

ical approach is needed, and what is the heart of the problem, is the balance in the curriculum. If newspapering is indeed a profession or is to become one, its preparation demands not training for dexterity but the learning on which wisdom can be built. It demands adult and civilized college courses; it demands the approach of a university that intends to educate future authors, not future bookbinders.

FOR ALL this criticism, let it be acknowledged that without the journalism schools, several essential functions would lapse. Journalism research and the pressure toward

higher press standards are a couple of them. But most important of all, the journalism schools do recruit, and hold to their course, a great many young men and women who become journalists. There are today too few of these candidates: entirely too many young people of quality turn away from the calling; the press is not enlisting in number and excellence the recruits to which its high role entitles it. It would obtain even fewer without the journalism schools. Somehow, they catch a good number of youngsters interested in press careers, maintain the enthusiasm of many of them, and graduate them into a noble endeavor. «»

## Strangers at Breakfast

GORE VIDAL

THE FIRST SCENE of Mr. Peter Shaffer's *Five Finger Exercise* is as depressing a bit of playwriting as one will ever encounter, even in the British theater where cozy domesticity and blandness enjoy much the same esteem as the queen, and for much the same reason. The family trots on stage at breakfast (plays and novels by inexperienced writers almost always start in the morning; I give that small insight to the graduate schools to do with as they will). And what a family Mr. Shaffer has sketched with his bold crayon! Father has made himself a small fortune manufacturing ugly furniture (I thought some of it was in use in their own house, but apparently the pieces on view during the evening are meant to be awfully good; I'm not sure whether this is Mr. Shaffer's irony or the set designer's irony at Mr. Shaffer's expense). The father has a genial contempt for culture and fine manners, a geniality that tends to turn ugly if pressed. Mum is a culture snob, trying to get above her station both intellectually and socially; she uses French phrases, misquotations, and generally behaves as though she might at any moment have to depend almost entirely upon the kindness of strangers. The son talks and talks and talks in the current British manner for the young. After two centuries of ret-

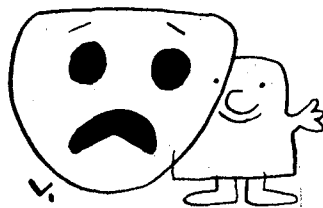
icence the British male has finally found his tongue, and I doubt if he will ever stop talking again. I suppose that when he was Out There building an empire and solemnly mismanaging the affairs of lesser breeds, it was a good idea for him to speak only in strangled monosyllables, on the very wise assumption that if he talked freely he might betray ignorance and lack of sympathy. But now that the Raj has flown and the banners have been furled (who among us will forget John Osborne's threnody in *Look Back in Anger* to the last trooping of the colors Out There?), the British male, restricted to a small island, has suddenly, with a roar of relief, discarded the phlegmatic image (as the advertisers say) of two centuries and turned into a chattering, rather happy fellow (oh, there are Things wrong, but once you talk about them it helps, doesn't it?). And in a few years' time I am sure he will even be able to burst into song without provocation, becoming the Neapolitan of the North Sea. Mean-

while, he is just very, very articulate.

Mr. Shaffer's boy is a more engaging sort than one usually meets in the current English theater. He is just starting at Cambridge. He has a little fantasy life with his mother in which she is the empress of Russia (Catherine, I think) and he is a Cossack admirer. For a moment in the first scene I experienced a sudden evil hope that that incest drama writers have been alluding to more and more openly might at long last explode upon the audience, with mother and son at the end going off together to find a new life without Dad. But Mr. Shaffer, happily, is up to other things, which I shall come to in a moment. To complete this family of stereotypes, there is the young girl who speaks with outrageous sophistication and wit and aplomb but is really nice and a virgin and a decent girl. Apparently the late Mr. F. Hugh Herbert did not break the mold when he departed this life; she belongs to us all now.

THE NARRATIVE is as simple as the characterizations. A German tutor is engaged for the young girl. He is a youth of great innocence, a Teutonic Billy Budd, cast among selfish domestic mariners. The mother, the son, the daughter each in turn is attracted to him. Each wants him for his own. He declines to give himself exclusively to any one of them, partly through policy, partly through plain inadequacy in dealing with such bald hungers. The mother tousles his hair on a sofa; the son sees her; the son gets drunk and tells the father, making the matter worse in the telling. The mother tries to go beyond maternal hair tousling only to find the tutor has indeed been drawn to her in a filial, not a sexual, way. The mother becomes an enemy. Charges and countercharges are made. The tutor is fired and the father threatens to have him deported to hated Germany. The tutor attempts suicide and fails, and the curtain falls with everyone a bit more alive than at the beginning.

Yet out of this unpromising material Mr. Shaffer has made a very good play, and it is interesting to speculate on how he managed it. What makes this flat little tale work is, I think, the implicit comment that is made on the family. The

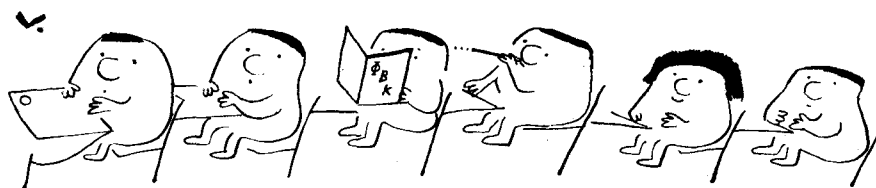


family is shown here as an impossible sterile fact of society; four strangers with nothing in common forced by ties of blood (and economy) to share the same house. We know that at the first opportunity each will detach from the other: the daughter into marriage, the son into homosexuality, the mother into her own dream world (hers is the tragedy, for she is truly useless and knows it), the father into his work and the dim companionship of his peers. Though Mr. Shaffer makes nothing of it, I could not help but feel that this was the first anti-family play since Strindberg. I mean "anti" in the sense that there is no alternative to the unhappy family except non-family.

Though Mr. Shaffer has not perhaps recognized his theme, it is a great one, and he is to be congratulated for having, if only by implication, dramatized it. For he suggests, and I think it a fact (which will of course be much disputed, as facts usually are), that the family in the West is finished. The family as we know it has evolved over the millennia, from the tribes of pre-history, and its origin was primarily economic. Yet once a woman can support herself in society and bring up her children by herself if she has to, and once there are sufficient jobs, scholarships, and economic opportunities for the young, then the patriarchal system is at an end; the odd group of strangers that make up every family no longer have any reason to live together, to suffer from one another's jagged edges.

But the human race is nothing if not reactionary in its tribal codes, and we do our best to create as much guilt and confusion as we can in those who transgress ancient law.

AT SOME POINT reality must intrude. In all highly organized urban civilizations, past and present, the family has disintegrated, and instead of crying that this is decadence, society might be wiser to reconsider the actual needs of human beings, to realize that there is a profound difference between the city dweller of Rome in A.D. 200 or New York City in 1960 and the ignorant tribesman in Judea or Thessaly whose economic needs and religious superstitions we still pretend to judge ourselves by.



## Questionnaire

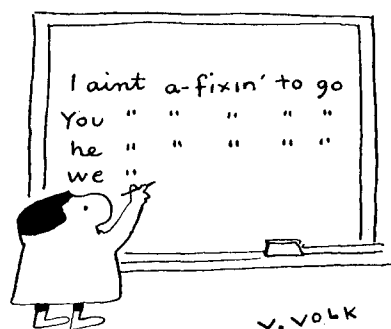
GEORGE STEINER

SCIENTISTS tell us that if the laws of probability and statistics work (and they must, for otherwise the entire structure of rational thought would collapse), there are numerous other solar systems capable of sustaining life in forms comparable or superior to our own. There are a million galaxies within reach of our telescopes. Statistical calculations suggest that within the relatively restricted part of the universe which we can observe there may be at least a hundred million planets on which life can exist.

The next step is to assume that the inhabitants of some of these planets have reached stages of evolu-

and particularly during the last year, that the way has at last been opened to what may well turn out to be the most spectacular and far-reaching development in man's history—communication with faraway worlds in outer space."

The attempt is to be made. Early in 1960, the new National Radio Astronomy Observatory at Green Bank, West Virginia, will point its reflector antenna at two stars, Tau Ceti and Epsilon Eridani. Both are, in certain respects, comparable to our sun and may have planetary systems on which conditions not entirely dissimilar to our own prevail. The scientists of Project Ozma believe that their equipment is good enough to select from other noises any regular or rationalized signal. Getting answers will be a tricky business and, because of the distance in light-years to even the nearest star, it may take a dozen years.



tion far beyond our own. Given a vast number of units, the laws of probability assure us that a good number must lie higher than ourselves along the curve of comparison. If these beings in outer space are further along than we, the chances are that some of them have been trying to span the great abyss of space by means of long-range signals. Until now, our ability to receive or interpret such signals was totally inadequate. But this is no longer so. William L. Laurence, the science pundit of the *New York Times*, assures us that "the sensitivity of receivers of faint radio signals from outer space has improved at such a rapid pace during the past few years,

WE SHALL BE in the position of a seventeenth-century mariner putting a letter in a bottle and throwing it overboard in some uncharted sea. But such letters are known to have reached their destination. What shall we write in ours? One of the wizards of Ozma tells us. If contact can be established, he proposes to ask our correspondents in outer space the following questions:

¶ Do they know a way to prevent cancer and heart disease?

¶ Are they able to prolong life?

¶ Are they able to harness the energy of the fusion process in the hydrogen bomb for industrial purposes?

¶ Have they managed to build a society in which there is peace and where each individual enjoys a full physical and spiritual life?

It is a fascinating list—fascinating because it reflects so much of that