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TV AND RADIO

Theater of the Ear

TWO SHORT PLAYS presented recently by WRVR, the FM station of Riverside Church in New York City, suggest that a new generation of playwrights could be writing fresh, compelling radio drama if there were a radio theater for which they could write. *Icarus* and *4-H Club* are the work of Sam Shepard, a twenty-two-year-old off-Broadway playwright whose plays have been produced in churches and café theaters. Puzzling, bizarre, pedestrian, yet touched with ominous overtones of violence and horror, they require of the listener that he enter into a guessing game with the author, trying to decipher the symbolism that one suspects is latent under the deceptive simplicity of the apparent content.

Listeners to WRVR in the past two years have had recurrent opportunities to compare old and new styles in radio drama. The station, under the imaginative leadership of Jack D. Summerfield as general manager, has been seeking "to rekindle an interest in radio as a basic medium for drama, and to provide a forum for some of the newest and most energetic forces in the American theater today." The station picked up a three-hour discussion recently, which began at midnight on the stage of an off-Broadway theater, in which producers, critics, and actors spoke with eloquence and passion of the *Marat/Sade* "total theater" play—a dialogue that developed into a probing examination of the state of the theater in the world today. WRVR presented classical and modern versions of *Hamlet* in 1963. In 1964, listeners heard performances of *As You Like It* and Bernard Shaw's *Man of Destiny*. Last Christmas, there was a "free adaptation of the medieval miracle plays," presented with charm and simple dignity, as well as Stephen Vincent Benét's *Into Egypt*. A week later, Samuel Beckett's latest work for radio, *Cascando*, "a piece for music and voice," had its American premiere over WRVR, and in March, the two Sam Shepard plays launched the station's Riverside Radio Theater.

A group of three programs from the BBC by Barry Bermange called "Inventions for Radio" have been presented more recently. No actors are used in them, only voices from real life skillfully edited and formally arranged in patterns of silence and pure electronic sounds, expressing feelings about dreams, the afterlife, and God.

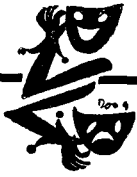
But *Icarus* and *4-H Club* are representatives of original, contemporary

American radio drama (electronic music was composed especially for their radio presentation, yet they remain essentially stage pieces performed in another medium). *Icarus* is set near a beach. Three young men and two girls, their picnic ended, await a display of fireworks. A jet plane flies erratically above them, two of the men send smoke signals to the plane, the third man and the girls go for walks on the beach, the plane writes $E=mc^2$ in the sky and crashes in the sea amid bursts of explosive emotion from the cast as a crowd quickly gathers to gape at the catastrophe. *4-H Club* is set in a kitchen containing three young men. Coffee is brewed, but there are no cups. One man crunches an apple, while another recalls mowing lawns for extra money. Desultory conversation explodes into violent fantasy as they pretend they are showering people in the street below with apples.

ONE man grows petulant for fear of mice in the garbage can, and his friends again erupt in a make-believe, atavistic destruction of the mice. Delicate sensibilities would find it difficult to take, yet there is a crude honesty in these abstract, impersonal beings who have only the vaguest, most tenuous relation to each other. If there is no meaning hidden here, the author is a skillful illusionist indeed.

Samuel Beckett's *Cascando* is also a difficult work; it needs more than one listening; but in its conciseness and compression, exploring the problem of human identity in two voices (one who speaks and one who knows), its impact resonates in the listener's mind. Beckett, of course, writes for radio because, in England, they pay well for radio drama: there is a market and an audience. Sam Shepard, who shares Beckett's world of abstraction, could undoubtedly contribute much to American radio drama, but he needs a market and an audience. His generation grew up without radio and is unaware of its power. Roger L. Stevens, the President's Special Assistant for the Arts, spoke seriously in a recent discussion of funding of creative radio experimentation. Now that some federal aid is beginning to flow to the arts, a grant to Riverside Radio Theater might be considered (it has earned it), in order to make it possible for contemporary young playwrights to explore in depth the fascinating dimensions radio offers their generation's unique approach to theater.

—ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON.



Strike Four

THE FOURTH and final production of the first Lincoln Center Repertory Theater season at the Beaumont Theater seems a jumpy and joyless labor for both cast and audience. Taking a cut version of Bertolt Brecht's long parable, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, director Jules Irving has manufactured something far less effective than did Brecht at the Berliner Ensemble (1954), Alan Schneider at Washington, D.C.'s Arena Stage (1961), or Edward Payson Call at Minneapolis's Guthrie Theater (1965). Oddly enough, it is also well beneath what Carl M. Weber achieved with some of the same actors at San Francisco's Actor's Workshop in 1964.

The New York premiere abounds with mistakes that work to the detriment of the play. To begin with, the agrarian argument of the prologue is played on an apron stage in front of a curved curtain with a corrugated iron façade that suggests the remains of a burned-out warehouse. Undoubtedly designer James Stearns wanted to emphasize the fact that the play takes place in an atmosphere of postwar desolation, for when this iron curtain lifts we see a fragment of a bombed building standing in the center of a raised revolving stage. This anchors a half-stage curtain on each side of it. When these are open we glimpse the Caucasian mountains low in the vast, empty void behind. As in the Broadway production of *The Devils*, this void is distracting. And matters are made worse by another void, the apron stage, which remains forbidding and unused during the entire first and second acts.

The actors seem reconciled to their losing skirmishes with their physical environment and the acceleration demanded both by the cuts and the direction. Halfheartedly the prologue's goatherds oppose the building of a dam in their valley. Then a storyteller appears to sing, with robust mellifluity but with no great insight, the introduction and significance of the old fairy tale about Grusha, the peasant girl who risked everything to save an aristocratic child abandoned during a people's rebellion.

Amazingly, Elizabeth Huddle, whose simplicity, warmth, and directness made her a radiant Grusha in the San Francisco production, now seems rushed and unsure. Deprived of the time to engender a genuine response to the soldier Simon's awkward attempts at a proposal, her practical but eager "My answer is yes" reduces one of the play's most fool-

proof dramatic moments to a detail of exposition. Furthermore, when, a little later, we see Grusha striding breathlessly against the counter-motion of the fast-turning revolving stage and heaving a sigh of relief at its cessation, the audience laughs more in sympathy with the actress than with the character.

Another disappointment is the scene in which Grusha must carry the baby across a swaying mountain bridge. The use of a realistic and tricked-up bridge serves to push the event into cheap melodrama. At this point one cannot help recalling that not only was Brecht a poet strongly opposed to the introduction of "stage business," but also that he cared so little for suspense and exposition that he very often told his audience in advance exactly what was going to happen, thereby liberating the actor from that menial function, and permitting a fuller concentration on a deeper and more poetic expression of emotion.

To say that the proceedings are somewhat redeemed in the final act may only

mean that after what has preceded, mere competence is set off to advantage. As if they had just noticed its availability, the actors now begin to use the forestage. As Azdak, the unorthodox judge, Robert Symonds seems to understand what he is saying and, beyond that, seems supremely confident that he can surmount any of the production's shortcomings. While he misses some of the mystery and ambiguity of the character, to emerge as more opportunistic than philosophic, and indulges himself a bit too much in the sort of quaintness that we remember as Lionel Barrymore's latter-day trademark, he does fulfil the function of his role. This helps the others, too, so that the final scene, in which Grusha and the child's blood-mother must vie for possession, is more satisfactory throughout—although it comes too late to save the evening.

We are left to hope that next season will be better. But a reluctant suspicion persists that this company, which has here performed so consistently below the promising level it reached in San Francisco, may be unwilling or unable to learn from its own mistakes or to make use of the wealth of experienced professional talent available in New York City. Even Brecht couldn't flourish like that.

—HENRY HEWES.

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