

Dora

AMERICAN THEATRE and the Human Spirit

By ELMER RICE

IT WAS, I believe, Anatole France who defined criticism as the adventures of a soul among masterpieces. But most critics necessarily function upon a far less exalted plane. Not only is there, at any given moment, a scarcity of masterpieces, but the number of souls capable of high adventure is equally rare. The practitioner of the arts who attempts to evaluate the work of his contemporaries embarks upon a dubious undertaking. If he is hypocritical or consciously tactful he will extravagantly overpraise his fellow artists (particularly if they happen to be his personal friends); if he is spiteful or envious he will be unfairly disparaging. But even if he tries to be impersonal or impartial unconscious influences will color his judgment. Either he will elevate his co-workers and thus, by association, become a member of a glorious company; or else, painfully aware of his shortcomings, he will find solace in bringing others down to his own level.

For these reasons, if for no other, I shall in this discussion of the contemporary drama in America refrain from commenting upon individual writers or their works, but shall limit myself to an attempt to discover what ideological, cultural, and psychological trends are discernible in the American theatre of today. And though I speak of the American theatre I believe that its essential qualities are more or less characteristic of

the theatre of the whole Western world.

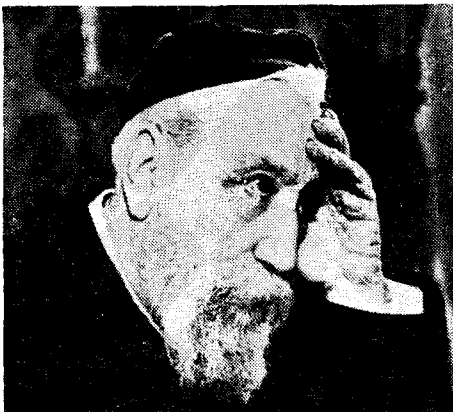
To begin with, we must remind ourselves that the artist, and particularly the dramatist, does not exist in a vacuum. He is a product of his times, and is most effective and significant when he expresses and reflects the currents of thought and of feeling that prevail in the society in which he lives. I say particularly the dramatist, for the drama is primarily a mass art. It addresses itself to the crowd rather than to the individual. And we all know that the responses of the crowd are more conservative, more emotional, less differentiated, than are those of the individuals who compose it. Furthermore, the fluid and kinetic nature of the drama makes it imperative that apprehension be swift and unmistakable. There is no time for reflection, no time to turn back the page, to view the image from more than one angle, to examine the texture of the material. What is not instantly grasped is forever lost. Hence, the dramatist, more than any other artist, must express himself in terms of the tempo and the outlook of his era. His role is not that of the thinker, the innovator, the discoverer, but, at his best, that of a catalytic agent, who fuses and vivifies what is already deeply believed or unconsciously felt by his audience. His work projects only what is already discernible: he is the mirror of his times.

All plays deal with the nature of man, and with his relationship to his fellow men, and to the material and

spiritual universe. If we look swiftly at three great periods of world drama we see, at once, how man's concept of himself is portrayed by the dramatist. To the Greeks man was an exalted, even a semi-divine being, the chief preoccupation of the gods on Olympus, and often on extremely intimate terms with them. His life's course was determined by inevitable destiny and inexorable moral laws. When the fallible protagonist of the Greek play came to his tragic end it was not defeat that was signalized, but rather the affirmation and vindication of universal principles of human behavior.

In Elizabethan times the gods were less dominant, but the world was still anthropocentric; it was still possible for man to believe that there was a divinity that shaped his ends. The Renaissance had awakened the Western world from the long sleep of the Middle Ages. It was a period of adventure and of discovery: the classics of antiquity and the New World beyond the seas. Man was flexing his muscles and proclaiming himself monarch of all he surveyed. His authority may have been recognized as brief, but he was still man, proud man. It has always seemed significant to me that Hamlet does not end with the heaping up of corpses at the court of Elsinore, but is carried on a beat farther to the triumphal entry of Fortinbras. The hero dies, but the life-cycle and the continuity of law and order are unbroken. The elo-

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Anatole France, W. D. Sievers, T. S. Eliot—"the dramatist must express himself in terms of the tempo and the outlook of his era."



—Howard Coster.

THE AUTHOR: "Consciously there is a part of me that is closely identified with Europe," Laurens van der Post has written in the introduction to "The Dark Eye in Africa," "but at heart I am indelibly and irrevocably in and of Africa." The popular conception of the white man in Africa is, at best, that of an employee in a gigantic adoption agency, but evidence of Colonel van der Post's deep association with the continent lies in practically every sentence he writes. Born in an Orange Free State village, of *voortrekker*, or pioneer, Dutch parentage, Van der Post's first language was Afrikaans, and he spoke no English until he was ten. His childhood travels took him from the interior to the Cape of Good Hope and Japan, and at the start of World War II, being in England, he enlisted in the Commandos as a private and emerged ten years later a colonel.

He served in Abyssinia, North Africa, Syria, the Dutch East Indies, and Java, where he had been sent at General Wavell's request to organize guerilla resistance and where he was taken prisoner by the Japanese. Since the war Van der Post has carried out a number of special missions for the British Government, the most recent being to the Kalahari Desert of South Africa. He lists his vocations as writer, explorer, and farmer, having farmed both in Africa and England, where he and his wife own a house in Chelsea and a cottage in Suffolk. But Africa and its (and the world's) problems of race can claim four of his five books and most of his thoughts. Several years ago, recounting in *Holiday* how a terrible mass despair had engulfed his Japanese prison camp after forced attendance at some brutal executions, Van der Post wrote, "Something had to be done, but what? Without any effort on my part the answer presented itself: 'Go and talk Africa to them.'" He did, for hours and with such feeling that the sense of final defeat never returned. He has been "talking Africa to them" ever since. —RICHARD LEMON.

AFRICA

What Is the African Soul?

"The Dark Eye in Africa," by Laurens van der Post (William Morrow, 224 pp. \$3), is a South African's attempt to answer some of the problems of Black and White in his native continent. Our reviewer is Stuart Cloete, author of "The African Giant."

By Stuart Cloete

ALMOST every week there are books about the problem of Black and White in Africa. Many of them very superficial and most of them with a strong anti-White bias, written by men who have never lived there and do not realize the difficulties of what I call the "African Transition"—transition from the early Iron Age to the terrible and complex period in which we live where man is utterly divorced from reality.

There have been several exceptions recently. Notable among these is John Gunther's "Inside Africa." Gunther is a trained observer. His book is important because it is so comprehensive. Minor errors are more than compensated for by the massive overall of the design. Now we have Colonel Laurens van der Post's "The Dark Eye in Africa." Like myself, Van der Post is a South African. Our ancestors were among the first settlers who landed in Table Land three hundred years ago. Our country is in our blood. All three of us agree that Africa is changing, that there can be no status quo. All three of us, at one time or other, have made our own separate contribution to the general picture which the reading public, ignorant of this vast continent, must paint in its own mind.

"The Dark Eye" consists of two main parts: the basis for discussion; and the discussion, or discussions. A series of questions are posed by an American lady, a missionary's wife, an Englishwoman, an Afrikaner, an English-speaking South African, and many others. Colonel van der Post answers in great detail in his inimitable prose.

Some of his answers I agree with. But the subject is so controversial that full agreement at all points in any group is almost impossible. But his most important message is that

the trouble in Africa is spiritual and not economic. That the African suffering from the general world unrest. We are all in danger of losing our souls, but the African, nearer to reality than we are, is fighting desperately for his. He is terrified of losing his past and failing to gain the future.

This is the key to the African door. I quote: "If you look at the African situation in terms of economics you will find yourself against a blank wall. Economically the African is better off than he has ever been before. . . . He has a larger share of the material goods of this world and what is called a 'higher standard of living.' It is true he still has far less than the European, but economically his life is on the upgrade. . . ." So good is his situation that one of the problems in the Union of South Africa is the influx of foreign natives from Portuguese East Africa and Rhodesia who come in to get work.

THE African trouble is spiritual. That is our trouble too, but we are already too far divorced from reality to know it. Two months ago I was on the veld in Africa. I could see no house, only the dry yellow grass, the blue mountains in the distance, and the sky. I could see nothing made by man. Today in New York I can see only concrete walls. I cannot even walk on the earth. The great sky is reduced to pocket-handkerchief size in which planes fly instead of birds. This is what frightens the African for his gods and the spirits of his fathers dwell in such natural things as the rocks and rivers and the ancient trees.

This is the aspect of the African's soul that Van der Post brings out in the "Dark Eye in Africa." It is something that must be understood before Africa, or the African, can be approached.

