



Mixed Demotion

FOR BETTER or worse the modern theater appears headed toward plays in which the plot is missing, or at least very much demoted from the all-important position it used to hold. If one looks at the best recent plays (i.e., *The Caretaker*, *A Man for All Seasons*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *Chips With Everything*, *After the Fall*, *Luther*, *The Subject Was Roses*, *Hughie*, *Tiny Alice*, *Inadmissible Evidence*, and *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*), one feels that whatever plot the author has supplied is a lesser factor in the play's potential effectiveness. The richness of our theater-going experience will be determined less by suspense and resolution, than it will by atmosphere, poetry, character insight, abrasiveness, blasphemy, and above all by excitingly imaginative though not necessarily logical production moments.

The Munich Bavarian State Theater's twin bill of Goethe's *The Accomplices* and Büchner's *Woyzeck* at the New York City Center is a remarkable demonstration of how this trend may have begun. The early Goethe piece, written in 1769, is full of plot and intrigue, with marital infidelity and robbery as its staples. Yet this patently artificial work, as stylishly performed by the Munich company, now is most effective for its confrontations which show up the truer nature of the characters' professed emotions.

On the other hand, *Woyzeck*, written in 1836, represents a complete break with the old traditions. While this twenty-four-scene work has a plot of cuckoldry and murder, its more important virtues are its poetry and its use of the theater as a means of expressing exaggeratedly the ridiculousness of society's conventions. One will not soon forget the haunted but simple wisdom in Heinrich Schweiger's suffering soldier, or the beauty of Elizabeth Orth's wife longing for something shinier than her drab life. Jürgen Rose's scenery and costumes also contribute superbly to the play's eloquent fabric of socially perpetuated poverty.

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A more contemporary indictment of social apathy is currently being performed on Tuesday and Wednesday nights at the Two Bleecker Street Theatre Workshop. There, with the audience seated in chairs lining three walls of a large darkened room, Arrabal's *Automobile Graveyard* is being used by imaginative director Joseph H. Dunn and a heroically masochistic cast to create

a social inferno. The entire middle of the room is filled with remnants of wrecked cars, here and there made visible only by flashing lights of the sort one sees near airports. Amid this pile of junk human beings live at their rawest and lowest, and eventually the one decent human being in the place, a Christlike young man named Emanu, is tortured and killed in front of us. At the end of what may be the most grueling two-and-a-half hours ever spent in a theater, the audience is admonished by one of the actors to "Wake up!" While this production is beautifully staged and unsparingly performed it is, like *The Brig* a couple of seasons ago, a fascinating experience for about fifteen minutes, and then a relentless nightmare that continues on despite its already having made its dramatic point. Because the plot is so drowned in superior production detail it becomes a chamber of horrors only the most adventurous theatergoer will want to experience. For it is probably more intensely Theater of Cruelty than the *Marat/Sade*.

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At Washington D.C.'s Arena Stage, director Edwin Sherin has executed a production of John Arden's *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* that uses the play neither as suspense nor for the cumulative evocation of atmosphere that is so remarkably achieved in the current New York version. Indeed, these qualities do not flourish in a theater surrounded on four sides by spectators. Accordingly, the presentation here begins with a dance by the entire cast to tell us that we are watching the ritual of performance more or less for its own sake. Its point is not to discover whether Serjeant Musgrave succeeds or fails in his strange peace mission, but rather to demonstrate along the way in a heightened fashion man's essential inability to be any more immune to violence than other animals. It is a superbly artistic and dynamic ensemble effort, with its most memorable scene being the one in which the striking miners armed with sticks confront the soldiers. And oddly enough the peripheral character of Bludgeon, the Bargee, here played by James Kenny, emerges as the play's key figure, a symbol of man's appetite for violence.

While this trend leaves something to be desired for those who seek cerebral stimulation, it is a welcome corrective to prosaic plays that stir emotions only in a more calculated and superficial way.

—HENRY HEWES.

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Ratings Rumble

PALM SPRINGS, CALIF. **T**ELEVISION PRODUCERS, critics, labor and management executives, and international communication experts met here recently, at the Third Annual Hollywood Festival of World Television. They screened outstanding foreign programs, discussed new program trends, color film, financing and communication satellites—but the meeting's surprise conversation piece was the Nielsen ratings. A panel of nine top Hollywood television producers, openly polled, voted six to three in favor of government administration of ratings or federal regulation of the commercial rating services.

Several producers previously had listened to a luncheon address by Rex Sparger, a former staff member of a House sub-committee which investigated ratings. Mr. Sparger, a critic of Nielsen, recently attempted to demonstrate the weaknesses of "the Bible of the industry" by "rigging the ratings" of four prime-time programs. He mailed a questionnaire to homes that had Nielsen audimeters attached to their sets and offered them money to watch certain shows, thus "biasing" the sample and rendering it inaccurate. His feelings about ratings were shared by all members of the Hollywood panel. "It's a way of life," said one producer. "There are only three stores (networks) in town, and we have to do business with them."

William Dozier, producer of *Batman*, asked: "What difference does it make if the ratings aren't accurate?" At an-

other point, he said: "TV is headed for total stagnation." David Levy, producer of *The Addams Family*, quoted a network executive who said to him: "We need in your shows more sound effects and less writing." Sparger, who is being sued by the A.C. Nielsen Company for \$1.5 million for alleged interference with its business, suggested to the producers that they sue Nielsen "for interfering with your business." He plans to write a book about ratings; and he hopes to persuade Congressmen to reopen the ratings hearings, which concluded in 1963 with a gentle admonition to Nielsen to improve its methods. "The Federal Communications Commission didn't want to put the rating services out of business," he said, "and the networks were expected to demand changes, but they failed to do so. The networks never see the Nielsen sample, which is supposed to be secret—only the final figures." Nielsen has recently adopted a new national sample of 1,174 homes, but it's still a "permanent" sample—that is, the same homes are measured over and over again.

AUDIENCE sampling procedures are valid, experts agree; but at best they represent an imperfect popularity poll with many departures from the mathematical ideal. Perhaps the vote at the Hollywood World Television Festival indicates that important industry members are ready to look seriously at proposals for some sort of independent Office of Research Methodology. Undoubt-

edly some agency, responsive to both the U.S. Census Bureau and the FCC, could, with sufficient funds, provide a larger, changing, and more accurate sample of audience tuning; and it could also carry on continuous research to reduce bias and sampling error. Neither of these two government agencies has said anything to suggest it would welcome such an assignment. An accurate sample is half the problem, however.

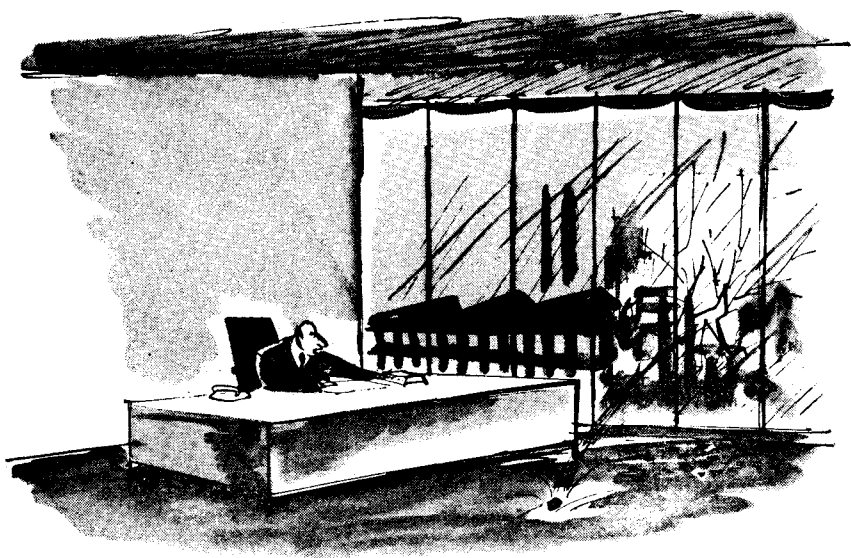
How would its figures be used? Mr. Sparger suggests that the ratings could be reported in a range, rather than as a fixed number. Instead of each program getting a 28 or a 19.5, as is done now, a rating sheet would look like this: ABC: range 13-17; CBS: 16-21; NBC: 14-18. Competitive programs, thus, would find that their ratings overlapped. This would compel the people who use the ratings to bring into play their independent judgments of the programs (they are supposed to be doing this now, but they seldom do).

The proposal holds attractions for all segments of the industry—even for the A. C. Nielsen Company. Producers would find that their programs had better chances to survive. Now their shows are cancelled—sometimes for as little as one hundredth of a rating point. One producer said: "When I was a kid, there used to be a silver medal for second place as well as a gold medal for first. There was even a bronze medal for third place. Now there's only room in television for winners." Advertising agencies and networks now use the ratings as a crutch. They tell their sponsors, "If you wish to succeed in this game, you must play by the figures. Nielsen is a vote-counter."

IF THE sponsor were not tyrannized by the numbers, he would have a broader range of programs with which to reach a wider cross-section of the audience. At present, Rex Sparger asserts, television aims at the middle mass (60 per cent. It ignores the top 20 per cent and the bottom 20 per cent). Even in the middle mass, the top and bottom 20 per cent are ignored. It is the narrowest heart of the artichoke the sponsor is getting. The public, under a range system as opposed to a fixed-point system, would have more opportunities to view programs which were silver and bronze medal winners.

As for Mr. Nielsen, he has often asserted that he loses money on his ratings service, which is merely one part of his large market research activity, albeit a prestige loss-leader. He has everything to gain by ceasing to be a target for public frustration. How long is the television industry to continue crying in its wilderness: "Nielsen is the best we can do?"

—ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON.



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