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Self-delusion in Stockholm

STOCKHOLM.

EUGENE O'NEILL's "A Touch of the Poet," now in its world premiere at Stockholm's Royal Dramatic Theatre, is a distinguished and vital example of demon-driven dramaturgy. While the four-hour work, written circa 1939, follows a conventional play form, its nature can only be described as a human comedy hovering dangerously near the fires of tragedy. Self-delusion obsesses the play's central figure, retired Major Cornelius ("Con") Melody. Con, though he is the son of an Irish innkeeper, fancies himself as a Byron standing in the crowd but not of it. Feeding this aristocratic illusion are the facts that he did fight bravely under Wellington at the Battle of Talavera and that he keeps a thoroughbred mare.

Con's pretensions to refinement cost his family dearly and make him a lonely man in the Massachusetts of 1828, where he operates a wayside inn. He won't mix with the "Irish scum" around Boston and he is not accepted by the Yankee aristocrats. While his wife and daughter secretly enjoy his pretensions, to some extent, they at the same time spoil them for him: his wife, Nora, because she has so worn herself out with menial work to support his fancy ways that her appearance constantly reminds him of his unaristocratic marriage; his daughter, Sara, because she wants to rise in the world and attacks Con for a self-indulgence that stands in her way.

The situation comes to a head when Sara sets her cap for the young Yankee aristocrat Simon Harford. Simon's father insults Con by trying to buy him off and Con furiously sets out to avenge his honor. Unfortunately, the days in which such affairs were settled by duels had just passed and Con finds his expedition of revenge degenerating into a Donnybrook. This so disillusiones him that he shoots the symbol of his predilection for aristocracy, his thoroughbred mare. Then, much chastened, he joins his class and discards his extravagances while Sara becomes engaged to young Simon.

This plot, which recalls Ibsen's "The Wild Duck," is only the bare bones of the play. O'Neill, who planned "A Touch of the Poet" as a part of an eleven-play cycle tracing the conflict between soul and matter through 150 years of American history, is concerned with the large questions of

how European romance mixes with American materialism and of the impact of earthy immigrants on cold-blooded Yankees. As Nora points out, "When Con came here the chance was before him to make himself all his lies pretended to be. He had education above most Yanks and he had money enough to start him and this is a country where you can rise as high as you like and no one but the fools who envy you care what you rose from once you've the money and power that goes with it." O'Neill never shows much of the Yankee side of the picture.

Beyond a concern with social history O'Neill explores the relationship between pride and love; this is what moves contemporary audiences most. At the beginning of the play we learn that Con married Nora because he'd fallen in love with her, but was ashamed of her because her folks were only ignorant peasants. Later Nora tells Sara, "It's little you know of love and you niver will for there's the same devil of pride in you that's in him and it'll kape you from ivir givin all of yourself and that's what love is." Sara argues, "I'll love—but I'll love when it'll gain me freedom and not put me in slavery for life." Nora replies, "There's no slavery in it when you love." This simple wisdom is proved in the fourth act when, after making love to Simon, Sara discovers, "I knew nothing of love or the pride a woman can take in giving everything—a woman can forgive whatever the man she loves could do and still love him, because it was through him she found the love in herself: in one way he doesn't count at all, because it's your own love you love in him and to keep that your pride will do anything." O'Neill finally celebrates the victory of love over false pride when, at the end of the play, Nora turns to Sara and says, "Shame on you to cry when you have love. What would the young man think of you?"

In the role of Con Melody Lars Hansson rises to one of the great virtuoso performances of our day, alternating a deep romantic charm and maddened rage. He hypnotizes us with a masterful variety of actions. Who will forget the dashing way he takes his stance before the full-length mirror, flicks a speck of lint from his sleeve, slings with calculated casualness his imaginary cape over his shoulder, and



Hansson—"great virtuoso performance."

proceeds to recite Byron? When stung by Sara's rebukes, what sadistic relish burns in his eyes as he cruelly reminds her that she has the coarse body of a peasant. When he argues with his daughter he does it with the punctuated intensity of a Spanish dancer. He does not speak lines, he generates sound. His hysterical laughter fills the theatre, and his agonized squeak of ego-exorcism sears the entire audience. He can be gloriously exultant too, as he speaks of the freedom he feels when riding his horse. While some of his acting is artificial, he never loses his potential to terrify us at will.

Though played in contrasting quietness, Sif Ruud's Nora is just as memorable. As a dumpy woman prematurely aged by overwork, worry, and maltreatment, Miss Ruud manifests an uncomplicated overflow of indestructible love that immunizes her to our pity. The role of Sara is a difficult one. She must be both coarse and beautiful, both sharing her father's pretensions and railing against them. If Eva Dahlbeck doesn't quite accomplish all this she does manage to glow marvelously in the scene after she has given herself to her love.

If "A Touch of the Poet" suffers somewhat from overexposition, too many vital scenes occurring offstage, and a plethora of old-fashioned melodramatic plot details, it at the same time foreshadows O'Neill's growth into his final great period. He bluntly refuses to bribe the audience with smooth and facile writing. He seems to be saying, "Here's your damned exposition and climaxes. They are arbitrary and unreal. The true drama lies in the moments of anguish and love. Someday I shall dare to write 'Long Day's Journey Into Night,' which is pure anguish and love."—HENRY HEWES.