

and behind everything the sopranos in an irregular dotted figure, chic-dedah-dic. If this has been going on since frogs came on the scene, why did it take our composers so long to discover polyphony? As the boat moves, the sound patterns change constantly, as though you were passing through the corridor of a conservatory or the rehearsal-rooms of a particularly crowded schola cantorum.

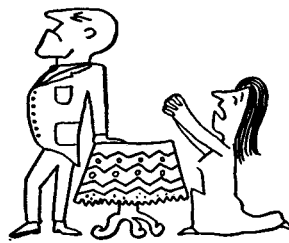
Sooner or later, on any azimuth through the marshes, you are bound to run across one of the three main arms of the river. The Danube twists through the delta as a muddy green boa constrictor (I doubt if anyone has ever seen it blue, even at Vienna); one moment you are punting along painfully in the shallows, scraping a sandbank every few feet; then suddenly the boat is almost torn from under you as the current seizes it, and you may be a mile downstream before the oars can be got into action.

The force of this river accounts for the tremendous rate at which the delta is expanding, with some seventy million tons of silt being dumped each year at the mouths of the estuary. Shifting sands have made this the most treacherous part of the Black Sea coast. A century ago, before artificial harbors were dredged, it was famous as a graveyard for ships. On a single stormy night in 1855, for example, twenty-four sailing ships and sixty lighters ran ashore here, with a loss of several hundred lives. Since then a whole new island of sand dunes, Sahalin, has gradually formed off the southern end of the delta. Though human beings must still pass through customs and passport control to visit it, the birds have already taken it over as an additional preserve. (There must be 144,000 of them by now.) With the coastline advancing nearly 250 feet a year, it is only a matter of time before this island, now entire unto itself, will become part of the main. The process has been going on for centuries; as recently as Roman times this whole area was merely a shallow bay dotted with islands. Here, for once, a wildlife sanctuary is growing steadily larger instead of smaller, and one has the satisfaction of knowing that, if a clod be washed away upstream, Europe is the more.

Less Stately Mansions

GERALD WEALES

ONE of the commonplaces of Eugene O'Neill criticism is that the most famous modern American playwright, the man who sparked what used to be called the revolution in American drama, filled his plays with devices, scenes, characters out of the nineteenth-century drama against which he was rebelling. Determinably a man of his century, obsessed by man's displacement in society and the universe, he constantly sought new ways of treating his recurrent themes—a search that brought him again and again to methods that he must have learned, perhaps unwillingly, in observing the theatre in which his father, James O'Neill, was a matinee idol or at least an institution as the Count in *Monte Cristo*. Ordinarily, when the analogy with nineteenth-century theatre is made, the emphasis is on the playwright's use of melodramatic devices, the grander the better, as in the poisoning scene



at the end of *Homecoming*, the first play in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, in which the guilty Christine faints and the vengeful Lavinia stops to snatch up the fatal pillbox before she delivers her curtain declamation to her dead father. In *More Stately Mansions*, the play that José Quintero carved out of an unfinished O'Neill manuscript, modeled in part on earlier versions mined by Karl Ragnar Gierow (performed in Sweden) and Donald Gallup (published by Yale), O'Neill's inheritance from his father and his father's theatre is more obvious and more extensive.

It was at the beginning of the third scene of the first act that I suddenly realized that what I was watch-

ing—despite the familiar O'Neill themes and the complicated if conventional psychology—was a very old-fashioned play. None of the stars was on stage. The initial distraction of Ingrid Bergman's beauty and Colleen Dewhurst's talent, which was beginning to wear off in any case, was not in operation. It would have been just as accurate to have shifted the qualities around in the sentence above, to have spoken of Dewhurst's beauty and Bergman's talent, since both have both in the complementary way so necessary to this drama.

IN ANY CASE, neither of them was there to capture the eye of the audience when two stock characters stepped onto the purposely artificial set and began to speak in the strangely stilted language so characteristic of the play. One was the priggish younger son, rigid in manner and thought, the butt of the play's few jokes; the other was the avuncular bachelor, the inevitable friend of the family (a lawyer, of course), destined to love the heroine at a polite distance. They were not characters in a realistic sense, not suggestions of human beings. They were vehicles for performers, acting turns that could be fleshed out with mannerisms of speech and movement, correctness of costume. By the time they were joined by Deborah (Miss Bergman), the mother in O'Neill's mother-son-wife triangle, everything had fallen into place. *More Stately Mansions* was revealed as an empty shell peopled with hollow men.

The hollowness takes in the principal characters too, probably because the presumed seriousness in O'Neill's play gets in the way of their working like their nineteenth-century counterparts. Although characterization was primitive and sentiments very conventional in the plays of the last century, characters—like Lady Isabel in *East Lynne* or Lady Gay Spanker in *London Assurance*—gave performers elbow room in which to convert the dramatist's hints of heartbreak or vitality into

genuine sentiment or comedy. That seems impossible in *More Stately Mansions*. The triangle play—the human play—is stifled by the fact that the characters seem to be concepts, conventional psychology made manifest—the mother as lover, the wife as mistress, the husband as little boy. More than that, they are representative figures in an abstract drama about the struggle between the spirit and the flesh, between the ideal and the material, as the two women, each representing one side of the hero's personality, pull at him, finally killing him in the process. They are never characters with depth, like those in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, which would be necessary to take the play seriously. Nor are they incompletely conceived characters working in flamboyantly dramatic scenes—as with Christine and Lavinia in *Electra*—in which a passionate performance is possible, where the play becomes exciting at least. Emotion and significance are in conflict in the big scenes in *Mansions*, as in the final struggle, and it is a standoff. O'Neill's long, long thoughts come through as shallow

as the rent crisis in *The Drunkard* or the mystery of the missing document in *Our American Cousin*, but without the *brio* that makes hearts pound as the villain is unmasked.

THIS SOUNDS like a criticism of the two actresses, and in a way I suppose it is. Yet it is not that simple. They are at their best in small effects that suggest the possibility of complicated character. Miss Bergman is fine in her flirtatious moments. Miss Dewhurst has a lovely bit in which, with the barest change of expression, she indicates that she has heard her mother's humility in her own voice and consents, almost grinning, to call her elegant mother-in-law by her first name. But too much of the time they are saddled with self-defining lines, crippled exclamations that they can neither subtilize nor declaim. At least they do neither.

The conflict between style and content in *More Stately Mansions* would not be so obvious if it were only a problem of characterizations. Character, pre-defined by type rather than by action, is not the only

nineteenth-century element in the play. The lines have a stagily formal quality about them, as though the nineteenth-century setting had somehow seduced the dramatist into imagining that people really talked the way characters did in the old theatre. "I would like to utter a word of warning," says Simon and the line drops, portentously, as though it should have been introduced by an "ah hah!" and not as though it were a prelude to a statement of the central theme. O'Neill has never been called America's most eloquent playwright, but particularly in the later plays—for Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh* and Erie in *Hughie*—he created verbal patterns that at once helped define the character and communicate the emotional stress out of which the drama grew. By contrast, when the characters in *Mansions* open their mouths, out flop phrases like "duel to the death" and "greedy pride." When they step out of a dialogue scene and speak for themselves, they are not performing an interior monologue, like those in *Strange Interlude*, but its ancestor, the soliloquy. In his direction, Quintero has heightened the nineteenth-century feel of the play by placing the characters in formal patterns on stage, not simply the thematic formality of the man between his two women but confrontation scenes that look as though they might be frozen for the kind of tableau once used as visual tag at the end of acts.

IN THE last few years there have been an increasing number of books on nineteenth-century drama—collections, criticism, history—most of them designed to make us reconsider the virtues peculiar to the drama of that period. Whatever those virtues, they are not transferable. *More Stately Mansions* is a paste-up version of a thirty-year-old play decked out in century-old devices, and it is less a theatrical event than an act of respect to the memory of Eugene O'Neill. One that backfires, as it turns out, for the best comment on the play is still O'Neill's own, the note accompanying the typescript: "Unfinished Work. This script to be destroyed in case of my death!" He did not intend a public execution.

Revival

The anxious hours numb me
but day's clock counts a low
November sun still warm at noon,
fields with the smell of damp decay,
a hawk fetters mice to their furrows,
wind bends the stiff weeds. I write
the record on odds and ends of mind,
shaken by leaf-fall I would have
tramped through in happier years.
Now in a whirl of dry grass I read
the signs that end love, but the sun
throws its web over my face, blinds me
to shadows, and I see how wind speaks
in bare trees, the hawk lives his way
in the sky, mice stuff their burrows
with seeds, a man reads autumn's words
like a text for his thought and remembers
the sharp taste of salt on his tongue.

—JAMES HEARST