



Lessons for Losers

THE GIRL on the Via Flaminia" is the most thoroughly engrossing piece of work yet performed at Circle-in-the-Square. Not only does this play deal with the never-quite-understood emotional manifestations of persons battling within themselves (which is the area of combat best served by arena theatre), but it is packed with fast-moving conflict between characters which dispels the tedium that usually accompanies introspective plays.

Alfred Hayes's adaptation of his own novel is a warm yet bitter job. In this play (as did Gertrude Stein in "Brewsie and Willie") Mr. Hayes found that Americans needed to learn to express complexity. The playwright goes farther than that. He finds a great difference between the 1920 American tourist schoolteacher who eats little sandwiches at the Hotel Tuscania and the 1944 soldiers who scratch their names on the walls of the Colosseum. Representing the latter in the play is a G.I. staff sergeant who offers food and money in exchange for not being lonely without thinking how the implications of this loveless pact may destroy a sensitive Italian girl.

Betty Miller, who plays the girl, twitches and turns throughout the play in temporary evasion of her sad destiny of suicide. Her hypersensitive portrayal is suspenseful and convincing. Leo Penn brings personal warmth to the role of the American young man who is neither a callous seducer nor a romantic sentimentalist. What he is would be interesting to probe, but perhaps that will be Mr. Hayes's next play. Felice Orlandi is terrifying as the proud Italian who despises what defeat and poverty have done to the ethics of his countrymen. As he states, "War is the opposite of men working together. It is more than ever only men trying to save themselves separately." In contrast to these three, James Greene draws a satiric portrait of a British soldier who makes life simple by limiting his horizon.

José Quintero's direction has a new air of confidence. Maybe part of this is due to the acclaim his work uptown received recently. But probably the lion's share of the credit should go to a play that describes with truth and passion the relationship between the American conquistadores and the shamed Italians. "God sends flies to the starved horse," says the Italian

girl. Fortunately, there are no flies on Circle-in-the-Square these days.

WHILE war certainly tends to make many of us lose our moral strength, Elmer Rice has in his latest play come to the conclusion that even a legal battle over a will can bring out the worst in people. Still, from the worst sometimes emerges the truth, and "The Winner" does succeed in dredging considerable virtue from an honestly-drawn cigarette-stand girl named Eva Harold.

Eva is not a sympathetic heroine. She is petty, selfish, and entices married men to take her out but refuses to let them come up to her apartment. There are two exceptions to this rule. One is a married man who is separated from his wife and has promised to marry Eva as soon as he can afford a divorce. The other is a hard-drinking, soft-living bachelor whom she rightly senses to be a man of principle. A third exception, who is older and very rich, forces his way into Eva's room with a plea of illness, and goes on to prove that his plea is not pure subterfuge by dying on her bed. ("The Winner" thus becomes the second play of the season to be based on the accident of a man's dying in a woman's apartment, the other being "The Prescott Proposals.") In "The Winner" the resultant scandal is complicated by a will drawn by the dying man in Eva's favor. The disinherited wife offers the impecunious girl a sizable settlement not to file the will, but Eva has a genuine if belated attack of high principles and wants nothing less than full exoneration.

From this point on the plot clichés come fairly routinely with a little talk on the gospels thrown in by a remarkably understanding judge to give a divine flavor to the ensuing events.

The trouble with "The Winner" is that its dialogue and construction are those of artificial comedy and would, if set in a London flat and played with British reserve, make an entertaining piece of theatre. There are stylish epigrams and smart phrases. "My thought," says the urbane young man who has refused to make the usual pass at Eva, "is that if God meant for men to make love in taxicabs He would have given us more joints."

However, Mr. Rice—who has directed his own play—has chosen to lessen the effect of his polished humor by allowing such lines to be delivered naturalistically without deliberate style. Perhaps the author-director hoped to compensate for his loss on the comic end by the serious and sincere things his play implies about contemporary metropolitan existence. Mr. Rice seems to be discovering that the degrading influences within America are not as strong as the moral fibre of some fundamentally well-brought-up human beings, and that in time of crisis we find our almost lost virtues. Since he has demonstrated this point with unsympathetic characters, one must respect "The Winner."

The actors caught between these levels do similarly respectable jobs. Joan Tetzl punches her lines till they are black and blue to give a hard portrait of Eva. Whitfield Conner manages the difficult task of being both prepossessing and unprepossessing at the same time. Lothar Re Walt deftly keeps his death scene humorous enough to prevent the play from sinking into melodrama. And Vilma Kurer as the mercenary secretary and spiteful ex-mistress is simultaneously caustic and convincing. The two more



Betty Miller, Leo Penn, and Emilie Stevens in "The Girl on the Via Flaminia"—"loveless pact."

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sympathetic characters in the play are acted with admirable restraint. Frederick O'Neal uses no tricks in his moving sequence as the judge. And while Tom Helmore as the casual but ethical lawyer leans, perhaps, a little too much on the side of light charm, he and Miss Tetzl do fulfil the surface requirement of roles which Mr. Rice did not draw very deeply in the first place. As a result "The Winner" becomes a winningly unwinning play made unwinningly winning.

—HENRY HEWES.

Play by Meters

HAPPY POETRY: Perhaps the most important poetic drama to appear within the last several months is Pulitzer Prize poet Archibald MacLeish's "This Music Crept by Me Upon the Waters" (Harvard University Press, \$1.50). In this one-act play written in unrhymed iambic tetrameter, Mr. MacLeish has fashioned what well might be the third act of a longer play. The fragment he has shown us is merely an effort to show the effect of a beautiful and miraculous moment upon several characters invited to a dinner party in the Caribbean. The moment is described as "a shoal in time where happiness is possible: / More perhaps than possible—inevitable,," or "Where now is truly now, and here/ Just here, and nothing left to hide us."

For most of us the poet points out, "Happiness is long ago or not yet come to/ Only a child or those like children,/ Meeting happiness in a summer's door/ Can take it by the hand and run with it." He then points to the intelligentsia who spend their time on the Riviera and says, "The wreckage of the right to happiness/ In painted shirts and canvas trousers/ Drinking Pernod before breakfast, the possibility of happiness so terrifies them!" Finally MacLeish explains this failure: "Happiness is difficult./ It takes a kind of courage most men/ Never are masters of, a kind of/ Innocent ruthlessness that lives/ Like leaves in the instant of the air:/ The courage just to be—to trust/ The wind that blows you."

This and a lot more of the play are simple and idyllic and offer us MacLeish at his lyrical best. However, a great deal of the play is chit-chat, and in these portions MacLeish's regular verse sounds too important for the subject matter. Here T. S. Eliot's method of using irregular verse that does not sound like verse seems the wiser course. Could the two be mixed within a single play? It might be a way out of the dilemma which at present hampers both poets' work.

—H. H.

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