



## The Backward Town of Llareggub

**P**ROBABLY the richest and certainly the earthiest theatre experience of this season is Dylan Thomas's reading—assisted by five actors—of his new play "Under Milk Wood" at the 92nd Street YMHA.

The title refers to the location of the imaginary Welsh sea town Llareggub, which lies in a valley beneath a wooded hill where—to put it in terms which Mr. Thomas would decry as euphemistic—lovers are wont to stroll. Llareggub's minister describes it:

A tiny dingle is Milk Wood  
By Golden Grove 'neath Grongar,  
But let me choose and Oh! I should  
Love all my life and longer

To stroll among our trees and stray  
In Goosegog Lane, on Donkey  
Down,  
And hear the Dewi sing all day,  
And never, never leave the town.

Although the play itself is more radio documentary than it is stage drama, it might be called the Welsh version of "Our Town." But whereas Thornton Wilder's play was a lament for the missed richness of life in a strict and outwardly sane New England community, Mr. Thomas's twenty-four-hour saga is a celebration of the ways the outwardly peculiar persons of Llareggub each find the richness of life in his or her own fashion, like the pigs whose idea of heaven is "acorned swill and the bagpipe dugs of the mother sow."

The play commences with Mr. Thomas using the sound-alert impassioned voice that makes him one of the most effective poetry readers in the business to describe the stillness of the sleeping town. "You can hear . . . the invisible starfall, the darkest before dawn minutely dewgrazed stir of the black dab-filled sea . . . night moving in the streets . . . quiet as a dominoe . . . like a mouse with gloves . . ."

He then introduces the sleeping characters. First there is the retired blind sea captain who is the witness of the play's action. Then Mog Edwards the draper, who loves Myfanwy Price more than all the candlewick, ticking, and twill in the whole Cloth Hall of the world; Myfanwy, "with her homemade plum and butterpat," who promises to warm his heart by the fire so that he can slip it in under his vest when his shop is closed; Butcher Beynon, who, when his wife remarks that the cat seems to like the liver she is eating, replies "She ought to, it's her brothers"; Nogood Boyo who, as he lies on his back in the unbaled water of a dinghy among crabs legs and tangled lines, looks up at the spring sky and says, "I don't know who's up there, and I don't care"; Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard, who doesn't want a boarder in her nice clean rooms "breathing all over the chairs, and putting his feet on my carpets, and sneezing on my china, and sleeping in my sheets"; Ocky Milkman, who waters the milk and

keeps his wife in the cupboard with the empties; and Mr. Pugh, who spends his entire time daydreaming a special mixture for Mrs. Pugh, "a venomous porridge unknown to toxicologists which will scald and serpent through her until her ears fall off like figs, her toes grow big and black as balloons, and steam comes screaming out her navel."

But easily the most memorable character is Polly Garter, the loose woman of Llareggub, singing a ballad to the deceased midget who is the father of two of her illegitimate children:

Now when the farmers' boys  
on the first fair day  
Come down from the hills  
to drink and be gay  
Before the sun sinks I'll  
lie there in their arms  
For they're good bad boys  
from the lonely farms.  
But I always think as we tumble  
into bed  
Of little Willy Wee  
who is dead, dead, dead . . .

**T**HE above characters and the rest of the sixty-six in the cast are all colorfully described along with some of their daily activities. Although, as read by Sada Thompson, Nancy Wickwire, Dion Allen, Allen Collins, Roy Poole, and Mr. Thomas, the identities of each are inevitably confused, it must be said that these young people read their way clearly and intelligently through a script that tests their ability to shift quickly into dialects and into different age brackets.

Since Polly Garter is the best part in the play, Nancy Wickwire makes the most of it, and her singing of the ballad is cream off the top of "Milk Wood."

Unfortunately, the play has several



Roy Poole, Nancy Wickwire, Dion Allen, Dylan Thomas, Sada Thompson, and Allen Collins—"a tiny dingle is Milk Wood . . ."

shortcomings which make it unsuitable for commercial production. It has no plot and no crisis, and the slight revelation which might indicate a growth on the part of Captain Cat tends to get buried in Llareggub's multicolored assortment of citizens.

Mr. Thomas is the first to admit all this. "When I began eighteen months ago," he says, "I had a very simple plot. I thought I'd make all the characters even more eccentric than they are now. Then I'd have a new nationalist Government taking over Wales. One of the new Government's inspectors comes to Llareggub and says to the mayor, 'We're taking charge of affairs here now, and we've decided to declare this disgraceful town an open-air lunatic asylum.' The townspeople scream with rage and each person defends himself, and his seemingly insane actions. In the end they accept, preferring to remain 'mad,' because their insanity appears to them healthier than the sanity of the Government."

However, Mr. Thomas soon found this plot too restricting. He found himself hacking the plot out instead of writing what he wanted to say. "You know," he adds, "if you feel you're hacking it out, you're either incompetent or doing something wrong."

Drawing the most charitable of these two deductions, the poet decided to abandon the plot. For a time he toyed with the idea of having one of the characters die, to give a feeling of the passage of time, but he even gave that up. "I guess I just got boozed up on the language," he admits with the not unhappy look of a man who has learned to face and live with his compulsions.

"I also did another unpardonable thing," confesses the poet, "I fell in love with one of my characters, so that Polly Garter gets too much attention at the expense of the others."

For all the emphatic response "Under Milk Wood" received from its audience, Mr. Thomas still regards it as incomplete. The present version ends with a rain (or reign) of dusk and Polly Garter in the wood with one of her admirers. "I want the night to come strong and fast," says Mr. Thomas, "and I want to follow lots of the characters into the night until the last lover has left the wood."

Despite the improvements that the poet will undoubtedly be able to effect, "Under Milk Wood" seems doomed to remain a reading piece. Yet this should not blind anyone to the significance of the work. At the time Mr. Thomas began the play he felt that in his poetry writing he was "apt to shout a little louder than life." He wanted to talk about things that his poems would not let him. "The kind of

poetry I was writing was not fluid enough to represent lived-around subjects, and I wanted to find a form that would be," he says.

Now that he has found that form in a work that might with discipline be carpentered into a high-quality play, there is every reason to hope that Mr. Thomas will go on to write for a theatre that needs his sounds and his vitality.

"I have to finish a comic book I am writing, called 'Adventures in the Skin Trade' [the title refers to the necessary nakedness that comes before you decide to remain naked the rest of your life, as Mr. Thomas has, or to put on new armor]. Then I shall try a new play that will probably be aimed more at presentation. It will take place in a smallish industrial town like Swansea, where I was born," he says, "and it will include a love story between two people who have never met until the end of the play, even though they've been brought up within a few blocks of each other."

Come to think of it, Broadway and the 92nd Street YMHA aren't so far apart either.

**T**HOUGH seldom produced here, Dylan Thomas's favorite playwright is Sean O'Casey, whose "The Plough and the Stars" is being given a loyal revival at Greenwich Village's Cherry Lane Theatre. An exceedingly vital and perhaps the best of all O'Casey dramas, this play about the 1916 Irish rebellion demonstrates the glory of the human spirit which beats with a vigorous heart despite all the world can do to discourage it. His shabby characters all behave badly and ignorantly. They die to no purpose except to show that justice is not to be expected in this life. The hero is a hot-tempered carpenter who dares to shake his fist at anyone who intrudes on his dignity. "That's not playing the game," he shouts at the British when a shell explodes near him. It is a glorious mixture of realism and irony.

The production is simple. Most of the actors have Irish names and handle the dialogue with greater competence than you would get from a non-Irish company of more established actors. John Scanlon and Barbara Winchester stand out in the two best roles, and the rest of the company is adequate though spotty, possibly because "The Plough and the Stars" calls for some powerful acting. But this group is on the right track. If they could spend the next few years working up a repertory program of Irish plays, they could do American theatregoers a great service.

—HENRY HEWES.

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## SR GOES TO THE MOVIES

**The Abuse of Greatness**

**"JULIUS CAESAR,"** a political play by William Shakespeare that has enough familiar lines to fill pages of Bartlett, and that has been dinned for Lord knows how long into the unwilling ears of countless high-school students, can only be supposed to have within it the powers of perpetual regeneration. M-G-M's new "Julius Caesar" would certainly seem to support this theory, and not only does it represent a clear-cut victory over the dull voices of high-school instructors and amateur intoners, but it firmly adapts the play, without the least sense of strain, into its motion-picture mold and, in the doing, gives it a gleaming new appearance. The marvelous poetry, oratory, and rhetoric of the play are apparent, almost as though heard for the first time; there are moments of shock and excitement that the contemporary drama never seems able to reach; one continually sees in it parallels to contemporary history, and prophetic lessons and warnings. That John Houseman, the producer, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, the director, and as accomplished a cast as one could wish could bring this pristine freshness and impact to a play three-and-a-half centuries old is the major accomplishment of the production. I will even go out on a limb and say that it seems to me to belong in the front rank of the great motion pictures.

We must get the inevitable comparisons to the "Hamlet" and "Henry V" of Laurence Olivier out of the way as soon as possible. Less consciously experimental, it seems to me superior to the Olivier "Hamlet," but not quite so gem-like and visually beautiful as the "Henry V." But they are, after all, three quite different plays, and as a result, three quite different movies. Shakespeare, for the movies, seems always to demand a certain refurbishing, perhaps less so for "Julius Caesar" than for "Hamlet," a most difficult movie nut to crack. What was demanded here was sensible cutting and sewing together of the gaps, and Houseman and Mankiewicz managed this job between them. There is not the slightest loss so far as I can see (unless one has memorized the entire play and thus misses certain favorite lines); there is, rather, a gain. The action proceeds with mounting foreboding and excitement, and in climactic scenes

reaches a truly fervent pitch. Among scenes that will always be memorable are the brilliantly staged assassination of Caesar, Antony's oration to the mob, and the tent scene in which Cassius and Brutus have their gloomy clash of temperaments. Mankiewicz, who impresses more and more with his striking ability to get actors performing at their peaks, seems to have had the fullest sort of collaboration from John Gielgud, James Mason, and Marlon Brando. My impression is that in this movie we have the best Shakespearean acting yet seen on film, perhaps because of the virtuoso nature of the performances.

It may be a little unfair to single out one performance as dominating the play, but I was particularly struck by the Cassius of John Gielgud. Mr. Gielgud, of course, is probably the most accomplished Shakespearean actor of our day, but I was not fully prepared for the complexity he manages to give to the darkly brooding conspirator. While Brutus, I suppose, must be considered the "hero" of the piece, it is the character of Cassius that in Mr. Gielgud's handling gives off reflections most relevant to our own period. I kept seeing in him (perhaps fancifully) the prototype of the Marxist intellectual. And it is Cassius, after all, who shows most knowledge of the revolutionist's handbook. If his suggestion to dispose of Antony (Shakespeare has him urge this more than once) had been lis-

**SR Recommends**

*Julius Caesar:* Reviewed in this issue.

*The Juggler:* A wanderer's struggle to fit into the alien homeland of Israel; title role superbly acted by Kirk Douglas. (SR May 9.)

*Man on a Tightrope:* A tense chronicle, scripted by Robert E. Sherwood, of the escape of a Czech circus troupe from Iron-Curtainland. (SR May 30.)

*Shane:* Another superior Western, with screenplay by A. B. Guthrie, Jr., a rewarding performance by Alan Ladd, and magnificent scenery by Technicolor. (SR May 2.)

*Call Me Madam:* The uninhibited Ethel Merman in an engaging movie adaptation of the stage show. (SR Apr. 4.)

*Lili:* Waif Leslie Caron takes up with some French carnival puppets in a charming musical. (SR Mar. 7.)

*Justice Is Done:* A French courtroom drama which poses a haunting human problem. (SR Feb. 28.)