



An Adaptor Is an Adaptor

A COMPARISON of Eric Bentley's precise but not humorless adaptation of Brecht's 1924 play "A Man's a Man" (now at the Masque Theatre) with Gerhard Nellhaus's softer and more colloquial adaptation of Brecht's 1953 revised "Man is Man" (now at the Living Theatre) is less revealing than had been anticipated. Far more important than the quality of the translation is the sort of production two different directors have given the plays. And while John Hancock's more emphatically theatrical staging at the Masque is the clearer and the more satisfactory of the two, it doesn't begin to achieve the sort of results that ex-Berliner Ensemble Director Carl Weber got with "Puntilla" (translated by Nellhaus) at Carnegie Tech last May. Nor does the play, which seems to take much too long to demonstrate that a man's identity can be completely changed to fit the needs of a militaristic society, ever become much more than a lecture on a point about which we don't need to be convinced.

The whole overpublicized contest, which will probably attract large numbers of people to sample both productions, recalls a 1954 interview with Brecht in which he told *Saturday Review* readers that he would like to see his plays done in as many different ways and in as many different translations as possible. The great director-playwright was a pragmatist who understood that his only protection against the accidents of a given production or a given adaptation was to have many instead of few.

At the present time it is the practice for an adaptor to seek, and often get, twenty-eight-year exclusive translation rights to a foreign play, and for a producer to share in revenue from all productions of the work for an eighteen-year period. While the original producer cannot forbid a subsequent Broadway or Off-Broadway production after his own has closed, a second producer cannot offer his investors the possibility of any revenue from subsidiary rights, which makes his project more difficult and, in effect, constitutes an economic deterrent to there being revivals. (Broadway had none last season.)

The crime here is not that the profit motive is being exercised. After all, even that old Marxist, George Bernard Shaw, maintained that it was a man's duty to make as much money as he

could. It is simply that the public is being deprived of its right to pursue the enjoyment of the world's best modern plays.

How could the current practice be changed? A first step would be for the Dramatists' Guild to set up a standard obligatory contract in which no producer could receive royalties from subsequent Broadway, Off-Broadway, summer-theatre, community-theatre, and amateur presentations, or to lease exclusive motion picture or TV rights for more than five years from the closing date of his initial Broadway or Off-Broadway production. Similarly the adaptor should be permitted his exclusivity for a period of no more than five years.

After that time the adaptor could continue to receive royalties from those who wished to publish or perform his translation, but he would receive nothing from those who preferred to use a new adaptation. The new adaptors would receive royalties for their adaptations, but would not be able to block others from doing their own different versions.

At first glance, such a notion might seem desperately unfair to producers and to adaptors. However, foreign authors would also have to agree to a reduction in royalties during that crucial period when a production is paying off its cost. And the adaptor would simply have to reconcile himself to diminishing his total compensation for a successful six-months adapting job from \$50,000 to \$35,000, or by about \$4,000 after taxes. But if the adaptor were any good, he would find this loss more than compensated for by the availability of more and better plays for him to readapt, just as the more intelligent producers would find themselves able to improve upon many a mediocre initial production by someone else.

Besides refreshing our theatre and permitting the producers to be judged by their taste and their creative insight, instead of by their ability to tie up a property, distort it to suit their own convenience, and then jam it down the public's throat with determined merchandising, it might also allow theatregoers to discover, as have some critics, that a play which seems unexceptional in its first exposure can in a different production become a great and unforgettable evening in one's life.

—HENRY HEWES.

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JACKIE GLEASON

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*Pronounced GEE-GO

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Humor Between Equals

THE NIGHT President Lincoln was shot in Ford's Theatre, the gala Washington audience was laughing at a play about a drawling Yankee in England, "Our American Cousin," by Tom Taylor. Billed as "an eccentric comedy," it was a popular favorite and had been performed at least a thousand times. Ever since then, American and English audiences have been laughing at comedies in which nationals of both countries exchange quips, lampooning respective weaknesses and strengthening common bonds. "Ruggles of Red Gap," "The Ghost Goes West," and many others come to mind as examples.

This is humor among equals, a kind of cousinly jesting, and it is difficult to bring off with others outside the family. "Ensign O'Toole," a new NBC comedy series about the Navy, tried a counter-cultural theme in its first episode, and failed because the characters were Japanese stereotypes. They were presented as inferiors—and one can mock but not be gently ironic with inferiors.

On the other hand, "Fair Exchange," a new hour-long comedy series on CBS (Friday nights), tried this kind of humor and brought it off with surprising success in the program's debut recently. An update of the American-cousin-abroad theme, it seizes television's unique advantage in story-telling speed and simultaneously parlays an American in England with an English counterpart in the United States. The parlays are teen-age girls, daughters of World-War-II veterans—the American (Eddie Foy, Jr.) runs a ticket agency here; the Englishman (Victor Maddern) is the proprietor of a bicycle shop in London. The families each take in the other's daughter for a year—Patty wants to study acting at the Royal Academy; Heather to broaden herself in the States.

The television audience's capacity to absorb more teen-age situation comedies has now been demonstrated to be a bottomless pit. We are victims of a holocaust of repetitive juvenilia which apparently will never be ended by the diviners of the public's wants; but, if

it must be endured, let it be cushioned with such stuff as "Fair Exchange."

The English and American scenes were intercut in the premiere episode: from CBS Press Information we learn that two resident companies are shooting concurrently, one in London and one in Hollywood. (This arrangement may actually contribute some margin of discernible difference in the playing styles of the separated groups of actors.) Mr. Foy, an accomplished variety artist, is delightful as the American father—playing everything with a detached air, as if he were kidding the briskly moving story and his own role in it. But the secret of the show's success, the first time out, lay chiefly in the affectionate cross-ribbing of easily recognized national symbols. A transatlantic telephone call connects the two families for the final decision to exchange their daughters-in-residence. While the long-distance charges on the American side mount, the mother of the English girl must have her cup of tea before she makes up her mind to let her daughter go. Independence Day finds the two girls swapped, and now the relentless pageantry of July Fourth is playfully winked at. The English girl—in America—can't possibly play Betsy Ross—she has an English accent.

On the other side, it's that old chestnut, the pea-souper, causing silly mistakes in identity. There's the English Army man who learned tolerance in India—a quality easily fractured by a neighbor's trying to get an antique car started. The sight-gags run from the sign YANKEE GO HOME, put up by the English kid brother in his bedroom, which has been pre-empted by the substitute sister, to Roman candles which startle the horse from under an English policeman. The English help Patty celebrate July Fourth away from home—and the American girl, turning the event from incongruity to respect sings "Greensleeves" prettily for the neighborhood group in the London street. This is not farce or slapstick; neither is it sophisticated fun requiring special areas of knowledge in the viewer's background to be appreciated.

The writing in the first show was clever, the cast and direction good. We hope "Fair Exchange" can keep it up. There are plenty of loyalties, ideals, and conventions on both sides of the Atlantic to be examined in broad-beamed humor. Comedy, it has been said, is a form of rational discourse, questioning and exposing absurdities and vices. If "Fair Exchange," created by Cy Howard, can maintain, at its popular entertainment level, the quality of such discourse, it can be useful as well as amusing.

—ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON.

Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

EX MARKS THE SPOT

Below are defined sixteen words, each of which contains the letters EX side by side (but not necessarily at the beginning of the word). Michael Hayes of Chicago, Illinois, tells us that if you drop the EX in each case, you will get another word, and these words he defines alongside the first definition. (Example: To breathe out is healthy. EXHALE—HALE.) Answers on page 34.

1. A specialist is saucy.
2. Dear is thoughtful.
3. The new addition is a girl's name.
4. Summits are beasts.
5. An area is a shelter.
6. To obtain by threat is a civil wrong.
7. College big shot is a snoop.
8. To interpret is a weight.
9. A network is something more.
10. Bending the elbow is a time of indulgence.
11. Resident of this state is brown.
12. Enlargement is a strain.
13. To denude is to stand for an artist.
14. A part of something larger is a religious pamphlet.
15. An ancient manuscript is a fish.
16. To praise is to announce a funeral.

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