



Sleighride Into Darkness

IN MY recent quick look at the British theatre I was faced by the choice either of reporting on productions seen in embryo during their out-of-town tryout period or not mentioning them at all. I chose the former course but, since this can be desperately unfair to the productions reviewed, I trust my readers will regard what follows as merely a preliminary account of the new Christopher Fry play as seen at Edinburgh some six weeks before its scheduled London opening.

At its present stage of development "The Dark Is Light Enough" would seem to have a rich potential. The play, described as "a winter comedy," takes place during the Austro-Hungarian revolution of 1848-1849 but is not a history play. Rather it is the story of an incredibly wise and compassionate woman who recognizes that the good in the worst of us is as valuable as the good in the best of us. The period and the setting are made to order for the romantic talents of director Peter Brook and scene-designer Oliver Messel. Because of their work, the production is already thick with style.

But, since most actors find it hard to have both style and the kind of reality which gives impact to lines that often dissipate their own immediacy by pausing to make side comments on other matters, a lot of work is going to have to be done on the performances. Fortunately, "The Dark Is Light Enough" stars the one actress in the British Empire who can best deliver both style and intense reality at the same time. Dame Edith Evans, with her 100-piece orchestra of a voice, makes the Countess Rosmarin every bit as remarkable as Mr. Fry intended her to be.

The play itself, though still infected with some of the exhausting circuitousness that marked this playwright's earlier work, represents a new departure in a direction which must be applauded by those who want to see Fry come more to terms with theatrical convention. In "The Dark Is Light Enough" the line is purer, sparer, and less encumbered with ornament, though the author has indicated his unalterable stand against absolute clarity by two lines in the play. While in one the countess forbids her little conversation group from discussing "eelelogy," in another she says: "If all the crooked

places of the world have been made plain to you while I was out, that I shall not forgive." Somewhere between these two poles dances Christopher Fry.

This dancing includes such a beautiful description of driving through the snow as:

I've been as clever as an ostler,
And driven alone, one human and
two horses
Into a redeemed land, uncrossed
by any soul
Or sound. And always the falling
perfection
Covering where we came, so that
the land
Lay perfect behind us, 'as though
we were perpetually
Forgiven the journey.

It also includes such profound thoughts on death as:

The argument, philosophy, wit,
and eloquence
Were all in the light of this end
we come to.
Without it there would have been
very little
To mention except the weather.
Protect me
From a body without death. Such
indignity
Would be outcast like a rock in
the sea.

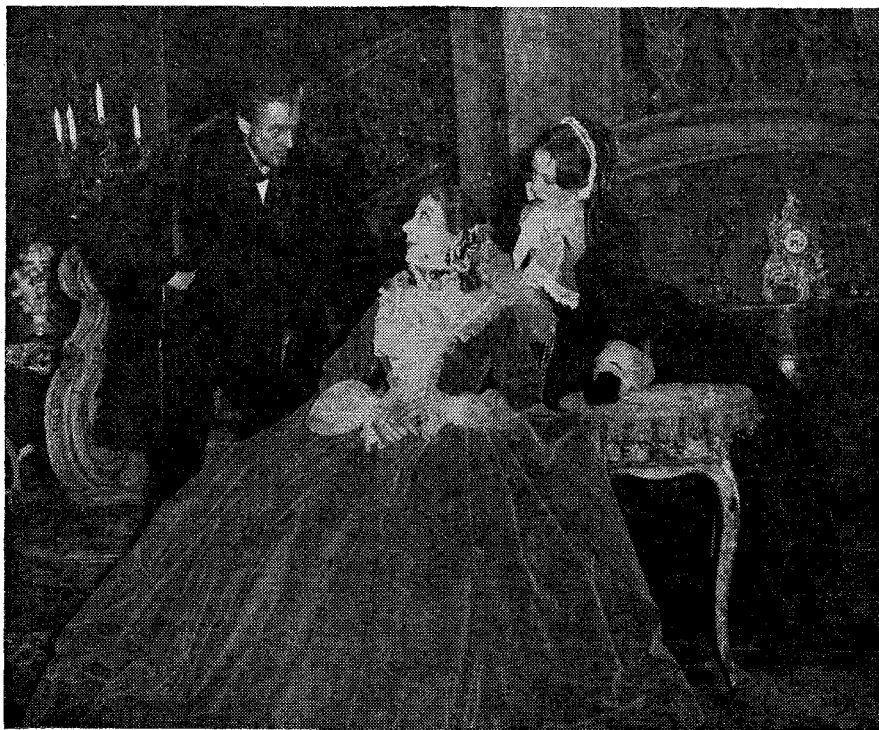
But with death it can hold
More than the earth shows it, and
more than time
Gives it. In its nature
There seems to be a founding
music it can almost hear
And moves to know and under-
lays a dance
In which it sometimes dreams.

There are other equally fascinating thoughts on such subjects as embracing causes, the loss of free will when we are elected into love, the problems of being a writer, the futility of revolution and of war, and this credo which is as plain speaking as Christopher Fry has ever been:

I shall never make
Myself or my friends or my way
of life
Or private contentment, or any
Preference of my nature, an ob-
stacle
To the needs of a more true and
living world
Than so far I have understood.

But the author and his director are well aware that brilliance, profundity, sincerity, and style are not enough to engross an audience for two and a half hours. If "The Dark Is Light Enough" is going to have the success its art and poetry entitle it to, it is going to have to find a means of making us care passionately about its characters. Now it is a beautiful but remote midwinter night's dream.

THE failure of Charles Morgan's "The Burning Glass" on Broadway and to a lesser extent in London is



Dame Edith Evans in "The Dark Is Light Enough"—"the line is purer."

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not a good sign. For in this play a highly intelligent playwright has tackled the most important subject in the world today, namely the control and use of the overwhelmingly destructive power science has been able to invent. Possibly such an astronomic and abstract subject does not lend itself to the medium of naturalistic representation as well as it would have to the Greek drama or to such experimental forms as Expressionism. Indeed, Mr. Morgan might have done well to have written in another form such as the one Paul Claudel has used in his "Christophe Colomb," now playing in Paris.

In that play, so beautifully produced by Jean-Louis Barrault, the story of the famous explorer is re-examined by a young Columbus who doubts the pessimism of the old Columbus dying in poverty. A chorus is used along with musical comment and re-enforcement by Darius Milhaud. In addition, motion-picture closeups of some of the events are flashed on a huge sail which hangs in the background. With such devices the audience is led into thinking about values and principles, and does not expect a story of suspense.

However, in "The Burning Glass" Mr. Morgan has realized that only suspense can carry us through the evening. And what we arrive at is a half-thriller about a Soviet kidnapping of a British scientist. As a dubious bonus, we have an unrequited love situation which lacks credibility.

Sir Cedric Hardwicke was not at the top of his game in the role of the prime minister. In fact he gave a less original performance than did Laurence Naismith in London. Of the remaining actors only Walter Matthau as the lover really improved on his English counterpart, and he did so by playing the embarrassing part less intensely.

On the positive side we must salute Mr. Morgan for drawing so accurately the current state of world thinking on the question of politics vs. science. He also has a sense of humor, and his telegram from the American President gets a laugh that must have been prophetically conceived, when the President promises his personal support but complains that he has no control over members of Congress.

Prophetic too may be Mr. Morgan's invention of a method of using the earth's ionosphere as a lens to direct the sun's heat at any portion of the earth, and we can assume that Weather Control will come in for increased respect from the War Department. A burning glass might be the solution to a cold war, but it does not make for warm theatre.

—HENRY HEWES.



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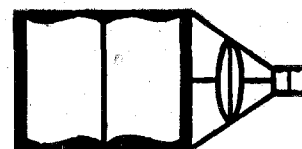
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Night Beauties and Beasties



—From "Beauties of the Night."

Gerard Philipe—"only in his dreams does he find a society receptive to his art."

WHY true fantasy should turn up so rarely on the screen is a disturbing question, especially since the film medium would seem to be ideally suited to such imaginative excursions away from reality. The freedom to move from place to place, from era to era, to thumb the nose at the laws of man and nature could afford the creative film-maker a challenge every bit as exciting as the incessant search for realism. But, even though there has always been an abundance of unabashedly escapist films, the escape into fantasy has been neither frequent nor notably successful. Too often it has been hamstrung by that nagging question: will the audience understand? Too often, lest there be the slightest possibility of misunderstanding, the fantasy is explained, excused, interpreted in words of one syllable. Instead of embarking on a flight of fancy, audiences are generally conducted on a guided tour of fantasyland, with all the exits clearly marked.

To this unfortunate rule René Clair's "*Beauties of the Night*" (Lopert) is a happy exception. True, as the title suggests, his fantasies live in the world of dreams, may even be explained as dreams. But what delicious dreaming! His hero is a young composer and music teacher unable to

cope with the world around him, distressed by the racket and roar of the twentieth century. Only in his dreams does he seem to find a society properly receptive to his art—first in the polite salons at the turn of the century, then in the exciting era of France's colonial expansion under Louis-Philippe, again in the days of the French Revolution and even, for a very brief moment, back in the time of D'Artagnan and his Musketeers. Each dream brings him not only success but also a sympathetic and exceptionally beautiful woman. (These same lovely creatures turn up in his waking hours as well, but there the young man scarcely notices them.) Before long his dream world has become so very desirable that he just can't wait to doze off.

The delightful thing about all this is that the dreams actually work like dreams, merging with each other, racing from century to century at the convenience of the dreamer. There is even an amusing interpenetration of dream and reality (as when, awakened in the midst of a glorious love-feast in an Algerian harem, his arm in a sling, the hero promptly wraps the bedsheets about his arm and drops back into his dream again). His dream world provides a delicately ironic comment on the world about us:

the director of the Paris Opéra declares his intentions in *bel canto*, the French army captain is officially decorated for his successes in *l'amour*, and the same venerable gentleman is on hand in each century to recall what a happier world it was when he was young. But Clair soon pricks these pleasantly nostalgic bubbles. One night his hero is late getting to bed, and as he dashes desperately from century to century he piles catastrophe on catastrophe (including a hilarious vision of his opera being performed by an orchestra that includes pneumatic drill, auto horns, and saws scraping on lead pipes). He awakes to the discovery that no era is perfect, while miracles can still happen today.

Actually, despite all of Clair's wit and invention, the dreams do have a tendency to become a bit repetitious before the end. It is almost as if, intrigued by the comic possibilities in each century, he invented too many variations and then found it impossible to eliminate any. In all truth, even the unprejudiced observer would have some difficulty saying just which details might best be dropped, so many wryly devastating moments crop up at every turn—a real embarrassment of riches. It is also unfortunate that the final sequence, with the young composer back again in reality, does not sustain the verve and humor of the dreams. After all, the scene is the Paris Opéra, and Clair himself once demonstrated what fun could be had there. Even so, "*Beauties of the Night*" ranks easily among his best works, a fantasy that invites its audiences to loose their own imagination. Clair is ably assisted by Gérard Philipe and Raymond Bussières as the composer and his friend, by delectable Gina Lollobrigida and Martine Carol in the title roles, and by Georges Van Parys, who has provided a musical score that manages at all times to match the picture's pointed humor.

* * *

After the beauties conjured up by M. Clair, Nunnally Johnson directs our attention to other and decidedly less attractive nocturnal creatures. "*Night People*" (20th Cent.-Fox) refers to the Communists of East Berlin, who, as one character in the film observes, seem congenitally incapable of working except under the cover of darkness. The picture starts—long before the credits appear—with the kidnapping of an American G.I. from the Western Zone, while the story itself gets under way when the boy's father, a hard-headed and influential businessman (Broderick Crawford), rushes to Germany to get some