

Of Human Badinage

GERALD WEALES

IN AN INTERVIEW in *Theatre Arts* in 1962, Tennessee Williams told Lewis Funke and John E. Booth how much he admired Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* and added, "I think my literary or pseudo-literary style of writing for the theatre is on the way out." If his guess is correct, *Slapstick Tragedy*, the Williams double bill recently at the Longacre, may be seen as a lively graveside rite for a dying art. Although the plays have been directed by Alan Schneider, who is best known for his work with Beckett, Albee, and Pinter, they have little relation to the Theatre of the Absurd, as Williams admitted when an earlier version of the two plays was published in *Esquire* last August. The plays may be a little bizarre, but there is nothing unusual about the conjunction of Tennessee Williams and *bizarrierie*, and they are plainly Williams in theme and in some of their devices.

"I think the strange, the crazed, the queer/Will have their holiday this year," the carolers sing at the beginning of *The Mutilated*, the first of the two plays. With these words we find ourselves on familiar Williams ground, for both *The Mutilated* and its companion piece, *The Gnädiges Fräulein*, reflect Williams's lifelong preoccupation with the "fugitive kind." From the crippled Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* to the dying Mrs. Goforth in *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, he has drawn a gallery of characters whose strangeness—physical defect, psychological disturbance, artistic sensitivity—sets them off from the ordinary world of placidity and cruelty. For the most part, they are depicted as victims, destroyed by society or devoured by time and their own fears. They find what comfort they can in the momentary company of a physical presence and display their courage by sticking to a struggle that cannot be won. "Give up, did you say?" says Celeste in *The Mutilated*. "An easy piece of advice to give but not to follow." Celeste and her friend Trinket and the titular heroine of *The Gnädiges Fräulein*

are members of what, in *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*, Williams called "my little company of the faded and frightened and difficult and odd and lonely."

TO RECOGNIZE that Williams is writing his play again is not to say that *Slapstick Tragedy* is the artistic equivalent of *A Streetcar Named Desire* or even *The Night of the Iguana*. At best, the two plays provide a fragile evening at the theatre. At worst, which is while



The Mutilated is going on, it can be a trying one. In that play, two old friends, or friendly enemies, spend Christmas Eve trying and failing to find peace on earth for themselves. One of them is Trinket, secretly mutilated; the other is Celeste, a shoplifting, streetwalking wino, who knows and threatens to divulge Trinket's secret. In presenting that secret, Williams (or Schneider) makes a nod in the direction of Pinter and his use of undefined terror. Trinket's mutilation, in the printed play, is stated clearly: she has had a breast removed because of cancer. On stage, the mutilation is not identified although all the indications of it are there—Trinket's nervous hand over her heart, Celeste's flaunting of her ample bosom, Celeste's chant about Sarah Bernhardt's having had just one leg. Since Williams has always used

specific physical conditions metaphorically, as with Brick's broken leg in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Trinket's uncertain mutilation seems not a nameless Pinterish terror but a simple lack of clarity.

At last, on Christmas Day, the two come back together and, in a haze of Tokay and sugar wafers, have a vision of Our Lady which, as Trinket says, takes away the pain. With the ironic religious experience, the omnipresent carolers chanting their miracle message *a cappella* (music by Lee Hoiby), and some standard Williams comic lines, the whole thing should probably be played much less seriously than it is. Since the familiar Williams message is repeated in every scene, verbally and dramatically, and since Margaret Leighton goes for pathetic effects, which she could probably get if she read aloud from *Consumer Reports*, the result is both monotonous and maudlin.

THE SECOND PLAY, *The Gnädiges Fräulein*, is another kettle of fish. It is a grotesque comedy in which the heroine, down on her luck, is forced to compete with the cocaloony birds for the fishing-boat rejects that provide her room and board. A decayed artist, recalling Alexandra in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, she is no match for organized parasites like the cocaloonyes; the play is the account of how she fights the good fight for survival even though it sends her back to the docks, blind and bleeding, crying, as the cocaloonyes do, *awk, awk, awk*. Although her action is the spine of the play, its flesh is the running commentary provided by Polly and Molly, the Greek chorus reduced to a comedy team. Williams has used this device before, as in *Orpheus Descending*, where the two comic sisters comment on the disastrous affair of Val and Lady, but now the comic dialogue has stepped to the front of the stage and the suffering figure is reduced to an almost mute scarecrow, shivering on the periphery of the main set. Williams described Flora and Bessie in *The Rose Tattoo* as "two female clowns"; here, he or Schneider has gone a step farther and made real clowns of Polly and Molly, dressing them in ludicrous clothes and making them up with white faces dotted with red on the nose and

cheeks. The last moment of the play, the final rush of the heroine while Molly, Polly, and Indian Joe sit down to dinner in the background, should be horrifying: it fails in this production because Schneider has so much busyness among the diners that the audience cannot concentrate on Miss Leighton's awking exit. For the rest, however, Williams wants laughs, and Schneider and his cast go all out to get them. Zoe Caldwell, as Polly, gives a maniacally mannered performance, far the best thing in the show; one would have to go to Geraldine Page, a former Williams heroine, in *The Great Indoors* to find anything comparable this season. Kate Reid plays Molly as a cross between Marjorie Main and Emmett Kelly, as coarse as a cob when she is not momentarily befuddled by events; her mugging works much better here than it does in *The Mutilated*. Margaret Leighton is at a disadvantage as the Gnädiges Fräulein, but particularly when she is singing she manages a loony dignity that the role and the play need. With all this going for him, plus an Indian priapic figure with shoulder-length blond hair and an honest-to-God cocaloony bird (costumes by Noel Taylor), Williams has a play that is funny enough for us to forgive him and Schneider for punching in so hard for their laughs.

WHEN the plays were published, Williams suggested that they should be performed on a single program. It is easy to see why. The first is a sad and occasionally brutal play that ends on a note of ironic exaltation; the second is wild slapstick that finishes on a note of horror. As a double bill, the world ends not with Our Lady but an *awk*. "... in production," Williams wrote, "they may seem to be a pair of fantastic allegories on the tragicomic subject of human existence on this risky planet."

That they seem a great deal less than this may be the fault of the production or an indication that Williams has fallen short of his intention. If we push aside the freight of significance and take them as simple diversions, a word that Williams has also used to describe them, it is possible to turn away from *The Mutilated* and still take knockabout pleasure in *The Gnädiges Fräulein*.



Mediterranean Götterdämmerung

ROLAND GELATT

WHAT has happened to the post-war Berlioz revival? For a while, the composer's fortunes seemed to prosper. Celebrations in 1953 commemorating the sesquicentennial of his birth and the copious writings of Jacques Barzun focused attention on the man and his music, while the performances of Sir Thomas Beecham and Charles Munch served to exhibit that music at its persuasive best. Today Beecham is dead, Munch is heard only rarely, and Barzun has apparently uttered his last word on the subject. Deprived of their help, the Berlioz boom is running out of steam. Perhaps things will look up again in 1969, when another anniversary—the centennial of the composer's death—gets under way. Meanwhile, the addicted Berliozian must make do with what aid and comfort he can derive from the phonograph.

Even here there are difficulties. Glaring gaps remain unfilled in the Berlioz discography. Still inadequately represented on records is the most ambitious and, some claim, most compelling of his works: the opera *Les Troyens*, an epic music drama in two parts ("The Fall of Troy" and "The Trojans at Carthage") based on Books II and IV of the *Aeneid*. Some years ago the

second part of *Les Troyens* appeared on records, but in a poor performance, directed by a conductor insensitive to the Berlioz idiom and sung by a mediocre cast. Now we have a set of highlights from both parts (Angel 3670; two discs, mono or stereo), intelligently conducted and superbly sung, but offering merely a few morsels from the feast.

In a way, the neglect of *Les Troyens* on records should cause no surprise, since it parallels the work's shocking neglect in the opera house. Berlioz was obliged to wait five years for a first production (in 1863, at the Théâtre Lyrique, Paris) and then had to accept a second-rate cast and—what was worse—excessive mutilations of the score. Despite everything, the opera achieved at the time of its unveiling both a critical and a popular success. It ran for twenty-two performances at above-normal prices, and earned fifty thousand francs for the composer when the purchasing power of the franc was at least equivalent to a 1966 dollar. Indeed, the proceeds were sufficient to free Berlioz from the drudgery of newspaper criticism for the remaining six years of his life. Thereafter, however, the fortunes of the opera ran downhill. The world went Wagner-mad, and *Les Troyens*