

After the Play

THE advantage of Ben-Ami's change in the type of his rôle is evident; last year the erotic, the sophisticated, the poetic; this year the half folk thing, swaggering, surly and violent. The difference not only makes it impossible to classify him as a one-type actor or to fix a so-called personality on him, but is at the same time a step toward that increase in our actors' range that we need so much. As for *The Idle Inn* it was already a tried and assured success at the Jewish Art Theatre in repertory if not as a continuous bill. But you must have seen it there or at least have read it in Dr. Goldberg's translation to understand Hirschbein's achievement or Ben-Ami's problem.

The Idle Inn is first and last a folk play. The forces that make it up are universal forces like love, superstition, the sense of property. It is built around incidents that may be real and are easily possible, passing merchants, fires, strange coincidences in things, but which at the same time lend themselves to fearful meanings among the folk whose lives they touch. A girl is to be married against her will to a neighbor's son; she loves her cousin, Itsik, whom her father hates because he thinks him a worthless rascal who has stolen his horses. An abandoned inn, said to be haunted by evil spirits, is to be torn down and rebuilt for the young couple. On the wedding day the dismantling of the inn begins, merchants with strange gifts appear at the festival, and then in the whirl of the dancing Itsik steals away the bride. That night her kinsmen find her with him in a deserted place near the ruins of the inn. But a spell is on them all; a strange power takes away their strength; they can do nothing. The girl will not stay with Itsik but she cannot leave him. And finally in the last act the father in a fit of fear and madness burns the inn and sets fire to his own house where the spirits have come to dwell; and Itsik takes the girl away with him.

This is the play that Ben-Ami builds his part from. The figure that last year was loved and applauded he abandons now for a very different thing. The face that in *Samson and Delilah* was made ironical and poetic and delicate, and in *Green Fields* was so ascetic and dreaming, the face of a young Talmudic Jew, sad, confused, fanatic, beautiful, is made now to look larger; the wavy hair comes down over the low brow; the body is coarser in mass; the feet belong more to the earth, they are lively as an animal's and as grave. When he comes to the wedding feast he is bitter, silent; his inner violence is thwarted of its outlet and comes out only in a wild, foolish rowdyism with the girls in the company. All through the play, in fact, this inner life of his is thwarted, dumb; the outer expression is half a mockery of it. In the last act he carries over him the ironic fatality of the animal in nature; he has tenderness and poignancy, bitter darkness and haunting, blind passion, and the bewildered soul of human life that is close to the earth but never wholly of it. In this rôle, different as is from last year's, Ben-Ami reveals the same insight as before, the same power of simplification and intensity, the same spiritual realism and accurate translation of the body into the dramatic idea.

And yet *The Idle Inn* at the Plymouth could not be called a success. Critics who had seen it before at the Jewish Art Theatre were plainly disappointed on the first night, the audience perplexed. And the reasons are fairly clear.

In the first place the translation of the play is stale and inflexible, and too often without any flavor whatever. In

the second place the play as produced at the Plymouth Theatre has not been allowed to be what it is first and last, a folk play. The entire fourth act is cut, moreover, and considerable cutting goes on throughout the three acts that remain. The innate quality of the play, which is the life of it, has not been trusted. The rich flavor is sponged down, the violence and racy abundance halved. The warmth of the family life of these Russian Jewish peasants is all lost in a kind of gray Plymouth Rock effect of fathers and uncles. The emotional rhythm of the scenes is slowed up and often sterilized. Even the setting of the third act which calls for a sight of the boards of the inn and for glimpses of the harvest fields beyond, all full of the necessary flavor of the moment, is changed to a meaningless blue night in a wood. And the mistrust of the play's quality shows even in a pruning of the translation, meagre as that is already, as when for one example "Sometimes it happens the cow refuses to leave the barn," good, racy, peasant idiom is flattened to "Perhaps she will refuse."

The gaiety and homely poetry and the swift underground forces that weave into *The Idle Inn* are not the grimmish, muted, simple affair that the production suggests. And the terror underlying the play is something as old as the race, a primeval thing, a kind of blurred religious mythology. It appears in the art of Knossos and other island races before history begins; it is in early poetry; and Mr. Robert Edmond Jones knew what it was when he designed that banquet scene in *Macbeth* last year. It is a terror out of the earth, out of vagueness and shadow, out of the double life stirring in man's soul and his body, out of our sense of sharing nature's laws without sharing her counsels. In it are the shiver and memory and the shudder of man's hidden origin and destiny. So much for Hirschbein's conception. The fear and dread at the Plymouth is only what one sees in a gypsy tale. It belongs to the boo-boo type of terror. But who is scared by someone's saying boo? Among the many unfortunate results of this cutting and booing and damping and taming down, the worst is that Ben-Ami with his vividness cannot subordinate himself in the scenes, or make the right ensemble with the surrounding flatness.

Here then are we with Ben-Ami, an actor who has a deep sincerity; who has a comic gift as well as tragic; an apt body and a fine mask; and a steadily improving English, which in the end, let us hope, will be as strange to Broadway by its correctness as it was last year by its foreignness. He has a profound desire for all the most varied and passionate and beautiful forms of dramatic writing; and a taste and long training for the needed repertory system. And last he has a complete and generous wish for excellence down to the very smallest parts on the stage not around him but with him. I should have to be curdled in cynicism not to believe that the presence of such a man there must mean a great deal to the poets and playwrights and actors who are trying to shape their lives around the art of the theatre. It could mean almost as much, though not with the same creative urgency, to all such people as would like to see Ibsen played sometimes, *Ghosts*, say or *Peer Gynt*—for which Ben-Ami would seem to be ideal—and to people who would like to see Chekhov, whose greatness we know but whose work we have never seen greatly acted. And meantime Ben-Ami, who might surpass the gamut of Chekhov in his art, plays the garbled *Idle Inn* at the Plymouth and enters his second season through that first act with its slow levels of opacity.

STARK YOUNG.

A Week in D. H. Lawrence

Sea and Sardinia, by D. H. Lawrence. New York: Thomas Seltzer. \$5.00.

BEAUTIFUL is the right word for *Sea and Sardinia*. It is a book shot through with beauty. Yet it is an inept and silly exhibition, in many ways, which makes it very hard to criticize.

"I like Italian newspapers," says Mr. Lawrence, "because they say what they mean, and not merely what is most convenient to say. We call it naïveté—I call it manliness. Italian newspapers read as if they were written by men, and not by calculating eunuchs."

There you have Mr. Lawrence's present note. Manliness, by God, manliness. Kick your wife in the stomach. No damn nonsense about tenderness and sympathy, sweetness and light. A certain amount about sunset and evening star, and a certain amount about cow droppings and the water-closet. A good deal about the maleness of the male, written with a touch of femaleness. And, yes, certainly, Sardinia. That's the subject of the book.

This, if you like, is naturalness, a willed naturalness, and it is amazingly interesting. Lawrence is not naturally natural. He is, one surmises, the kind of person who ties himself into black knots trying to decide the right and the wrong way of everything. He apparently suffers a great deal from the supposed unfriendliness and resistance of the world. He has still, in a remarkable state of preservation, the ordinary English middle-class horror of having his privacy invaded by a "bounder." "His mate was a bit of a bounder. . . . He had dark eyes that seemed to look too much. . . . We rather fought shy of him." So he speaks about a youth in a motor bus who shouted "awkward questions" in the centre of Sardinia. But, with this right English conventionality and itching self-consciousness you have, inside the sufferer, one of the most hungry and inflammable and rebellious of imaginations. No humor about this fact whatever, but twenty times a proof that the life of the imagination is surging inside and running out like a flame that wants to embrace and lick up the world. Hence, an exciting but not a mature personality.

Because he is everlastingly faithful to this personality of his, his Sardinia notebook gives one an excellent idea of Lawrence. We have him for a week, close-up, with a pointedly seen and swiftly changing background of Sardinia. Also we have a silhouette of his accompanying wife, a mere outlander who prices vegetables and shops for saddle-bags and wants to go to the marionette show and is rather annoyingly interested in the native. She is a German. After the English fashion, she is never really introduced to us, but Mr. Lawrence nods at her with a vague head. He calls her the q-b, queen bee. Had he come from Peoria he'd indicate her as the squaw. But in essence if not in the idiom of his facetiousness D. H. Lawrence does come from Peoria. He is the Middle Westerner athirst for beauty, aflame with imagination, and aching with ideas as with apples devoured green.

To specify those green ideas is hardly necessary, but you may observe Mr. Lawrence in the rôle of the satiated aesthete: "Life is life and things are things. I am sick of gaping things, even Peruginos. I have had my thrills from Carpaccio and Botticelli. But now I've had enough. But I can always look at an old, grey-bearded peasant

in his earthy white drawers and his black waist-frill, wearing no coat or over-garment, but just crooking along beside his little ox-wagon. I am sick of 'things,' even Peruginos." Back to the ox-wagon! Or the sound, basic sex war. Or the dear love of freedom. "How glad to be on a ship! What a golden hour for the heart of man! Ah, if one could sail forever, on a small quiet, lonely ship, from land to land and isle to isle, and saunter through the spaces of this lovely world, always through the spaces of this lovely world. Sweet it would be sometimes to come to the opaque earth," and so on. It reads like one of the happiest flights of Gilbert and Sullivan, or like the Gimbel man trying to imitate the nobly seraphic style of the Wanamaker man. But it is D. H. Lawrence when soulful: "the opaque earth, to block oneself against the stiff land, to annul the vibration of one's flight against the inertia of our *terra firma*! but life itself would be in the flight, the tremble of space. Ah the trembling of never-ended space, as one moves in flight! Space, and the frail vibration of space, the glad lonely wringing of the heart."

It is a mood, but the "ahs!" and the "ohs!" and the repetitions and the sighs and the sobs and the susurrus have the ineffable ululation of the sophomore. It is true mid-Victorian gush, giving us the "small, quiet, lonely ship" without a destination, without a cockroach. "Oh, God," exclaims Mr. Lawrence at Nuoro, "what a blessed relief, to be with people who don't bother to show off." But these purple patches, these flights to freedom and glad lonely wringings of the heart, are just as much showing-off as Victorian wax-flowers and castles in cork. They exaggerate human susceptibility. They are embarrassingly artistic.

Mr. Lawrence is not dishonest. He suffers honestly from exaggerated susceptibility. Being the kind of susceptible man to whom personal contacts present an enormous problem, and consequently the kind of man who is often thrown out of delicate adjustment into exasperation and annoyance and resentment, it is natural for him to seek recompense in the sights and scenes around him, and in erotic daydreams possibly, and in a voluptuous imagining as to history and as to the meaning of symbols and the shape and stamp and ring of lovely words themselves. So, when he leaves out or lifts us over his grinding account of his own temperament and exhibits the attunements of that temperament in wintry but colored Sardinia, we have a superb chance to enjoy Sardinia. For D. H. Lawrence is so susceptible, so saturable, that what one receives (outside his agacement and his human judgments) is as keen a sense of actual experience as any traveler ever gave. And this without any of the ordinary intellectual, historical, social aids and with less than the ordinary ascertainment of the views and feelings of the primitive people who live in Sardinia.

Because what D. H. Lawrence communicates is his own feeling. He gives us the stone-damp houses, the innkeeper with a wine-dripped shirt-front, the nerve-drained bus driver who is yet such a smooth master of his machine, the priest with a long nose who spits, the young wife restless from her bridal bed, the little cabin in the ship with a panelled slide-door and no room to move, the icy dawn that is like the kiss of a corpse, the kid roasted in front of a roaring oak-root fire, the impudent peddler packed with aqua vitae, the Italians sugary with sympathy and linked together in fondness, with feelings as nude as sausages. Whatever Lawrence experiences he experiences with full