

Seeing Things

ACTORS' THEATRE

POLONIUS, though a theatre-lover, was obviously a bookish man. Consider his windy catalogue of the types of scripts at which the Players excelled. I mean his not uncelebrated "pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral" speech. He attacked the job of partitioning the drama with the relish of a realtor breaking down a tract of land into measly subdivisions. Yet, in spite of the mouthsome hyphenates into which his thoroughness tempted him, Polonius was guilty of a grave omission.

He made no mention of a very special kind of theatre; one prized by playgoers when it is good, and cherished by performers even when it is not. I have in mind the *theatre-of-the-actor*; the theatre in which the player counts for more than the play; in which life is not so much observed as acting opportunities are provided; in short, the very kind of theatre of which "Edward, My Son"* is a triumphant example.

"Edward, My Son" is a detailed and pitiless study of an English tycoon. He is a man without scruples or mercy. The one decency of his enormously successful but indecent life is his love for his son. Yet he blights his boy's career by spoiling him just as he ruins the lives of most of the other people with whom he comes in contact by despoiling them.

The story—as a story—is an interesting one. It may be told with greater length than is necessary. It may drag here and there, and to impatient Americans seem more leisurely than it did to Britishers, who are not so clock-conscious. Even so, the skill of its writing is undeniable. It has wit, dexterity, and, considering its basic unpleasantness, a kind of courage. It is minutely observed, too. Moreover, as acted, especially by Robert Morley and Peggy Ashcroft, its fascination is irresistible.

Why, then, with such qualities to its credit, should this script, that Mr. Morley has written with Noel Langley, confess itself in its every line and scene to be an actor's rather than a dramatist's play? Why, when it is so

easy to enjoy it, is it impossible to take it seriously?

Actor's plays, though overlooked by Polonius, are neither uncommon nor unwelcome. The need and place for them must date back to the appearance of the first professional players. If they are rarer than they once were, it is because, since Ibsen and with the coming of realism, the theatre of the actor has to a large extent become the theatre of the playwright. And the dramatist worthy of the name is a person more interested in what he has to say himself than what he has given others to say or do. This does not mean that, when they are successful in achieving their ends, actor's plays fail to provide evenings rich in their pleasures and rewards. It means only that they are apt to be different in their appeal, no less than in their touch and approach, from the works of playwrights who are not actors.

These differences make themselves felt throughout the whole of "Edward, My Son." Though first-rate as theatre, it seems secondhand as life. There is something hollow about its writing, something simulated and specious, which refuses to be hidden. It is written less from actual observation than from the memory of other plays. To be sure, it creates a world of its own which appears real enough. But this world, engrossing as it is, is cut off from the real world by the asbestos, not the Iron, curtain. Its people

never quite become people. They remain "characters" (which is part of the fun), and, as such, they seldom allow us to forget that they are also juicy "parts" (which also contributes to the fun).

The script in which Mr. Morley stars and has had a hand is an actor's dream come true. In fact, since Mr. Morley is a player both generous and wise, it is several actors' dreams come true. It is wonderfully considerate of its players, hence its audiences. Its men and women, all except Edward, who is never seen, do not merely come into a room or leave it. They have "their exits and their entrances." The situations in which they find themselves may be somewhat tired, yet these are all whipped up into arresting "scenes" so that they acquire the illusion of novelty. The words the actors speak may, as words, be lacking in distinction. But this does not matter. The real writing is done for them by the gestures and stage business they are expertly planned to invite.

Perhaps, the unseen Edward is the perfect symbol of how illusionary is the reality of Mr. Morley's and Mr. Langley's play. Heaven knows, Edward, though absent, seems real enough. We follow him from his first birthday in 1919, when his family is poor, until his death as a pilot twenty-two years later in the Battle of Britain, when his father has won his millions and a title and his mother, in her heartbreak, has become a drunkard.

We learn of his costly illness as a baby and how, in order to pay for it, his father risks his first crooked enterprise. We pick up his career at the public school from which he would have been fired had his father not been rich enough to buy off the headmaster by buying up the school's mortgage. We see him (or think we see him) later when, utterly corrupted by his father's indulgences and standards, he has his troubles with money, drink, and women. In episode after episode Edward is just about to appear as the curtain falls. To the end, however, he remains the little man who wasn't there. Yet, though absent, he is so present that we accept him without question as the "stinker" he is described as being. We could swear we had watched him as he misbehaved at school or run into him when, drunk at a hotel, he had thrown up in the lobby.

What is true of Edward is true of the play's literary qualities and its validity as realism. These also seem to be present without actually being there. If they are not present, something else is; something which replaces them; something which serves as a more than acceptable substitute. This,



—Eileen Darby, Graphic House.

"If Robert Morley triumphs as the tycoon, so does Peggy Ashcroft as his unhappy wife."

**EDWARD, MY SON*, a play by Robert Morley and Noel Langley. Directed by Peter Ashmore. Setting supervised by Raymond Sovey. Presented by Gilbert Miller and Henry Sherek. With a cast including Robert Morley, Peggy Ashcroft, Ian Hunter, Torin Thatcher, Dayton Lummis, Waldo Sturvey, Godfrey Kenton, Leueen MacGrath, Dorothy Beattie, and Patricia Hicks. At the Martin Beck Theatre.

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OCTOBER 16, 1948

of course, is what the *theatre-of-the-actor* can, and in this instance does, brilliantly supply.

No one who saw Mr. Morley when he played Oscar Wilde in this country nine seasons back, and no one who has seen him since in London as the Prince Regent in "First Gentleman," can be surprised by the magical excellence and authority of his acting of the tycoon-father in "Edward, My Son." Mr. Morley's Oscar was portraiture in the flesh; his Prinny biography in performance. The same thoroughness, the same uncanny skill, he brought to recreating these historical figures he now brings to making an imaginary character real.

Life may by-pass him as an author, but as an actor he misses no tricks. If the part he has helped to write for himself is a fat one, that is as it should be. He is not a thin man. From the moment he strides before the curtain, a huge, arrogant, cockney version of Toulouse-Lautrec's Aristide Briand, to speak the prologue directly to the audience, he is in full command of the stage.

His is the task of making us believe that Arnold Holt is the kind of conscienceless dynamo who can bully and badger the headmaster as he does, ride roughshod over everyone coming in his path, and gain his fabulous wealth and power because of the lunge of his will, the drive of his personality, and his complete lack of scruples. To say that a man has the leader-stuff in him is quite different from having to demonstrate that he has it. Yet Mr. Morley manages to demonstrate this, quietly, fearfully. He does it with no seeming effort, and without overlooking any detail that might help. He does it by his stance, his gestures, and the arctic coldness of his eyes. He does it with a laugh which, though constant, has no merriment in it.

If Mr. Morley triumphs as the tycoon, so does Peggy Ashcroft as his unhappy wife. She, too, is playing the kind of part that a gifted monologist would love to write for herself. It is one of those studies in disintegration of which playgoers are as fond as players. Ranging as it does from her first scene of young innocence to the drink-thick speech, the quivering hands, and the disordered hair of her last scene twenty-nine years later, it abounds in chances for change and display. Of each and every one of these opportunities Miss Ashcroft takes such admirable advantage that they give the impression of being golden rather than greasepaint.

Nor does the excellence of acting in "Edward, My Son" end there. Ian Hunter, as a former business associate ruined by Mr. Morley, and the beauti-

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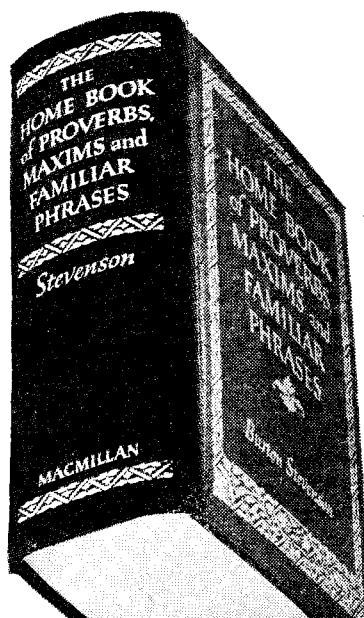
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ful Leueen McGrath, as a secretary with whom he has an affair, are likewise exceptionally capable. Indeed, the winter is not apt to reveal performances more polished or persuasive than those to be enjoyed in Peter Ashmore's suave production of Mr. Morley's and Mr. Langley's play. It offers an evening of theatre, pure theatre, but of theatre which is magnificent. That is something which, though special in its yields, is not to be scoffed at.

Barbara Ward in "The West at Bay," her fine and ever-illuminating analysis of the troubles of the present world, points out how money worship in the last century betrayed itself even in the popular vocabulary. It was then that such revealing phrases as "good as gold" and, above all, "making good" (as a synonym not for a high and virtuous life, but for the acquisition of wealth) crept into the language. Equally strange things have happened to the meanings of words having their origins in the theatre. "Showy," "stagey," "theatrical," "melodramatic," even "dramatic," are generally used as terms of abuse. In the strictest sense of the words, each and all of them, this should not be so. They should be prized as compliments. For what they really mean is that the theatre is being as excitingly true to itself, regardless of the rouge it may daub on life, as it is in "Edward, My Son."

JOHN MASON BROWN.

"Seek No Further"

(The name of an old
New England apple)

By Leila Jones

ONE snake is all I need
To set the balance even:
As blossom counters weed,
As Hell is wooed by Heaven
To make this garden Eden.
How shrewdly he might barter
With a mortal unaware,
(Though of the Genus Garter,
And mild), if passing where
The orchard meets the walk
His person I should see
Coiled in the apple tree
And hear prodigious talk
Of wisdom to be won;
Fame and a lordly wit,
Since royal Solomon
Housed queens because of it,
Then, were he Lucifer,
Adroitly ringer, astir
Where "Seek No Further" falls,
How then should I believe
Him true, who softly calls:
"An apple for you, Eve?"

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GEVAR.RELUCTANCE magnetic cartridge with .001 sapphire point. List \$7.95.	The standard GE unit, with microgroove sapphire point. Standard shape. Needle not removable. Preamp, required.	Use for separate players, since needle is not removable and cartridge is fastened in. Fits standard arms.

CREDO FOR "TECHNICAL" CRITICISM

THE above experiment in space-saving incidentally points up a creed. I assume that to make an intellectual distinction between recorded music and the complex processes by which that music is put down, reproduced, and perceived is to sever a triple relationship of such profound intimacy that the truncated parts libel any useful truth. Recorded music differs profoundly from music in the concert hall nor is it, as we begin to understand, a mere substitute. Between the composer and this audience there is more than the performer. Each step in the long, intervening electro-mechanical chain is inextricably mixed with psychological overtones of human reaction—so close to the very meaning of musical perception as to be virtually the musical reaction itself.

I find no one aspect of this musical practice lower than another; I am interested in what makes the wheels go round because in the answers are clues to the very nature of music. I would as soon discuss equalizers as equal temperament, the balance of tone as the balance of tonality—with one qualification: that the end of all this is, and must be, *heard music*; for I am a musician, not an engineer. Minus the musical end the recording business is (for me) a headless monstrosity.

I assume further, and for these reasons, that critical writing in this field should tackle the whole and all of its parts and that the same critical standards of unkept freedom should apply, for the whole. Heaven knows, there is little that is simple about the recording process; it demands intelligence equally from engineer and musician and an equally far-sighted view of the common end and purpose. Nor do I like the specious argument that esthetic criticism is a matter of opinion, whereas criticism in the manufacturing fields deals merely with fact. Fact and opinion gang together. There is no art criticism free of the solid frame of fact; conversely, the technical facts in recording are inert and useless until mustered into an ordered critical evaluation.

I see no difference except that of custom. The manufacturers, now, are easily shocked by adverse criticism, though they are pleased with the favorable. *Can criticism and advertising stand side by side?* In the arts—yes, because custom has it so. I believe that the technicians are already on the way to accepting honest criticism, the pro with the con, as ultimately constructive—and perhaps even stimulative of increased sales!

EDWARD TATNALL CANBY.