



Last Laughs and Last Tapes

A DISTINGUISHING characteristic of this disastrous theatre season is the number of plays by respected writers that try to combine the fun of satire with bitter resentment toward our unsatisfactory contemporary life.

One such drama was Lillian Hellman's recent *My Mother, My Father, and Me*, which jumped hysterically from target to target to demonstrate obvious inner contradictions in the urban middle-class family. Admittedly, Miss Hellman contrived some outrageously funny moments, and created an accurate image of the monstrous insanity we accept as a substitute for purposeful action. Yet the cumulative effects of her play were an unpleasantness and unconcern grimly suffered by the audience to no apparent dramatic purpose.

Another noted writer has attempted a similar drama and has failed for similar reasons. Irwin Shaw's *Children from Their Games* is, for the most part, a misanthrope's relentless diatribe against our times. The misanthrope, Melvin Peabody, is played with demonic passion, intelligence, and taste by Martin Gabel. Yet this two-hour unrelieved howl is, at best, an extended one-act play in which the protagonist's final cure seems arbitrary and joyless.

The irascible Peabody not only enjoys the pain of gout but also gets savage pleasure from confronting all forms of pain around him. He records on tape a *Hear It Now* of the horrors of noise city-dwellers endure without protest: street-drilling, demolition, violent TV dialogue, vacuum-cleaner whines, obscene radio commercials, and, of course, the raucous rock 'n' roll that is the ideal entertainment in this age of competitive noise.

To demonstrate Peabody's masochism still further, Mr. Shaw has the fifty-six-year-old man merrily tearing up photographs of his younger, more handsome self, and rejecting all conventional pleasures. He is broke, but turns down \$250,000 for his house. He needs love, but rejects a woman who offers it, because of the self-deluding inanities love involves. He even refuses to take a pill that will relieve him of gout pain.

Is all this merely the bitterness of a neurotic whose life is an overwhelming failure? Or is it, as some maintain, a valid appraisal of our times by an author who sees the responsibility of the world's deterioration as his own? Pea-

body's eloquent speech to a friend strongly suggests the latter: "I am in pain. I am in pain for myself today, in pain for myself for everything I did since the day I was born. I am in pain for the world . . . , for the temples that have crumbled, the altars that have been defiled, the children who have been taken from their games. . . . I am in pain and I believe I would be better off dead. . . . There, there, don't cry. Have some vodka, it has no taste."

Unfortunately, the dramatically challenging sentiments of this speech are never very strongly contested. Mr. Shaw is thus obliged to resolve his nominal plot by presenting a final picture of Peabody as a curable neurotic.

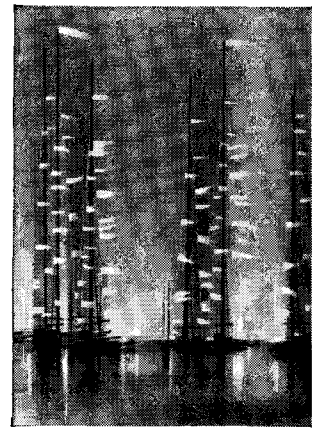
The truth may be that both Miss Hellman and Mr. Shaw believed that their plays would be esthetically adequate if they represented our mass insanity in strong theatrical images, without indicating either its sources or its solution. Perhaps the ultimate purpose in their tough-minded dramas was to show sufficient contempt for audiences to win their belligerent works the proud badge of unpopularity.

A more effective way to look at our contemporary ills would be, perhaps, to determine how we arrived at our self-delusion and mass insanity rather than merely dramatizing their unpleasant results. *The Dragon*, a parable of a police state by the late Soviet writer Eugene Schwartz, does this to some extent. Writing such a play within an actual police state, however, apparently forced its author to encumber it with fairy-tale accoutrements and to conclude it with an acceptable Soviet moral.

The Phoenix Theatre has produced Schwartz's work attractively and with much the same jolly air that it would require in a Russian production. Its most effective moments, however, are those in which we see how the three-headed dragon reduces a people to such fear that they dread even the *attempt* to kill it. They reason that their present dragon at least keeps other, probably worse, dragons away.

The production fails, however, because we are not really moved by the young liberator's steadfastness, or by the sudden awakening of revolutionary spirit among people willing to jeopardize their own safety to help him. Profound emotional response to this drama requires something more than the Phoenix cast seems able to evoke.

—HENRY HEWES.



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TV AND RADIO

Straight from the Wolf's Mouth

CULTURAL technicians interested in making converts for high-art forms would have been both instructed and entertained recently by *In the Mouth of the Wolf*, a television documentary film presented by the CBS Public Affairs Department. In a departure from the didactic method of communication, it successfully shifted the emphasis from the art form itself, and even from the artist, to the public. Viewers of this engaging sixty-minute program were invited to identify with the people of Parma, Italy, generally represented as critical, tough-minded, but passionate fans of grand opera. The attitudes of these Parma opera-lovers were revealed as they eagerly awaited the performance by their local opera company of Verdi's *Luisa Miller*. These were not the social elite, we were told, but ordinary citizens, people one meets in bars, shopkeepers, policemen. It was easy for the average American viewer to recognize their common humanity and through sympathetic association to understand in some degree their commitment to grand opera.

In our country, for the public at large, even well-meant, constant exposure to opera, without natural, positive feeling may only enhance alienation. It was a virtue of the CBS documentary that it began with sentiments toward opera that are no doubt widely shared by television viewers. These attitudes were articulated by a narrator, the proprietor of a bar in Parma, who said he was an Italian-American born in New Jersey. He married an Italian singer and was compelled to like opera by domestic pressure. Opera has funny plots, he commented, but the people of Parma actually believe them and are not offended by their conventions, which often appear ridiculous to the uninitiated. Of course, non-enthusiasts who spoof opera are conventional, too; but this trite note was precisely the correct one to strike to capture the attention of an American television audience likely to be hostile or indifferent to opera.

Having introduced the Parma townspeople as experts who know their opera as Americans know their baseball, the barkeep gave way as narrator to Margherita Roberti, an American opera singer who had come to Parma to sing the leading role in *Luisa Miller*. Miss Roberti's commentary on the visual story of backstage opera rehearsals was

followed by sequential scenes from the actual opening-night performance. The performers took television viewers one step closer to the Verdi work without losing the empathy established between the viewers and the people of Parma.

The American soprano, on stage, fits the prima donna image. She gave her real name, Mary Jean Roberts, and said that she came from Davenport, Iowa. In forthright, unpretentious narration, she came through as a hearty, likable person. She said she was worried about catching cold and about whether or not the supercritical Parma audience would like her. Our easy identification with Miss Roberti was a bridge to the other leading singers and the conductor—all Italians.

English titles flashed over bilingual conversations were fresh, effective devices in this documentary context. The hectic preparations backstage were theatre traditions familiar to the television audience, but Miss Roberti infused them with humor. The cast got the giggles when cues were missed, and the conductor's downbeat went unanswered in the confusion. The star refused to take a death-fall in rehearsal lest she get another run in her stocking; and her lusty "Oh boy, oh boy!" was spontaneous and winning, as the singers polished off a rousing climax with a wallop. The professionalism and exacting discipline required of opera singers were impressively suggested. *In Bocca al Lupo* (the program's title) is an expressive phrase for the ordeal of the performers as they face across the footlights the great, encircling mouth of the darkened theatre with its unpredictable audience.

Predictably, the wolf, which had made some furious signs in advance, roundly applauded in the end. For television's popular audience, accustomed to suspension of belief, the manipulation was esthetically justified. J. C. Sheers, who cleverly wrote and produced the documentary, and Robert Morgan, who briskly directed and edited the lively footage, may be forgiven the storytelling liberties they took in the handling of their material; I would guess they made friends for grand opera. *In the Mouth of the Wolf* demonstrated that the strategy of through-the-public-to-the-art can be diverting and fruitful in the battle for quality in mass taste.

—ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON.