class whose watchword is "No compromise with wrong-doing." A little leaven of unbending opposition to evil leaveneth the whole lump of wavering expediency-worshippers. As Thoreau puts it, "The trouble is not that many are not so good as you are, but that there is no absolute goodness anywhere." And to whom, with better logic, can we look for this "absolute goodness" than to the professed followers of Him whose teachings are summed up in a burning insistence upon the purity and integrity of thought, word, and action?

Those who excuse warfare because of the nobility of its purpose are prone to point to the American Civil War as the specific case which illustrates a wise choice of the lesser of two evils. To a thoughtful person, however, this argument is not so conclusive as it might be were he not in possession of knowledge concerning the attitude of so-called Christianity dur-