



BROADWAY POSTSCRIPT

Requiem for a Roué

EUGENE O'NEILL's genius for naturalistic playwriting finally led him into writing long works in which people—as in life—say the same things a dozen times; in which people—as in life—do not change; and in which people—as in life—peel off the shams of pride to arrive at a moment of short-lived serenity, and then rush back to other protective shams. This is the pattern of his final play, "A Moon for the Misbegotten," which though it has played successfully in Stockholm and Berlin is only now having its New York premiere.

Unfortunately, this American production instead of strengthening the bonds of love, anguish, and humor which tie James Tyrone, Jr., Josie Hogan, and her father together, spends too much of its energy on less essential matters. To tell us she is a messy and unlovely farm girl Wendy Hiller works frantically at contorting her face, walking in grotesque postures, and speaking in a slightly cockney accent that cannot help but remind us of her Liza Doolittle in the film, "Pygmalion." As her father, Cyril Cusack supplies the exact physical appearance and accent of the peppery, little Irish farmer, but he employs an unusual technique in which he seems to drift away from the activities onstage only to snap suddenly back in when his line is due. As a result, the first half of this production is—except for one moderately effective comic interlude when Josie and Phil play a practical joke on their rich neighbor—pretty much characterization and conversation. And we find ourselves drowsily tuning in and out on the play.

It is only when Franchot Tone, as the drink-sodden half-dead James Tyrone, enters to keep his date with Josie that "A Moon for the Misbegotten" comes to life. Miss Hiller now forgets her eccentric characterization and begins to play the gradual unfolding of an unattractive woman allowing herself the risk of confessing her love and exposing her need to be loved in return. And Mr. Tone rises to the performance of his career as the man who has sought out evil as an antidote to his own incapacity to have fine emotions towards those he should feel deeply about. Indeed, he exhibits a spark of greatness when he suddenly bursts into anger at Josie for pretending to be a slut. And the love that they finally arrive at is a love beyond the temporary gratifications of

shared bodily pleasures. For sexual intercourse only rakes up James Tyrone's guilt-ridden past. His radiant moment of love consists of being held asleep in the arms of Josie, who gives him the understanding affection he needed but never got from his mother. Josie's final lines, spoken beautifully by Miss Hiller, mean even more because we sense O'Neill speaking to his dead brother: "May you have your wish and die in your sleep soon, Jim darling. May you rest forever in forgiveness and peace."

William Pitkin has come up with some excellent morning sky effects that carefully refrain from being too showy, but at the same time reinforce the poetry that lies underneath the squalid surface. Perhaps with a bit more time the cast also will find more of the play that lies beneath O'Neill's words. Only then will it create a full stage world for fellow misbegottens, as did the Jose Quintero productions of "Long Day's Journey Into Night" and "The Iceman Cometh." In the meantime, even the flickering satisfactions of the second half of this performance will make a visit to the Bijou Theatre a rich and memorable experience.

The First Gentleman" has about it the conventional appeals of romance and regality plus a recurring pattern of ironies that give it a dramatic punctuation. This combination in the hands of that skilful and stylish actor, Robert Morley, proved so popular to London audiences a decade back that Norman Ginsbury's play ran close to two years there.

Yet in its American production it seems little more than a sketchy chronicle of King George IV's attempts to interfere with the marriage of his daughter, the Princess Charlotte. Director Tyrone Guthrie puts the accent on explosive farcical detail, and allows actor Walter Slezak to play George as a buffooning boor. The action is thus reduced to one repeated joke, the preposterous self-centredness of a dissolute monarch. Even Charlotte's death seems to exist only to prove that no conceivable human consideration could affect this monstrously self-indulgent ruler.

With this sort of treatment, Mr. Ginsbury's attitude towards his story remains unclear. We neither despise George for his ruthlessness, nor do we sympathize with him for his inability

to have warm human relationships. What we are left with is a mildly amusing portrait of a vain man.

As the center of attention, Walter Slezak plows through the dialogue as if it were all comic material that he must constantly make funny. Looking every pound the king, his outrageous confidence demands our laughter. Yet one misses the kind of modulated delivery that could make the play's cautious wit sparkle. One also misses the elegance that earned George IV the title of "Europe's first gentleman." In the subsidiary roles, Inge Swenson brings fresh beauty and unbridled enthusiasm to the part of Charlotte. When she isn't pirouetting she's skipping, and when she isn't skipping she's bouncing. Isobel Elsom adds a theatrical highlight as Charlotte's disenfranchised mother, and Peter Donat manages to be noble without also appearing smug as Charlotte's husband.

Ralph Alswang has designed sets which are both practical and lush, and director Guthrie has contributed some fine directorial touches such as seating the King on a hobby horse as he takes advantage of Charlotte's naivete. Yet he somehow fails to organize the rambling events of "The First Gentleman" into a meaningful story on the one hand, or a laugh riot on the other.

DUBLIN.

That tiny Ireland should be the source of such theatre talents as America's greatest playwright (O'Neill), Britain's greatest modern playwright (Shaw), and the world's greatest living playwright (O'Casey), would seem more than sufficient excuse for a patriotic celebration, and so it is that Dublin this week begins its first annual theatre festival. Following Edinburgh's example the festival will have its international treats, which include the Sadler's Wells Ballet, Jean Vilar's Theatre Nationale Populaire, and the European English-language premier of Tennessee Williams's "The Rose Tattoo" (Ireland has no theatre censorship, though the play's most important prop will have to be smuggled past the sodality). There will also be a new British production of Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest."

More exciting to the visiting theatregoer will be special productions of O'Casey's "Juno and the Paycock" and Synge's "Playboy of the Western World" by the renowned Abbey The-



atre, and Michael MacLiammoor in Denis Johnston's "The Old Lady Says No" at the Gate Theatre. A late night revue parodying local events and a program of Yeats plays rounds out the home schedule.

While the casual tourist will probably spend a lot of his time wandering through the green Irish countryside, the serious theatregoer will be well-advised to visit the foyer of the old Abbey Theatre, where playwright-director Lennox Robinson will give afternoon talks. For this year will probably be the last in which one can see the historic old building whose auditorium was partially destroyed by fire in 1951, as next year the Irish Government plans to raze the building preparatory to constructing a new theatre on the same site.

Festival director Brendan Smith has done a remarkable job of assembling this first festival on seven months notice amid the big-talk-but-no-money atmosphere that invariably surrounds the beginnings of such projects. "Eventually," he says, "we would like to commission new plays from important Irish authors. And if we could hold the festival in mid-September we might get more star attractions to premiere here on their way to London, just as they do in Edinburgh."

A visit to a typical Abbey production revealed the current and, it is hoped, temporary dilemma this famous organization is facing. Because it must use the large Queens Theatre for the time being, it has the twin problems of attracting mass audiences and devoting itself to producing plays of Irish life. Thus, it finds itself performing a great many new and popular but not very high-quality melodramas. When asked why the Abbey preferred such fare to the later and unproduced plays of O'Casey, the Abbey's managing director, Ernest Blythe, gave this interesting explanation. "While O'Casey's later plays may be better than most of the ones we do, audiences here expect more from O'Casey and would be disappointed to find his later plays not as good as 'Juno and the Paycock' or 'The Plough and the Stars.' But they expect less from our other writers."

For all its dilemma, the Abbey remains a good permanent acting company and the stimulus of festival-commissioned plays from Sean O'Faolin, Elizabeth Bowen, and others would seem to be just what the doctor ordered. For the daily rush of colorful language, humor, and rebellious spirit in working-class Ireland still furnishes material galore, not so much for high-toned cultural exercises as for earthy festivity.

—HENRY HEWES.



TV AND RADIO

A Small Frequency for the Muse

ROSE ORENTE, a young New Yorker who writes publicity for John Wiley and Sons, publishers of scientific and technical books, has been writing poetry since she was eight years old. Steadily, across the years, she has submitted her poems, several thousand of them, to the nation's leading magazines, but she has never been published except in vanity magazines, who occasionally have accepted her work but never paid her for it. To her credit Miss Orente also has three novels—unpublished. Last October this persistent collector of rejection slips found in her mail a blue brochure: an official entry blank for a verse-play contest sponsored jointly by CBS Radio and the Academy of American Poets. The prizes for win-place-and-show were \$500, \$300, and \$200, plus a \$300 fee for the winning broadcast.

The poetess was not so much attracted by the prize money as she was by the presence on the trio of contest judges of one of her favorite writers, Thornton Wilder (Maxwell Anderson and Brooks Atkinson were the other two). She completed the entry blank, set about looking for a subject, and by February 1, 1957 (the contest closing time), she had mailed her typed, double-spaced manuscript suitable for twenty-seven minutes of broadcast time, accompanied by "a proper return stamped envelope." Two-and-one-half months later, on April 14, the CBS Radio Workshop presented "Carlotta's Serape," a verse-play by Rose Orente, first prizewinner.

My first probing question (on lunching shortly afterwards with this winner) was, "How do you account for the fact that after years of your failure to receive recognition as a poet, three prominent American men of letters unanimously chose your verse-play for first honors out of a list of 167 official entries in the contest, including the work of some highly regarded poets?"

Miss Orente's explanation was that she had recently completed a four-year psychoanalysis by a specialist in writer-patients. Her analysis has enabled her to understand that, while consciously she had always sought success as a poet, unconsciously all her creative efforts had been governed by a desire not to sell. Her characters, she feels, are now psychologically valid. Furthermore, now she is able to revise her work, whereas formerly

she was incapable of editing. The impact of her analysis on Miss Orente's poetry extends even to the theme of her prize-winning verse-play. "Carlotta's Serape," mostly a dialogue in a Mexican marketplace between an old weaver and a girl who has had several unhappy love affairs, is, in a sense, a therapy administered by a wise old man to a young woman who uses misery as a self-inflicted goad. "What unnatural laws you follow!" says the old weaver to Carlotta, as they bargain over the sale of the serape. "They win you only pain." In the end the sale is completed; Carlotta has gained some maturity.

If Miss Orente's new approach to the muse is heavily psychoanalytical, the three judges of the CBS Radio-Academy of American Poets contest responded to her winning verse-play in more conventional terms. "A charming idea!" commented one judge. "This seems to me to be pure art," ruled another. "It has a sensitive, thoughtful idea, and the writing, I think, is beautiful." As a radio play, this listener found it rather haunting and fragile but static. Three veteran radio actors played it. Technically, the actors "taped" the play first without a music background, which was later dubbed in. This is a production error, especially in a verse-play, which gains much from the evocation of a mood. Actors invariably derive important help from the presence and the immediacy of a score.

"Carlotta's Serape" represents the first brush the Academy of American Poets has had with radio. Mrs. Hugh Bullock, the Academy's president, thinks there ought to be at least one regular network program devoted to poetry. The president is right, of course. The new TV generation, growing up, allegedly turns more and more to radio, chiefly as background for homework and reading. Today's youth will never know the excitement of hearing the rich verse-plays of Archibald MacLeish, Stephen Vincent Benet, and Norman Corwin, when American radio drama strode across the air-waves to do battle with Nazis and Fascists. But today's poets have their own original testaments to articulate—clinical or otherwise, what matter, so long as they be alive. Let's leave one small frequency of American radio for the muse—amid disc-jockeys and soapsuds.

—ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON.