

husband had once been her mother's hairdresser. Lydia, the author gently hints, had been her father's friend. Lydia's immensely successful cosmetic business, together with her equally successful liaisons with Nazi officers, enabled her to keep the David family supplied with food for many months and to arrange, on a snowy January night in 1943, just before the beginning of the end

of the ghetto, for Janie to be smuggled out from behind the wall. It is to the ambiguous Lydia that Janina David owes her life. But the hero and heroine of *A Square of Sky* are her unhappy father and mother, whose only common bond lay in the sacrifices for their child. More about them than about herself, this book, written in faithful memory, is their cenotaph.

believable characters (my italics this time); he also falls in love with Shirley Essex, a typist sent by an old enemy to destroy him. For although she is only eighteen and was raised in a loathsome suburb, Shirley is also a "princess of a lost race, awaiting discovery among cyclopean ruins in the jungle, some troll king's daughter, some nereid floating towards a drowned sailor . . .," or, in short, "one of those rare young women who suggest to the eyes of sensitive men an *anima* figure, a soul image."

Unobtainable? Not at all. Unbeknownst to Sir Michael, Shirley returns his passion. However, for reasons not explained, she chooses to disappear, and goes off to work for an attractive Eastern Potentate. Horrors. But wait. Act III: Lady Drake returns from Paris and to her husband, for reasons not explained, and he is subsequently appointed head of the Department of Organic Molecular Chemistry, where he finds happiness. Sir Michael also comes out splendidly. He is appointed head of a new arts foundation—a sensible one this time; no more supporting tours of religious plays in verse through the mining towns of Yorkshire and Durham. And what's more he marries Shirley, who proves to be "not just another babbling, moaning, scratching, biting . . . prisoner of feminine sexuality" (and this time, by God, off I go to the doctor) but, though "responsive, ardent, eager to learn [and] refusing nothing," yet someone "who could not be taken finally." For "whenever they met nakedly as man and woman, she would remain this magically desirable and tantalizing being."

WHEN I was a boy, I used to read stuff of this caliber in a weekly woman's magazine called *Red Letter*, which both I and our maids devoured with ecstasy and believed with passion; and I dare say it helped to wreck their lives. But *Red Letter* cost twopence. And it was not further contaminated with Purpose. For Mr. Priestley also has a few serious thoughts he wants to communicate:

¶ Life is not all a fairy tale, as he reveals through two case histories of women who briefly stret and frut



Signifying Nothing

SAREL EIMERL

SIR MICHAEL AND SIR GEORGE, by J. B. Priestley. *Atlantic-Little, Brown*. \$4.95. Imagine yourself to be a reviewer who receives through the mails an English novel subtitled *A Comedy of the New Elizabethans*. Opening it, you find on the first page that an American, Franklin Bacon, on a grant from the Lincoln Applebaum Foundation, is trying to ascertain the difference between Sir George Drake's Department of Information and Cultural Services ("We call it DISCUS, Mr. Bacon. Saves time") and Sir Michael Stratherrick's National Commission for Scholarship and the Arts ("COMSA it's known as, Mr. Bacon"). The reviewer knows immediately that he is headed for a stern dose of overweight satire, and that his best policy is to close the book forthwith. But then, there is the challenge. . . .

Well, anyway, I can't say I enjoyed reading Mr. Priestley's latest or that anyone else should try it, but it did provoke a few reflections about the writing of comedy and the ghastly catastrophe that awaits him who fails to remember the classic rules. But first, the book.

It reduces to three acts. Act I: Sir George is a stuffy but well-meaning

civil servant. He has no taste for the arts but loves his wife. His deadly rival, Sir Michael, is a non-stuffy non-civil servant, with a real taste for the arts, who spends his afternoons seducing women, including, alas, Lady Drake. She, like all the women in this book, and in modern fiction for that matter, is a passionate and noisy lovmaker. I often wonder, to digress for a moment, where modern novelists get their ideas about women always moaning, gasping, and screaming in bed. From other novelists, I suppose. Or maybe they slap the moans in to make the rest of us feel we ought to go to the doctor for a shot of something.

But, to return. Act II: Sir George and his fellow bureaucrats are petrified by the rumor that there's going to be a *Question in the House* (Mr. Priestley's italics). To make his situation utterly intolerable, Sir George, at a party, hears his wife making "those muffled ecstatic noises," provoked by a drunken artist with whom she then goes off to Paris. Meanwhile, back at COMSA, Sir Michael is also in dire straits. He is not only dragged off by the head of his drama section to see an *avant-garde play without a plot or any*



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their three paragraphs on the page, in which they describe their unhappy love lives and then are heard no more. God alone knows where they came from and why, or where they went.

¶ Civil-service departments are run by bureaucrats who lack both the imagination and the nerve needed to advance the arts.

¶ Dramatic and literary critics tend to be pretentious and in thrall to prevailing fashion.

¶ The prevailing fashions stink—cf. the comment on avant-garde plays above.

AND NOW for the reflections on comedy. It can be, as it has been defined, a story that ends in marriage and, as such, it can even be successful if the characters are totally unreal and their behavior ludicrous—as in the work of P. G. Wodehouse. But this kind of comedy is incompatible with serious social comment because the basic tone of absurdity inevitably makes any such comment sound itself absurd. If any author wants to combine the ludicrous with the satirical, he must observe at least a few rules. His characters must possess some individuality, and not just be reprints of hoary old caricatures—pretentious drama experts, for example. They should not be pitiful, like the poor old civil servant who can't make his wife moan any more. Pity and comedy don't mix. They must be portrayed as genuinely believing in whatever it is the author wants to satirize. Mr. Priestley's characters don't believe in anything. And if, incidentally, one of the author's targets is conventionality of thought, he should try to pick illustrations which have not been as thoroughly done in as the theatre of the absurd; otherwise, reviewers are liable to make disagreeable observations about people in glass houses. And if an author has the gall to announce, in a subtitle, that his book is a comedy, he really should take some trouble to make it funny.

It is a pity to write with such severity about Mr. Priestley, who has given us some pleasant entertainments in the past. But if he is going to produce work that is banal and sloppy, he must expect to get his lumps.

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