



Just Looking

MARYA MANNES

YOU CAN'T SEE the big lizard roped beneath the porch awaiting his killing, but so potent is the playwright's spell that you shudder as he strains against his bonds. The ropes that trap the people in *The Night of the Iguana* are equally manifest, but this time Tennessee Williams grants his human beings stature and his audience the privilege not only of pity but, in one case at least, of admiration.

The place is a small, ramshackle inn on the west coast of Mexico, steaming in the still green wetness of the rain forest. The people are Mrs. Faulk, the proprietress-widow; Shannon, a defrocked priest now running bus tours along the coast; Hannah Jelkes, a beautiful, intelligent spinster from Nantucket; her aged grandfather, Nonno ("the oldest living and practicing poet"); and others who have nothing to do with the story but plenty to do with the atmosphere. These include four repulsive German tourists who sing as they walk; two Mexican houseboys who serve the widow rather than her customers; a virulent lady Baptist from the bus tour; and a shrill teen-age girl, ravished in a careless moment by Shannon, who regrets it more than she does.

These are the bonds: Hannah's to her dying grandfather and to the fastidiousness, courage, and self-knowledge that condemn her to chastity and loneliness, Widow Faulk's to the insatiable demands of her flesh and the contempt of men, Shannon's to the physical and spiritual torments that make him her prey, Nonno's to the illusion that his poetry is good. The attempts of Shannon and Hannah to free themselves, or rather to free each other from their respective bonds, is the core of the play. It is clear from the start that they will fail, but so tender and luminous is Williams's writing that their hopeless travail is not only engrossing but moving. Against these two, or these three (for Nonno has his own majesty), Williams plays the

fierce vulgarity of the Widow Faulk (Bette Davis), who is something to see and hear in tight blue jeans, a red wig, and a shirt opened to the waist; with a walk like a whore's and a laugh like a truck driver's.

The Night of the Iguana has its theatrical irrelevancies, and its moments of suspended belief. Margaret Leighton plays Hannah with great distinction and feeling, but it's sometimes hard to believe that she could ever be an old maid or come from Nantucket. Patrick O'Neal as Shannon enjoys his torments perhaps



too much, although this is part of his trouble. But they manage to make you ache, and they show you that Tennessee Williams can do this without violence or the violation of man's image.

Brecht on Brecht is another strong theater experience. Although it concerns only the written thoughts of one man, so wide is their range, so imaginatively have they been selected and ordered by George Tabori, so excellently are they translated into sound by six actors, that the evening becomes a full meal. There is nothing on the stage but the stools on which the actors sometimes sit, two sound men controlling the recorded excerpts from Brecht himself on a platform above, and a pianist below the stage on the right who provides the accompaniment for the songs Lotte Lenya so brilliantly sings.

Alternately the actors read or act out Brecht's philosophies, his humors, his conceits, his ballads, or scenes from his plays: *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, *The Life of Galileo*, *The Jewish Wife*. Advice

to actors, on critics, Hollywood elegies, burning of the books—Bertolt Brecht, German exile, free soul, roams many regions with a sharp eye, compassion and contempt, and the simplicity of primal innocence.

His spirit should hover happily over the Theatre de Lys and the people whom Cheryl Crawford has picked to honor his talent: Lotte Lenya, George Voskovec, Anne Jackson, Dane Clark, Viveca Lindfors, Michael Wager, and director Gene Frankel. This is the theater of love, and love of truth.

Iguana has one set and *Brecht on Brecht* has no set; facts which, by contrast, confirm my belief that contemporary theater suffers more from overproduction than anything else. I have also come to believe that this overproduction is often the result of turning books into plays, a process that favors the scene designer at the expense of the writer. We have had several instances this season of what I would call "moving theater" because great technical and artistic ingenuity have gone into providing the illusion of twenty different locations instead of staying within one, thus presumably freeing the drama from four walls and the constraints of time and space.

A prime example was *First Love*. As everyone knows, this was Samuel Taylor's adaptation of Romain Gary's extraordinary autobiography, published in France as *La Promesse de l'Aube* and for some time now a best-seller here. Taylor was faced with a terrific task of selection, for Gary's book is not a simple tale of a mother's passionate and unconquerable dreams for her son but a penetration on many levels into the nature of love, hallucination, history, politics, heroism, and duty. And Taylor not only did his skillful and sensitive best to distill these essences but added a device of his own to sharpen them: the physical confrontation of the grown Romain Gary with his childhood and adolescent self. Yet with all this and the dedicated acting of the two miscast principals, Lili Darvas and Hugh O'Brian, and with the highly complex scenic manipulations of Donald Oenslager, the book steadily withered. Smothered by production and an unnecessarily large cast, in spite

of moving and effective moments *First Love* remained a poster of the book, outlining its contents but never encompassing its style—Gary's style. Here is a case where movies would be far better equipped than theater to convey it.

Take Her, She's Mine and *Something About a Soldier* are other instances of "moving theater," the former considerably more successful than the latter because it conveys what it means to convey—the tribulations of being parents to college-age daughters—directly and often amusingly. But both are so preoccupied by the physical pace of changing scene that the characters are never given time to grow. The blackout is fine for revues but it is a pernicious crutch for writers who cannot sustain their story on the merits of plot and dialogue. What we are left with, then, is a three-dimensional comic strip, with funny lines and funny situations, or scattered dramatic moments that never form a whole.

Something About a Soldier means to say something very important about the hopeless incongruity of rational man in that huge irrationality of a war machine, the army, but here again we have a talented writer, Ernest Kinoy, adapting a novel by Mark Harris which clearly demands the fluidity of the screen rather than the heavy encumbrances of cast and scene change that Dore Schary loads it with. Again, too, we have people who never really have time to make sense.

The only "moving theater" so far that succeeds as theater is *Ross*, and that is because Terence Rattigan is a superb craftsman and because the production (since 1960 a London hit) is so imaginatively conceived that it never intrudes. I saw this study of the enigmatic T. E. Lawrence with Alec Guinness in the title role, remarking in these pages that it was the first time I felt this superb actor was guilty of "hamming." John Mills, who plays it here, doesn't ham, and I think the play has gained accordingly.

SPEAKING about "moving theater," NBC Radio, starting January 17, is broadcasting an extraordinary series of dramatizations of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in Amer-*

ica. George E. Probst, an associate professor of American history at New York University, has been their guiding spirit, having performed the prodigious task of selection and direction as well as scriptwriting along with Lister Sinclair. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation has provided the actors from their repertory group, and an original score was composed and conducted by Lucio Agostini, one of Canada's major contemporary composers. The result is not only a delight to the mind and the ear, it is not only a course of fourteen lessons in "The Happy Republic" of America in the 1830's, it is a re-education in the essence of this democratic heritage: it gives an American pride.

These are some of the program titles: "Where Could I Be Better Off? A Study in Jacksonian America"; "The Ark of Civilization: A Study in American Character"; "Any Woman Is a Lady: A Study in American Manners"; "The Tyranny of the Majority: A Study in American Freedom." Through them all we hear the querying voices, the delight, bewilderment, and astonishment of the two young traveling Frenchmen, de Tocqueville and de Beaumont, the American voices, from governors to street hawkers, that answered them, the sounds of our streets and towns and markets in those bursting and boisterous days, and above all the marvelous intelligence of de Tocqueville himself, who came to see us more clearly, perhaps, than we have ever seen ourselves since.

"One is carried back," wrote Professor George Wilson Pierson of Yale, the undisputed authority on de Tocqueville in this country, "to the concerns of our great-grandfathers, and forward into the still-unexplored mysteries of self-government. . . . The whole series testifies to unusual learning and imagination in reconstructing Tocqueville's voyage to democracy."

It testifies also to that union of scholarship with showmanship which is the only way mass communications can educate successfully.

It is hard to pin the culprits for the misdemeanor of *Romulus*. The writers first, of course; but who could imagine such theatrically potent talents as Friedrich Duerrenmatt and Gore Vidal turning out this feeble mish-mash of satire and farce which manages to engage neither the mind nor the emotion? The actors? Cyril Ritchard as the last Roman emperor is Cyril Ritchard, convincing himself that his lines are wise and funny; and the rest of the cast tries to do the same with even less success. Certainly Oliver Smith bears a heavy burden for the debacle: this brilliant designer who has so delighted us in so many shows encumbers *Romulus* with a set so hideous in its garish confusion that few scripts could survive it. And what of Roger L. Stevens? Can a producer never smell disaster at the first rehearsal? Ah well; mark it down as one more victory of matter over mind. Not much matter, at that.

Brünnhilde Rides Again

ROLAND GELATT

ONE CANNOT SAY that if there were no *Ring* cycle it would have been necessary to invent one. Richard Wagner's series of music dramas is an imposition by a man of genius, not the ineluctable flowering of a creative epoch. The undertaking is indeed an act of the utmost arrogance. It demands of the spectator some seventeen hours in the theater on four successive evenings; it requires a special breed of leather-lunged singers fit to perform little

else; it strains the scenic resources of the most lavishly equipped opera house and exacts unusual endurance and ability from the orchestra. Moreover, it forces us to master at least the bare outlines of an absurdly convoluted plot that is both tedious in exposition (the characters of the *Ring*, as Shaw observed, have a positive mania for autobiography) and murky in significance. And yet we put up with it because of the music, that gorgeous outpour-