

the three monitors that give substance to what would otherwise be pointless satire. They move back and forth between complete absorption and total inattention in a way that reduces everything from gushing ads to bloodcurdling news reports to a tasteless puree. In the end the two playing areas become one, with real and TV people in a single scene together, the real characters having become situation-comedy stereotypes and the entire company turned into a mechanical laugh track. In van Itallie's world, all is false.

Of the other two plays, *Interview*, which in an earlier form was called *Pavane*, is the less interesting. It is a dance of disconnection in which the actors pass from brief scenes as half-realized characters to mass scenes in which separation, guilt, and the crying need for help are presented visually and chorally and where the conventional helpers (the priest, the psychiatrist, the politician, the employment agent) are necessarily failures.

The final play, *Motel*, is a destructive fable in which a mechanical recitation of the comforts of the motel (and of the affluent society) goes on and on while two gigantic doll figures act out a sex-and-violence ritual in which they smash the furniture, rip up the bedclothes, cover the walls with obscenities, and mutilate the motelkeeper. Presumably the destroyers and the destroyed are of a piece and the final effect is to be horrifying. In fact, there is a kind of grotesque grace about the dolls—rather like the gorilla's in *Cabaret*—and it is possible, particularly when the girl doll curtsies so cunningly after adding dribbles from the giant penis she has chalked on the wall, to find oneself feeling benign toward a very sick exhibit. Ironically, the complacency, the indifference, the tolerance that is under attack in *America Hurrah* has conspired to embrace the attack and turn the show into a hit. "Life is a cabaret, old chum."



Mixed Bag from Britain

DEREK MORGAN

WHAT WITH Pinter's *The Homecoming* dwarfing the rest of "legitimate" Broadway, what with the Robert Bolt-Paul Schofield *A Man for All Seasons* sending movie critics rushing to their thesauri, what with TV being set on its ear by the Laurence Olivier-Michael Redgrave-Rosemary Harris-Joan Plowright-Max Adrian-Sybil Thorndike-Fay Compton-Lewis Casson *Uncle Kanya* (good God, they'd probably use Burbage and Garrick as spear carriers if they were around today!)—what with all this evidence of a dazzling renaissance in the English theatre, there is some tendency to take a sneaking pleasure in the fact that even the English have to come down to our level from time to time—and sometimes sink below it.

Take Peter Shaffer's *Black Comedy*, which has just arrived from London at the Ethel Barrymore. "In one of the most celebrated scenes in the repertoire of the Chinese Classical Theatre," reads a program note, "two swordsmen fight a duel in a completely darkened room. The scene is performed with the stage fully lit." Mr. Shaffer has taken this dramatic idea and used it for a one-act drawing-room farce.

Fair enough. Even when one is prepared for it, the concept on stage is spectacular. The play opens in pitch darkness. Two people are talking. A phonograph plays a loud Sousa march. The conversation repeatedly teases us by referring to things we need to be able to see to appreciate: "You look wonderful in yellow . . ." and so forth. They are preparing for the arrival of the girl's father, who is to meet the young man—his prospective son-in-law—for the first time. Then, just as we are getting a little restive at not knowing precisely what they're doing or what they look like or what they—plonk! a fuse blows. Off go the lights and the phonograph groans into silence, leaving them in frozen attitudes in the dark. Except that for us the situation is reversed: now the stage is suddenly flooded with light. What we see is a delight-

fully conceived set of the young man's flat: bedroom upstairs, artist's studio downstairs (it's the girl who is dressed in yellow).

In the course of the next hour the old Chinese idea gets a pretty thorough going-over, and it just about survives. To the trio so far identified (played by Lynn Redgrave, Michael Crawford, and Peter Bull) add the young man's Other Girl Friend (Geraldine Page), his fellow-artist friend from next door (Donald Madden), an electrician who gets mistaken for an art expert come to inspect the lad's work (Pierre Epstein)—and you can see that we have the makings of a fairly lively little farce, with everyone gropingly mistaking this for that and this one for that one. A profusion of sight (?) gags is implicit in the idea of the play, and Michael Crawford takes some pratfalls that would make Mack Sennett wince.

Throw in a homosexual relationship (tee-hee) and have gentlemen making accidental and unfortunate bodily contacts in the dark, and, hey presto, you have a ho-ho-ho! The audience, in fact, seemed to relish the treatment of homosexuals as music-hall clichés more than anything else in the play. (I wasn't sure whether we were with them or against them, but golly, were they ever funny!) Such unpriestly gambits as referring to a gentleman as "she" brought howls of merry laughter. If you find that as funny as everyone else seemed to, then *Black Comedy* is for you.

THE SNAG is that it's only the second half of a double bill. And here we come to more serious matters. In the London production, *Black Comedy* followed Strindberg's *Miss Julie*—an ingenious juxtaposition that must have set the audience up beautifully for slapstick. Unfortunately, in the Broadway version the first part of the bill is another one-act Shaffer play called *White Lies*, and I will freely admit that by the time we had got through that, I came to *Black Comedy* in an extremely churlish mood. Mr. Shaffer might



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possibly have made this into a shambling and corny short story, but it has as much right in the theatre as a telephone book worked over by Colley Cibber. The acting is ladies' social club, Grade B, and the static verbosity of the thing is almost beyond belief. It eventually maundered off into a hypnotically stupid monologue of "Dear Abby" drivel.

When plays and playwrights have to compete for a small handful of stages on Broadway, it is shocking that badly acted non-theatre like this should be foisted upon us. The only person who emerges from it with any credit at all is the stage designer, Alan Tagg, who provided fine sets for both plays on this bill.

WELL, enough of that. Cheer up: Michael Flanders and Donald Swann are back, dropping another hat at the Booth Theatre. They present the warmest and wittiest couple of hours of fun the theatre has to offer. The evening spins away in delight as they are simultaneously perceptive and bewildered, obstreperous and cuddlesome, funny and poetic.

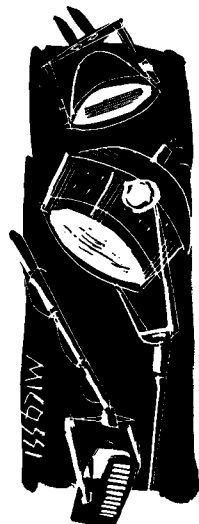
Yes, poetic. When Flanders recites a list of wonderfully named British railway stations that have been closed down in the interests of economy and progress and such-all, he brings the theatre to a rapt hush in memory of a world we shall not see again. It is a tour de force comparable with Stephen Vincent Benét's poem "American Names."

But no mood is allowed to last long when Flanders and Swann are in command. They reduce the dreary regiment of writers who use dirty words in search of immortality to the naughty children they are, with a cheerful burble about bellies and bums (English for backsides) and po's and pee. Flanders, whose monologues glow with a sunny mixture of wit and idiocy, gives a memorable impression of a skeptical, man-in-the-street ancient Briton coming upon Stonehenge for the first time and having its horological function explained to him ("It's a *what* . . . ?). Swann contributes what he assures us is a perfectly genuine Russian song that turns out, in translation, to be the daftest thing you've heard for many a day.

And so it goes. They are irreverent

about de Gaulle, blithely unsympathetic to Mr. Wilson, wry about Mr. Johnson, gently despairing about the Empire, the New World, the Old World, the arts, the sciences. . . . Flanders is thrown badly off balance by the fact that the audience is not able to recite with him in unison the Second Law of Thermodynamics and turns to Swann with a puzzle-moment not untouched with acerbity: "I thought this was where the brain drain was supposed to come out!"

Flanders and Swann have none of the pretentiousness of contemporary so-called satire. The truth is that this is not an age for satire—we are much too regimented in our various good-guy roles for that, too holy and bland in our belief that "freedom" is the converse of all evil, to perceive that our pervasive liberations have imposed on us, for the moment at



least, more taboos than ever hamstrung the most staid Victorian. It is refreshing, therefore, to find sparkling, educated minds uncluttered with pious purpose or any intent to "make us see" things that we have already seen, or to "shock" us out of our clichés—and into someone else's.

But the shock-and-reform bug is so contagious that even these two come perilously close to catching it at one moment when they sing a deadly serious song completely out of context with the easy whimsy of the evening, pointing out the stark fact that the world's stockpile of arms contains an equivalent of twenty tons of TNT for every man, woman, and child breathing on the face of the earth. It is an insane situation,

and the audience gives a grimly sincere ovation at the end. Yet how sincere is it really? Minutes later we are chuckling away as happily as ever. Surely if the message had impressed us as deeply as the applause would indicate, we would be wondering desperately what to do about it instead of listening to any more lighthearted frivolity from Flanders and Swann. They are undoubtedly sincere, but it seems to me that their song has the effect of exposing our insincerity. Although it is not intended that way, whatever point is made here is against us.

BUT where were we? Part of the beguilement of Flanders and Swann is in the interplay of their characters. Swann, weedy, bespectacled, absent-minded, is forever letting out little whoops of private delight at the world he perceives vaguely to be surrounding him, a world to which Flanders is his trusted but alas only partly trustworthy guide. Flanders, bearded, heavy-set, and confined to a wheelchair which he makes into such an asset that you wonder how he'd do without it, is apparently more in touch with things, and from time to time he makes impatient asides to us about his scholarly friend. But mixed with the impatience there's a touch of envy, and we feel that he'd probably prefer to be away out there with Swann (wherever that is) than be stuck with having to explain him to us or us to him.

Perhaps it's tougher being an actor ("working," as they put it in their jargon) than you and I are supposed to think, and for all I know these two fools sweat blood before each performance. But it doesn't seem like that. The flavor of this entrancing evening is perhaps best conveyed by a song about a sloth, idly swaying upside down from a tree in the teeming forests (and rhyming, as they make abysmally unclear, with both "both" and "moth"):

"While eager beavers overhead
Rush through the undergrowth,
I watch the clouds beneath my feet—
How sweet to be a sloth!"

How sweet indeed! Thank you, Mr. Flanders. Thank you, Mr. Swann.

By the Docks, Nassau

Harbor women lounge in chattering rows,
weaving straw in the shade. Children wade
and cry round them like gulls. When a man throws
a glance, they laze, unafraid,
in the backwash of it. They ride
easy on that tide.

Freighters, nose to tail, are warped in
to sag amidships, let the hungry cranes
rummage below. Yawning, they keep up a tin
chatter with old rains,
or lie rusting through noon, lazily
flaking their paint into the sea.



Street

The bundle on her head is yellow,
and sways.
Sun blaze
narrows her
to
a
black
stem.
Her shadow
undulates
over sprigged
English porcelain
under a shop
window's
cool
glaze.

Tides

In the wake of the breakers, between
tide and tide, luminous waters crack
beached rock, splinter even the floating green
boughs of trees, smash them back
on shore, battered and dripping. Yet the thin
scallop, china urchins riding a bland
froth, may be fingered so gently in;
coral branches flower upon this sand
whole. With a sound I have heard before
the tides rise blind, walk in their sleep
to choose what to shatter upon the shore
and what to keep.

—NANCY PRICE