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BROADWAY POSTSCRIPT

The Importing of Being Earnest

ADAPTING a modern play from one language to another appears to be a tremendously difficult task. In Paris recently Jean Anouilh was something less than successful with an adaptation of "Desire Under the Elms," and here in America dramatic critic Louis Kronenberger confesses that his version of Anouilh's "Colombe" has presented him with a dilemma or two.

Interviewed in Philadelphia, where "Mademoiselle Colombe," featuring Julie Harris, Eli Wallach, and Edna Best, was getting its naturalization papers, Mr. Kronenberger looked reticently objective about the whole business.

"The thing that pleased me about adapting this play," said Mr. Kronenberger, "is that it wasn't a literary blind date. They handed me the script and because I liked it as a reader I said yes, I wanted to adapt it."

He obviously did like it, because he has had to sandwich "Colombe" in between his critical paragraphs for *Time*, his lectures at Brandeis University, and the editing of some half-dozen books within a matter of months.

"Anouilh has a wonderful sense of theatre, he is a good dramatic philosopher, and—bitter as his plays may be—they come out of honest emotion," continued Mr. Kronenberger. "Furthermore, at the end of 'Colombe' you are left with a real feeling about life, which is not true of a great many of our most heralded American dramas."

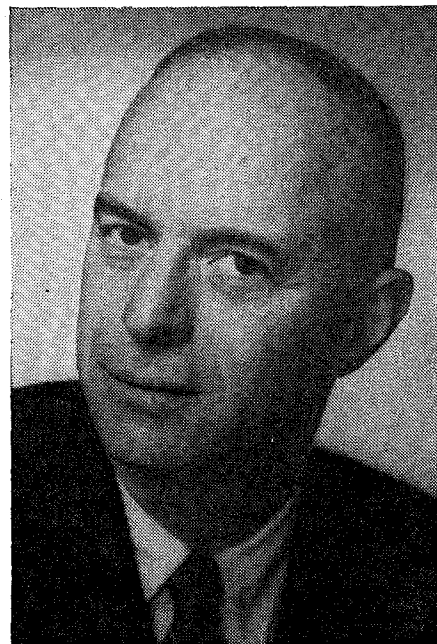
That Mr. Kronenberger decries the trend towards naturalism in the American theatre is indicated by his preface to the recently published "Cavalcade of Comedy" (Simon and Schuster, \$7.50), in which he says, "For myself, comedy and tragedy are the only finally valid and artistic forms for portraying life; the only ones that can give an extra dimension to their subject matter. The naturalistic drama only gives an extra vividness to it . . . It combines the grayest sort of material with the purplest sort of treatment. . . . Everything is thus externalized, there is no inwardness or subsurface . . . there is a want of that perspective that we derive from comedy, or that enlargement that tragedy bestows."

"Colombe" combines both tragedy and comedy, and its adapter feels that this may hurt its chances here.

"Americans are used to having tragedy or comedy so labeled. It may worry them to have both under the same blanket."

M. Anouilh, when interviewed in Paris last summer, advanced much the same reason for the lack of commercial success his plays have enjoyed on Broadway. Said M. Anouilh, who pronounces his name *ah-Noo-yi*, "I believe the people in America are accustomed to a surface realism. They want the appearance of reality, not reality itself. My realism is stylized and not a mirror realism at all. The feelings are true, but not the appearances."

He has discussed this beautifully in one of his plays. In Act II of "La Répétition" the Count makes the following speech to the actors in a little play. "The natural, the true, in the theatre is the thing that is the least natural in the world. Do not think that you must re-create the appearance of life. In the first place, in life the script is always so bad! We live in a world which has lost completely the use of the semi-colon. We say everything in half-finished sentences with three little trailing dots implied, because we cannot find the word that suits. And then take the natural conversation which some performers pretend to make: these mutterings, these hiccoughs, these slurrings over, these



Louis Kronenberger: "extra dimension."

pauses, it really isn't worth the trouble of bringing five or six hundred people together in a room and charging them money to watch it. They like it, I know. They recognize themselves in it. But all the same we must write and act the play better than they do. Life is very nice, but it has no form. The aim of art is to give it exactness, and to use all the artifices there are to make it more true than the real thing. But I'm boring you. I'm starting to touch on a serious subject."

Despite this handicap of being truer than it is natural, "Colombe," according to M. Anouilh, has more appearance of reality in it than do his other plays, and he thinks it therefore could do better than "Antigone," "The Cry of the Peacock," and "Legend of Lovers," all of which enjoyed very short runs here.

Mr. Kronenberger, who admits that he is more at home in the definitely artificial kind of play like "Ring Round the Moon," has nevertheless done considerable adapting in an effort to make "Colombe" play more comfortably in our commercial theatre. Some things, of course, he could not change. For instance, he feels that the idea of a girl who can be faithful to two men at once is a profoundly un-American notion, and that Colombe's explanation to her returning husband will seem unrealistic. Nevertheless, it is fundamental to the story and must remain. But where he can he has tried to find equivalents that will have a French flavor and at the same time be expressive and intelligible to Americans.

Also he has had to cut some twenty-five minutes of dialogue. "The French love long speeches and conversations for their own sake, and besides their language can be spoken faster than ours," explains Mr. Kronenberger. "I have cut a great deal out of the role of Madame Georges, a comedy-of-humors character with a passion for talking about diseases. She seemed a useful old-fashioned character who could be had at any length. I also eliminated one long speech by La Surrette in which he tells the heartbroken Julien the sordid details of his own unfortunate marriage. I hope these cuts will help the play, because I think of all the classic French qualities the one Anouilh has least is measure. In that respect he is more of a romantic writer."

This romantic quality perhaps leads Anouilh into writing about extremes. In "Colombe" the characters are either very immoral theatre people or smug puritans, and Mr. Kronenberger feels that this gives both sides equally good arguments. He hopes he has made it clear that one reason Colombe succumbs to her husband's wastrel half-

brother is that she has been exposed to so much of the other extreme.

"In a way Anouilh is a little like Swift," concludes Mr. Kronenberger. "He is always exploding because something deep down won't explode."

Because he did not adapt with a particular cast in his mind—Mr. Kronenberger is categorically opposed to suiting plays to actors—the company of "Mademoiselle Colombe" has had to do considerable mind-climbing of its own. If everyone has succeeded, "Mademoiselle Colombe" may appear as true a "Colombe" to Americans as the original did to the French.

"IN THE SUMMER HOUSE" is a strange mirage of a play that at moments seems to touch upon the unreality of neurotic existence like a stroke on a Javanese gong. Jane Bowles's new play tells the story of Mrs. Eastman-Cuevas, a meticulous widow who runs a Southern California guest house. She has a daughter, Molly, who spends her time in a summer house reading comic books. These miserable interdependents who "do not care for the kind of excitement you get when you go out" sap each other's vitality.

Soon a second pair arrive. They are Mrs. Constable and her daughter

Vivian. While resembling the first two, they are very different in that they believe in freedom and uninhibitedness. Both daughters fall in love with the same young man, and Molly finally pushes Vivian off the cliff. Then Mrs. Eastman-Cuevas makes a marriage of convenience with a prosperous and unneurotic Mexican, and Molly marries her young man. However, these marriages fail to bring either of them out of their summer houses. In an earlier version of the play this results in Molly's suicide, but in this version her mother, who in her own youth had murdered someone, sets her free.

The play may gain in interest if you think of Mrs. Constable and Vivian as *alter egos* to the first pair. But I'm afraid the increment will be insufficient to carry you over the long languid stretches where Mrs. Bowles has been unable to sustain her brilliantly perceptive dialogue or to support it with enough significantly active plot.

Paul Bowles's music has style and humor and helps his wife's play considerably. In fact, the sum of its virtues makes "In the Summer House" a memorable piece of theatre. They do not, however, make it into a very satisfactory play. —HENRY HEWES.



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SR GOES TO THE MOVIES
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—From "Knights of the Round Table."

Robert Taylor (Sir Lancelot) is distressed by a lady's dismay over a friend's demise.

I HAD LOOKED forward to seeing M-G-M's "Knights of the Round Table," for my memories of this studio's "Ivanhoe" were pleasant. The same director (Richard Thorpe) and the same producer (Pandro S. Berman) were commissioned to do this one, and they were allowed considerably more in the way of medieval armament because it was being done for the CinemaScope screen. The statistics alone are impressive: 6,000 costumes, including heavy armor plate for both actors and animals; 500 hard-riding horses; 10,000 arrows for the soldiers' bows; 200 large sets, including a complete stone castle built to order; and even ten trained falcons, a figure which somehow touched me most of all. The filming took six months, some of it in England (one site was Tintagel in Cornwall, where King Arthur's castle was supposed to have stood) and some in Ireland. Nice scenery, too. But, in spite of the valiant efforts by all concerned, it's a dullish film that has been turned out. I had the distinct impression that all the wonderful body of Arthurian legend and romance, including Malory's "Le Morte d'Arthur," had been compressed by the busy screenwriters into something suspiciously close to the format of a large-scale Western. In fact, near the end there was a scene that might have been borrowed from a Roy Rogers show. Lancelot fell into a quagmire,

and his faithful white horse came at his call and pulled him out.

Nevertheless, along the way there's a lot of interesting pageantry. There are three pitched battles in which the hard-riding horses, all five hundred of them, get the workout of their lives. There's the expected jousting tournament, and three or four other occasions when Robert Taylor, as Lancelot, charges an opposing knight with his lance. Arthur and Lancelot have a whale of a fight, before each knows who the other is, with huge broadswords; and there are a couple of other set-to's with smaller keen-edged weapons. Then there's the wedding of Arthur and Guinevere, a very formal affair; the trial of Lancelot (for having a supposed affair with the queen); and a courtly dance scene. All of this is handsome stuff.

So, I suspect it's the script that's to blame for the heavy-handed impression the movie eventually makes. The gaps between the fights have not been filled with anything reasonably imaginative or subtle. I suppose a suggestion of quaintness or of the archaic was wanted in the dialogue, but the writers fell into the trap of using the whiskered speech of the comic strips. "Ho! Where goes thee, noble knight?" is a not too inaccurate rendering of its quality. "I have fought with Sir Lancelot and lived!" marvels a knight who had made the mistake of abduct-